A Woman's Place is in the Resistance; Self, Narrative, and Performative Femininity as Subversion and Weapon in *The Handmaid's Tale*

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Preface

The basis for this paper originally stemmed from my interest feminist theory, women's literature, and contemporary literature. Margaret Atwood is an acclaimed writer, and her 1985 novel *The Handmaid's Tale* is iconic and only growing in influence. A paper examining the gender structures of *The Handmaid's Tale* and how they describe life in a patriarchal culture seemed like a natural fit for both the novel and my own research interests. Despite years of undergraduate and graduate work in English, I have unfortunately never had the opportunity to take a class specifically in women's literature or feminist theory, and I appreciate the opportunity to explore those areas in my work on this thesis.

Though I began a version of this thesis in summer of 2016, after the results of the 2016 presidential election, I was moved to alter the focus of this paper to examine the ways in which Offred performs gender as a method of survival as well as resistance. While this paper is not explicitly political, I feel that the themes and characters of *The Handmaid's Tale* are extremely relevant and relatable to our political climate today.

I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Rineer as well as Dr. Farkas and Dr. Jakubiak for stepping in as my Research Advisor and committee chairs, respectively, late in my thesis process.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

A Woman's Place is in the Resistance

Self, Narrative, and Performative Femininity as Subversion and Weapon in The Handmaid's Tale

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This paper examines the role of gender and femininity in Atwood's dystopian novel The Handmaid's Tale, particularly in the character of Offred. Offred performs her/Gilead's idea of womanhood as a conscious defense to preserve her own life. Simultaneously, she resists assimilation by weaponizing her femininity in a way that transcends "feminine wiles," subverting gendered expectations while finding and preserving an underground/unspoken culture of women. In a patriarchal, prescriptive culture where women have become pieces of property, maintaining her mental/spiritual identity, memory, and sense of selfhood is an essential and defensive subversive act that safeguards her personhood. In a world where women are to be seen and not heard, Offred regains agency through narrative power and literally survives through her own voice. This paper applies a performative perspective of gender to the novel based largely on Butler's idea of gender as social performance, one that is both consciously and either submissively or subversively done. Offred is in a strange position to do both: gender is being compelled upon her; gender imprisons her; and yet it is gender in both her internal sense of self as well as her outward manipulation of it that sets her free.

Signature of Investigator: __ Courtney M. Landis ___ Date: _Sept. 21, 2018_

Table of Contents

Chapter One: Introduction

At an early point in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred narrates, "I believe in the

resistance as I believe there can be no light without shadow; or rather, no shadow unless there is also light" (Atwood 105). Some thirty-odd years after the novel's publication, Greenpeace protesters will scale a giant construction crane in Washington D.C. to let a large banner reading "RESIST" fly over Donald Trump's White House. In the novel, America has been taken over by Christian religious extremists and purged of all who cannot conform to the stringent, Puritan gender and social ideals of "The Republic of Gilead." This totalitarian, dystopic society is in the hands of a small group of the elite who control censored news and propaganda, state-mandated reproduction, public execution, and a network of shame, spies, government surveillance, and betrayal. *The Handmaid's Tale,* initially published in 1985, has long been a keystone of contemporary dystopian genre compared to classics like Orwell's *1984* and Huxley's *Brave New World*.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred and "Handmaids" like her are in life-or-death positions where they are simultaneously prized and used for their fertility. Caught in a socio-moral purgatory among an extremely literal Madonna/Whore dichotomy, Handmaids are women who cannot be "wives" in polite society due to some moral failing-- in Offred's case, marrying a divorced man and thus considered an adulterer-- but who are presumably fertile and therefore not utterly irredeemable. Every aspect of their lives are dictated by puritanical, fundamentalist ideals: modesty, chastity, sobriety, etcetera. Gilead is a wet dream of the moral majority built on the backs of women.

In this paper, I argue that Offred performs Gilead's idea of womanhood in order to survive. Internally, Offred resists patriarchal objectification internally by focusing on her memories of her loved ones and by eventually telling her story in her own voice.

Externally, Offred weaponizes her femininity in order to regain some power in a world that has made her powerless, particularly in her relationships with the Commander and Serena Joy. Ultimately, however, what brings Offred to freedom is love; the treasonous act of her relationship with Nick restores Offred's sense of humanity internally and finally is what helps her escape Gilead altogether.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

In the months following the January 20th, 2017 inauguration of the 45th President of the United States Donald Trump, sales of Atwood's speculative and dystopian novel increased by upwards of 200% (Mayer, NPR). A day after the inauguration, millions of women convened on all seven continents and on the Mall in Washington D.C. in support of the Women's March on Washington to send a message to the new president: we will resist. The timing here is not coincidental; between the "Nasty Woman" and "Nevertheless, She Persisted" signs and buttons and t-shirts present since the election were those that read "*The Handmaid's Tale* is not an instruction manual" and "*Nolite te Bastardes Carborundorum* (Don't let the bastards grind you down)" (Levine, *Bustle*). In the past year, women have dressed as Handmaids with signature red cloaks and white veils in order to protest anti-women's health legislation at state houses from Texas to Ohio (*Slate* 2017). On March 10th, 2017, the *New York Times Book Review* published a short article by Atwood titled "Margaret Atwood on What 'The Handmaid's Tale' Means in the Age of Trump." In the article, Atwood retells the novel's origin story, sparked in 1984 while living in a still-severed Berlin: "Having been born in 1939 and come to consciousness during World War II, I knew that established orders could vanish overnight. Change could also be as fast as lightning. 'It can't happen here' could not be depended on: Anything could happen anywhere, given the circumstances" (Atwood 2017). Atwood shies away from descriptions of the novel as prediction or foretelling, but admits,

"No, it isn't a prediction, because predicting the future isn't really possible: There are too many variables and unforeseen possibilities. Let's say it's an antiprediction: If this future can be described in detail, maybe it won't happen. But such wishful thinking cannot be depended on either" (2017).

Margaret Atwood is a prolific and well-known Canadian writer of fiction, poetry, and literary criticism. Since the publication of her first poetry collection *Double Persephone* in 1961, Atwood's bibliography includes upwards of fifteen novels, eight collections of short fiction, five edited anthologies, seventeen poetry collections, and an array of scripts, screenplays, graphic novels, and critical work. Atwood even boasts a small cameo in the *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Alias Grace* streaming TV adaptations. In the time it takes me to complete this paper there will likely be news of another credit to her name.

Critical Reception

Since its publication in 1985, *The Handmaid's Tale* has existed as a topic of academic literary and feminist debate, particularly so for "genre" fiction (as it is sometimes labeled). The book was nominated for a number of prestigious awards including the Booker Prize, the Nebula Award, and the Prometheus Award. It won the Governor General's Award for English Language Fiction (1985) as well as the Arthur C.

Clarke Award (1987). In recent years, *The Handmaid's Tale* is included as #37 on the American Library Association's list "100 Most Frequently Challenged Books of 1990-2000" (ala.org).

The novel's secondary existence begins with a spate of high-profile contemporary reviews, such as a lukewarm pan from Mary McCarthy in *The New York Times Book Review* (Feb. 1986). McCarthy's general impression is that the biblical puritanism of the new Gileadean regime is unrecognizable and inspires no fear, no "shiver of recognition," and cites the "thin credibility of the parable" while somehow also noting that "the author has carefully drawn her projections from current trends" (McCarthy 1986). Most significant of this review, however, is McCarthy's dissatisfaction with the language of the novel itself: "the inability to imagine a language to match the changed face of common life. No Newspeak." In contrast, I would argue that this is one of the *most* chilling parts of the book: the language is our own, the world is our own, and the characters are simultaneously in this nightmarish dystopia while baking bread, using umbrellas, and playing *Scrabble*. The very nearness of the language is reminder that this could be us.

Conversely, Patrick Parringer reviewed the novel for *The London Review of Books* in March 1986. Parringer contextualizes *The Handmaid's Tale* among Atwood's five prior novels, arguing that *Handmaid,* and particularly Offred*,* is the spiritual successor to *The Edible Woman, Survival,* and *Lady Oracle:* "Margaret Atwood's novels are not written to a formula. *The Handmaid's Tale*, like its five predecessors, is an unrepeatable and starkly individual performance. At the same time, it is the Science Fiction fable that this author (who is at once a poet and a primarily realistic novelist) has long hinted that she intended

to write" (Parringer 20).

Matthew St. Pierre reviews *The Handmaid's Tale* for the journal *Crosscurrent* in Fall 1986. He notes that current feminists have (in his words) reacted "rather shrilly against the idea of women's collective role as child-bearer," but supposed that it is certainly possible that imposed procreation could exist in a "monstrous future society" (St. Pierre 371). Ultimately, he describes the novel as a "triumphant humanitarian testament, unrestricted by feminist polemic and patrilineal bias alike, and originally provocative case for the common primacy of women and men and a satirically distorting glass" (373).

Finally, Gayle Greene reviews the book for *The Women's Review of Books* in an article titled "Choice of Evils." Greene remarks on Atwood's assertions that these speculations are "logical," and traces elements of the novel that have been spun from historical and social precedent. Most interestingly, she questions whether *The Handmaid's Tale* does too much to romanticize our present, as Offred longs for her existence before Gilead, which "make today's rules seem like freedom" (Greene 14). Greene suggests that the book lays as much of the blame for the "rise" of Gilead at the feet of feminists for failing to prevent it as it does religious extremists for enacting it, arguing that this book serves to show how bad things *could be* compared to now, but does nothing

to suggest how we can be *better* compared to now.

Dystopian Fiction

Much critical work on *The Handmaid's Tale* focuses on the dystopian structure of Gilead and contextualizes *The Handmaid's Tale* in the framework of the dystopian tradition. Earl Ingersoll's article "Margaret Atwood's 'The Handmaid's Tale': Echoes of Orwell" discusses the impact of *1984* on both the novel and its reception in addition to comparing Winston and Offred: "Orwell's nightmarish future is written all over Atwood's similarly near-future vision of the misogynist theocracy of Gilead. Atwood shares Orwell's liberal-humanist anxieties about a future in which totalitarian states offer individuals the grim option of either freedom and anarchy or repression and security" (Ingersoll 64). This article makes the case that the catharsis is the same in *1984* and *The Handmaid's Tale*: the reader feels relief that, while things may be bad in real life, at least they aren't *that* bad.

David Ketterer's article "Margaret Atwood's 'The Handmaid's Tale': A Contextual Dystopia" categorizes *The Handmaid's Tale* as a science-fiction novel (despite Atwood's opinion to the contrary), specifically claiming that this novel is important because sci-fi is only relevant "when it is about something real" (Ketterer 209). Ketterer refers to the dystopian novel framework used in the novel, but discusses the ways in which Atwood's style breaks away from sci-fi norms by use of "indirection, irony, and understatement…

as one would expect of a poet" (211). Essentially, Ketterer defines *The Handmaid's Tale* as a "Contextual Dystopia," meaning a temporary or transitory dystopia (as evidenced by the historical epilogue that places Gileadean society in the past, or *a* past).

The article "Margaret Atwood's 'The Handmaid's Tale' and the Dystopian Tradition" by Amin Malak notes Foucault's argument that power "dictates its law to sex" (9), and identifies the six primary characteristics of dystopian fiction: "Power, Totalitarianism, War; Dream-Nightmare: Fantasy: Reality; Binary Oppositions; Characterization; Change and Time; *Roman a These*" (10-11). Malak discusses the importance of these themes as structures of dystopian work, and argues that as *The Handmaid's Tale* contains the correct criteria of a dystopian novel, what sets it apart from classics of the genre is "feminism and irony" (15).

Dominick M. Grace's article "'The Handmaid's Tale:' 'Historical Notes' and Documentary Subversion" discusses *The Handmaid's Tale* in the context of other sci-fi novels and dystopias, specifically in regard to the narrative techniques that build a sense of the dystopian. Grace outlines the pseudo-history world-building of novels such as *Frankenstein* and *Utopia*, and argues that Atwood's narrative structure (particularly the "Historical Notes" epilogue) subverts the traditional dystopian/sci-fi structure, and in so doing channels a more realistic and powerful voice for Offred.

Finally, Atwood herself discusses the genre in her article titled "*The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* in Context" for *PMLA*. Atwood explains that she is "not primarily a writer of science fiction," but merely a "dabbler" (513). Specifically, she denotes the difference, in her opinion, between *science fiction*-- "books with things in

them we can't yet do or begin to do, talking being we can never meet, and places we can't go" -- and *speculative fiction*, "which employs the means already more or less to hand, and takes place on Planet Earth" (513). Generally, Atwood's work is the latter: speculative fiction. She writes about the place of *The Handmaid's Tale* within the genre, noting, "*The Handmaid's Tale* is a classic dystopia, which takes at least part of its inspiration from George Orwell's *1984,* particularly the epilogue" (516).

Narrative & Gender

A second but perhaps equally significant area of critical work examines the gendered implications and influences of the narrative form, both in regard to the novel itself as well as the actual handmaid's tale. Mario Klarer's article "Orality and Literacy as Gender-Supporting Structures in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale"* discusses the gendered aspects of the oral tradition, and the use of "enforced orality" within the novel (e.g., the Gilead ban on women reading and writing, and Offred's subsequent use of recordings to tell her story). Klarer draws on Walter Ong's principles of discussing oral cultures as well as Deridian *ecriture* to examine the male/female split in language, and how those patterns emerge in Offred's narrative. Specifically, Klarer also addresses the narrative depending on gendered censorship and feminine voice and community.

Hilde Staels's article "Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*: Resistance Through Narrating" reflects recurring discursive forms, the form/tone/manner of Offred's first-

person narration, and the composition of the text. Staels utilizes Roger Fowler's idea of "mind-style" to examine the "personal voice of the narrator." Mind-style, according to Forler, is "the systems of beliefs, values, and categories by reference to which a person comprehends the world" (as qtd in Staels, 228). This article discusses "mind-style" as one of the author's techniques of indirect characterization combining stylistics, narratology, linguistics, and literary theory. *The Handmaid's Tale* is a triple-exposure sort of example of the mind-style, which concerns both the larger linguistic environment of Gilead, Offred's narration within that culture, and the historian's ironic repetition of Gileadean discourse in the future/epilogue.

The article "The World as it Will Be? Female Satire and the Technology of Power in 'The Handmaid's Tale'" by Stephanie Barbe Hammer argues that *The Handmaid's Tale* is significant in the "evolution of women's writing" because the novel is one of the few commercially and critically successful instances of satire by women. Despite the necessarily subversiveness of this combination, Hammer cites aspects of Atwood's writing that make *The Handmaid's Tale* a "textbook" example of satire (39). Most importantly to both satire as a genre and *The Handmaid's Tale* as a novel is "the clear existence of a topical political target," aka, evangelical Christian right-wing fundamentalism as Gilead.

Identity and Self

In addition to examinations of *The Handmaid's Tale*'s place in the tradition of dystopian

literature and critical discussion of the narrative form, another significant area of criticism deals with identity and the self in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Elisabeth Hansot's article "Selves, Survival, and Resistance in 'The Handmaid's Tale'" links Offred's resistance to Gilead (in general and in the form of the people around her) to her identity, and how she maintains her sense of self both in order to survive and to subvert. Hansot relies on James Scott's work *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* to provide a "framework for discussing resistance," in regard to "relations between dominant and subordinate groups as socially constructed public and hidden transcripts" (56). In Hansot's view, part of the genius of *The Handmaid's Tale* is in how Atwood frames resistance and domination in the "mundane and ordinary quality of the dystopian lives it depicts:" shopping, cleaning, cooking, etcetera. (56). Essentially, Offred's transgressive narrative of self happens on two levels: in the remembrance of her past and in surviving her present.

The article "Identity, Complicity, and Resistance in 'The Handmaid's Tale'" by Peter G. Stillman & S. Anne Johnson discusses the varied identity of the different women in *The Handmaid's Tale,* specifically Offred and Serena Joy, the other maids, and the women of the bordello. The authors argue that Gileadean society asserts control over all media/communication in order to "suppress individuality and maintain the regime," in combination with extreme surveillance and propaganda (73). In contrast to Hansot, Stillman & Johnson argue that Offred fails to maintain her identity and fails "to structure a sense of self, to connect with others, and to act" because Gilead is so powerful and omnipresent that everything Offred does supports the system, either by compliance or by

confirming her own damnation. Actions or thoughts that might actually be subversive lose their power by not using it when it could be powerful; by hesitating out of fear (75). Similar to Winston in *1984,* the authors argue that our narrators have the satisfaction of understanding the truth of the regime, but where has that knowledge gotten anybody?

Finally, author Danita J. Dodson wrote the article "'We lived in the blank white spaces': Rewriting the Paradigm of Denial in Atwood's 'The Handmaid's Tale,'" which discusses the "American" identity of the novel in two primary forms: America's foundational dichotomy of utopia/dystopia (significantly in its history of enslavement), and in America's/Gilead's Puritanical roots (66). According to Dodson, part of the message/morality of *The Handmaid's Tale* is a warning against nationalistic hubris, which is the direct cause of America's historical mistreatment of the marginalized (69). Interestingly, Dodson references her own interview with Atwood, in which Atwood argues that the Puritans had no love of democracy from the beginning, but rather came to America in pursuit of theocracy; this pursuit being enmeshed in idea and practice with white Christian colonization.

Religious Influences and Implications

Beyond critical discussions of identity, genre, narrative, and gender, the body of work

surrounding *The Handmaid's Tale* includes, almost by necessity, work examining the Biblical and religious themes and characterization in the novel. Dorota Filipczak's article "Is There no Balm in Gilead? -- Biblical Intertext in 'The Handmaid's Tale'" contextualizes the role of the Bible in the state of Gilead as well as the female role(s) within that state. The author argues: "The society fosters male domination and female object status, which is sanctioned by the patriarchal history of Jacob/Israel and by Paul's First Letter to Timothy. 'Let the woman learn her subjection.'" Even the state's methods of surrogate motherhood for sake of elite lineage are directly inspired/sanctioned by the Jacob/Rachel/Bilhah arrangement (171). Filipczak attempts to untangle the existing arguments that Atwood's Gilead is either a shocking caricature of Biblical reality versus a logical consequence of imposing Biblical word on a modern reality.

Contemporary Dystopian Fiction

The Handmaid's Tale was published in Canada in 1985 and the United States in 1986. At this point the classic dystopian genre has already been well-established by classics such as Orwell's *1984,* published in 1949, and Huxley's *Brave New World,* published in 1932. Significantly, the 70's and 80's had a surge of dystopian movies, with influential directors introducing films considered classics today such as *Bladerunner* (1982) based on Philip K. Dick's 1968 novel; Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979) and its sequels; and Katsuhiro Otomo's *Akira* (1988) based on his own manga. In a post-*Star Wars* world where science

and speculative fiction were beginning to take over mainstream imagination, the question of what happens if things go *wrong* becomes a natural progression of curiosity.

Today, the dystopian genre has exploded in popularity, particularly among Young Adult books and movies. *The Giver,* by Lois Lowry, is a children's/YA dystopian novel published in 1993 and winner of the 1994 Newbury Medal about a young boy named Jonas living in what seems initially to be a utopia of the future but is actually a dystopian society based on eliminating emotion, memory, and color. The *Hunger Games* books by Suzanne Collins, published between 2008 and 2010 were each *New York Times* YA bestsellers, while the movies are one of the highest-grossing film franchises of the 21st Century (IMDb). Other contemporary dystopian YA novels that followed such as the *Divergent* series by Veronica Roth have achieved wide commercial success. Atwood herself has revisited dystopian themes in several of her novels following in the years after *The Handmaid's Tale,* such as the trilogy of *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009), and *Maddaddam* (2013) as well as the standalone novel *The Heart Goes Last,* published in 2015.

Significantly, *The Handmaid's Tale* had been previously adapted for film back in 1990, but is being updated for streaming television on Hulu in April 2017 starring Elisabeth Moss as Offred, Samira Wiley as Moira, and Joseph Fiennes as The Commander. The novel's remarkable renaissance of popularity in today's political climate

cannot be entirely credited to coincidence.

Moving Forward

While there is a long history of critical work on *The Handmaid's Tale* that deals with gender and feminism, this paper fills a gap in applying a performative perspective of gender to the novel based largely on Butler's idea of gender as social performance, one that is both consciously and either submissively or subversively done. We perform gender-- it is not born in us or anything innate-- but neither can we be truly free of gender as members of society that has invented it. One of the most interesting aspects of *The Handmaid's Tale* is that Offred is in a strange position to do both: gender is being compelled upon her; gender imprisons her; and yet it is gender in both her internal sense of self as well as her outward manipulation of it that sets her free. Moreover, in today's political climate, it becomes essential or inevitable to view *The Handmaid's Tale* from the perspective of an American woman. As the fight of Republican-led branches of government to revoke funding from Planned Parenthood or remove preventative birth control from insurance plans makes headlines, a world where a woman's body belongs to the state rings a somberly familiar note.

Chapter Three: Theoretical Framework

Michel Foucault was a French theorist, philosopher, and literary critic of the 20th Century associated with the structuralist and post-structuralist movements. His body of work ranges broadly in the studies of philosophy, sociology, classic thought, and sexuality. While Foucault's bibliography is extensive and far-reaching, a significant theme in his works involves society, power, and knowledge. The four-volume work *The History of Sexuality* was published beginning in 1976. Foucault's work on power structures, social roles, sexuality, and more heavily influenced feminist critical theorists, including Beauvoir and Butler. To paint broadly, Foucault suggests that people imagine power as an item or thing that can be possessed by an individual, conferred on a person, and that works downward in a hierarchical structure. Foucault argues that power is essentially relational and therefore not just a part of social structures, but inherently intertwined with, creating, and created by them. The concept of "biopower" combines disciplinary power with a "biopolitics" that impacts people's lives at a biological level, thereby enforcing social (and in much of Western culture, patriarchal) norms. In *Discipline and Punish,* Foucault discusses disciplinary power as techniques of social regulation and control which are enforced on and by way of the body:

> "What was then being formed was a policy of coercions that act on the body, a calculated manipulation of its elements, its gestures, its behavior. The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it…Thus, discipline produces subjected and practiced

> bodies, 'docile' bodies" (Foucault *Discipline* 138-9).

In addition to control of the body, constant surveillance and awareness of the body link it to mental and spiritual power and control; the body and sexuality become the locus of social control. Individuals are shaped by their experience or role in power relations, limiting the ability of truly original or rebellious identity. However, in a 1984 interview titled "The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom," Foucault suggests that by using techniques of self-formation that are 'proposed, suggested, imposed' upon them by society (Foucault *Ethic* 291), individuals may creatively transform themselves, and in the process refutes normalization by activating power and agency.

Simone de Beauvoir's 1949 book *The Second Sex* is a landmark work of feminist and gender theory, emblematic of the post-WWII "second wave" of feminism. De Beauvoir describes the cultural role of Woman as "the Other," saying in Part. III "Myths:"

> History has shown us that men have always kept in their hands all concrete powers; since the earliest days of the patriarchate they have thought best to keep woman in a state of dependence; their codes of law have been set up against her; and thus, she has been definitely established as the Other. This arrangement suited the economic interests of the males; but it conformed also to their ontological and moral pretensions...To regard woman simply as a slave is a mistake; there were women among the slaves, to be sure, but there have always been free women-- that is, women of religious and social dignity. They accepted man's sovereignty and he did not feel menaced by a

revolt that could make of him in turn the object" (de Beauvoir 77-78).

De Beauvoir's theory of the male vs. the female-as-Other explains the psycho-social framework for a patriarchal society where the male is the primary, the archetype, the hero; where the female is the accessory, the helpmeet, the wife and mother: "woman is defined exclusively in her relation to man… Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth" (de Beauvoir 80). Chapter I of Part III "Myths" sketceterahes the outline of human history regarding sexuality and motherhood, particularly the religious/ mythological/historical disgust and taboo of the menstruating mother. This cultural taboo drives man to separate female archetypes (the mother and the possession) as much as possible, even within the same woman or household: "More vaguely, man finds it repugnant to come upon the dreaded essence of the mother [menstruation] in the woman he possesses; he is determined to dissociate these two aspects of femininity" (de Beauvoir 144). The primary quality of male-defined femininity is an innate binary and sense of twoness: Madonna/whore, life/death, mother/lover, sinner/saint. "There is no figurative image of woman which does not call up at once its opposite… Under whatever aspect we consider her, we always find the same shifting back and forth, for the nonessential returns necessarily to the essential. In the figures of the Virgin Mary and Beatrice, Eve and Circe still exist" (de Beauvoir 150). Much as the idea of "woman" is defined by what she is not (man), the kind and quality of each woman is defined by what kind of woman she is not.

In de Beauvoir's understanding of marriage/the married state, man has "succeeded in enslaving woman; but in the same degree he has deprived her of what made

her possession desirable… she is no longer that unconquered prey" (de Beauvoir 186). Man's own institution confines him in the same way that he has engineered to confine woman, and meanwhile creates the dual weapons of adultery and desire. Meanwhile, marriage elevates women within the patriarchy:

> "In order to separate woman from Nature, to subject her to man through ceremonies and contracts, she has been elevated to the dignity of being a human person, she has been given liberty. But liberty is precisely that which escapes all subjugation, and if it be granted to a being originally possessed of maleficent powers, she becomes dangerous… Woman has been free only in becoming a captive; she renounces this human privilege in order to regain her power as a natural object. By day she perfidiously plays her role of docile servant, but at night she changes into cat, or hind; she slips again into her siren's skin or, riding on a broomstick, she takes off for the devil's dances. She is thus fated for infidelity: it is the sole concrete form her liberty can assume" (de Beauvoir 188).

Man feels compelled to subjugate in order to affirm superiority and purpose; meanwhile, woman's engagement with this repression confers upon her the ability to transcend subjugation, while her presence disquiets the male order. The existence of the Good Woman merely makes it more evident that the Bad Woman exists. Moreover, just as man has made woman Other, the ideal of the Other then becomes desirable: "There is still no end to dreaming and debating on the feminine mystery. It is indeed to preserve this mystery that men have long begged women not to give up long skirts, petticoats, veils,

long gloves, high-heeled shoes: everything that accentuates difference in the Other makes her more desirable, since what man wants to take possession of is the Other as such" (205). The myth of "woman" embodies modesty, maternity, innocence, death, seduction in one eminently ownable package only non-self-contradicting by sheer force of want:

> He projects upon her what he desires and what he fears, what he loves and what he hates. And if it is so difficult to say anything specific about her, that is because man seeks the whole of himself in her and because she is All. She is All, that is, on the plane of the inessential; she is all the Other. And, as the other, she is other than herself, other than what is expected of her. Being all, she is never quite *this* which she should be; she is everlasting deception, the very deception of that existence which is never successfully attained nor fully reconciled with the totality of existence" (290).

The feminine archetype ultimately serves as the life's grand foil: ever the appropriate background needed to enhance the male; a helpful white page that allows comfortable room for the projections of the male imagination. Desirable, fuckable, admirable, subduable, malleable, and ultimately ownable.

Forty years later, scholar Judith Butler published the highly influential book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, which builds on Foucault's ideas of sex and gender to argue that sex is just as socially constructed as gender, and the "performativity" of either/any gender is social production that can be subverted. Though Butler is known both as a feminist theorist and a lesbian theorist, she expressed a systematic discomfort with "labels," arguing that "identity categories tend to be

instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures of as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression… I'm permanently troubled by identity categories, consider them to be invariable stumbling-blocks, and understand them, even promote them, as sites of necessary trouble" (Butler 709). Moreover, in discussions of gender, we need to accept that *all* ideas of gender are foundationless from an essentialist point of view: "Gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original" (Butler 716). Ultimately heteronormative gender roles are "real" only in the sense that they have only been made so by humans, through generations of compulsive/compulsory tradition. This social compulsion is a significant qualification; "Gender is not a performance that a prior subject elects to do, but gender is *performative* in the sense that it constitutes as an effect the very subject it appears to express. It is a *compulsory* performance in the sense that acting out of line with heterosexual norms brings with it ostracism, punishment, and violence, not to mention the transgressive pleasures produced by those very prohibitions" (Butler 718). This analysis of gender weaves together the vital understandings that gender may not be biologically innate or compulsory, but is a limitation and performance necessitated by cultural mores and pressures. Gender and the idea of gender are one and the same. Defying those mores becomes both an act of subversion and, in the spirit of eating the forbidden fruit, an act of pleasure.

Chapter Four: Gender Roles and Compulsory Femininity in Gilead

Gileadean society is built on and for a strict definition and delineation of gender roles and roles within gender, to the absurd point of color-coding women in accordance with their position. The most significant difference between male and female roles is linked to the fundamentalist mores-turned-laws that prevent women from working jobs for pay, owning property, holding bank accounts, etcetera. Therefore, while both genders are expected to be happy worker bees within the roles prescribed for them, the female roles are strictly controlled under the governance of the men around and above them, and are limited to social roles except for a few select areas of traditional "woman's work:" cooking, cleaning, teaching, and sex work. In Gilead, women can be Wives, Marthas, Handmaids, Aunts, Econowives, or Jezebels. Anyone else, any women outside of or who have rejected this social schema, are Unwomen. In the 1970 feminist critical work *Sexual Politics* by Kate Millet, the author examines the layers of patriarchal power in society: "Patriarchy's chief institution is the family. It is both a mirror of and a connection with the larger society; a patriarchal unit within a patriarchal whole… As the fundamental instrument and the foundation unit of patriarchal society the family and its roles are prototypical… the fate of the three patriarchal institutions, the family, society, and the state are interrelated" (Millet 344-345). Gilead, if it has so chosen, could have keep its fertile women rounded up in Red Centers, impregnated clinically and moved through

production like a factory assembly line. Instead, Gilead folds the role of Handmaid into the conventional and patriarchal family unit, isolating the Handmaids from their peers and setting them under the primary authority of their household while simultaneously under the authority of the state.

The first chapter of the book *A Literature of Their Own; British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* by feminist theory and literature scholar Elaine Showalter discusses the evolution of gender roles and "sexual spheres" throughout the 19th century, specifically as relates to the first, English, female novelists and professional writers. This includes the Victorian "Angel in the House" feminine ideal, which imagined a woman "contentedly submissive to men, but strong in her inner purity and religiosity… Many observers have pointed out that the first professional activities of Victorian women, as social reformers, nurses, governesses, and novelists, either were based in the home or were extensions of the feminine role as teacher, helper, and mother of mankind" (Showalter 14). Like the Victorians, the "Sons of Jacob" have assigned women to very basic roles that presume their most essential functions: wife, mother, teacher, maid, and prostitute. In a Freudian Madonna/whore distinction, Gilead totally separates the functions of women so that each is as one-dimensional and rigidly defined as possible.

The Wives

The wife of Offred's Commander is Serena Joy, a supposed "true believer" and

televangelist Christian worship singer in the time before. The color of the Wives is blue: a light veil, gloves, and a long sweeping dress similar in modesty to the Handmaids, but with a bit more decoration and richer quality. In a 2017 article for the New York Times "Margaret Atwood Annotates Season 1 of 'The Handmaid's Tale,'" Atwood talks about how her goal for the novel (and subsequently the TV adaptation) was to only include elements with real-life precedents. This includes color-coding the women, which is particularly inspired by Christian artistic tradition: "the Virgin Mary would inevitably wear blue or blue-green, and Mary Magdalene would inevitably wear red" (Vineyard 2017). It's an easy precedent for the lawmakers of Gilead; the virginal blue Madonnas, the red whores.

Serena Joy is older than Offred and walks with a cane and a limp (14). The Wives, or at least Wives of high-ranking men such as Offred's Commander, have a little room for privileges that Handmaids and Marthas do not: gardening, knitting, smoking cigarettes, watching TV, wearing diamond jewelry and perfume-- and of course, should the Handmaid bear a baby, it is legally and immediately the Wife's. Certainly not freedom, or anything close, but a little more life than the other women. Other than this permissible list of hobbies, the social lives of the Wives include public events like the Prayvaganzas and Salvagings as well as a small, controlled number of polite social calls such as visiting other Wives during illnesses and for Birth Days. Apparently taking ill is something of a hobby for the wives, a luxury that Handmaids and Marthas cannot afford for fear of losing their usefulness and thereby their life. Now that traditional social events like dinners and dancing are taboo, Wives carefully take turns falling "ill" and retiring to their bed for a few days to enjoy the company of a steady stream of her fellow Wives. "They get sick a lot,

these Wives of the Commanders. It adds interest to their lives… They take turns. There is some sort of list, invisible, unspoken. Each is careful not to hog more than her share of the attention" (154-155). It's very polite and civilized, fitting neatly into the ideal of physically weak but spiritually strong angels of the hearth.

Offred remembers Serena Joy from the time before; after a career singing on children's evangelical TV, "by then," she was making speeches:

> "about the sanctity of the home, about how women should stay home. Serena Joy didn't do this herself, she made speeches instead, but she presented this failure of hers as a sacrifice she was making for the good of all… Luke thought she was funny. I only pretended to think so. Really she was a little frightening. She was in earnest. She doesn't make speeches anymore. She has become speechless. She stays in her home, but it doesn't seem to agree with her. How furious she must be, now that she's been taken at her word" (45-46).

Serena Joy was not captured by police at the border and given a choice the way Offred was; she *campaigned* for this while actually doing the opposite and her hypocrisy is evident from the beginning. She wanted this to happen, even if at the time she could not comprehend what *this* would really mean.

In her article "Is There No Balm in Gilead? -- Biblical Intertext in *The Handmaid's Tale*" published in 1993 in the *Journal of Literature and Theology,* Dorota Filipczak discusses the role of the Bible-- as text, inspiration, and emotional cudgel-- in the novel. Discussing the physical and spiritual presence of the Bible in Gileadean households,

Filipczak notes: “Locked in a special wooden box, [the Bible] becomes a totem of the totalitarian system in every house. At the same time, it is ‘an incendiary device’, available only to the initiated; others are forbidden to read it… The Bible is a trapped text turned into a lethal instrument because the regime makes it generate oppressive laws… The society fosters male domination and female object status, which is sanctioned by the patriarchal history of Jacob/Israel and by Paul’s First Letter to Timothy” (Filipczak 171). Serena Joy’s character and identity begin as evangelical Christian, as someone deeply moved, or willing to pretend to be, by the grace of God. Whether her campaign for this new life was entirely by her choice, she ended up on the winning team, in as plush and secure a position as it gets for a woman in Gilead, with no work to do or quotas to fill except to obey Gilead’s rules.

The delineation between Handmaid and mistress, concubine and wife are clear, or at least are supposed to be. When Offred first arrives for her post at the household, Serena Joy tells her, “As for my husband, she said, he’s just that. My husband. I want that to be perfectly clear. Till death do us part. It’s final… It’s one of the things we fought for” (16). This is the hill that “we” (presumably the other wives?) chose to die on; they retain their husbands in every way except body.

Serena Joy is the only Wife really described in Offred's tale; the others she encounters are vague, nameless figures. In the group Prayvaganza setting, Wives piously, with appropriate dabbings of handkerchiefs at happy tears, present their teen-aged daughters in a group wedding, a fresh crop of girls in white dresses assigned to a group of up-and-coming Angels (61). On the Birth Day, Offred is driven in the Birthmobile to

Commander Warren's house, where Ofwarren is about to give birth. We see “the Wife” outfitted in a nightgown and crowded around by her friends as the Handmaids attend Ofwarren. When it finally comes time to push, Ofwarren is placed on a two-tiered birthing stool with the Wife seated above her with splayed legs, similar in position to the nights of the ceremony. Once the baby comes, the Wife is tucked reverently into bed and handed the child to name, while Ofwarren is left on the floor to pass the afterbirth (116-127). Her function is complete, minus a few months before weaning. The child is now literally in the hands of the Wife, as it was legally all along.

An uneasy, often painful truce stands between Wives and Handmaids; theirs is something of a symbiotic relationship where the Handmaid is allowed to live and given a home, while in exchange the Wife must “share” her husband for the chance to have a child. The Handmaid role is state-created, by the men in control of Gilead, and seems to be an aspect of their lives that the Wives deal with only because they have no choice. In the beginning of the novel, Offred notes, “She doesn’t speak to me, unless she can’t avoid it. I am a reproach to her, and a necessity” (13). Offred and the Handmaid’s role would not need to exist at all if the Wife could simply bear children; even if their lack is technically the result of the husband’s infertility, all blame is shifted to the woman, and she has failed at the essential, in Gilead’s view, function of womanhood. It is only thanks to her extremely elevated social and economic rank that keeps this from being a death sentence; in Offred’s position, it could be. In Offred's education at the Red Center, the Handmaids are taught to pity the wives, broken women who have fallen short in the ultimate way: “Of course they will resent you. It is only natural. Try to feel for them… Try to pity them.

Forgive them, for they know not what they do… You must realize that they are defeated women. They have been unable-- Here her voice broke off" (46). Defeated. Not the women serving in the kitchens, not the women forced into surrogacy, not the Unwomen and gender traitors slowly soaking up radiation poisoning in the Colonies. These rich white women who cannot conceive, or who are unlucky enough to take the blame for an infertile husband, are the defeated.

The Handmaids

Offred lives in "the Commander's" house, "and serves as Handmaid to him and his Wife, Serena Joy. In the "Historical Notes" epilogue, Professor Pieixoto discusses how the Handmaid pool was created, informing the audience, "[Offred] was among the first wave of women recruited for reproductive purposes and allotted to those who both required such services and could lay claim to them through their position in the elite. The regime created an instant pool of such women by the simple tactic of declaring all second marriages and non-martial liaisons adulterous, arresting the female partners, and, on the grounds that they were morally unfit, confiscating the children they already had, who were adopted by childless couples of the upper echelons who were eager for progeny by any means" (304). It's easy enough to create a desperate population of criminals by criminalizing common behavior after the fact; it is impossible to avoid committing a crime that is not even a crime yet. In one fell swoop, a conveniently fertile and vulnerable

segment of the population is up for grabs.

Each morning, Offred wakes up and dresses in a long, shapeless red robe that stretceterahes from neck to wrists to ankles. Accompanying this are red gloves, red boots, a long veil, and a white head covering—"wings"— shading her face. Not a single flash of skin or hair to be seen, not even by accident. "Everything except the wings around my face is red: the color of blood, which defines us… The white wings too are prescribed issue; they are to keep us from seeing, but also from being seen" (8). After a wholesome breakfast served on a tray, Offred is issued food tokens (rations) and sent on a walk for groceries. Lest this simple pleasure be accidentally perceived as a freedom, she is assigned a chaperone, the Handmaid from a neighboring household also out on her daily walk: "We aren't allowed to go there except in twos. This is supposed to be for our protection, though the notion is absurd: we are well protected already. The truth is that she is my spy, as I am hers. If either of us slips through the net because of something that happens on one of our daily walks, the other will be accountable" (19). Like in any good fascist regime, every relationship is suspect; betrayal and secrecy are how one stays alive.

The Handmaids greet one another by prescribed custom: "Blessed be the fruit," says Ofglen. "May the Lord open," replies Offred. This is "the accepted greeting among us" (19). Every social convention, at least the few that remain, are focused on their goal: conception. Early on the same walk, Offred and Ofglen encounter guards, "young Guardians," at the checkpoint. Offred imagines that their minds will not let them be distracted, that "They think instead of doing their duty and of promotion to the Angels, and of being allowed possibly to marry, and then, if they are able to gain enough power

and live to be old enough, of being allotted a Handmaid of their own" (22). Handmaids are a precious prize and government issue; from each according to her ability, to each according to his need-- as they are taught to recite at the Red Center, slightly misquoting Paul in Acts (117).

How exactly the role of "Handmaid" should be considered is apparently still up for some kind of debate, as Offred is among a sort of "first generation" of Handmaids-- beta testers for a new social role. Offred repeatedly remembers Aunt Lydia promising that things will get better in time, once the transitional generation has passed and the new norms are all people will remember. "It is the hardest for you. We know the sacrifices you are being expected to make. It is hard when men revile you. For the ones who come after you, it will be easier. They will accept their duties with willing hearts. She did not say: Because they will have no memories, of any other way. She said: Because they won't want things they can't have" (117). What is it that the Handmaids want so badly that is so wrong? Freedom, dignity, bodily autonomy, sun on their skin, a kiss? In the Aunts' perspective, in Gilead's perspective, these are not worth mentioning. These are needless distractions that have done well to fall to dust by the wayside. The sooner forgotten the better.

When Offred first arrives at the Commander's house, she is ushered by her chaperone through the front door, but will only use the back door in the future: "Things haven't settled down, it's too soon, everyone is unsure about our exact status. After a while it will either be all front doors or back. Aunt Lydia said she was lobbying for the front. Yours is a position of honor, she said" (13). When out walking, the Guardians salute the

Handmaids as they pass the checkpoints-- "They are supposed to show respect, because of the nature of our service" (21). As of yet, no one can decide just how *much* respect the Handmaid position earns. Whispering in the kitchen, Offred overhears the Marthas as Rita says to Cora that she "wouldn't debase herself like that." Cora asks what she'd do otherwise-- go to the Colonies? -- "Catch you." Finally, Cora says, "It could have been me, say I was ten years younger. It's not that bad. It's not what you'd call hard work" (10). It is not much of a choice, but it is one, and compared to hard labor and radiation it must often be an easy one.

Following the Biblical precepts of Sarah and Hagar, Rachel and Leah, as the Commander reads before the "Ceremony," Offred and handmaids like her will act as surrogates for Wives who cannot conceive. Early in Genesis, Sarai bears her husband Abram no children, so she presents Hagar to him as a wife: "'Behold now, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children. Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.' And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai… Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her servant, and gave her to Abram her husband as a wife. And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived" (Genesis 16:2-4). However, this backfires on Sarai. When Hagar conceives, she "looked with contempt on her mistress." Sarai blames Abram, and with his blessing to keep the peace, she "deals harshly" with Hagar, who flees only to return after a vision of an Angel of the Lord in the wilderness commanding her to return to Sarai (16:5-9). Later, after Sarai and Abram's (now *Sarah* and *Abraham's* by command of the Lord) childbearing years have long passed, the Lord promises Sarah that she will bear a son. She laughs, but God tells them, "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" (17: 12-

14). As promised, Sarah bears Abraham's son Isaac. However, once Isaac is born, Sarah grows jealous of Hagar's son Ishmael, and insists that Abraham cast them out lest Isaac share his inheritance. He does so, with the assurance from God that all will be well, and Isaac becomes the sole heir of Abraham.

Later in the book of Genesis, Jacob marries both of Laman's daughters Rachel and Leah under duress, and while Leah the Unbeloved bears several sons right away, Rachel is barren and bitterly longs for a child. Envying her sister, she says to Jacob, "Give me children or I shall die!" Jacob grows angry, and says, "Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?" She presents Jacob with her maid Bilhah, "so that she may give birth on my behalf, that even I may have children through her" (Genesis 30:1-3 ESV). Later, after a period of not conceiving, Leah does the same with her maid Zilphah. Finally, after Leah has borne six sons and the maids each two, God "remembered Rachel… and opened her womb" (31:22). In this story, in which Jacob is passed from bed to bed as a largely passive character, he speaks little and makes no decisions. All of the action is directed by the Wives, with the will of God deciding the outcome. At one point, Rachel "sells" a night with Jacob to Leah in exchange for some mandrakes (30:14). Rachel and Leah are sisters and sister-wives, but rather than love hold only bitterness and jealousy for one another. Leah envies Rachel for Jacob's love, while Rachel envies Leah for her sons (30:1). When Bilhah bears her second son, Rachel names him Naphtali, saying, "With mighty wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister and have prevailed" (30:8). They constantly struggle against the other's presence in their household.

Funnily enough, Bilhah's or Zilphah's names do not appear once in *The*

Handmaid's Tale despite them being the actual analogous handmaids-- Offred refers to "Rachel and Leah stuff," the Commander's Bible passages for the Ceremony quote Leah's words, and we learn that the actual name of "the Red Center" is the "Rachel and Leah Center for Reeducation." Given the choice between encouraging polygamy, infidelity, or bastard children, the commanding class attempt to have their Biblical cake and eat it too by believing fervently in a sort of transubstantiation through surrogacy; the Handmaid's womb becomes the Wife's just as the baby is. Even in the readings of the holy book and their doctrine, the Handmaids occupy a mental limbo, "living in the blank white spaces" as Offred says later (203), where they cannot be named and are merely a convenient appendage to the "actual" wives. Similarly, Rachel and Leah are the ideals held up in Gilead, which Sarai and Hagar go unmentioned despite being the original Biblical precedent. Hagar retains her son Ishmael and eventually leaves Abraham with him, while Rachel and Leah count Bilhah and Zilphah's offspring among their own. Offred, expected to a produce a baby directly into the waiting arms (literally) of Serena Joy, is living in a story like Bilhah's, not Hagar's.

Filipczak comments on this clash of expectations between the desired Rachel/Bilhah dynamic, and the potential for the acrimonious Sarah/Hagar relationship wherein the handmaid somehow incurs the wrath of the mistress and "may be sent off to the colonies, the equivalent of inhospitable wilderness with no merciful Yahwist God to watch over her plight" (172). These two divergent paths are set up as ideal and warning: conform to the Bilhah role, play your part, lest you be condemned like Hagar.

Listening to the Commander, during the Ceremony, Offred thinks, "It's the usual

stories, the usual story. God to Adam, God to Noah. *Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth.* Then comes the moldy old Rachel and Leah stuff we had drummed into us at the Center. *Give me children, or else I die. Am I in God's stead, who had withheld from thee the fruit of the womb? Behold my maid Bilhah. She shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her.* And so on and so forth. We had it read to us every breakfast, as we sat in the high school cafeteria" (88). The choice of passage here is no accident, not from an ancient text with dozens of different stories of concubines to pick from: *Give me children, or else I die.* Gilead prefers to take the Bible as literally as possible as it suits a principle of oppression; the Commander must give Offred a child, just as she must in turn give Serena Joy a child, or else she die. All of the other rules Offred lives by, of modesty, moderation, and chastity, are in service of this ultimate goal.

Of course, it is treason and blasphemy to imply that the common element in the equation, the husband, might be anything less than virile. In the case of Genesis, Jacob has proof of Rachel's barrenness in the fertility of Leah and the two handmaids; in Gilead, with fertile women in such short supply, the Commander has no logical proof that he is not the problem. The doctor, at Offred's monthly checkup, offers to try and impregnate her. Where once an offer like that would have been irredeemably sleazy, it is no longer so simple, though just as or even more illegal; by offering his help, he is offering to help save her life. "'Most of those old guys can't make it anymore,' he said. 'Or they're sterile.' I almost gasp: he's said a forbidden word. *Sterile.* There is no such thing as a sterile man anymore, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that's the law" (61). Later, after a few more fruitless Ceremonies, even Serena Joy

proposes an alternative: "'Maybe he can't,' she says. I don't know who she means. Does she mean the Commander, or God? If it's God, she should say *won't*. Either way it's heresy. It's only women who can't, who remain stubbornly closed, damaged, defective" (204). Men have been elevated-- have elevated themselves-- to God's level: omnipotent, omniscient, without reproach. The role of the Handmaid exists not just as the functionary, the walking womb, but to fully shift responsibility away from men and onto a designated scapegoat third party.

The Marthas

The Marthas are the servant class of Gilead, women who "work" in the homes of Gilead's elite for the privileged of life, room, and board. In Commander Fred's household, this includes two Marthas, Rita, the cook and Cora, the maid. One Martha is a good sign of economic security and some importance; two Marthas signals that Offred's Commander is indeed important and powerful. Their assigned color is green, "dull green like a surgeon's gown of the time before." They also have aprons, as workers, and while they have veils they need not wear them at home, because "nobody much cares who sees the face of a Martha" (9). The role of "Martha" is named after Martha of the New Testament, described in Luke and John. Martha is the sister of Mary and of Lazarus, who was resurrected by Jesus. Martha is introduced in the Gospel of Luke when Jesus and his disciples enter a village, and Martha invites him to her home. Her sister Mary sat at

Jesus's feet to listen to his teachings while Martha serves her guests. Martha asks Jesus to tell her sister to help, and Jesus rebuked Martha, saying that "Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:38-42).

In post-biblical Christian tradition, the Martha/Mary divide is used as teaching about different kinds of faith and ministry. In Aquinas's *Summa Theologica,* a classic of philosophy and theology dating to the 13th century, the scholar considers "the active life" of Martha vs. the "contemplative life" of Mary in Question 182, and quoting Augustine concludes that Mary has chosen better, as Martha's "burden of necessity shall at length be taken from thee: whereas the sweetness of truth is eternal"; *however,* should one be "called away from the contemplative life to the works of the active life on account of some necessity… we must bear it because charity demands it of us" (182). In *The Handmaid's Tale,* we know very little (as does Offred) about Rita and Cora, the only two Marthas we encounter; all we know about Rita is that she is gruff, while all we know about Cora is that she is kinder and had already had her tubes tied rendering herself ineligible for service as a Handmaid (Atwood 10). We don't know about their families, or about any other Marthas, or how one even ends up as a Martha-- just that Rita bakes the bread and Cora dusts the house. Offred longs for a friendship with Rita and Cora, some sign of kindness of camaraderie, but is rebuffed and does not dare attempt explicitly: "Rita would not allow it. She would be too afraid. The Marthas are not supposed to fraternize with us" (11). Why this is-- whether that is to protect the Marthas, or the Handmaids, or just to isolate

everyone whatsoever (most likely), Offred does not know or does not say.

The Econowives

For men too low in socioeconomic status to be assigned a woman for each female role, there are the Econowives. To signify their tripartite role, Econowives are dressed in stripes; the red of Handmaids, the blue of Wives, and the green of Marthas. “These women are not divided into functions,” Offred explains. “They have to do everything; if they can” (24). Her tone is pessimistic: *if* they can. As if the all-in-one woman, a woman free-floating from one role to another as needed, is exhaustingly impossible. The existence of the Econowives is suggested vaguely as a temporary measure: “Someday, when times improve, says Aunt Lydia, no one will have to be an Econowife” (44). Out on the daily walk, Offred and Ofglen step aside to let a funeral procession of Econowives pass, mourning a miscarried fetus. One Econowife scowls, spits on the sidewalk as they pass the Handmaids: “The Econowives do not like us,” says Offred, with no explanation (44). If being a Handmaid really is a position of honor the way that Aunt Lydia and the rest think it should be, perhaps it's enough prestige to inspire jealousy in women who do three

times the work.

The Aunts

In the Rachel & Leah Re-education Center (the *Red Center* as slang), the Handmaids are trained, taught, indoctrinated, and guarded by women known as the Aunts. Like the Handmaids' patronymic names, the Aunts are not just called Aunts with a view of fostering familial appreciation, but issued new names that would have been familiar from the time before. From the Historical Notes epilogue, "the Aunts should take names derived from commercial products available to women in the immediate pre-Gilead period, and thus familiar and reassuring to them-- the names of cosmetic lines, cake mixes, frozen desserts, and even medicinal remedies? It was a brilliant stroke" (308). Thus Offred mentions characters such as Aunt Sara (Sara Lee cakes?), Aunt Elizabeth (Elizabeth Arden cosmetics?), and Aunt Lydia (a reference before my time?). None of these inspirations are mentioned, of course[1]. Of course, in the "Sons of Jacob's" view, this was the upper limit of what women could understand: lipsticks and baked goods. Even the names of the jailers serve to be patronizing.

At the Red Center, Handmaids-to-be sleep on army cots in what used to be the

[1] Interestingly, aside from said example-less allusion to these female-named products, no brand names are mentioned in the novel except one: Scrabble. Whether this is out of a polite aversion to using trademarked material or an implication that common brands like Kleenex and Marlboro have folded within this new society is unclear.

gymnasium while Aunt Sara and Aunt Elizabeth patrol, cattle prods at their sides. “Even they could not be trusted with guns,” Offred says (4). Aunts are not exactly color-coded the way that the household women are; instead, they wear a khaki dress “with the military breast pockets” and a generic “headcovering,” (117), otherwise undescribed. When Ofwarren, formerly Janine, gives birth, it is the Aunts that assist and serve as midwives while the (male, always) doctors wait banished in the van, on standby in case of the only thing that would be worth compromising the woman's modesty: peril to the baby.

The Aunts, more so than any other group of women, are the true believers. More than this even-- they are enforcers and builders of this new society. The voice of Aunt Lydia follows Offred, doctrine and wholesome reasoning from her lips quoted again in Offred's narrative. In order to teach the Handmaids, the Aunts lead classes, teaching pelvic exercises and reading scripture. In one class, Testifying, women are called up one at a time to confess or fabricate a tragic sob-story while the rest of the class chants their flaws: “*Who* led them on? Aunt Helena beams, pleased with us. *She* did. *She* did. *She* did… Aunt Helena made her kneel at the front of the classroom, hands behind her back, where we could all see her” (72). Shame, female shame, is a building block of Gilead, and the Aunts are the instrument that deliver and foster it.

Later, at the Jezebel club, the Aunts reprise their original role from the Red Center and work partly as guards of the women, part chaperone, part Madames. When Offred finds the washroom to meet up with Moira, an Aunt is at the door issuing passes like in high school, turning away a working girl who was “just there.” This Aunt is in disguise,

dressed in a purple caftan and sparkly gold makeup, but she is older and Offred knows that she is an Aunt "nevertheless:" "The cattle prod's on the table, its thong around her wrist. No nonsense here" (241). When Moira is telling Offred her story, she talks about her punishment after her first escape attempt, a beating that left her feet swollen and useless for days: "back to the Center and the attentions of Aunt Lydia and her steel cable. She enjoyed that, you know. She pretended to do all that love-the-sinner, hate-the-sin stuff, but she enjoyed it" (248). It is the Aunts, too, that host the Women's Salvagings and Particicutions, public executions in that they are publicly shown and committed by the public. Aunt Lydia is the host of the Salvaging and enjoys the spotlight, lingering on stage over the list of names (275). This is the largest audience she may ever have; the most power over the most people she may ever feel. We are not told at all about what kind of people the Aunts were in the time "before," where they came from or how they were chosen. The only wider perspective, on the Aunts, comes from the "Historical Notes" epilogue, in Professor Pieixoto's academic presentation. He informs the audience that the elite were:

> "of the opinion from the outset that the best and most cost-effective way to control women for reproductive and other purposes was through women themselves. From this there were many historical precedents; in fact, no empire imposed by force or otherwise has ever been without this feature: control of the indigenous by members of their own group. In the case of Gilead, there were many women willing to serve as Aunts, either because of a genuine belief in what they called "traditional values," or for the benefits

> they might thereby acquire. When power is scare, a little of it is tempting. There was, too, a negative inducement: childless or infertile or older women who were not married could take service in the Aunts and thereby escape redundancy, and consequent shipment to the infamous Colonies" (308).

Like the Handmaids, the appeal of being an Aunt was rooted in a fear of the alternative, and the tantalizing offer of a scrap of power.

The Jezebels

Late in the novel, Offred has been secretly seeing the Commander at nights, indulging in secret and utterly illegal rendezvous to play *Scrabble* and use moisturizer. After some time and Offred is (relatively speaking) more comfortable around the Commander, he tells her that he has a surprise for her and is taking her out. "Out" ends up being sneaking her into "the club," called Jezebel's. Here, Wives and Handmaids aren't allowed. Jezebel's operates as a sort of speakeasy Playboy club, with contraband alcohol, cigarettes, and prostitutes in makeup and lurid outfits. The effect is dazzling, Offred overwhelmed by sheer sensation and stimulation after years of total austerity.

The Jezebels are the secret, taboo role for women in Gilead. "I recognize them as truants," Offred says. "The official creed denies them, denies their very existence, yet here they are. That is at least something" (235). As the Commander shows her around, Offred

is disguised as an “evening rental,” in high heels and a dancer's outfit done up in sequins and feathers. The Commander explains, feeling indulgent, that some of them are “real pros,” working girls “from the time before. They couldn't be assimilated, anyway, most of them prefer it here.” The rest are “quite a collection,” in the Commander's words, of once-professional women; a sociologist, a lawyer, a business executive. “They prefer it here, too” (237-238). Why he assumes that he doesn't explain, but offers Offred a drink, saying smugly, “You can have quite a good conversation if all you feel like is talking... You see, they do have some advantages here” (238). Admitting, somehow, that Offred is disadvantaged?

This is where Offred finally finds Moira again, one of the Jezebels, and arranges to meet her in the bathroom to finally talk. Moira is dressed in a satin bunny outfit, complete with ears, bow-tie, and fishnets, and remarks dryly that it's “government issue” (242). She had managed to escape from the Red Center a second time, and made it nearly to the border in Maine before being captured and tortured. After the torture was over, the guards decided that Moira was too dangerous to be returned to the Red Center, so she is shown a film of life cleaning up corpses and radiation in the Colonies, and told to choose: the Colonies, or Jezebel's. “Shit, nobody but a nun would pick the Colonies. I mean, I'm not a martyr” (249). Before admittance, Moira, like the rest of the Jezebels, is sterilized. Even in Gilead, a culture that prizes viable pregnancy above all else, these women are too low to be allowed to breed.

Like The Commander, Moira explains to Offred that Jezebel's is not that bad, and

that she should

> “figure out some way of getting in here. You'd have three or four good years before your snatch wears out and they send you to the bone-yard. The food's not bad and there's drink and drugs, if you want it, and we only work nights... Anyway, look at it this was: it's not so bad, there's lots of women around. Butch paradise, you might call it... They encourage it... The Aunts figure we're all damned anyway, they've given up on us, so it doesn't matter what sort of vice we get up to, and the Commander's don't give a piss what we do in our off time. Anyway, women on women sort of turns them on” (249).

Offred is surprised and dismayed to hear such bitter resignation in Moira's story; after all of her fight, after protests and escape and torture, Moira has finally given up. Worse, she accepts life in the Jezebel club as her best option.

Early in the novel, Offred and Ofglen see two men hanging on the Wall, marked as “gender traitors,” still wearing uniforms. She presumes that they “must have been caught together” (30), and the consequence is execution. This is only one of a list of hypocrisies coexisting in the Jezebel club, but the moral relativism is clear: crimes that men have decided are punishable by death are acceptable only when they are being done for men's own gratification.

Chapter Five: Mother, You Wanted a Women's Culture; Relationships in *The Handmaid's Tale*

As Offred builds the narrative of *The Handmaid's Tale,* the action of the novel is organized and divided by landmark events over time, with sections titled "Waiting Room" and "Jezebel's" interspersed with sections repeatedly titled "night"; meanwhile, it is Offred's relationships that propel the story forward and give meaning to her circumstances as well as context and structure to her sense of identity.

Throughout the novel, Offred remembers her mother, a classic stereotype of the second-wave feminism of the 60's; an intentional single mother, Take Back the Night and Pro-Choice rallies, anti-porn demonstrations and a rejection of beauty norms. In the time before, Offred's mother complains to her and Luke, that the young people "don't appreciate things… Don't you know how many women's lives, how many women's *bodies,* the tanks had to roll over just to get that far" (121). The role of the Handmaid is based on a lot of isolation, the strict fascist regime depending on monitoring its citizens closely and making them fear speaking freely. One of the rare times Handmaids have a chance to come together, to speak a little, and to support one another are Birth Days. Leaving Ofwarren's Birth Day, Offred is "wrung out, exhausted… we ache. Each of us holds in her lap a phantom, a ghost baby." Some of them are lactating, "fake milk," overwhelmed with the emotion of watching Ofwarren deliver and immediately hand over a baby that is not considered her own. "Mother, I think. Wherever you may be. Can you hear me? You

wanted a women's culture. Well, now there is one. It isn't what you meant, but it exists. Be thankful for small mercies" (127). In spite of everything that has gone wrong, and every way that our culture has regressed, it is this new sense of desperate sisterhood, at least between some, that is the most precious resistance and gives meaning to these women's lives within a society that allows them none.

Offred and Moira

Moira is a relief figure to Offred, her best friend from the time before that seems to be, in Offred's eyes, everything that Offred isn't. Offred and Moira go to college together, and in dorm rooms and cheap college apartments Moira comes around to raid Offred's cigarettes and cajole her into a night out. At night in the Commander's house, Offred mentally checks out, taking herself "somewhere good." The first nighttime memory she recalls for us is Moira, cracking dumb jokes about English papers and date rape (37-38). Like Aunt Lydia, Moira is a voice in Offred's head, but rather than serious instruction about Handmaid deportment and morality, Moira's commentary is dry, sarcastic remembrances of the time before, a nod to the absurdity of things now. "I'm laughing. She always made me laugh" (56). Offred has been at the Red Center about three weeks when Moira arrives, and the women carefully ignore one another until they get a chance to speak secretly in the bathroom. "It makes me feel safer, that Moira is here" (71). Later, whispering to Moira in the bathroom stall, Offred even thinks, "I feel ridiculously happy"

(73). She's exactly as safe as she was before, of course-- if not less so-- and has so recently lost her husband, child, and autonomy. Still, like being with Nick, companionship and emotional intimacy has become so precious that it supersedes the danger and grief. A true friend is precious, and a hundred times so when it's the only thing you have.

In the time before, Moira is vaguely described as some kind of activist, a queer woman working for "a woman's collective" who networks with other LGBTQ and marginalized in hiding from labels as "gender traitors." Offred remembers speaking to Moira on the phone the night that Congress is killed, and Moira says, "Look out... They've been building up to this. It's you and me against the wall, baby. She was quoting an expression of my mother's, but she wasn't intending to be funny" (174). Presumably, this is before people are literally being hung on the Wall. Beyond un-funny, Moira is far more literal than even she can guess.

Offred's methods in the Red Center and in her life as a Handmaid are to keep her head down, get through, and be careful. She is cautious observation at all times. Moira, on the other hand, won't be stifled. She tells Offred that she's got to escape, that she is "going bats" in here, and Offred feels panic and tries to talk her out of it: "I couldn't stand the thought of her not being here, with me. For me" (89). Moira does get out, fakes ill, gets carried out of the Red Center on a stretceteraher, but is back in less than a day: "She could not walk for a week, her feet would not fit into her shoes, they were too swollen. It was the feet they'd do, for a first offense. They used steel cables frayed at the ends" (91). Undeterred, eventually she tries again and makes it farther-- Offred hears through the grapevine that one day Moira flooded the toilet, and when Aunt Elizabeth came in to fix

it, held the metal connector from the flush against her neck and marched her to the basement where she took her clothes and cattle prod. As word gets around the Red Center that Moira has escaped, the buzz among the other Handmaids is intoxicating, with even the uncertainty of her fate consuming their imagination. “Moira had power now, she'd been set loose, she'd set herself loose. She was now a loose woman. I think we found this frightening. Moira was like an elevator with open sides. She made us dizzy. Already we were losing the taste for freedom, already we were finding these walls secure… Nevertheless Moira was our fantasy. We hugged her to us, she was with us in secret, a giggle; she was lava beneath the crust of daily life. In the light of Moira, the Aunts were less fearsome and more absurd. Their power had a flaw to it. They could be shanghaied in toilets. The audacity was what we liked” (133). In the scope of Gilead, the Commanders have set themselves up as God figures of authoritarian Christian tradition, the benevolent paterfamilias that maintains total control, awe, and fear. In contract, Moira is the unknown, the lawless, the divine feminine that cannot be contained and, most importantly, is powerful because she made herself so.

The afternoon after Offred “really” speaks to Ofglen for the first time, Offred lays in her room too keyed-up to nap, and thinks about the fan in her room: “If I were Moira, I'd know how to take it apart, reduce it to its cutting edges. I have no screwdriver, but if I were Moira I could do it without a screwdriver. I'm not Moira. What would she tell me, about the Commander, if she were here? Probably she'd disapprove… Moira was always more logical than I am” (171). Offred describes Moira in the past tense as she speaks about herself in the present tense; her hope in Moira as a person is fading, but Moira as a

concept and as the personification of freedom occupies her thoughts. While Offred's history leading to the Red Center is clearly explained-- her affair with Luke leading to a second marriage, and the birth of their daughter-- we don't know anything about Moira's personal life beyond some quips about “switching to women” and allusions from Offred to their being together in college. What is it that qualified Moira to be a Handmaid, rather than a Martha, or immediately declared Unwoman? Did she ever have a child, or even an abortion? The details aren't merely foggy, they are utterly ignored; the hows and whys of Moira's being are totally unnecessary to her character. When she is recaptured after her second escape, she no longer has the “privilege” of “choosing” the Red Center: “They said I was too dangerous... They said I would be a corrupting influence” (249). Judging by the way Moira's presence lingers with Offred, maybe they were right.

Later, once Offred sees Moira again at the Jezebel's club, she hears the rest of the story: disguised as an Aunt, Moira makes it as far as a Quaker safe house she remembers from her time in the resistance, and then again on a chicken truck heading for the border at Maine before getting sold out, recaptured, tortured and interrogated. Whispering in the bathroom once more, Moira explains the Jezebel Club to Offred, and it breaks Offred's heart the way nothing else has yet to see Moira content with her jail:

> “I had my choice, they said, this or the Colonies. Well, shit, nobody but a nun would pick the Colonies. I mean, I'm not a martyr... So here I am. They even give you face cream. You should figure out some way of getting in here. You'd have three or four good years before your snatch wears out and they send you to the bone-yard. The food's not bad and there's drink and drugs,

> if you want them, and we only work nights... Don't worry about me... Anyway, look at it this way: it's not so bad, there's lots of women around. Butch paradise, you might call it" (249).

I'm not a martyr, Moira explains, which is exactly the problem for Offred-- Offred's hope for a resistance, for vengeance, and for freedom hinge on an ideal of Moira that takes apart fans without a screwdriver and fashions them into weapons, not a Moira that wears a bunny suit, sips cocktails, and coquettishly entertains Gilead's elite. Then again, Offred understands that what disappoints her in Moira is what disappoints her in herself: "She is frightening me now, because what I hear in her voice is indifference, a lack of volition. Have they really done it to her then, taken away something-- what?-- that used to be so central to her? And how can I expect her to go own, with my idea of courage, live it through, act it out, when I myself do not? I don't want her to be like me... I want gallantry from her, swash-buckling, heroism, single-handed combat. Something I lack (249). Offred's disappointment is muted beneath her joy at hearing Moira's sarcastic commentary again, but this is the end of Moira's story. "I'd like to tell a story about how Moira escaped, for good this time. Or if I couldn't tell that, I'd like to say she blew up Jezebel's, with fifty Commanders inside it. I'd like her to end with something daring and spectacular, some outrage, something that would befit her. But as far as I know that didn't happen. I don't know how she ended, or even if she did, because I never saw her again" (250). Here are the limits of Moira's imagination, the line where idealism breaks against the cold shore of reality. Offred wants to continue to be comforted by her imaginary Moira, cling to her figurehead like a child to a doll, but finally acknowledges that Moira

does no more than Offred or anyone else.

Offred and Serena Joy

The Commander's Wife, Serena Joy, is head of the household and within the bounds of the Wife/Handmaid structure, perhaps the person with the most control of Offred. She is a petite woman, with ash blond hair and a snub nose, with diamond rings on her fingers. She is somewhat older than Offred, as Offred remembers seeing her on TV when she was "eight or nine," she walks with a limp & cane, and her hands are arthritic-- but this is all we know. From seeing her on TV Offred is familiar with her from the time before, and recollects mockingly her name, Serena Joy, and the knowledge that that was just her stage name-- her real name was Pam-- but a stupid one that sounds like a shampoo brand (44). Or at least, this is what she tells us; in the epilogue, Professor Pieixoto explains that he doesn't think Serena Joy or Pam could have been the Wife's real name as it doesn't match the records of any of the Commander's Wives, and that this must have been a "malicious invention" by the narrator. Still, we do know that Offred changed many of the names in her story, so how "real" Serena Joy's name isn't clear to us. Later, Offred will mock Serena Joy in her head as "Saint Serena" on her knees: "I often amused myself this way, with small mean-minded bitter jokes about her; but not for long" (153). Like Winston in 1984,

these little thought crimes are her last form of resistance.

The night Offred arrives at the Commander's house, it is Serena Joy that answers the door immediately-- "she must have been waiting behind it." This seems like it isn't the norm for Wives or Handmaids, since Offred was "expecting a Martha," but it's the Wife instead. Serena Joy stands in the doorway, neither coming out or allowing Offred in, and says dryly, "So you're the new one." Offred understands: "She wanted me to feel that I could not come into the house unless she said so. There is push and shove, these days, over such toeholds" (13). Offred-- this Offred, *the new one*-- is just the next to show up, like a new stove being delivered. Eventually, once the Guardian with Offred leaves, Serena Joy says "You might as well come in... Shut the door behind you" and walks away, leading Offred to Serena Joy's sitting room where she takes her armchair while Offred stands in front of her, head bowed. Serena Joy smokes, which gives Offred "hope," since it means that they must have come from the Black Market; "She then was a woman who might bend the rules" (14). She allows Offred to sit, "just this time," and when Offred calls her "ma'am," responds irritably-- "Don't call me ma'am... You're not a Martha." Offred "didn't ask what I was supposed to call her, because I could see that she hoped I would never have the occasion to call her anything at all." Offred is disappointed by the coolness of Serena's tone, her businesslike demeanor; the Wife at her last posting mostly kept to her room drinking, and Offred "wanted, then, to turn her into an older sister, a motherly figure, someone who would understand and protect me... I wanted this one to be different. I wanted to think I would have liked her, in another time and place, another life. But I could see already that I wouldn't have liked her, nor she me" (16). It would have made sense for

the women of the house to band together, for them to confide in and aid one another. Later in the novel they do, to a point, as Serena Joy arranges for Offred to try and become pregnant by Nick. Still, that interaction leads to no closeness between them. Instead, it is the Commander that reaches out to Offred, while Serena Joy remains the enemy.

Offred and Serena Joy are highly attuned to the other's presence in the house, each with their own defined territories; Offred takes the back stairs while Serena takes the front, Offred takes meals in her room while Serena has the dining room; Offred goes for a single daily walk while Serena Joy works or knits in the garden. They keep tabs on one another the better to avoid each other: “I don't like to come upon the Commander's wife unexpectedly,” thinks Offred, and “She doesn't speak to me, unless she can't avoid it” (12-13). The night the two women meet, Serena Joy informs Offred, “I want to see as little of you as possible... I expect you feel the same way about me... As far as I'm concerned, this is like a business transaction. But if I get trouble, I'll give trouble back” (15). Later, looking at Serena Joy's ringed hands, Offred thinks, “She probably longed to slap my face. They can hit us, there's Scriptural precedent. But not with any implement. Only with their hands” (16). The Wife resents Offred, as Offred's presence in her house is a constant reminder of her own failings-- Offred would not be there had Serena Joy, over the years, been able to bear a child herself. The night of the Ceremony, Serena Joy shows up in a dress and veil embroidered in white flowers, and behind a blank face Offred thinks of her, “No use for you... You can't use them anymore, you're withered” (82). It seems like her hatred of the Handmaid is impersonal rather than related to Offred herself-- or rather, directed towards *all* of the Offreds rather than “ours” in particular. When Offred meets

her for the first time, she remembers Aunt Lydia's words: “Try to think of it from their point of view... It isn't easy for them” (14). It's funny that Aunt Lydia admits that this might not be ideal, since she seems convinced that this new society has achieved nothing but good. Apparently what little sympathy Aunt Lydia carries is reserved for the Wives. Offred remembers Serena Joy as a public figure from the time before-- the only reason she knows her name-- when Serena was a televangelist’s prop and singed who advocated for good, conservative Christian family values that obviously lead to the uprising of the Sons of Jacob and her husband coming into power. On some level, Serena Joy wanted this, or at least thought she did. We and Offred don't know what she is thinking, but it seems evident that she should have been more careful in what she wished for.

During the Ceremony, both women lay on the bed, fully clothed or near it, with Offred between Serena Joy's spread legs and her head on Serena's stomach. Offred holds her hands above her head, and they are gripped in Serena Joy's: “This is supposed to signify that we are one flesh, one being. What it really means is that she is in control, of the process and thus of the product. If any. The rings of her left hand cut into my fingers. It may or may not be revenge” (94). Moreover, it keeps Offred from touching the Commander beyond the essential parts; as Aunt Lydia reminds the women at the Red Center, their hands are not essential to their purpose as Handmaids. The Commander, after he comes, silently adjusts his clothes, nods, and leaves the room. Offred is supposed to lie still for ten minutes for optimal conception while the wife takes the time for “silent meditation, but Serena Joy orders her up: “You can get up now. Get up and get out... There is loathing in her voice, as if the touch of my flesh sickens and contaminates her... Which

of us is it worse for, her or me?" (95). The night of the arranged tryst with Nick, Serena Joy leads Offred down the stairs, and Offred catches a glimpse of the two of them in the mirror: "I see the two of us, a blue shape, a red shape... Myself, my obverse" (259). The old role of Wife has splintered, fractured by task, the Wife and her Handmaid. Two sides of a coin, interdependent.

The night Offred arrives, Serena Joy says to Offred, " As for my husband, he's just that. My husband. I want that to be perfectly clear. Til death do us part. It's final... It's one of the things we fought for" (16). Offred doesn't reflect on this further, and until the Commander summons her to his office via Nick, makes absolutely no contact or communication with him outside of the strict bonds of the ceremony. In hindsight, Serena Joy must be thinking about the "last one," the Offred before Offred, whom she caught sneaking out with the Commander. We don't know if the last Handmaid slept with the Commander outside of the Ceremony the way that Offred does the night at the Jezebel club, or what Serena Joy knows about their relationship. Does she assume that they've been having a physical affair, or is it the emotional affair that she so resents? For Offred, too, things become awkward after she seeing the Commander:

> "Serena Joy had changed for me, too. Once I'd merely hated her for her part in what was being done to me; and because she hated me too and resented my presence, and because she would be the one to raise my child, should I be able to have one after all. But now, although I still hated her... the hatred was no longer pure and simple. Partly I was jealous of her; but how could I be jealous of a woman who so obviously dried-up and unhappy? You can

> only be jealous of someone who has something you think you ought to have yourself. Nevertheless I was jealous. But I also felt guilty about her. I felt I was an intruder, in a territory that out to have been hers... I was taking something away from her, although she didn't know it...Why should I care? I told myself. She's nothing to me, she dislikes me, she'd have me out of the house in a minute, or worse, if she could think up any excuse at all... Also: I now had power over her, of a kind, although she didn't know it. And I enjoyed it. Why pretend? I enjoyed it a lot" (160-162).

This isn't the first time Offred played the mistress role; apparently she snuck around with Luke for two years before he managed to "break free" of his wife. Now, finally, this particular sin is outside of her control, as she certainly cannot afford to offend the Commander; Offred is absolved on a technicality, though no one from the state to Aunt Lydia to Serena Joy would agree.

Later, after some time has passed and Offred still has not conceived, Serena Joy summons Offred to her in the garden in their only quasi-friendly conversation of the novel. She orders Offred to offer her hands for winding wool. It's the middle of summer, and she even allows Offred to sit: "It's too damn close in there. You need some air." Neutrally and calmly, the two women talk about how Offred isn't pregnant yet, and Serena Joy shockingly and blasphemously suggests that perhaps it's the Commander's fault. Offred agrees, careful not to sound too sure one way or the other, and finally Serena suggests that Offred try sleeping with Nick. It's a risk, as Offred points out, but Serena Joy counters: "'You might as well.' Which is what I think too" (206). This is Offred's third and

final post; *give me children or else I die*. The consequences should she be found fraternizing with Nick would be exactly the same. At least this way, there's a chance. Finally, once Offred agrees, Serena Joy offers her a prize: “A picture... Of her. Your little girl. But only maybe.” With this, Offred realizes that *she knows;* til now Offred had no idea if her daughter was even alive or dead. And all this time, Serena Joy knows where she is, and close enough to get, somehow, a photograph. Offred is furious-- “The bitch, not to tell me, bring me news, any news at all. Not even to let on. She's made of wood, or iron, she can't imagine.... But I can't let go of this hope.” Obediently, calmly, she nods; indulgently, Serena Joy even gives her a cigarette, tells her she can ask Rita for a match. “She's actually smiling, coquettishly even... 'Only the one though!' she adds roguishly” (206). What's one little piece of contraband compared to treason? The night Serena arranges for Offred to sneak out, she leads Offred through the house, and whispers instructions in a low voice: “Odd, to hear her whispering, as if she is one of us. Usually Wives do not lower their voices” (260). In breaking the rules together, for a brief moment Offred and Serena Joy are near equals.

At the end of the novel, Serena Joy discovers makeup stains on her blue cloak, and the sequined dancer's outfit, and understands immediately what the Commander and Offred have been doing. She lashes out at Offred, the only safe vent for her anger; maybe she understands that Offred and the Handmaid before couldn't have dared to refuse the Commander what he asked, but Serena joy is just as unable to blame him.

“I trusted you,” she says to Offred, looming over her from the doorstep; “I tried to help you.... How could you be so vulgar? I *told* him..... Behind my back. You could have left

me something… Just like the other one. A slut. You'll end up the same" (287). Offred walks to her room, stoic, unable to flee or fight back or do anything except carry on. That evening, the back van comes for her, Mayday sent for by Nick. The Commander and Serena Joy are fearful and incensed; one Eye tells the Commander Offred is being arrested for "Violation of state secrets," and Serena Joy pales. "'Bitch,' she says. 'After all he did for you'" (294). What is she referring to; what did the Commander do for Offred that was so good, that would have bought her loyalty? Should the night out that Serena Joy was furious over hours before now be considered a good thing, a fond memory? We don't know. It's the end of the last tape, and those are the last words Serena Joy and Offred exchange.

Offred and the Marthas

Two Marthas work in the Commander's household; Rita, who cooks and runs the kitchen; and Cora, who cleans and assists Rita as needed. Even more so than with Serena Joy, Offred longs for a relationship with Rita and Cora that she does not get. The Marthas disapprove of Offred, or rather the office of Handmaid; at least Rita does, while Cora is more sympathetic. Eavesdropping outside of closed doors one day, Offred overhears Rita say to Cora that she "wouldn't debase herself like that." Cora doesn't buy it, asks what Rita "would do, supposing?" Rita replies, "Go to the Colonies… They have the choice." "With the Unwomen, and starve to death and Lord knows what all? Said Cora. Catch you…

Anyways, they're doing it for us all... or so they say. If I hadn't of got my tubes tied, it could have been me, say I was ten years younger. It's not that bad. It's not what you'd call hard work." "Better her than me," Rita says. Offred walks in then, and the two women look guilty, conscious of talking about Offred behind her back; "That day, Cora was more pleasant to me than usual, Rita more surly" (10). Though neither woman is friendly with Offred, that first response about sums it up.

Offred's interactions with Rita and Cora are businesslike and bare-bones, interactions at the bare minimum per policy. Rita is indifferent to her at best, frequently curt and short, as neutral as possible without outright insubordination or disrespect. After Offred's walks, she returns the groceries to Rita, who inspects them disparagingly: "She's thinking she could have done better herself... she envies me the walk. In this house we all envy each other something" (47). Meanwhile, Offred envies Rita her kitchen; the smell of baking bread, the warmth-- the knives, the matches. At times, Offred is simply another chore to be dealt with; before the Ceremony, Handmaids are given a bath, and supervised by a Martha to prevent any drownings or other accidents, accidental or otherwise. "Who's doing the bath?' says Rita, to Cora, not to me. 'I got to tenderize this bird.' 'I'll do it later,' says Cora, 'after the dusting.' 'Just so it gets done,' says Rita. They're talking about me as though I can't hear. To them I'm a household chore, one among many" (48). It's Rita Offred asks about the Handmaid before her, the one that carved the *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*, and Rita is tight-lipped. "She didn't work out... What you don't know won't hurt you, was all she would say" (53). Aside from that, most of their interaction is through food. "The thigh of a chicken, overcooked. Better than bloody, which is the other

way she does it. Rita has a way of making her resentments known" (65). Like the other women of the novel, Rita expresses the little power she has in whatever way she can.

Cora is a bit more deferential, the one to bring Offred's meals up to her room on a tray, knocking at the door before entering: "I like her for that. It means she thinks I have some of what we used to call privacy left" (65). When the two of them are alone together, Cora is shy of Offred, not speaking or looking her in the eye, but she's excited about the prospect for a baby. "'Maybe we'll have one, soon,' she says, shyly. By *we* she means me. It's up to me to repay the team, justify my food and keep, like a queen ant with eggs. Rita may disapprove of me, but Cora does not. Instead she depends on me. She hopes, and I am the vehicle of her hope... I would rather have the disapproval, I feel more worthy of it" (135). One night Offred falls asleep in the wardrobe, hand on the *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum* graffiti, and the next morning Cora comes in with the breakfast tray and screams, thinking Offred has hanged herself like the last Offred. Most of the breakfast is ruined, but both women know it would kick up too much fuss to request another; quietly, they agree that Offred can do without this morning, leaving Offred and Cora with a small secret to share. At this point, secrets are the main fabric holding the household together; Offred has secrets with the Commander, with Nick, with Serena Joy, now with Cora, and even with the dead Offred. "It pleased me that she was willing to lie for me, even in such a small thing, even for her own advantage," Offred thinks, "It was a link between us" (152).

Like with Serena Joy, Offred imagines a longed- for friendship that could have

been, between the serving-class women of the house.

> "Despite Rita's closed face and pressed lips, I would like to stay here, in the kitchen. Cora might come in, from somewhere else in the house, carrying her bottle of lemon oil and her duster, and Rita would made coffee… and we would talk, about aches and pains, illnesses, our feet, out backs… We would nod our heads as punctuation to each other's voices, signaling that yes, we know all about it. We would exchange remedies and try to outdo one another… How I used to despise such talk. Now a long for it. At least it was talk. An exchange, of sorts… But even if I were to ask, even if I were to violate decorum to that extent, Rita would not allow it. She would be too afraid. The Marthas are not supposed to fraternize with us" (10-11).

Isolation is a key instrument of fascist rule; in the article "Get Out of Gilead: Anti-Blackness in *The Handmaid's Tale*," Nair points out that rules created for Handmaids as a class recall slavery-era restrictions on African-Americans as well as Jim Crow laws, including bans on reading, writing, and congregating (Nair 2017). Even if she could sit and chat with Rita and Cora, the other women seem totally uninterested in spending any time with her. Instead she is alone, a caste of one.

Offred Among Other Handmaids

Like with the Marthas, Handmaids are discouraged from fraternizing, but do spend a

prescribed amount of time with one another; in training at the Red Center, in pairs on their daily walks, and at public events like Birth Days, Prayvaganzas, and Salvagings. At the Red Center, in the gymnasium-turned-dorm at night, the Handmaids-in-training reach out their hands between guard patrols in order to touch fingertips and whisper their true names to one another. In the article "Identity, Resistance, and Complicity in *The Handmaid's Tale"* by Stillman and Johnson, the authors identify isolation as a weapon of Gilead: "The structure of the household isolates Handmaids: each is the only Handmaid in the house, usually disliked by the Commander's wife, and more trouble than help to the Marthas… she has little to do" (Stillman Johnson 74). Community is something that Gilead actively plans against for Handmaids.

When Moira comes to the Red Center, she and Offred occasionally find moments to talk, but the risk of being overheard is perilous; not just by the Aunts, but by another Handmaid that might actually be a true believer. Offred and Moira schedule meetings in the bathroom, whispering to one another and touching fingers through a small hole in the wall. After Moira's first escape attempt, she is beaten, and left in bed to recover. Without words, the other Handmaids leave little packets of sugar at her bedside; they feel compelled to offer *something*, even if useless: "it was the only thing we could find to steal, to give" (91). It's the thought that counts.

Offred's assigned walk partner is Ofglen, the Handmaid from next-door. Though they speak every day, the two women are formal with one another; "She has never said anything that was not strictly orthodox, but then, neither have I. She may be a real

believer, a Handmaid in more than name. I can't take the risk" (19). Eventually, Ofglen opens up to her, but it takes weeks if not months. Standing at the Soul Scrolls store, the two Handmaids manage to look like they're praying while meeting one another's eyes for the first time in the window reflection. "There's a shock in seeing; it's like seeing somebody naked, for the first time. There is risk, suddenly, in the air between us, where there was none before. Even this meeting of eyes holds danger. Though there's nobody near. At last Ofglen speaks. 'Do you think God listens,' she says, 'to these machines?' She is whispering, out habit at the Center. In the past this would have been a trivial enough remark, a kind of scholarly speculation. Right now it's treason... 'No,' I say. She lets out her breath, a long sigh of relief. We have crossed the invisible line together" (168). Not that that barrier has passed, Ofglen slips Offred small bits of information, and most importantly, lets her know that this is more of "us," that there is a resistance: "It occurs to me that she may be a spy, a plant, set to trap me; such is the soil in which we grow. But I can't believe it; hope is rising in me, like sap in a tree. Blood in a wound. We have made an opening" (169). From Ofglen, Offred learns that Janine's baby is "a shredder" after all, that the password of the resistance is "Mayday." Ofglen tries to involve Offred, encourages her to funnel back any information she can get about her Commander, but as Offred becomes more wrapped up with Nick, she becomes too cautious.

Birth Days, Prayvaganzas, and Salvagings are prized as an opportunity to get a little bit of news, or at least the hope of it. At the Birth Day, another Handmaid asks Offred, "'Are you looking for anyone?' 'Moira,' I say, just as low. 'Dark hair, freckles.' 'No,' the woman says. I don't know her... 'But I'll watch for you' ...Sometimes you can find things

out, on Birth days" (124). Birth Days are the time when Offred feels most connected to the other Handmaids, the excitement and raw energy of attending their fellow giving birth uniting and driving them together. "It's coming it's coming, like a bugle, a call to arms… We grip each other's hands, we are no longer single" (125). Once the baby is born and passed over to the wife, the Handmaids surround Janine, protecting her from the sight of her baby in the Wife's arms. "We are jubilant, it's a victory, for all of us. We've done it" (127). They move and celebrate and grieve as one, just for a minute. Soon each Handmaid will be deposited back in her posting, alone.

Chapter Six: Women Were Not Protected Then-- the Self-Righteousness of Gilead

The prospect of Gilead is meant to be horrifying to the reader, as Offred slowly explains to us the pains and rules of the Handmaid's role. A significant part of what makes it so horrifying is the perspective of the privileged in Gilead that they are doing the Handmaids a favor, creating these new social structures for the greater good. The Aunts teach the Handmaids this at the Red Center, classes and lessons about how lucky they are to be where they are now, in positions of honor. Aunt Lydia, in particular, is the voice of the new order, indoctrinating the Handmaids with pleas for them to understand just how good they have it. “There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underestimate it” (24). Offred is grateful to be alive, sometimes, and understands that this is a bargain she made to keep her life, even if it wasn't much of a choice. “Where I am is not a prison but a privilege, as Aunt Lydia said, who was in love with either/or” (8). Though the privilege of “being allowed to live” isn't much, it still counts. Sunshine is still warm; flowers still grow. Some things are still good.

Gilead's gender roles require an extremely “traditional/conservative” performance of femininity from women. In practice, this means women spend their time gardening, knitting, cooking, cleaning, and mothering; they all wear long, modest dresses with no makeup, jewelry, or other beauty products; hair must be “long but covered... Saint Paul

said it's either that or a close shave" (62); in demeanor they are meant to be modest, demure, and deferential always. Offred's room is lightly decorated, with a rag rug and a framed painting of flowers. "This is the kind of touch they like: folk art, archaic, made by women, in their spare time, from things that have no further use. A return to traditional values. Waste not, want not. I am not being wasted. Why do I want?" (7). Moreover, being a woman in Gilead means a lot of time spent waiting patiently; like the Odyssey's Penelope, to wait is female virtue. Offred remembers nineteenth century paintings, with lush women reclining lazily in fields and among harems. "These pictures were supposed to be erotic, and I thought they were, at the time; but I see now what they were really about. They were paintings about suspended animation; about waiting, about objects not in use. They were paintings about boredom. But maybe boredom is erotic, when women do it, for me" (69). What isn't erotic, now, when women do it at the bidding of men?

As much as Aunt Lydia enjoys glamorizing the "honorable" status of Handmaids, she is at least willing to acknowledge how much the women are giving up, though she truly believes that they're the better for it. "We were a society dying, said Aunt Lydia, of too much choice" (25). Looking at her summer dresses (exactly the same as the winter dresses but in cotton instead of wool), Offred remembers Aunt Lydia lamenting "the spectacles women used to make of themselves. Oiling themselves like roast meat on a spit, and bare backs and shoulders, on the street, in public, and legs, not even stockings on them, no wonder those things used to happen. *Things."* Here Aunt Lydia cries, telling the assembled prisoners, "I'm doing my best, she said. I'm trying to give you the best chance you have" (55). In the grand scheme of things, she might not actually be wrong-- it's the

chance to be a Handmaid that is saving these women from death, and Aunt Lydia is teaching them how to survive in that role-- but as Offred compares her expression to that of a dead rat, she does not come across sympathetically. When Offred and Ofglen meet the Japanese tourists, the visitors ask to take the Handmaid's picture, and Offred shakes her head no: “I know better than to say yes. Modesty is invisibility, said Aunt Lydia. Never forget it. To be seen-- to be *seen*-- is to be-- her voice trembled-- penetrated. What you must be, girls, is impenetrable” (28). The focus on the passive act, of *being seen*, is strange but not unfamiliar; let the blame lie with women who invite (by merely existing) the male gaze rather than the men gazing. Later, when Nick speaks to Offred, she remembers Aunt Lydia again: “All flesh is weak. All flesh is grass, I corrected her in my head. They can't help it, she said. God made them that way but he did not make you that way. He made you different. It's up to you to set the boundaries. Later you will be thanked” (45). “A thing is valued,” Aunt Lydia says, “only if it is rare and hard to get. We want you to be valued, girls” (114). Maintaining modesty and purity is women's work.

Walking through the city with Ofglen, Offred remembers going for runs on those same sidewalks, wearing fluorescent running shoes, but also remembers how she would only run during the day for fear of her safety. “Women were not protected then,” Offred acknowledges. “I remember the rules, rules that were never spelled out but that every woman knew; Don't open your door to a stranger, even if he says he is the police. Make him slide his ID under the door... Now we walk along the same street, in red pairs, and no one shouts obscenities at us, speaks to us, touches us. No one whistles” (24). By this Offred manages to sound a little disappointed, which is distasteful. Walking past the

checkpoint of Angels, Offred imagines their eyes on her, how hard it must be to be celibate men, too young to truly be blamed for Gilead and forbidden even from self-release, "a sacrilege" now (22).

Now that Offred and the other women have adjusted to this new normal, old-normal things from the time before have become scandalous, spectacles. Walking to market, Offred and Ofglen see a group of Japanese tourists, including two women, and are stopped in their tracks. The Japanese women wear "normal" clothes, skirts above the knee, lipstick and high heels. "We are fascinated, but also repelled. They seem undressed. It has taken so little time to change our minds, about things like this. Then I think: I used to dress like that. That was freedom" (28). Offred points out that Aunt Lydia loves the Dutch painting aesthetic of the Handmaids lined up in a neat row, hands clasped and eyes down beneath their wings like a line of Precious Moments statuettes. Just as the role for each woman is made evident in her uniform, the outward appearance and flaunting the body are emblematic for a more existential meaning of freedom. Later, walking into the Jezebel club, Offred is again stunned and shocked by the visibility of women's bodies: "There are a great many buttocks in this room. I am no longer used to them." Their outfits are attention-grabbing, garish and "tropical," and the shock of seeing made-up faces for the first time in so long shocks Offred; "their eyes look too big to me, too dark and shimmering, their mouths too red, too wet, blood-dipped and glistening; or, on the other hand, too clownish." The Commander brags that this is "just like walking into the past," and Offred tentatively agrees, but finds that she cannot really remember if that's true. "A movie about the past is not the same as the past" (235). Offred, of course, is made up the

same to blend in, but her makeup job is clumsy and soon disheveled over the course of the night; the lipstick smudges and her sequined outfit begins to shed. “You look like the Whore of Babylon,” Moira quips, and Offred grins back, “Isn't that what I'm supposed to look like?”(242). In the Jezebel's club, the old stereotypes of whores and working girls have been restored. At the end of the night, the Commander finally leads Offred upstairs, and they have sex for the first and perhaps only time outside of the Ceremony nights. The Commander is excited, and thinks Offred should be as well, and suggests that they “jump the gun” on the Ceremony. Apparently he's a frequent patron of the club, since Moira recognizes him and has “had him,” but despite night after night of *Scrabble* and old magazines the only time he tries to sleep with Offred is when she is finally out of her chaste uniform and performing the “traditional” (to the Commander at least) idea of a whore.

The Commander is of the upper echelons of Gilead, one of the founders of the Sons of Jacob and therefore directly responsible for all of the rules that govern Offred's life. Still, even though he *did* this, he seems to understand that something could be wanting from her life. Via Nick, the Commander invites Offred to his study at nights, to relax, play *Scrabble,* and read. A few, small immoralities that don't affect the overall social order in and of themselves, but that betray the overall principles that govern the Handmaid's role: women are weak, women are illogical, women's minds can be altered by exposure to immoral media. Thinking he may be testing her, Offred puts a show at resisting the *Vogue,* but the Commander explains “with what may or may not have been irony,” “What's dangerous in the hands of the multitudes is safe enough for those whose motives are… Beyond reproach” (158). The first night, the Commander is slightly deferential, cordial

and welcoming, obviously making an attempt to make Offred feel comfortable. "'You must find this strange,' he says.... 'I guess it is a little strange' ...And he does look embarrassed, *sheepish* was the word" (138). Later, Offred suggests that maybe she shouldn't come anymore, that it might not be safe, and the Commander looks sad for a moment: "'I thought you were enjoying it," he says lightly... 'I wish you would.' 'You want my life to be bearable to me,' I say... If my life is bearable, maybe what they're doing is alright after all. 'Yes,' he says, 'I do. I would prefer it'" (187). Like the "benevolent" plantation owner that is willing to give his slaves time off for Christmas or feed them above starvation levels, the most generous praise that can be said for the Commander is that he treats his Handmaid as slightly more of a human than the rest of his peers do; the Commander is willing to allow just slightly more happiness in Offred's life as long as it stays totally secret, with no chance of infecting the rest of the population or jeopardizing his own status. If anything, even if the Commander can acknowledge the challenges of Gilead, he believes that this is still the best choice, that in balance the good outweighs the evil:

> We've given them more than we've taken away, said the Commander. Think of the trouble they had before. Don't you remember the singles' bars, the indignity of high school blind dates? The meat market... Think of the human misery... This way they all get a man, nobody's left out... This way they're protected, they can fulfill their biological destinies in peace. With full support and encouragement... All we've done is return things to Nature's norm (219-220).

In explaining this to Offred, the Commander uses *they* and *them* as if Offred isn't one of

them; still, he acts like he's doing women as a whole a favor, like a father preventing his daughter from eating too many sweets so she doesn't get sick. *This way they're protected,* he says, every word creepily paternalistic. Women are in danger, certainly, but rather than remove the dangers, Gilead has placed their treasured pets in a cage.

Despite the Commander's pitiful attempts at benevolence, he naturally believes wholeheartedly in the mission of Gilead; the key distinction is that he understands Gilead for what it is, or at least a closer approximation than what they are willing to admit to the public: that it is a system that predicates on a natural inferiority of women and structures life to leave white, Christian men with fundamentalist conservative Christian values in control and cater to their needs. The Commander does not pretend, the way that the Aunts do, that the Handmaids should be honored to have even been given a chance to *participate* in this society. If anything, however, this is even more of a condemnation of his morality. The Aunts, at least, are working in support of a system that they truly believe is *good*, as deluded or sadistic as that belief may be. Conversely, the Commander understands that Gilead is *not good,* but willingly engages in it, creates it, and enforces it anyways.

If he truly believes in anything, it's that men were the real victims of modern life, "in the past." The modernization of women and second-wave feminism of the 1970's left unfortunate rich, white Christian men without enough of a purpose in life:

> "The problem wasn't only with the women, he says. The main problem was

> with the men. There was nothing for them anymore.
>
> Nothing? I say. But they had…
>
> There was nothing for them to do, he says.
>
> They could make money, I say, a little nastily…
>
> It's not enough, he says. It's too abstract. I mean there was nothing for them to do with women… I'm not talking about sex, he says. That was part of it, the sex was too easy. Anyone could just buy it. There was nothing to work for, nothing to fight for. We have the stats from that time. You know what they were complaining about the most? Inability to feel. Men were turning off on sex, even. They were turning off on marriage.
>
> Do they feel now? I say.
>
> Yes, he says, looking at me. They do" (210).

Women are enslaved, deprived of bodily autonomy, and eventually put out to pasture when they can serve men no more purpose, but at least rich white men can finally feel the thrill of the chase again. The Commander sees the sexual liberation of the seventies and eighties as a personal affront to men; the inclusion of "gender traitors" in the list of crimes punishable by execution reinforces the straight male ideal of sexuality existing to meet their needs. Women being able to hold jobs, own property, and general independence left men feeling tragically un-depended on.

When the Commander asks Offred what she thinks "about what we've done… How things have worked out," she cannot bring herself to answer, struggling even to say "I have no opinion" in a neutral voice. The Commander sighs, hearing the subtext, and says "You

can't make an omelet without breaking eggs… We thought he could do better… Better never means better for everyone, he says. Better always means worse for some" (211). Offred is just one among the huge swath of *some* he is referring to, but the conversation goes no further, never quite bringing the Commander up to "remorse." In Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex,* the author describes the Othering of women, and how that division has been orchestrated by the patriarchy for their own interests:

> History has shown us that men have always keep in their hands all concrete powers; since the earliest days of the patriarchate they have thought best to keep woman in a state of dependence; their codes of law have been set up against her; and thus she has been definitely established as the Other. This arrangement suited the economic interests of the males; but it conformed also to their ontological and moral pretensions (de Beauvoir 159).

The deep indignity of women daring to do what *men* do-- engage in casual sex, work outside of the home, be real people with real feelings-- disrupted the Madonna/whore dichotomy like a tidal wave, leaving men with too many whores and not enough Madonnas to pursue. In the same chapter of *The Second Sex,* de Beauvoir discusses the origins of the menarchal fear in men-- the rigorous taboo forbidding intimacy with a woman in a "state of menstrual impurity" -- and how this "uncleanness" affects the entire female identity: "Man finds it repugnant to come upon the dreaded essence of the mother in the woman he possesses he is determined to dissociate these two aspects of femininity…. Man is on the defensive against woman in so far as she represents the vague source of the world and obscure organic development" (166). The solution to this old-as-

new existential angst: separate women into groups of Madonnas and Whores once and for all, and forbid women from working or owning property so that men can finally have a purpose once more.

On a triangular spectrum between Handmaids and Aunts and Commanders the Wives hover somewhere in the middle, in strange positions of power and respect while still totally limited by their gender in their appearance, act, pastimes, and relationships. While not physically subject to compulsory reproduction the way that Handmaids are-- indeed, said pregnancies are for their benefit-- resentments breed in relationships between Wife and Handmaid, as Serena Joy despises and avoids Offred. Wives can move about the neighborhood a little, visiting other Wives, and Serena Joy at least has enough black-market connections to get cigarettes, but they are veiled and robed like the Handmaids and still kept within the household, occupied with mild domestic tasks like knitting and gardening. Like the Aunts, we understand that Serena Joy had some kind of hand in the inception of Gilead, with a reputation in the time before as an advocate for "traditional family values." This is played off as something of a joke, as a celebrity preaching the domesticity of women just as she lives a life un-domestic.

> "Her speeches were about the sanctity of the home, about how women should stay home. Serena Joy didn't do this herself, she made speeches instead, but she presented this failure of hers as a sacrifice she was making for the good of all... We thought she was funny. Or luke thought she was funny. I only pretended to think so. Really she was a little frightening. She was in earnest. She doesn't make speeches anymore. She has become

> speechless. She stays in her home, but it doesn't seem to agree with her. How furious she must be, now that she's been taken at her word" (45-45).

We don't see much of the other wives-- naturally, as Offred is so confined-- but she remembers that the wife at her last posting mostly stayed in her room; "the Marthas said she drank" (16). Serena puts on a brave face aside from an outburst of anger when she discovers that Offred has been spending time alone with the Commander, and is willing to engage with Offred like a business transaction. She's even willing to bend the rules to help Offred get pregnant, though whether this is in want of the status symbol of a daughter or a wish to get Offred out of her home and free her household from the need of Handmaids, we cannot know. At night, Offred hears her pacing in her room, short staggered steps with the cane back and forth for hours. Over the course of the novel, we don't see a single sign of happiness in any of the wives, though it's possible that that's due to Offred as an unreliable narrator seeing what she wants to see. Then again, neither do we see any signs of resistance; even Serena Joy's illegal act of setting Offred up with Nick holds no consequences for herself. Whatever they've gotten from this new order-- the chance at children, more power for their husbands, a religious state, household servants-- cannot possibly outweigh everything they've lost, but other than Offred's speculation about Serena Joy we see no signs of remorse.

Chapter Seven: Identity and Self as Resistance

Like the citizens of Oceania in *1984,* a deconstruction of identity and a homogenization of the Party is crucial to the ruling state of Gilead. By neatly sorting people (especially women) according to function, stripping them of their names, and limiting them to a small, prescribed set of activities, one Handmaid or Martha or Wife is much like another. In a fascist environment that depends on reducing people to objects, retaining one's sense of self and personhood becomes a radical act of resistance. Often alone, Offred finds herself waiting, constantly with time on her hands and nothing to kill it with: “I wait. I compose myself. My self is a thing I must now compose as one composes a speech. What I must present is a made thing, not something born” (66). Throughout *The Handmaid's Tale,* Offred does this by fostering her memory of the time before, keeping mantras of words and writing, and harboring the knowledge of her true name.

In the article “Selves, Survival, and Resistance” by Elizabeth Hansot for the journal *Utopian Studies,* the author argues that Offred's “self” as it is created by memory and narrative are transgressive and crucial to humanity: “Both activities-- the narratives of self drawn from a past now seen as land mined and the meticulous attention to the specificity of events in the present-- are transgressive. What makes them so is their exactness and their sensuality... In both their making and their maintenance, the selves that Offred laboriously constructs are potential acts of hidden resistance” (Hansot 59). As a Handmaid, it would be easy to devolve into madness, or at best a robotic

depersonalization as a logical response to trauma. Offred's emphasis on herself and her own mind is one of her most significant features as a character, and dovetails with her position as storyteller, archivist, and narrator.

Memory & Imagination

Memory is essential to modern philosophical understanding of personal identity. John Locke held that memories are (part of) what make me the same as the person I was in the past. Memories of past actions go towards constituting personal identity. Even Locke's relative contemporaries like David Hume, who reject the idea that there is an enduring self, still typically acknowledge the force of memorial experience in giving the impression of identity across time: "As a memory alone acquaints us with the continuance and extent of this succession of perceptions, 'tis to be considered, upon that account chiefly, as the source of personal identity" (Hume 542). While this paper is literary, not philosophical, the belief that memories are essential to an idea of the self is critical to our understanding of Offred as a character. In one of two lectures to Dartmouth published in 1993, Michel Foucault reviews the importance of a daily reflection to the concept of self:

> First, this examination, it's not at all a question of discovering the truth hidden in the subject. It is rather a question of recalling the truth forgotten by the subject. Two, what the subject forgets is not himself, nor his nature, nor his origin, nor a supernatural affinity. What the subject forgets is what he ought to have done, that is, a collection of rules of conduct that he had

> learned. Three, the recollection of errors committed during the day serves to measure the distance which separates what has been done from what should have been done. And four, the subject who practices this examination on himself is not the operating ground for a process more or less obscure which has to be deciphered. He is the point where rules of conduct come together and register themselves in the form of memories (Foucault *Lectures* 11).

Offred, in the medium of and described in this narrative to the listener, reflects and meditates on her life on two levels: her then-past in The Time Before, her life as it was before becoming a Handmaid; and in her now-past, her time as a Handmaid in the Commander's house. On both levels, Offred evaluates her actions as they were, and considers how she should have been. Throughout the novel, Offred's concept of the "correctness" or "goodness" of her actions is nebulous; she apologizes for the actions she has taken (agreeing to become a Handmaid in lieu of exile, taking the secret meetings with the Commander, and sleeping with Nick) while often simultaneously describing how she could not have done differently.

For Offred, one of the most persistently frustrating aspects of her role as Handmaid is the boredom, the sheer number of unfilled hours in the day. Besides a daily walk, meals, a once-a-month doctor's appointment and a once-a-month Ceremony, Offred and all of the Handmaids find themselves with hours of unfilled time every day. They are forbidden from any kind of occupation or entertainment, so what remains? Aunt Lydia recommends doing floor exercises to strengthen the core and prepare for pregnancy, but Offred occupies herself mentally. "The night is my time out. Where should I go? Somewhere good" (37). She remembers nights in college with Moira, early memories of her mother.

Alone in the bath, Offred remembers her daughter. “I close my eyes, and she's there with me, suddenly, without warning, it must be the smell of the soap... This is the age she is when I'm in the bath. She comes back to me at different ages. This is how I know she's not really a ghost” (63). Memories are the only “possessions” Offred has left: her room is temporary, her clothing state-issued, and she has nothing else. (There is nothing else, anymore, *to* have; it appears, for Handmaids at least, that “shopping” beyond food and essential household goods has been abolished.) She remembers the mementos she used to keep of her daughter-- a lock of hair, her baby pictures-- but understands that these things are gone: “I've learned to do without a lot of things. If you have a lot of things, said Aunt Lydia, you get too attached to this material world and you forget about spiritual values. You must cultivate poverty of spirit” (64). Blessed be the poor, etcetera. Hansot writes: “Offred's re-viewing of her past and present is a moral and intellectual exercise, as well as an exercise in survival” (Hansot 59). Memory is necessary to make Offred's present present bearable: “Otherwise you live in the moment. Which is not where I want to be” (61).

Later, with Nick, Offred drinks in every detail of him, memorizing the contours of his body by moonlight from the window: “I want to see what can be seen, of him, take him in, memorize him, save him up so I can live on the image, later: the lines of his body, the texture of his flesh... I ought to have done that with Luke, paid more attention, to the details, the moles and scars, the singular creases; I didn't and he's fading. Day by day, night by night he recedes, and I become more faithless” (269). Offred hates herself for her infatuation with Nick, berating her past self for not foreseeing this future, for not loving

Luke well enough to outlast these hard times. Nick becomes a vehicle for some of her memories as she talks about her past, her daughter, and her friends-- everything but Luke. Until the making of these tapes, these conversations with Nick are Offred's only opportunity to perform her sense of identity and self externally, rather than hiding within her mind.

Memory as self is also at the center of Orwell's *1984*. In Oceania, the Party controls the future by controlling the past; the main character, Winston, finds himself constantly struggling against the Party to remember things as they really were, rather than what he has been told they are. The heart of this struggle is the question of objective truth; where does the past exist if not in the mind? “The mutability of the past is the central tenet of Ingsoc. Past events, it is argued, have no objective existence, but survive only in written records and in human memories. The past is whatever the records and the memories agree upon. And since the Party is in full control of all records, and in equally full control of the minds of its members, it follows that the past is whatever the Party chooses to make it” (Orwell 213). Winston understands that this is not right, that memory and past are not the same thing, but at the climax of the novel under torture in the Ministry of Love he is made to understand what the Party needs him to understand: that he, his memories, and therefore his truth are all mutable at a lift of their finger. In the torture chamber, O'Brien explains: “Reality is not external. Reality exists in the human mind, and nowhere else. Not in the individual mind, which can make mistakes, and in any case soon perishes; only in the mind of the Party, which is collective and immortal” (Orwell 249). At the last line of the novel, the takeover is finally complete, Winston's mind is finally pure: He loves Big

Brother. If memory is identity and the Party controls memory, it follows that the Party controls identity. Eventually, Winston is completely overtaken by a new self as he is overtaken by new memories prescribed by the Party.

In contrast, Gilead cares little about memory as a method of propaganda and control. From the perspective of the Aunts and the Commanders, the past as it was merely proves how necessary Gilead and the Sons of Jacob are; at the Red Center and in Commander Fred's conversation with Offred, both linger on memories of the past as painful and dangerous: women attacked walking alone, men emasculated and unfulfilled, the moral deficiencies of the modern era all "proving" just how much better they (a select *they,* of course) have it now. What is key is not a lack of memory, but the "correct" *perception* of memory, and understanding that the past is not to be *missed*; Offred's habit of living in her memory is secret not because her memories are wrong, but because she fails to condemn them.

The True Name

Handmaids are issued a patronymic for each of their postings, so that Offred is Of-fred. The name is passed down from each Handmaid that has been in Commander Fred's house. After the "original" Ofglen dies, Offred is startled and asks the new Handmaid "where Ofglen is." The Handmaid "replies 'I am Ofglen,' word perfect." Interchangeable and replaceable. This act of objectification makes it clear what these women are: property,

fruit trees of the Commander's orchard who are simply waiting to bear fruit. This apparently begins at the Red Center, as in the first chapter Offred remembers whispering "true names" from bunk to bunk in the dark: Alma, Janine, June. It isn't clear how the Aunts address the Handmaids at the Center without names, as these names seem like a secret, but Offred in her story of Moira's escape imagines Aunt Lydia calling Janine by name, saying Moira's name. It's insignificant, for the most part; what need would the Aunts have to treat these women as individuals, except in punishment?

Remembering the time before, as Offred and her husband were planning their escape, she remembers that time as the period where

> "my name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden. I tell myself it doesn't matter, your name is like your telephone number, useful only to others; but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter. I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I'll come back to dig up, one day. I think of this name as buried. This name has an aura around it, like an amulet, some charm that's survived from an unimaginably distant past. I lie in my single bed at night, with my eyes closed, and the name floats there behind my eyes, not quite within reach, shining in the dark" (84).

Naming has been significant aspect of human culture since God named Adam in the Creation story. Names are emblems, signifiers of who we are, what we should be, and where we belong. *Offred* signifies that this woman is a possession *Of Fred,* just as keenly as Offred's true name signifies that she is a *someone,* a person with a history and thoughts

and agency. This, of course, is exactly what Gilead wants to eradicate from its Handmaids. Hansot writes, "Using a name from the past is treason in Gilead, for it risks bringing in its train an unprescribed humanity. And names are known, from the outset, in the almost silent whispering that the newly inducted handmaids learn in the indoctrination center. Through such whisperings abbreviated biographies are attached to names, and through such whisperings the Handmaids create temporary sites of non-compliance" (64). The scene Hansot refers to is in the very first chapter, the second page of the short prologue to the novel. From the outset, the reader is made to understand that this is a secret act and a treasonous act that these women are doing despite being prisoners under armed guard; we are not meant to underestimate the Handmaids.

Eventually, Offred reveals her name to Nick, and feels foolish for it: "I tell him my real name, and feel therefore that I am known. I act like a dunce. I should know better, I make of him an idol, a cardboard cutout" (270). While the physical act of intimacy is the most dangerous part of her relationship with Nick, it is the knowledge of her true name that she links to their emotional intimacy. At the end of the novel, when the black van comes for Offred, Nick quickly tells her that it is safe to go with them, and calls her by her name. While Nick is a known Eye and could just as easily be sending her to her death, the use of her name is the sign that all is going to be okay, that Offred can trust Nick just as she trusted him with her name. From the fact that Offred survives long enough to make it to Maine and create this recording, we are able to assume that this trust was rightly placed.

Offred's name is never revealed to the reader, neither by herself nor the academic

epilogue. At one point Offred addresses her imaginary reader, telling us that it doesn't matter that she doesn't know who is or could be listening to her story: "Just *you,* without a name. Attaching a name attaches *you* to the world of fact, which is riskier, more hazardous: who knows what the chances are out there, of survival, yours?" (40). Though she isn't necessarily talking about herself here, the same principle applies: though her namelessness is imposed upon her by her oppressors, she maintains it here as an act of self-preservation, to protect herself and those she loves. It is uncomfortable, in scholarship, to called "Offred" by this patronymic, acting complicitly in stripping of her humanity, but Atwood does not reveal Offred's "true name" within the novel and leaves critics with the problem of needing to refer to the main character as *something*. Some scholars have suggested that Offred's true name is *June,* as it's the only name we hear in the list at the Red Center that is not later connected to another character, and is moreover the last in the list (4). This theory made its way all the way up to the hulu TV adaptation, which refers to Offred as June in flashback of the time before. Atwood has specifically discounted this interpretation as far as her intent, saying:

> Why do we never learn the real name of the central character, I have often been asked. Because, I reply, so many people throughout history have had their names changed, or have simply disappeared from view. Some have deduced that Offred's real name is June, since, of all the names whispered among the Handmaids in the gymnasium/dormitory, "June" is the only one that never appears again. That was not my original thought but it fits, so

readers are welcome to it if they wish. (Atwood, *New York Times* 2017).

This un-naming of Offred is a key element of the horror of Gilead, and ties Gilead securely to those history has forgotten or un-named in our world.

Wordplay and Words

Reading and writing are forbidden for women, to the point where shop names have been replaced with icons so that women might not accidentally see a word and find themselves reading. Even the Wives seem to be prohibited, though the Aunts are allowed to read and write in the line of duty. The house Bible is kept in a lock-box, and the Commander reads aloud to the household. When he pulls the Bible out on the Ceremony nights, Offred senses the whole room leaning towards him: “He has something we don't have, he has the word. How we squandered it, once” (88). *The word,* uncapitalized, as opposed to *The Word* meaning the Word of God. That what he's reading is the Bible is totally insignificant to Offred, if not distasteful (“the moldy old Rachel and Leah stuff”). It's the *word,* the written word, that allures.

The choice of the Scrabble game is doubly damning; not just a secret game with the Commander, but a game spent entirely in letters and words. Two instances of words have been left to Offred: a little needlepoint cushion in her room that says *Faith*, and the graffiti *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum* carved inside her wardrobe. While the graffiti is hidden, the cushion must be some kind of oversight, as it shouldn't even exist anymore:

“I can spend minutes, tens of minutes, running my eyes over the print: FAITH. It's the only thing they've given me to read. If I were caught doing it, would it count? I didn't put the cushion here myself” (57). It's like walking through the desert and finding a photo of a well; it doesn't quell her thirst, and it might be a trap, but she can hardly take her eyes off it.

Offred meditates on words, obsessing over them as forbidden fruit, going over and over a single word so as to wring out every drop of meaning. “I sit in the chair and think about the word *chair*. It can also mean the leader of a meeting. It can also mean a mode of execution. It is the first symbol in *charity*. It is the French word for flesh. None of these facts has any connection with the others. These are the kinds of litanies I use, **to compose myself**” (110, bold emphasis mine). Here we see another level of wordplay in the spirit of Offred, in her own words; she *composes herself* emotionally so as to feel stable while simultaneously she *composes her **self,*** the selfhood of “Offred,” by making the substance of a person out of memory, sensation, and language.

Chapter Eight: Narrative Agency and Feminine Power

The very existence of Offred's tale as word of dissent from within the culture of Gilead is an act of subversion in a culture committed to silencing women and any non-believer at every turn. Like Offred's lingering journeys into her memory, her narration of this tale to us is a mental exercise in hope. The narrative style is strange, mixing present and past tense when talking about her time in the Commander's house as well as her time in the Red center and in the time "before." In reality, this narration doesn't happen during Offred's time with Commander Fred at all, but sometime after the black van takes her away, though we do not get this information or context from the actual text of the handmaid's tale. Details about the physical and historical existence of Offred's text are revealed in the "Historical Notes" epilogue taking place in the year 2195: the artifact as described by Professor Pieixoto was a metal, US Army-issue footlocker from the 1950's, sealed with packing tape, filled with about thirty loose cassettes, and was "unearthed" in what was once Bangor, Maine (301). The cassettes were originally a variety of secular music, with a few songs left at the beginning of each tape for camouflage: "Elvis Presley's Golden Years," "Boy George Takes it Off," "Twisted Sisters at Carnegie Hall," etcetera. Significantly, these tapes are not numbered or ordered in any way; to transcribe, the professors ordered the "chapters" according to their best guess. Professor Pieixoto-- a man based on the pronouns-- is described in the panel chair's introduction as "instrumental in [the Handmaid's tale's] transcription,

annotation, and publication" (300). It seems, then, that what we have been reading are Offred's words, but transcribed and arranged by at least one male historian. These dizzying levels of narrative filter-- told by a woman but transcribed by a man but authored by an actual woman-- add another layer of irony to a story from a character working to be heard in a culture and country that works to keep her voiceless. Aside from this shade cast by the epilogue, the fact that Offred is telling her own story in her own words, from her point of view, literally with her own voice, and with her unpolished opinion of Gilead and the people in it is a significant act of empowerment.

The Handmaid's Tale as a Letter of Hope

The Handmaid's Tale as a text occupies historically female narrative space; oral storytelling is significant in feminist studies and history, and the epistiolary form[2] is particularly feminine; while Offred is not literally penning documents, the existence of her story as a text, included as meta-text alongside the 2195 BCE conference presentation, serves as a series of oral messages to a hoped-for listener existing in the future, in a world better than the one she inhabits now. In Atwood's *New York Times*

[2] While the epistolary genre typically refers to texts comprised of written correspondence, it includes all narrative composed of a series of documents. The definition is loose, but I argue that *The Handmaid's Tale* can be understood as an epistolary novel as a series of audio recordings created for a hoped-for listener.

article “Margaret Atwood on What ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’ Means in the Age of Trump,” she describes Offred’s story as belong to the “literature of witness,” a relatively new and loosely defined “genre” that includes, generally, first-person accounts of traumatic or horrible experiences and cultures that includes books like *The Diary of Anne Frank*. “Offred records her story as best she can; then she hides it, trusting that it may be discovered later, by someone who is free to understand it and share it. This is an act of hope: Every recorded story implies a future reader.” Throughout the novel, Offred occasionally addresses the reader directly, and explicitly compares her story in form to a letter:

> I must be telling it to someone. You don’t tell a story only to yourself. There’s always someone else. Even when there is no one. A story is like a letter. *Dear You,* I’ll say. Just *you,* without a name. Attaching a name attaches *you* to the world of fact, which is riskier, more hazardous… I will say *you, you*, like an old love song. *You* can mean more than one. *You* can mean thousands. I’m not in any immediate danger, I’ll say to you. I’ll pretend you can hear me. But it’s no good, because I know you can’t (40).

Though Offred admits that her imagination falls short as she attempts to picture her audience, she doesn’t give herself enough credit; obviously, she persists regardless. Later, she acknowledges the fact of distance in her story, particularly as she’s not able to write her story but rather is limited to remembering, later: “When I get out of here, if I’m ever able to set this down, in any form, even in the form of one voice to another, it will be a reconstruction then too, at yet another remove. It’s impossible to say a thing

exactly the way it was" (134). Finally, of course, there will be yet another remove that Offred has not even imagined; the transcription and arrangement by the professors.

Compared to other novels of the genre, *1984* includes a similar element in form of Winston's secret diary; he is recording, for himself and for some kind of hoped-for post- or extra-party reader, the objective truth as he knows it, somewhere where he thinks that the Party cannot alter it. Still, the part of the novel in Winston's own words is relatively small, with the bulk of the novel told in the limited third-person. The result to the reader is similar to *The Handmaid's Tale* as we hear Offred and Winston's thoughts and fears as they live in these dystopic cultures, but only Atwood's novel places her main character in the position of final narrative power, and gives her her own voice. In the article "*The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* in Context" written by Atwood for *PMLA* in 2004, Atwood places Offred's narration in the historically male context of dystopian literature: "The majority of dystopias-- Orwell's included-- have been written by men, and the point of view has been male. When women have appeared in them, they have been either sexless automatons or rebels who've defied the sex rules of the regime… I wanted to try a dystopia from the female point of view-- the world according to Julia, as it were" (Atwood "In Context" 516).[3] Rather than a plot device or foil for an

[3] While Atwood's discussion on the overwhelming maleness of dystopian fiction absolutely rings true regarding the traditional dystopian canon, it is worth noting that the genre has become notably more female-dominated since the publication of *The Handmaid's Tale,*, particularly in extremely popular YA fiction such as *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent*.

angsty male thought-rebel like Julia or Lenina (*Brave New World*), Offred is the plot, the middle and momentum of her own story.

Within Offred's present/lifespan (i.e., aside from any post-mortem influence by the professors), *The Handmaid's Tale* belongs to Offred, untouchable by the Commander or other agents of Gilead. Like in *1984,* the dominant cultural narrative of Gilead and how it came to be is entirely controlled by those in power. While her body is totally controlled (and violated) by Gilead, and while attempts are made to control her mind (ban on reading, the Re-Education center, etcetera), Offred reclaims her personal agency with narrative agency, using her story to help create her identity and self as well as establish her personal power.

Oral Storytelling & the Slave Narrative

Offred "tells" her story into a tape recorder because she has no other choice: "Tell, rather than write, because I have nothing to write with and writing is in any case forbidden[4]" (52). Orality and feminist theory have long been connected, with bell hooks arguing that "until masses of women in this society read and write, feminist ideas must also be spread by word of mouth" (hooks 5). hooks offers no specification of whether

[4] One of the accidentally absurdist jokes of the novel; a bunch of cheesy 80's pop cassette tapes and a cassette recorder are more accessible to Offred than a pencil and paper

women *can* read or write; Offred's literacy or lack thereof is a moot point. Here, as in any other society where oppression (of gender, class, race, etcetera) prevents women from reading and writing, orality becomes essential.

In the article "We lived in the Blank White Spaces: Rewriting the Paradigm of Denial in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*," Dodson points out a connection between this oral tale and historical slave narratives, "a distinctly American form of prose" (72). *The Handmaid's Tale* is a slave narrative, in a way-- Offred is enslaved in the Commander's household, under locked key and guard, in a way that is legally permissible/encouraged by the state-- but awkwardly transposed to feature a white woman rather than a black woman. Atwood almost entirely avoids dealing with race throughout the novel, dispatching Jews and Black Americans ("children of Ham") with a few sentences in an early chapter, never to be spoken of again. Since the casting of the hulu adaptation, which includes several actors of color in significant roles, a number of articles have been written criticising Atwood's avoidance of race in *The Handmaid's Tale,* especially distasteful as Offred's story in many ways co-opts actual experiences of black American slave women. In an essay for *The Verge*, Noah Berlatsky identifies the habit of mainstream speculative fiction reversing historic violations committed by white people for greater effect: "In Western fiction, dystopic stories often ask, "What if this atrocity had happened to white people instead? ...Gilead obligingly moves black people away so the novel can present black people's experiences without black characters. Atwood critiques the regime, but also collaborates with it to push black people aside" (Berlatsky 2017). Atwood has carefully explained on numerous occasions how every law or horror

found in *The Handmaid's Tale* was deliberately pulled from some historical precedent, in defense against those who would like to dismiss the novel as hysterical exaggeration. "I made a rule for myself: I would not include anything that human beings had not already done in some other place or time, or for which the technology did not already exist. I did not wish to be accused of dark, twisted inventions, or of misrepresenting the human potential for deplorable behaviour" (Atwood "Haunted" 2012). What she does not specify is which human beings were doing all of these things and which people that were doing them *to* in these real-life examples, or how often it was women of color (or queer women, or disabled women, etcetera) with even less privilege than our abled, straight, white woman protagonist. In an article for *Bitch* magazine titled "Get out of Gilead: Anti-Blackness in *The Handmaid's Tale,"* author Priya Nair heavily criticizes Atwood for taking so freely from black experience without giving it voice:

> "Being banned from reading, writing, or congregating, the spectacle of public lynchings, and the practice of naming people after their owners (Offred, or "of Fred") were all methods used to control Black people during (and after) slavery. In order to escape Gilead, women use a secret network to get to Canada called the "Underground Femaleroad." And most importantly, the central theme of the book—that women are property, deemed valuable by their ability to produce children for their Commanders and Wives—is stolen from the distinct oppression that Black women were forced to navigate. By taking the specific oppression of enslaved Black women and applying them uncritically to white women,

> *The Handmaid's Tale* ignores the historical realities of an American dystopia founded on anti-Black violence" (Nair 2017).

While these critiques refer to Black experience in America, Dodson argues that the form of *The Handmaid's Tale* is taken from slave narrative in addition to context. According to Dodson and confirmed in the author's interview with Atwood herself, Offred's tale in many ways mirrors the famous American slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,* written by Harriet Ann Jacobs in 1861. "When *The Handmaid's Tale* is explored in terms of its oral history, it becomes evident that Offred's recording reveals a metaphorical discourse with the autobiographical narratives of black female slaves of antebellum America" (Dodson 73). Whether this is gross erasure of black experience or simply a truthful acknowledgement of historical precedent varies from critic to critic and reader to reader, with many condemning Atwood's whitewashed slave narrative while just as many see virtue in examining this reversal of white women's fortune, a nightmarish dystopian white women themselves contributed to[5]. In the Historical Notes, Pieixoto notes that the "racist" policies of Gilead were not inherent to the Gilead regime, but rather inherited or rooted from the time before; moreover, "racist fears provided some of the emotional fuel that allowed the takeover to succeed as well as it did" (305). In the political aftermath of Donald Trump's presidential campaign that

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[5] While the Women's March of 2017 is a landmark event of resistance from the beginning of the Trump presidency, it is sadly worth noting that 53% of white women voted for Donald Trump, even when his opponent was a white woman (New York Times 2016).

hinged on racist policy promises such as a "muslim ban" and "building the wall" which were wholeheartedly embraced by his base of white conservatives, the suggestion that racist fears begets an embrace of totalitarianism is not unimaginable.[6]

At a few points in *The Handmaid's Tale,* Offred acknowledges how she is still in a position of relative privilege, and how oblivious she was in the time before. According to Dodson, "Through an agonizing process of recording details about her own enslavement, Offred discovers that she had, even in her own history, denied that the stories of other women were important" (Dodson 81). Offred described her life before Gilead as a state of wilful ignorance as bliss: "We lived as usual by ignoring. Ignoring isn't the same as ignorance, you have to work at it… The newspaper stories were like dreams to us, bad dreams dreamt by others… We were the people who were not in the papers. We lived in the blank white spaces at the edge of print. It gave us more freedom" (74). *We* here of course is white women, middle class, healthy, heterosexual, established in a happy little nuclear family. As America as we know it begins to collapse and Gilead takes over, Offred remembers that there were marches and demonstrations, but also that she stayed home: "Luke said it would be futile and I had to think about them, my family, him and her. I did think about my family" (180). In real life today, in the wake of news events like Charlottesville's neo-nazi riots and the president's encouragement of

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[6] The article "Racism Motivated Trump Voters More than Authoritarianism" by Thomas Wood for the Washington post analyzed post-election data and found that among white voters, their primary motivation was indeed racism/racially motivated or founded fears (Washington Post 2017).

police violence against minorities, it become tempting to bury one's head in the sand, willfully disengage from political news, and cling to feel-good discourse about *why can't we all get along*. In a 2017 statement from Black Lives Matter organizers Monica Cannon and Angelina Camacho explain how this is a weakness and hallmark of white privilege: "I don't have the privilege of ignoring this problem" (WCBV Boston 2017). Offred and women like her had the privilege of ignoring the problem for a time, but cannot escape the consequences of that ignorance.

While this section is by no means intended to belittle the *actual enslavement* of Offred and the other Handmaids or even imply that these women did something to "deserve" this treatment, it is important to remember that even Offred knows her life could be much worse; misbehave, get caught reading, commit gender treachery, etcetera and the consequences are lynching, stoning, or the nuclear waste fields. Even as Offred sits "brushed and fed like a prize pig," she remains in her role from fear of the alternative.

Epilogue of Irony and Hope

Of all the ways that *The Handmaid's Tale* echoes and fights against the legacy of Orwell's *1984*, possibly the most important-- particularly in Atwood's own commentary on the book-- is the existence of the "Historical Notes" epilogue following and commenting on Offred's story as text within an academic conference. While the "story" value of Offred's

narration is still significant on its own, the "Historical notes" provides valuable context and framework for Offred's story, both explicitly and implicitly.

Explicitly, we learn from Professor Pieixoto some of the basic facts of Gilead and the rest of the world at the time: that Britain and Canada served as refuge for American women, with "Save the Women" campaigns; how "handmaids" were legally created (the abolishment of second marriages & outlaw of extra-marital families; that the sharp decline of fertility was real, not a panic created by Gilead, and in evidence throughout "Caucasian societies"; that Gilead was born of the "Sons of Jacob" think tanks which were organized after some kind of "superpower arms stalemate" and an international agreement that prevented state interference in national rebellion; that the "resettlement" of Jews and POC largely ended in their deaths; and more. While little of this information affects our perception of Offred or her story, it provides some answers to questions of how this could have happened. We also learn a bit about Offred's creation of her story: recorded on cassettes, hidden in Maine, etcetera.

Implicitly, the existence of these notes is a wink of hope at survival, both of Offred after she's been put into the black van, and of humanity in the United States after ending the rule of Gilead. Without this epilogue, Offred's prospects as she taken from the Commander's household and tossed into the back of the van with only the promise of good faith from Nick would be bleak: "And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light" (295). Though Offred doesn't know her fate when she enters the van, she has some idea at the time of her recording, having at least gotten far enough safely to set down and hide her story. The framing of the "Historical Notes" is our only indication that

Offred's story is truly told, rather than narrated to us simply in first-person real time. Throughout *The Handmaid's Tale,* Offred gives no sign that she has escaped, that there is at least something of an *after* Gilead and the Commander's house.

Atwood sees the existence of this epilogue as hopeful, and talks in an interview with Geoff Hancock about the importance of *1984*'s ending:

> In fact, Orwell is much more optimistic than people give him credit for... Most people think the book ends when Winston comes to love Big Brother. But it doesn't. It ends with a note on Newspeak, which is written in the past tense, in standard English-- which means that, at the time of writing the note, Newspeak is a thing of the past (Hancock 217).

At the academic conference on Gilead Studies heard in the "Historical Notes," these professors are talking about Gilead as a thing that ended, that is in the past. The very existence of university, schooling, and academia do not exist at all in Offred's description of Gilead. At least two of the professors mentioned are women based on pronouns used, meaning that women can again be scholars, hold jobs, travel, be people. At least two professors with indigenous-sounding names, Maryann Crescent Moon and Johnny Running Dog, are mentioned, which hints that people of color have some presence in the world again. Similarly, Professor Crescent Moon is a scholar of "Caucasian Studies," a field that does not exist today (at least in reference to North Americans rather than people of Caucasus) in the way that African Studies and Asian Studies do, hinting that History and academia are no longer (as) White by default. The epilogue attempts to reframe Offred's narrative for male consumption but they cannot fully do it, and it's there for us,

the third audience. With tragic irony, the epilogue objectifies Offred one last time, reducing her to a historical object lesson. All in all, the ending of *The Handmaid's Tale* is a hopeful peek into a future world that could be better than the one we have now, or at least is not the bleak horror of Gilead.

Narrative Power and Responsibility

In the article "Utopias of/f Language in Contemporary Feminist Literary Dystopias" by Ildney Cavalcanti, the author argues that dystopian novels, particularly those set in an alternate time or future, are essentially stories about language, thematizing issues related to language and linking language to power and conflict within the novel, particularly in regards to gender:

> Linguistic control and the enforcement of strict linguistic normativity symbolically stand in for other forms of social (ideological, political, institutional control. Contemporary feminist dystopias overtly thematize the linguistic construction of gender domination by telling stories about language as instrument of both (men's) domination and (women's) liberation… These elements can be interpreted as (sometimes crude and straightforward) metaphors for the historical silencing of women (Cavalcanti 152).

The Handmaid's Tale, like much of the dystopian genre, is metafictional on several

levels: Offred tells her story to no known listener for her own sake, her text is analyzed in the historical notes, and finally we as reader bring the novel into our cultural narrative. While all of these different narrative layers are happening concurrently, the central driving force is Offred's narrative power, which is a function of resistance in a world where she and others like her have been silenced. Atwood's use of a female narrator in a genre where female authors and characters have historically been silenced mirrors the in-text significance of Offred's story.

Placed carefully within this story-in-a-story are further layers of words and narrative as rebellion, like a matryoshka doll of subversive. In the nighttime meetings in the Commander's office, Offred's secret pleasures amount to games of *Scrabble* and reading, novels and old magazines. Playing *Scrabble* again dusts the cobwebs off, works the rusty skill: "My tongue felt thick with the effort of spelling. It was like using a language I'd once known but nearly forgotten, a language having to do with customs that had long before passed out of the world. It was like trying to walk without crutches" (156). In Offred's secret trysts with Nick, the intimacy of their bodies is less significant than the intimacy of story as Offred tells Nick about her true self and her past, and when Offred finally finds Moira again at the Jezebel's club, the two women meet in order to talk, and tell each other what has happened to them since they last parted. At a few points, Offred looks at the other women around her and longs for the hominess of chatter: "I would like to stay here, in the kitchen… we would talk, about aches and pains, illnesses, our feet, our backs, all the different kinds of mischief that our bodies, like unruly children, can get into. We would not our heads as punctuation to each other's

voices… How I used to despise such talk. Now I long for it. At least it was talk. An exchange, of sorts" (10-11). Words and language always have value, but even more so to people like Offred who are systematically deprived of them. While gossip has been derided as sinful since Biblical times[7], recent work largely in feminist and gender studies has sought to reclaim the value of "gossip," specifically the understanding of historical, misogynistic tendencies to dismiss women's community and culture by labelling it "gossip"[8]. In a world without it, Offred feels the loss of that intimacy and connection.

Even in her own head, Offred thinks about words, meditating on language like a mental touchstone of sanity: "I sit in the chair and think about the word *chair*. It can also mean the leader of a meeting. It can also mean a mode of execution. It's the first syllable in *charity*. It is the French word for flesh. None of these fact has any connection with the other. These are the kinds of litanies I use, to compose myself" (110). Language is an indulgence as it is simultaneously a weapon or a wound, a lifeline back to a different world that now exists only in memory.

Aside from a small amount of fact-checking that the professors of the "Historical Notes" are able to make, we must take the majority of Offred's story at her word as our narrator. Troughout her story Offred struggles to reconcile the opportunity and burden

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[7] Proverbs 16:28, Proverbs 18:7-8, James 3:7-8, Timothy 5:13

[8] For further reading on this topic: "'You'll think we're always bitching': the functions of cooperativity and competition in women's gossip," Guendozi 2001; "Girl Talk: Gossip, Friendship, and Sociometric Status," McDonald et al 2007; "In Praise of Gossip," Spacks 1982

of narration, realizing that in order to truly share her story she must commit as much as possible to honesty, even when a true recount of reality paints her in a poor, unromantic, cowardly, or even immoral light. At a few points in the story, Offred acknowledges this struggle to her reader, admitting that even at her best recollection this is merely a reconstruction from a reconstruction that will never quite mirror reality, and wishing that she could change her own narrative to make it happier, better, or paint her in a better light:

> I wish this story were different. I wish it were more civilized. I wish it showed me in a better light, if not happier, then at least more active, less hesitant, less distracted by trivia… Nevertheless it hurts me to tell it over, over again. Once was enough; wasn't once enough for me at the time? But I keep on going with this sad and hungry and sordid, thiS limping and mutilated story, because after all I want you to hear it, as I will hear yours too if I ever get the chance… Because I'm telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are. So I will go on. So I will myself to go on. I am coming to a part you will not like at all, because in it I did not behave well, but I will try nonetheless to leave nothing out. After all you've been through, you deserve whatever I have left, which is not much but includes the truth (267-268).

Offred speaks to a *you*, an imagined listener, the listener that proves there is a world beyond Gilead, a listener that personifies hope. However, the focus here never really stretceterahes outside of Offred's person. Her claim *I tell therefore you are* echoes

intentionally *I think therefore I am*. Offred has made herself, has "composed myself" as a "made thing" (66) through her story. Somewhere between the black van and a footlocker in Bangor, Maine, Offred never really knows that her listener will exist. The *you* here is as much Offred as it is some imagined audience. Her apologies are directed inward; it is Offred that deserves the truth, even from herself. As a character that is deprived of so much of her identity, even her name, Offred's narrative, story, and memory compose and retain her identity.

Chapter Nine: The Weaponized Femininity of *The Handmaid's Tale*

In Gilead, the rights of women have been systematically stripped in order to enforce and enable the patriarchal, Christian fundamentalist, fascist state. In order to keep a hold on her humanity and sanity, Offred defends herself by meditating on her memories, finding human contact and intimacy, and telling her story. While these tools help keep Offred mentally safe, in the reality of Gilead it is Offred's femininity, womanhood, and female-ness that are keeping her alive just as they keep her imprisoned in so many ways. Ultimately, Offred is able to reverse the confines of these gendered expectations, using the mores of femininity and womanhood (both the public expectations of Gilead as well as the private expectations of the Commander) in order to resist the state and even eventually escape it.

At its heart, *The Handmaid's Tale* is consumed with gender, as images of femininity and womanhood saturate Offred's narrative from beginning to end. Atwood resists the labelling of *The Handmaid's Tale* as a "feminist" novel, but there is no avoiding that it is a female novel told in feminine terms and sustained with feminine power. In a patriarchal dystopia that attempts to crush female agency at every avenue, women of Gilead, particularly Offred, weaponize their femininity not just to survive, but to transcend. It's no wonder that the symbol of Atwood's Handmaid has become a rallying

call of resistance for women in America today.

From the beginning of the novel, Offred identifies traditional, powerful feminine symbols in a world around her that has become hostile to women. *The Handmaid's Tale* opens in Chapter 1 with the women sleeping in the Red Center, lined up on bunks with flannelette sheets and their clothes folded neatly at the ends of the beds. Aunt Sara and Aunt Elizabeth keep an eye on them and the women whisper from bed to bed with the lights turned down low, and were it not for the cattle prods carried by the Aunts indoors and the Guards and dogs and barbed wire out of doors, it would be a cozy scene reminiscent of sleepovers and girlhood. Logically, as Gilead covets and attempts to enforce a "traditional" ideal of womanhood centered around children and the home, many of the novel's settings are similarly structured-- a world of familiar, cozy props and tasks with just a hint at something sinister beneath: Rita baking bread in the kitchen, Serena maintaining the garden, Offred taking daily walks to market. The Commander's house is decorated in "traditional," homey touches that extend to Offred's room, such as the window seat with the little petit-point pillow reading *Faith,* the braided rag rug on the polished hardwood floor. "This is the kind of touch they like," Offred explains, the antecedent of *they* undefined: "folk art, archaic, made by women, in their spare time, from things that have no further use. A return to traditional values. Waste not want not" (7). The Gilead ideal of femininity is silent, hardworking, ensconced in the home and in homemaking, breeding if at all possible. A woman outside of these bounds is literally

declared *Unwoman*.

Flowers, Fertility, Freshness

Flowers and Serena's garden are a significant motif throughout the novel, all over the Commander's house as decoration. Offred is in a land without calendars (as calendars would be something to read), marking the passage of time by the changing of flowers in season. In Chapter 3 "daffodils are now fading and the tulips are opening their cups;" it is May[9]. As Spring turns to summer:

> Then we had the irises, rising beautiful and cool… a Tennyson garden, heavy with scent, languid… To walk through it in these days, of peonies, of pinks and carnations, makes my head swim. The willow is in full plumage and is no help, with its insinuating whispers. *Rendezvous,* it says, *terraces;* the sibilants run up my spine, a shiver as if in fever. The summer dress rustles against the flesh of my thighs, the grass grows underfoot, at the edges of my eyes are movements, in the branches; feathers, flittings, grace notes, tree into bird, metamorphosis run wild. Goddesses are possible now and the air

[9] This logical progression of time in accordance with flowers and seasons lends some legitimacy to the order of the novel as supposedly structured by the future historians.

suffuses with desire (153-154).

At this point, Offred's secret meetings with the Commander have begun; simultaneously, she finds herself longing for Nick's touch. If Offred is the garden, the heat and floridity of summer consume and distract her; she identifies the danger there and is wary of it even as she is tempted by it, this lure of intimacy. *Goddesses are possible now,* she thinks, and while this is not elaborated (what Goddesses? Is Offred referring to herself?), and idea of power and new possibilities are in the air.

Perhaps the literary figure most frequently associated with flowers, even to a fault, is Shakespeare's Ophelia. In her madness she gives flowers away, and when she drowns is wreathed in them. Noted literary critic Elaine Showalter writes about how Ophelia is physically depicted in various mediums in the article "Representing Ophelia," particularly discussing the uses of Ophelia's flowers: "[Ophelia's] flowers suggest the discordant double images of female sexuality as both innocent blossoming and whorish contamination; she is the "green girl" of pastoral, the virginal "Rose of May," and the sexually explicit mad-woman who, in giving away her wild flowers and herbs, is symbolically deflowering herself" (Showalter 286). This unsettling middle ground depicted in *Hamlet*-- the struggle between virginity, maternity, and female sexuality-- is all wrapped up in the singular body of Offred the Handmaid, highlighted by her contrast to the childless, sexless, withered-up Serena Joy.

Serena Joy wears a dress embroidered in flowers, and Offred mentally notes this specifically and with disdain: "Even at her age she still feels the urge to wreathe herself in flowers. No use for you, I think at her, my face unmoving, you can't use them anymore,

you're withered. They're the genital organs of plants. I read that somewhere, once" (81-82). Serena Joy is frequently described in words that age her, in ways that the Commander (who is presumably the same age, and quite likely older) is not: the "shriveled white" of her skin (287), "dried-up and unhappy" (161), "gradually crippling hands" (203). After the ceremony Offred gets "the urge to steal something" and sneaks downstairs, ultimately taking one of Serena Joy's daffodils that is now dead and dry and destined for the garbage, "withered." Everything Serena Joy does is a desperate cling to youthfulness; in reality, everything she touches withers. Even Offred, the fresh young flower transplanted into her household, fails to blossom despite Serena's extreme, even illegal, efforts. Serena Joy wears Lily of the Valley perfume, from the black market, and the scent of the flowers mingles with the carcinogenic odor of her cigarette smoke and stifles every interaction with Offred; ceremony nights, their conversation in the garden. "A mist of Lily of the Valley surrounds us, chilly, crisp almost" (93). When Offred begins to see the Commander, she feels a little guilty, mixed with a jealousy she does not understand: "How could I be jealous of a woman so obviously dried-up and unhappy?" (161). If Offred is the fertile garden, Serena is her opposite, dried and aging; after all, Offred would not even be in her house if Serena Joy had not failed to have a child. Offred's disdain for Serena Joy is palpable throughout the entire novel, both for Serena Joy as a person and for what she represents: an old woman, childless, fruitless, withering away.

Just as Offred notes the live flowers, dead flowers haunt her; the "genital organs of plants," as she remembers, past their prime just as Offred fears she might be. Late in the novel, in Chapter 25, Offred walks through the garden and remembers seeing Serena

tending the tulips that have now wilted and dropped their petals. “She was snipping off the seedpods with a pair of shears… She was aiming, positioning the blades of the shears, then cutting with a convulsive jerk of the hands. Was it the arthritis, creeping up? Or some blitzkreig, ome kamikaze, committed on the swelling genitalia of the flowers? The fruiting body. To cut off the seedpods is supposed to make the bulb store energy” (153). Serena’s animosity towards the seed of the flowers is imagined, perhaps, but the parallel to Offred (and perhaps the Commander, the provider of the seed) is clear. If Offred fails to flower again, fails to fruit, she will be pruned. The last flowers we see are the flowers of high summer: black-eyed susans and daisies that are “drier, more defined… starting us on the long downward slope to fall” (270).

In the end, Offred apologizes for the failures, as she sees them, of her narrative; the gossip, the failures, the pain and cruelties and ugliness. Still, she says, she tried to put some good things in as well: “Flowers, for instance, because where would we be without them?” (267). This theme is deliberate, on Offred’s level of narration as well as Atwood’s; like the implied optimism of an epilogue, this story of imprisonment, coercion, and dehumanization is leavened by flowers.

Lunar Time

Echoing the feminine timekeeping of the flowers is a deeper naturalistic cycle: Offred’s sense of the lunar cycle and her own time and fertility. “September first will be Labor Day,

they still have that. Though it didn't used to have anything to do with mothers. But I tell time by the moon. Lunar, not solar" (199). The male/female dichotomy of sun and moon is ancient, reaching back into the collective primordial ocean of myth and language. The basal link between woman and the moon is menstrual; women's bodies cycling in 28 days, the renewal of fertility waning and waxing alongside the heavenly body. In *The Second Sex,* de Beauvoir discusses the power and fear inspired by women's connection to the moon:

> The periodic haemorrhage of woman is strangely timed with the lunar cycle: and the moon is also thought to have her dangerous caprices. Woman is a part of that fearsome machinery which turns the plants and the sun in their courses, she is the prey of cosmic energies that rule the destiny of the stars and the tides, and of which men must undergo the disturbing radiations... Through menstrual blood is expressed the horror inspired in a man by woman's fecundity. The moon is a source of fertility (de Beauvoir 144).

In the same passage, Offred scoffs at her own obsession with the passage of time, as "this isn't a jail sentence; there's no time here that can be done and finished with" (199). On the contrary, time-- time passed without fruiting, without conception-- only carries Offred closer to her death, further from freedom.

Offred's "job," her role in the Commander's house, moves in monthly cycles: one doctor's visit a month to be sure the necessary parts are in working order (59); the Ceremony once a month scheduled on a fertile day; and finally, the death of the cycle in Offred's period, an announcement of an anti-conception. All of the women of the

household follow Offred's cycle, particularly her menstruation as that month's stack of sanitary napkins are doled out by Cora like an allowance. "Each month I watch for blood, fearfully, for when it comes it means failure. I have failed once again to fulfill the expectations of others, which have become my own… Every month is a moon gigantic, round, heavy, an omen. It transits, pauses, continues on and passes out of sight, and I see despair coming towards me like a famine" (73-74). With the new moon and new fertility cycle Offred's chances are reborn, representing the double chance of new life both in conception of a new fetus and in redemption of Offred saving herself from death by fulfilling her role.

The Self as Object and Weapon

As a Handmaid, Offred is traded and guarded like a broodmare or pedigree dog, studded out and assigned a future that ends in either successful procreation for sake of the master society, or being put out to pasture. While the state and some of the people around Offred-- Serena Joy, the Aunts-- have objectified Offred for her fertility and reduced her to a walking womb, Offred herself considers and imagines her body as weapon, a ticket to freedom that is slightly too risky to cash in. This system, with a mirrors the Nazi Germany association Lebensborn, a program established by the SS in 1935 with the goal of raising the birth rate of "pure" Aryan children begat by those deemed worthy by the Nazi state, per information from the Jewish Virtual Library. Like in *The Handmaid's Tale,* the state

encouraged extra-marital procreation with the goal of engendering as many children as possible and adopting them out as needed to equally "pure" and desirable parents. Many of these children were born to young, unwed mothers, who were given a home and support in exchange for their participation. Abortion was illegal, though this policy was only bent to apply to these desirable pregnancies. In a similar directive organized by Heinrich Himmler, the Nuremberg Trials suggested that this program encouraged and planned the kidnapping and "Germanisation" of Polish and Russian children deemed to be racially pure, just as Offred's children will be re-assigned and adopted out to a more "fitting" mother (jewishvirtuallibrary.org).

Immanuel Kant's description of sexual objectification is the foundation of feminist theories of objectification. Interestingly in the context of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Kant argued that the source of objectification was sexual relationships and desires outside of monogamous marriage. He writes in his *Lectures on Ethics* that

> Sexual love makes of the loved person an Object of appetite; as soon as that appetite has been stilled, the person is cast aside as one casts away a lemon which has been sucked dry. … as soon as a person becomes an Object of appetite for another, all motives of moral relationship cease to function, because as an Object of appetite for another a person becomes a thing and can be treated and used as such by everyone (Kant 163).

Objectification, for Kant, involves the lowering of a being with humanity to the status of an object-- in this case, a sexual object. In theory this process could/would apply to both men and women, but Kant acknowledged that objectification usually was instigated by

men towards women, and that this in particular was the source of undesirable social practices like prostitution, adultery, and concubines.

In *The Second Sex,* Beauvoir writes a chapter on the "narcissism" of women as the objectification and love of self, a logical end to being so objectified by men and the world around her. Narcissism "consists in the setting up of the ego as a double 'stranger'" (Beauvoir 375). The adolescent girl "becomes an object and she sees herself as an object; she discovers this new aspect of her being with surprise: it seems to her that she has been doubled; instead of coinciding exactly with herself, she now begins to exist outside" (Beauvoir 316). Offred's sense of self is diminished as part of her position as a Handmaid; everything from the words she is allowed to use to how she is allowed to spend her time and what she is allowed to wear are carefully calculated to reduce her to the position of object-- the Handmaid as *thing* is indistinguishable from the next[10]. Put in this position, Offred's perception of herself is removed to a feeling of being doubled; walking down the street next to Ofglen, Offred's perspective disassociates from her body, and she looks down on the two Handmaids as if in the third person: "I walk down the street, doubled" (45). Of course Offred is not literally split into two copies; rather, as Offred's has lost

[10] The idea of the commodification of female bodies as relates to procreation is particularly pertinent to studies on African-American slavery. For further reading: Baptist's article ""Cuffy," "Fancy Maids," and "One-Eyed Men": Rape, Commodification, and the Domestic Slave Trade in the United States" and "Commodification of the Black Body, Sexual Objectification and Social Hierarchies during Slavery" by Iman Cooper.

herself through patriarchal objectification, her friend Ofglen has been equally and identically depersonalized until the two are indistinguishable, at least on the surface. In de Beauvoir's view, this objectification is centered on women as sexual object, a vessel both physiologically and emotionally set as a receptacle for men. For Handmaids, the practice of objectification is the same, but fixated on the product of their bodies rather than the actual use of them, with sexual objectification simply the inconvenient means that bear to the end of reproductive objectification. *Give me children or else I die,* the novel repeats, quoting Rachel of the Bible. The Handmaid must self-objectify in order to live; their lives depend on performing the "correct" biological functions of their sex.

In response to Gilead's cultural expectations, Offred regresses to her earlier state of objectification, a sexual object that at least has some agency. She-- and the other Handmaids, at least as Offred imagines-- appraise the currency of their bodies as what little value they have left to bargain with; they/Offred fantasise about what could be gained with their bodies: "If only [the Angels] would look… Something could be exchanged, we thought, some deal made, some tradeoff, we still had our bodies. That was our fantasy" (4). When Offred and Ofglen leave the Commanders' compound to do the marketing, they pass through at least one checkpoint staffed by young Guardians, entry-level soldiers little more than boys. On the morning she describes, one of the young guards bows a little to try and get a glimpse of Offred's face beneath the veil of her white wings. Offred raises "my head a little, to help him, and he sees my eyes and I see his, and he blushes… It's an event, a small defiance of rule, so small as to be undetectable, but such moments are the rewards I hold out for myself… Such moments are possibilities, tiny

peepholes" (21). Soldiers like this haven't been "issued" a woman yet and are expected to be totally chaste, forbidden even from touching themselves as "sacrilege" (22). As Offred walks past the checkpoint with Ofglen, she imagines the eyes of the young guards on her body, thrilling even to their imagined attention. "It's like thumbing your nose from behind a fence or teasing a dog with a bone held out of reach, and I'm ashamed of myself for doing it… Then I find I'm not ashamed after all. I enjoy the power; power of a dog bone, passive but there" (22). Like existence of the Aunts and the Wives-- women who have less power than men but more power than most women and therefore cling to it with both hands-- a little power in the hands of the otherwise powerless is intoxicating. This does not translate to reality, however; the first time Moira attempts escape from the Red Center, it is whispered that she "shouldn't have tried it with the angels," and she is returned with her feet flogged to bloody stumps (91). Moira herself, like these dreams of seduction, "was our fantasy" (133).

Judith Butler's theory of performative femininity proposes that sex is just as socially constructed as gender, and the "performativity" of either/any gender is social production that can be subverted: "Gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original" (Butler 716). Ultimately, heteronormative gender roles are "real" only in the sense that they have only been made so by humans, through generations of compulsive/compulsory tradition. This social compulsion is a significant qualification; "Gender is not a performance that a prior subject elects to do, but gender is *performative* in the sense that it constitutes as an effect the very subject it appears to express. It is a *compulsory* performance in the sense that acting out of line with heterosexual norms

brings with it ostracism, punishment, and violence" (Butler 718). In Gilead, the *compulsory* performance of gender-- female gender in particular-- is even more crucial than in our own reality; fail to perform to the defined standards of femininity and you are legally declared *Unwoman,* removed from society and send to toxic wastelands to rot out the end of your days. Fail to perform to the standards of masculinity (as homosexual "gender traitors" caught red-handed, or men in desertion of military duty) and face execution, your body marked with the symbol of your crime and placed on display.

Offred performs Gilead's expectations of femininity in order to survive. She wears the Handmaid uniform, lives quietly in the Commander's house, speaks when spoken to, and tries as best she can to get pregnant. At the start of *The Handmaid's Tale,* Offred is moved to Commander Fred's house like a new armoire, unpacked and delivered to the front door, installed in a bedroom upstairs, even issued a new name stemming from his own. Offred and the Commander do not speak or interact in any way--with Offred taking meals separately in her room, and coming and going through the back entrance-- except for nights of The Ceremony, where the entire household is present for prayer and Bible readings, and then upstairs in Serena Joy's bedroom for the actual insemination itself. Even in bed together there is no eye contact, no kissing, no caresses; no contact but the bare minimum required to achieve a chance at conception. The Commander seems to be older than Offred, described as having silver hair and a silver mustache, shoulders a little stooped: he "looks like a vodka ad, in a glossy magazine, of times gone by" (86). This is Offred's third posting, so if she does not manage to have a viable baby in her time with him, she will be sent to the Colonies. The question of life-or-death has reached peak

urgency. In contrast, Offred is at least the third Handmaid issued to the Commander. Apparently, men at his rank have access to an unlimited supply, at least until a child appears: “From each according to her ability, to each according to his need.” For a right-wing vision of utopia fine with enslaving those outside their moral code, the Handmaid policy is surprisingly Marxist.

One afternoon after shopping, Offred walks upstairs to her room to find the Commander in the hallway, looking into her room. When he hears her coming, he “walks forward. Towards me. *He is violating custom*” (49, emphasis mine). They do not speak, and Offred is unsettled, understanding that this encounter is some kind of sign, but indicating what she cannot tell. After what is the first, or at least the first described, Ceremony night, Offred feels compelled to sneak down to the living room at night, looking for something to steal. In the dark, she finds Nick, who whispers that the Commander wants to see her, the next night (99). She does so, uncertain, scared, but she is in no position to refuse the Commander anything; he could have her killed in a single sentence. “There's no doubt about who holds the real power.” Offred hovers at the doorway, unable to push forward or fall back: “I stand [outside], feeling like a child who's been summoned, at school, to the principal's office. What have I done wrong? My presence here is illegal” (136). No woman is allowed in the room-- not even Serena Joy, or the Marthas to clean-- and when the door opens Offred sees why: bookcases line the walls, filled with books, out in the open without lock or key; “No wonder we can't come in here. It's an oasis of the forbidden. I try not to stare” (137). Offred understands that the Commander wants something from her, that the reason she would be summoned to his office like this must

be to do *something* for him, but she is in such a position that makes it seem impossible for her to *offer* anything, let alone *do* something for someone else. Inviting her in, eventually the Commander tells her, albeit "sheepishly," what he would like her to do: he would like her to play *Scrabble* with him.

The main appeal, it seems, is that now *Scrabble* has become something illegal and enticing, just like books; it is the fact of the cultural taboo that brings the perversion, not an inherent dirtiness to the thing itself. "Now it's indecent. Now it's something he can't do with his Wife. Now it's desirable. Now he's compromised himself. It's as if he's offered me drugs... He doesn't say why he wants to play Scrabble with me. I don't ask him" (138-139). When it comes time for Offred to leave, the Commander asks for one more forbidden innocence: a kiss goodnight. Offred does so, obedient, still option-less, but his response is sad: "Not like that," he says. "As if you meant it" (140). It seems like a nice enough request on the surface, almost sweet, and it comes close to humanizing the Commander; a lonely man who is looking for a chaste intimacy, a token of love. But the moment of empathy turns to bitterness fast. No one has forced the Commander into this life; the rules he apparently feels so restricted by and wishes to break are created and enforced by himself, to benefit himself. Moreover, just the act is not good enough for him-- Offred's kiss on command does not satisfy. *As if you meant it*. Not *because you meant it*, but *as if*. He doesn't necessarily need her to *actually* mean it; he needs her to *pretend more effectively,* to better satisfy his needs. Offred gets something back from these exchanges with the Commander; some intellectual stimulation, something to do, moisturizer, some humanization and eye contact. However, the Commander makes clear,

and Offred cannot forget, that these visits ultimately exist to satisfy *his* needs and because he has the power to take what he wants. As they become more familiar with one another, Offred begins to find the Ceremony nights awkward in a way they weren't before; she is "conscious" of her unshaved legs, her armpits, the harsh overhead lighting. "He was no longer a thing to me," she says with some surprise; in the meantime, Offred is still a thing to him, at least on some level-- she is still owned and moved and traded and discarded like a possession. Once she's at the Jezebel's club with him, he literally tags her with a wristband, which signals the other men to back off.

The visits continue, and Offred, who was once her husband's mistress before he left his first wife, finds herself as a sort of mistress again. "The Commander and I have an arrangement. It's not the first such arrangement in history, though the shape it's taken is not the usual one... The difficulty is the Wife, as always" (154). All of this is kept secret and separate from Serena Joy, even as Offred sneaks past her closed bedroom door. Nick is the intermediary, a tilt of his cap signaling the Commander's desire for a meeting. On the second night the Commander shows her an old *Vogue,* something that should have been "burned." Offred recoils at first, unsure of how pious she should appear, of if this is a test: "It's not permitted, I said. In here, it is, he said quietly. I saw the point. Having broken the main taboo, why should I hesitate over another one, something minor? ...Behind this particular door, taboo dissolved" (157). Dissolved doesn't seem to quite be the right word, as it isn't like all taboo is gone; initially, Offred is confused and a bit let-down that there wasn't something "unspeakable" behind his door-- "Perversions, whips, mutilations? At the very least some minor sexual manipulation, some bygone peccadillo

now denied him, prohibited by law and punishable by amputation. To be asked to play *Scrabble*, instead, as if we were an old married couple, or two children, seemed kinky in the extreme, a violation in its own way" (155). Rather than *dissolved,* the taboos have regressed to what they once were, what they are to us now or were to Offred in the time "before." Gilead has turned normalcy on its head and made the everyday and normal suspect, while finally in privacy the new taboos are innocent again, at least as much as they can be between a man and his Handmaid.

As the Commander and Offred become more comfortable with one another-- "too comfortable" as Offred remembers chastisingly-- the nature of their relationship becomes more dependent on exchange; pressured by Ofglen, who suggests that "the resistance" knows about these secret rendezvous, Offred asks for the most precious thing she can think of: information. "I would like to know" (188). In a world where women cannot own property or hold money-- and where even the Fake News TV propaganda is restricted from Handmaids-- information is the most powerful currency Offred can access. Though we don't know to what degree, or have any other kind of verification, it seems that the Commander does tell Offred what she wants to know. "Sometimes he becomes querulous, at other times philosophical; or he wishes to explain things, justify himself... What I think doesn't matter. Which is the only reason he can tell me things" (210). Like a movie villain monologuing before the captive hero, the Commander is so secure in this world he has built that the slight risk of letting this one woman know too much is insignificant; what could she possibly do with the information anyway? She can barely leave his house. Paternalistically, he explains to Offred why things have turned out the way that they are,

why the way that things used to be was just no good for men, and how “better never means better for everyone” (211). Offred pushes back against him, a little, asking for more details or suggesting lightly that men didn't really have it so bad, before. The Commander insists that he would “like to know what you think…You're intelligent enough, you must have an opinion.” Offred responds neutrally: “I have no opinion, I say. He sighs, relaxes his hands, but leaves them on my shoulders. He knows what I think, all right” (210-211). It's strange, to see a humanized relationship between the Commander and Offred, where the Commander is able and even willing to acknowledge that this is not an ideal life for Offred. In contrast to the ultra-pious Aunts, it is endearing to see that he is not just parroting the party line down to his core, to hear him acknowledge that this might not be something she desires. However, like the juxtaposition between the everyday items of dishcloth and Scrabble that lend this dystopia its imaginable horror, the most chilling part of the Commander's character is that he understands that this world is not good for the Handmaids, that they “broke a few eggs” to make this omelet, that she is a human being who can read and write and form an opinion-- but he treats her and others like her like chattel anyway. Female humanity is worthless and erasable in pursuit of male fulfillment.

The last night we see Offred spend with the Commander, he offers her something too good to refuse: a night “out,” a secret trip to the Jezebel's club. To sneak her in, the Commander disguises Offred in a sequined and feathered leotard, high heels, lipstick and a bit of oily mascara. The Commander is playful and excited, teasing Offred with hints of where they are going and what they will do. Once dressed, Nick drives them to the club, with Offred down on the floor of the car to get through the checkpoints. Once inside, the

Commander leads her around the club on his arm:

> "It occurs to me he is showing off. He is showing me off, to them, and they understand that... But also he is showing off to me. He is demonstrating, to me, his mastery of the world. He's breaking the rules, under their noses, thumbing his nose at them, getting away with it. Perhaps he's reached that state of intoxication which power is said to inspire, the state in which you believe you are indispensable and can therefore do anything, absolutely anything you feel like, anything at all. Twice, when he thinks no one is looking, he winks at me. It's a juvenile display, the whole act, and pathetic; but it's something I understand" (236).

In Gilead, the Commander enjoys privilege of the highest order, a social structure of his making and of people like himself designed at every level to favor himself and those like him. Yet all of this power is second only to the ultimate privilege, the knowledge that he is so powerful that he can flout his own rules, right in the face and in the body of someone who is ruled by them from head to toe. With a hint of schadenfreude, no pleasure is as sweet as pleasure in the face of the miserable. In Simone de Beauvoir's landmark feminist work *The Second Sex,* she argues that the Othering of women, by men, is done in part to allow men the satisfaction of an audience: "Man dreams of an Other not only to possess her but also to be ratified by her... she remains exterior to a man's world and can view it objectively; and being close to man and dominated by him, she does not establish values foreign to his nature... The knight jousts for his lady in the tourney" (171-172). The Commander peacocks for Offred specifically because he views her as a possession rather

than an authority; her identify contained (in his eyes) under the umbrella of his own gives him a certainty that her values are the same as his own, and will admire him as he admires himself through her eyes.

This is the point where the chaste perversions of *Scrabble* and hand lotion finally meet their limit; this is a brothel, and Offred is disguised as an "evening rental," and after some time in the glittering, secret social sphere, the Commander leads Offred upstairs to a room. Offred excuses herself to the bathroom to freshen up, a parody of the old formula of lovers' meeting, until she has to emerge: "I should get this over with... I don't have to be told. I would rather not; but it's good to lie down... The fact is that I don't want to be alone with him, not on a bed. I'd rather have Serena there too. I'd rather play *Scrabble*" (254). The Commander is unwilling to pick up on this hesitation, this reluctance, and begins to touch Offred's body. "I thought you might enjoy it for a change." He undresses, and begins to undress her, and Offred forces herself to move and pretend, caught in a web between the beliefs that this man is not a bad man, that this is something she must do, that once again-- even if not by law this time-- her life depends on this performance. "It's the least you can do" (254-255). That is the end of the chapter, her final night with the Commander that she describes to us, though the meetings go on; we aren't told if the *Scrabble* games are resumed, or if the night at the club is a bell that cannot be unrung.

After the Salvaging, after Serena Joy discovers the affair, the black van comes for Offred. The Commander offers one weak line of protest: "'I need to see your authorization... You have a warrant?' ...The Commander puts his hand to his head. What have I been saying, and to whom, and which one of his enemies has found out? Possibly

he will be a security risk, now. I am above him, looking down; he is shrinking" (294). We don't know who is in the black van, though Nick tells Offred that it is the resistance group Mayday, and it seems like freedom is within reach. Now, with a means of escape, the Commander has become small. Offred literally looks down on him and walks past him; he is powerless to keep her. The ideal of him is gone.

Before being placed as a Handmaid, the women are indoctrinated at the Red Center and given specific instructions on how to perform the role of Handmaid, which echo in Offred's mind as she navigates the world and relationships around her: use the back door, do your exercises, don't step on the Wife's toes, keep your eyes down. Offred is suspicious of her shopping partner, Offred, and suspect that she is over-acting and hypocritical: "I can't entirely believe it. I think of her as a woman for whom every act is done for show, is acting rather than a real act. She does such things to look good, I think. She's out to make the best of it. But that is what I must look like to her, as well. How can it be otherwise?" (31). Offred mentally accuses Ofglen of the thing she does herself, and it disgusts her; the only two possibilities are that Ofglen is acting, or that she actually believes in Gilead's screed, and both ideas are distasteful, though a liar is more appealing than a zealot, and less dangerous to boot. Later in the novel, when Offred cracks and signals non-belief to Ofglen, both women are relieved: "I thought you were so stinking pious," one says; "I thought *you* were," replies the other (150). It is crucial, in Gilead, that this performance of pious, Christian womanhood be convincing; your life is on the line. But with everyone wearing the same mask, it becomes near impossible to tell who is hiding a real face beneath. Everything about the Handmaids' prescribed gender

performance is based on fundamental Christian ideals: the long robes, bare skin, and covered hair, not unlike a nun or an Amish woman. Everyone in Gilead is playing their part, but rather than winners and losers, this game has higher stakes: you play or you die. "Gender treachery," a crime that includes homosexuals and anyone thought to be flaunting gender's rules to a dangerous degree, is a trespass that get you banished to the radiation fields, or tortured and left on the wall. In the article "The World as it Will Be? Female Satire and the Technology of Power in *The Handmaid's Tale*" by Stephanie Barbe Hammer, the author discusses the inherent hypocrisy of Gilead: "Within this demonic scheme even the victimized handmaids are forced into an existence which is no less hypocritical than that of their oppressors; in order to survive they and the narrator among them are constantly obliged to pretend to espouse a system of values which denigrates and threatens to annihilate them" (Hammer 40). No one could be truly expected to advocate for one's own dehumanization the way that Handmaids, Wives, and the other women of Gilead seem to. Nonetheless, this pretense has become necessary for bare survival.

Of course, while the face of Gilead requires a conservative and puritanical performance of femininity, beneath the surface are the secret performances, when gender deviates from the new norm in order to recall the old. Upon the Commander's request, Offred sneaks to see him at night, and takes on a flipped role of Mistress where the forbidden thing isn't sex, but words: "Men at the top have always have mistresses, why should things be any different now? ...It's something to do, for one thing" (163). The formula is still the same: rich man in power gets a thrill by sneaking around behind his

wife's back (and killing two birds with one stone by cheating on his wife and the political/social system he help create in one move). The way that secrecy feeds into power is the important thing, with the women in the Commander's life serving as the tools to that end; hence how Offred is following in the footsteps of the *last* Offred as a convenient replacement to an existing role. Late in the novel, at the Jezebel club, the Commander irritates Offred by talking about how "natural" this new order is, how "it solves a lot of problems." In her irritation, Offred feels like "freezing on him, passing the rest of the evening in sulky wordlessness. But I can't afford that and I know it" (237). The rapt, docile audience is part of the femininity expected of Offred and necessary to remain in the Commander's good graces. Though the Commander likes it when Offred "show[s] precocity, like an attentive pet" (183), Offred's identity with the Commander is another carefully constructed mask, designed to comfort and flatter and soothe and tease as needed while keeping Offred as safe as possible. At the club, Offred is overwhelmed by the crowds and by the danger in being found out as a Handmaid, but calms herself: "All you have to do, I tell myself, if keep your mouth shut and look stupid. It shouldn't be that hard" (236). This, essentially, is how Offred manages to survive Gilead: mouth shut, eyes open, head down. The Commander buys it, for long enough.

Finally, when the Commander and Offred sleep together at the Jezebel club-- outside of the Ceremony-- Offred struggles to play her role, to slip into the archaic idea of the sexpot mistress. Before they leave the house, the Commander provides her with a dancer's costume, all sequins and fishnets, calling it *a disguise*; "You'll need to paint your face, too" (231). It's a sort of code-switching, moving from the modest red habit of the

Handmaid to the tarted-up clubwear; both are uniforms artfully designed to let Offred slip through the appropriate world without notice. At the club, Offred is overwhelmed by the sea of women, standing out like diamonds in a sea of dark business suits: women in lingerie, in pinup clothing, in bikinis and Playboy bunny outfits. "At first glance there's a cheerfulness to this scene. It's like a masquerade party; they are like oversize children, dressed up in togs they've rummaged from trunks. Is there joy in this? There could be, but have they chosen it? You can't tell by looking" (235). The question of *choice* is murky, in Offred's projection/perception of the crowd as well as in herself. She has chosen to be here, in a manner, by deciding to meet secretly with the Commander and follow him out of the house. But is it a choice, when she could not have refused a man who could have her put to death by sending a memo or lifting a finger? In Chapter One of *The Psychic Life of Power,* Judith Butler expands Foucault's and Freud's ideas of identity and power to gender and compulsory heteronormativity:

> "Where social categories guarantee a recognizable and enduring social existence, the embrace of such categories, even as they work in the service of subjection, is often preferred to no social existence at all… How is it, then, that the longing for subjection, based on a longing for social existence, recalling and exploiting primary dependencies, emerges as an instrument and effect of the power of subjection?" (Butler *Psychic* 20).

In a choice between social nonexistence and subjugation, Butler argues that it is against human nature to choose nonexistence, particularly and subjects and participants in a culture since birth, who have known no other structure. In *The Handmaid's Tale,* this

choice becomes even easier: subjugation or death. Who among us would make the choice for death? As Cora says to Rita early in the book when she insists that *she* would never agree to be a Handmaid: "And go to the Colonies? Catch you" (12).

As she works to survive within that binary of choice, Offred weaponizes her femininity as an act of resistance. After the first Ceremony, the Commander summons Offred to meet him in his office, the same way he has done with his other Handmaids in the past; for the Commander, fulfilling his want of contact and intimacy are simply another part of the function of the Handmaid, albeit a secret one. Once Offred understands what the Commander wants from her, she also understands that this gives her leverage; in exchange for her intimacy and company, she can get something that she wants. "There's no doubt about who holds the real power. But there must be something he wants, from me. To want is to have a weakness. It's this weakness, whatever it is, that entices me. It's like a small crack in a wall, before now impenetrable. If I press my eye to it, this weakness of his, I may be able to see my way clear. I want to know what he wants" (136). Later, Offred considers: "I know I need to take it seriously, this desire of his. It could be important, it could be a passport, it could be my downfall. I need to be earnest about it, I need to ponder it" (144). Like the interchangeability of the Handmaids, the Commander is a totem, a symbol for The Man who could just as easily be any other Commander sneaking around at night. What he wants as a person-- say, companionship; to share his collection of contraband-- is irrelevant to Offred except as a toehold, a pressure point. "On the third night I asked him for some hand lotion, I didn't want to sound begging, but I wanted what I could get" (158). The hand lotion is a test, a tentative

toe-dip into the waters of exchange, the beginning of Offred creating a two-way relationship. When the Commander gets Offred the hand lotion, he watches her rub it into her skin, and the scrutiny makes her feel uncomfortable. Offred wishes she could turn away, indulge in this ritual privately, but understands that this is part of the bargain: "I didn't dare. For him, I must remember, I am only a whim" (159). What Offred gives the Commander is submission as an object, existence as the focus of his gaze; in return, she gets her small luxury.

Eventually, Offred escalates this exchange into more a more meaningful exchange: knowledge. "I want to know," she informs the Commander simply. When he asks "Know what," smiling like an indulgent parent, Offred tells him: "whatever there is to know… What's going on" (188). Ofglen tells Offred that "they"-- the resistance, Mayday-- know that Offred is meeting with the Commander in secret, and Ofglen instructs Offred to use this to her advantage. "Find out and tell us… Anything you can" (223). They talk, tentatively, Offred feeling gently for the boundaries of their intimacy: "I know I'm prompting him, playing up to him, drawing him out, and I dislike myself for it, it's nauseating, in fact. But we are fencing. Either he talks or I will" (185). A hundred metaphors could have been used in lieu of *fencing*-- dancing, circling, flirting, etcetera-- but Atwood uses the one that puts a weapon in Offred's hands. Offred finds out little that is useful to the resistance, and has nothing to report back to Ofglen, partly due to how closely guarded the Commander's secrets are, partly out of self-preservation; now that she has begun seeing Nick, Offred resists doing anything that would put him in jeopardy.

Ultimately, however, it is not her femininity-- or solely her gender-- that sets

Offred free. While Offred weaponizes her femininity and performs gender as survival and resistance, she remains shackled by Gilead and its expectations. In the essay "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," scholar and poet Audre Lorde writes:

> Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference -- those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older -- know that survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support (Lorde 26-27).

As Lorde describes, Offred's participation in Gilead's prescribed gender structures allows her temporary feelings of power and temporary privileges. However, she still remains imprisoned in the Master's house. Even when Offred manages to escape-- thanks to Nick's connections with Mayday, the rest of the terms unknown to us-- Gilead still continues on,

leaving unknown multitudes of women still oppressed[11].

The Love/Self & Rebellion

Throughout *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred uses and weaponizes her femininity in order to survive, but still remains trapped within the larger structures of Gilead. At the end of Offred's time in the Commander's house, she begins seeing Nick; the first time in an impregnation scheme set up by Serena Joy, but willingly as often as they can afterwards. When the black van comes to take Offred away, it is Mayday disguised as Gilead's Eyes, and Nick is the one that reassures Offred, tells her it's okay, and instructs her to trust them. As proof, he calls Offred by her true name, a sign of the intimacy she shared with him. While Offred's external performances and weaponizations of her femininity have protected Offred's life, she remains constrained by her gender role within Gilead. It is Offred's engagement with emotional intimacy and agency in taking pleasure in her physical self that takes her outside of the constraints of Gilead, both mentally/emotionally and finally in the sense of her physical escape.

When Offred begins meeting with the Commander, she realizes that she has a chance to ask for something in return for her presence in his company. Eventually, she

[11] When I presented a short version of this paper at the PCA/ACA national conference in Indianapolis in March of 2018, a black audience member asked me during the Q&A if I thought it was appropriate to use Lorde's language to describe the situation of Offred and the women like her in Gilead considering that Atwood had totally excluded people of color from her original narrative. While I do still feel that Lorde's critical work here applies to the patriarchal culture and women's lives in *The Handmaid's Tale* and therefore wanted to keep it in my paper, I understand that as a white woman talking about white characters, it's not my place to decide whether this use is appropriative or not. I am extremely grateful for that question and perspective.

settles on hand cream. Offred and other Handmaids usually use stolen bits of butter in lieu of moisturizer, with hand cream or lotion considered a luxury and a vanity not fit for Handmaids or a worthwhile investment for Gilead as their womb will be worn out long before their skin. When she asks for the moisturizer, the Commander smiles, laughing at the butter trick before agreeing: "I think I could get some of that, he said, as if indulging a child's wish for bubble gum" (159). The lotion is kept in his office so that no one else finds it and Offred applies it as he watches, uncomfortable and shy under his gaze: "I wanted to turn my back on him-- it was as if he were in the bathroom with me-- but I didn't dare" (159). The significance of the hand lotion is lost on the Commander; his bathroom is likely stocked with fine shaving cream and straight-razors alike, his office filled with forbidden indulgences like whiskey and cigars. As a "walking womb," Offred's body is meant to be strictly utilitarian; maintained by the state at a bare minimum of health required to produce healthy babies. Food is bland and nutritious, physical exercise is the same daily walk, hair and body are covered modestly and practically in long, plain cloth. Any physical pleasure these women might have enjoyed is not only a waste, but practically considered blasphemy. Offred enjoys the mental exercise in her time with the Commander, through *Scrabble* and old magazines and a little bit of conversation outside of her own head. The hand lotion is the first step Offred takes back towards a tangible pleasure, a tangible *existence*, towards the enjoyment of her body as a part of her Self rather than an object of production.

Eventually, Offred's rebellion of the senses escalates from hand lotion to late-night trysts with Nick. Nick is the Commander's chauffeur, "one of the Guardians assigned to

our household." He wears his cap tilted on his head, his uniform sleeves rolled to the elbow, and smokes; a sign that he can get things on the black market. Offred described him as having "a French face, lean, whimsical, all planes and angles, with creases around the mouth where he smiles" (17-18). Her words are soft, endearing towards him, different than the aged stoop and "vodka ad" looks of the Commanders. Offred's narrative is in the present tense, jumbled, and it is easy to forget that these tapes have all been recorded substantially after the fact as they could not possibly have been made in the Commander's household. Though these descriptions happen in the first few pages of the novel and are given as a first-blush glance of Nick, Offred's words may be colored by all that comes after.

Nick is too "low status," she says, to be issued a woman-- neither Wife, Martha, nor Maid-- and lives in a bachelor's apartment over the garage. Somehow he "doesn't rate," in Offred's words, hasn't curried favor with the right official. "He's too casual, he's not servile enough. It may be stupidity, but I don't think so. Smells fishy, they used to say; or, I smell a rat" (18). Nick catches her eye, drops the cigarette, and winks; unbelievably forward in a society where even the eye contact is strictly prohibited. Offred wonders if he's being friendly, wonders if the cigarette and the wink were a test, wonders if he's an Eye. In the epilogue, Pieixoto notes that Nick must have been a member of Mayday in order to help Offred get away safely, but that he was also likely a member of the Eyes, as "such chauffeurs and personal servants often were" (310). What the "Eyes" are are never exactly described, but seem to be the spy network/SS of Gilead. The Eyes' vans are black and tinted with a white eye painted on the side, the driver wearing dark shades. When the vans drive by, "if there are sounds coming from inside we try not to hear them. Nobody's heart

is perfect" (22). If Nick is an Eye, Offred is right to be more cautious; doing something forbidden like speaking to him could be fatal.

The night after the Ceremony, when Offred sneaks downstairs, Nick finds her in the sitting room. Both of them being there is illegal; they kiss, and that's illegal too. They're both equally guilty, equally at risk, equally at the other's mercy: "for the moment we're mirrors." Offred "craves" him, craves his touch, and thinks about how it's been so long since she was touched by someone else-- despite having come from Serena Joy's bed that same night. Nick becomes the meeting signal for the Commander, wearing his cap crooked on his head summoning Offred for a visit that evening, if she can. His motives are opaque to Offred, though she knows he must be getting *something* for his trouble: "What does he get for it, his role as page boy? How does he feel, pimping in this ambiguous way for the Commander... Depend on it, there's something in it for him. Everyone's on the take, one way or another. Extra cigarettes? Extra freedoms... Maybe he just likes the satisfaction of knowing something secret. Of having something on me...I would like to think better of him" (181). We never really find out *what's in it for Nick,* though something must have happened for the Commander to have bought his loyalty, or to at least think he has. Later, we know Nick drives the Commander and the occasional guest back and forth to the Jezebel's club; while Jezebel's is the elite's worst kept secret, Nick is still more in the know than most.

Even, as we find out, with Serena Joy-- desperate for a child, for whatever reason, Serena Joy arranges for Offred to secretly meet with Nick and attempt to conceive by him, at is seems the Commander cannot. What Offred gets out of the arrangement is fairly

straightforward: she needs to produce a child, and soon, in order for her life to be spared. In addition, Serena Joy gives her a hint of Offred's daughter in one flash of a photograph. The first night, Offred apologizes to Nick awkwardly, and he shrugs: “I get paid, he says, punk surliness” (262). After the single meeting arranged by Serena Joy, Offred sneaks out to Nick again and again, creeping across the lawn to his apartment in the middle of the night. She loses herself in a desperate romance, knocking at his door, making love, kissing him with her eyes open so she can drink in every moment. Where ceremonies with the Commander are a pure exchange of DNA and the meetings with the Commander are a stilted game of intimacy, here Offred falls hard, telling Nick about Moira and about Ofglen, and even her name: “I tell him my real name and feel that therefore I am known. I act like a dunce. I should know better. I make of him an idol, a cardboard cutout… Neither of us says the word *love*, not once. It would be tempting fate; it would be romance, bad luck (270). Initially a gamble at survival by procreation, Offred has become foolhardy, projecting what's left of her humanity onto this man at the expense of her own safety. It would be so easy to be caught, and to pay with her life; perhaps in a life where every other moment is carefully guarded and controlled, that sense of freedom is the thing that she finds most precious.

Much of Offred's perception is sensual, and she describes her world in very physical, tactile ways: the soft soles of her red boots, the grain of the carved wood in the wardrobe, the crisp brown petals of the dead daffodils. Offred is obsessed with touch as a starving person is obsessed with food: throughout the book, though this obsession is always present, it takes on the most importance in her fantasies about Luke, and in her

relationship with Nick. From the beginning of the book, she carefully notes the amount of skin he reveals, and wonders what it would be like to be close to him: “Despite myself, I think about how he might smell. Not fish or decaying rat; tanned skin, moist in the sun, filmed with smoke. I sigh, inhaling” (18). The next time we see Nick, the night of the Ceremony, Offred is placed in a kneeling position while Serena Joy sits to the side, and the rest of the household stands at attention behind her. The Marthas keep a respectful distance, with a sense of impatience, but Nick lets his foot brush Offred's: “Is this on purpose? Whether it is or not we are touching, two shapes of leather. I feel my shoe soften, blood flows into it, it grows warm, it becomes a skin. I move my foot slightly, away... He laughs, moves his foot so it's touching mine again. No one can see, beneath the folds of my outspread skirt. I shift, it's too warm in here, the smell of stale perfume makes me feel a little sick. I move my foot away” (81). That touch is relatively so insignificant; though illegal for them to interact in any way, no one could possibly notice or even suspect the brush of boots beneath a skirt. It is exactly that mundanity that is important to Offred, the willful disobedience of Nick. On a night when she is going to get fucked by the Commander for the good of the state, this is the touch she spends her time thinking about.

Later, the nights of those secret meetings, Offred's description of their affair is centered the look and feel of him, so different from nights with the Commander. “With the Commander I close my eyes, even when I am only kissing him good-night. I do not want to see him up close. But now, here, each time, I keep my eyes open.... I want to see what can be seen, of him, take him in, memorize him, save him up so I can live on the image, later: the lines of his body, the texture of his flesh, the glisten of sweat on his pelt...

I ought to have done that with Luke, paid more attention to the details" (269). Offred tells him things, secrets and her feelings, but he "on the other hand talks little… alive only to the possibilities of my body" (290). Their intimacies are an arrangement of the forbidden; what exists between them exists nowhere else, at least nowhere illegally, in Gilead. Their relationship is precious for itself, for the pleasures of the moment, and for what it recalls of the time before. What Offred feels with Nick is safety-- ironically, she knows, because undressed or not in his bedroom is the riskiest place she can be-- but Offred finds a comfort in him that pulls her into a sense of security. How Nick feels we do not know, and Offred does not speculate. In Nick's room, Offred has the opportunity to see herself as a person; to do something for pleasure, rather than survival. Where the Commander asks Offred for a show of intimacy and goads her into a conversation loaded with landmines, Nick and Offred tacitly create a safe space, or at least the nearest thing to it within the lion's den.

Offred's affair with Nick is not simply illegal rebellion or the means to a life-saving pregnancy, but an act of humanity. "What did we overlook?" the Commander asks Offred thoughtfully, like an analyst discussing budget numbers. "*Love,"* Offred fills in (220). Thus, Winston has an illegal affair with Julia, and Offred has an illegal affair with Nick. As Winston remarks after he and Julia have sex for the first time, their action could not be described as passionate or motivated by desire, but as "a blow struck against the Party. It was a political act" (Orwell 105). And as Offred remarks about her secret liaisons with Nick: "This room is one of the most dangerous places I could be" (269-270). Under extreme circumstances, even the most personal of acts becomes a political statement; the

most personal of moments becomes treason. In the article "Resistance Through Narrating," Hilde Staels argues that this "yearning" of Offred's is key to her survival: "She gives voice to a want, to a personal desire for touch and for being touched. Against the reign of economic exchange value between commercially valid objects, she posits a desire to create a contiguous, free-flowing relationship with the elements and with other human beings" (234). Offred's relationship with the Commander is a carefully constructed chess match of give and take, with each party carefully circling the other's boundaries. Offred's relationship with Nick is much more primal and much more human: Offred wants something, and she gets it from Nick regardless of the political consequences.

In Foucault's *Subjectivity and Truth,* he writes: "It is a matter of acts and pleasures, not of desire. It is a matter of the formation of the self through techniques of living, not of repression through prohibition and law" (Foucault *Subjectivity* 89). Between Offred and Nick, her desire is not the key piece of her rebellion; Offred wants many things she can't have, from summer sandals to a cigarette to an ice cream cone. Throughout the novel, Offred plays by the rules and denies herself everything she desires, until her relationship with Nick begins. This act moves Offred from "thoughtcrime" to an act of rebellion. In *1984's* Oceania, *thought* is the nexus of being and rebellion; thoughts are regulated and prescribed so tightly that Winston and Julia were rebels from the moment they first dared to lust. Gilead, not able to be so invasive, wants a show of loyalty from its people. *Kiss me as if you meant it*, the Commander asks of Offred. Like the biblical Pharisees, what is seen by others becomes more important than what is; the performance is key. When Offred begins seeing Nick, she begins to fail at the performance

of womanhood Gilead requires; she fails to perform the right level of enthusiasm to please the Commander, and crucially, fails to perform the role of pious Handmaid well enough to protect herself from the new Ofglen, who might well be an Eye, and necessitates Offred's escape via Mayday and the black van. When the black van does come, Nick tells Offred that she should go with them, it's all right, and as a sign of good faith calls Offred by her real name. "Why should this mean anything?" Offred thinks; "I snatch at it, this offer. It's all I am left with" (293-294). Like Winston and Julia in *1984,* love is the thing that the state does not and cannot account for; love or something like it in this physical intimacy is what leads to Offred's real agency, and eventually her freedom.

Conclusion

The theoretical concept of performativity as regards narrative, gender, and sexuality is the key to my analysis of *The Handmaid's Tale*. All the world's a stage, Shakespeare wrote, and the human condition entangles our social roles with our actions, identity, relationships, and sense of self. The rigidity and peril of these roles is one of the most important thematic elements of *The Handmaid's Tale*, and this pressure informs nearly every choice and action the characters take. By understanding how Offred performs, navigates, and weaponizes the different performances of gender expected of her, we can understand more fully the ways in which gender, power, and religion mix and clash in our time today.

I believe that *The Handmaid's Tale* is just as relevant today as it was in 1985, if not more so to a frightening degree. In the article "What *The Handmaid's Tale* Means in the Age of Trump" by Margaret Atwood for the *New York Times,* Atwood sums up why the novel strikes readers as so terrifying: "'It can't happen here' could not be depended on: Anything could happen anywhere, given the circumstances" (Atwood "Age of Trump" 2017). It's not so easy to wave away the human rights violations of Gilead as just taking place in a more backwards land, in a more backwards time; it's that same sense of complacency that allows toxic, fascist sentiment to fester. At one point in *The Handmaid's Tale,* Offred explains with an air of guilt just how easy it was for women like her to see

their freedoms slip away:

> We lived, as usual, by ignoring. Ignoring isn't the same as ignorance, you have to work at it. Nothing changes instantaneously: in a gradually heating bathtub you'd be boiled to death before you knew it. There were stories in the newspapers, of course… But they were about other women, and the men who did such things were other men. None of them were the men we knew…. How awful, we would say, and they were, but they but they were awful without being believable. They were too melodramatic, they had a dimension that was not the dimension of our lives. We were the people who were not in the papers. We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of print. It gave us more freedom. We lived in the gaps between the stories (56-57).

Offred, pre-Gilead, lived a life of "normalcy," of privilege. White, straight, college-educated, married, employed, healthy; she says *we* here, without specifying who. *We* is the women like Offred, who keep their heads down, who don't go to marches because their husbands want them to stay home; who vote democrat in the presidential election once every four years but forget about midterms; who think that *feminism* was the cause of their mothers' and grandmothers' generation but should be all behind us now, who think that they are safe because they are good women, women who play by the rules. *The Handmaid's Tale* is a dark foretelling of what can happen when evil people come to power, but just as importantly, when good people fail to act. It was Dr. Martin Luther King Jr who said, "History will have to record that the greatest tragedy of this period of social

transition was not the strident clamor of the bad people, but the appalling silence of the good people." *The Handmaid's Tale* reminds us of how our rights are rights that were and are fought and bled for. We cannot afford to stay in the blank white spaces.

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