

5-29-2016

A Defense of Offred's Agency

Camille Weber
Linfield College

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A Defense of Offred's Agency

by Camille Weber

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Bachelor of Arts in English

Linfield College

May 29th, 2016

Approved by: Barbara Kitt Seidman

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Author's Name: (Last name, first name)

Weber, Camille

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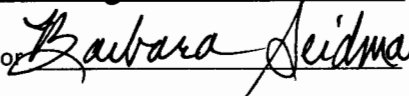
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Introduction

Although her novel falls within the 20th century dystopian fictions such as Aldous Huxley's *A Brave New World* and George Orwell's *1984*, Margaret Atwood refuses to label *The Handmaid's Tale* that way, believing it minimizes the real focus of her work: the struggle her protagonist, Offred, must go through in order to maintain her individuality in a totalizing society. Instead, Atwood regards this novel as a work of speculative fiction, as all aspects of the narrative were inspired to some degree by events that have occurred throughout the course of human history.

The Handmaid's Tale is Atwood's sixth novel and has been a crucial part of her extensive writing career since 1989. Atwood wrote the novel shortly after the elections of U.S. President Ronald Regan and first woman British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher. These elections marked a period of conservative revival fueled by growing religious influence on liberal democratic systems. What is now considered the "religious right" planted roots in the American justice system after World War II when a religious conservative political activist, Paul Weyrich, saw an opportunity for Evangelical Christians to become a powerful force in U.S.' elections. According to Randall Balmer's *The Real Origins of the Religious Right*:

Weyrich wrote in the mid-1970s "When political power is achieved, the moral majority will have the opportunity to re-create this great nation." Weyrich believed that the political possibilities of such a coalition were unlimited. "The leadership, moral philosophy, and workable vehicle are at hand just waiting to be blended and activated," he wrote. "If the moral majority acts, results could well exceed our wildest dreams." (Balmer 2)

This new political movement attacked many liberal stances regarding individual liberties and were particularly critical of the “sexual revolution” of the 1960s and 1970s. By the 1980s this organized movement threatened the progress women had gained in the areas of reproductive rights and social equality, elevating feminist fears of potentially backtracking away from gender equality.

In Atwood’s cautionary tale, the U.S. is overthrown by a radical right wing religious movement under the cover of an orchestrated terrorist attack of the U.S. president and Congress. The new regime which aggressively rolls back female rights and liberties made its move toward totalitarian control slowly, first eliminating oppositional ideologies such as Quakers, Baptists, Catholic nuns and political descendants to establish Gilead, a Christian fundamentalist theocracy which uses Biblical justification, particularly from the Old Testament, to impose absolute patriarchy and to tyrannize over the remaining population of the U.S. Among its victims. The protagonist is a woman in her thirties who has been designated a reproductive “Handmaid” and has acquiesced to her new status in this society as she is serving her final posting as a Handmaid and faces certain death by banishment to the Colonies if she fails to conceive her Commander’s child.

The goal of this thesis is to defend Atwood’s protagonist, a woman temporarily renamed Offred, as evincing more agency than critics often accord her. Her gradual defiance against the state shows her desire to regain her individuality by the conclusion of the novel. The three chapters of this thesis address the socio-political obstacles that challenge Offred, the ways in which she defies the system to assert her subjectivity and critiques of Professor Pieixoto’s perspective on Offred’s oral account of her transformation in the final *Historical Notes* section of the novel. In the first chapter, I apply Michel Foucault’s theory of panopticism and Isaiah

Berlin's two concepts of liberty to deconstruct Gilead's power structure, highlighting how the society maintains its dominance and yet how its weaknesses enable Offred to use them to her advantage. The second chapter offers an analysis of Offred's emergent agency during her third posting, with particular focus on her sexual transgression, manipulation of language and willingness to authorize herself through her own account. Finally, I conclude with an analysis of the controversial *Historical Notes* section in which I argue that, despite Professor Pieixoto's dismissal of the significance of Offred's narrative, Offred remains the most memorable aspect of the novel.

Offred is not a traditional hero, but Atwood's novel does not take place in a traditional world. Offred's willingness to sustain her individuality despite Gilead's overwhelming effort to erase it defies the state's agenda of female suppression and reaffirms Atwood's effort to warn her readers that everyone's rights are interconnected. Ultimately proving that if the erosion of any one group's liberties is silently tolerated, eventually everyone's liberties evaporate.

Chapter 1

How and Why Gilead Sustains its Influence:

A political analysis of Gilead using Michel Foucault's Panopticon and Isaiah Berlin's Two Concepts of Liberty

In order to convincingly prove Offred's evolving agency as in resisting the self-erasure of a totalizing state, it is helpful to recognize the extent of the socio-political pressures exerted upon all individuals living in this new regime. While Gilead's theocracy punishes and thereby represses political disagreement with the state as a means of keeping the new power structure alive, I argue that Michel Foucault's social implementation of the Panopticon and Isaiah Berlin's two concepts of liberty are necessary theories to better understand Gilead's socio-political influence, functionalities and vulnerabilities. Michel Foucault's theory of panopticism also provides useful philosophical tool to analyze Gilead's dependence on the collective to automate and de-individualize power and explain the rational process by which the individual becomes complacent under a totalizing regime. Berlin's two concepts of liberty highlight Gilead's clever bifurcation of civil liberties in its transitioning phase to privilege one facet of liberty at the expense of the other, thereby compromising democratic ideology in stages so that the regime ensures its longevity until more draconian controls can be established. Gilead maintains its influence over its citizens by entrapping them initially in a society familiar enough to permit the steady withdrawal of liberties until the normalizing of the Panopticon subordinates all persons to the needs of the state. Foucault and Berlin both highlight the complexities and potential manipulations of Gilead's socio-political behaviors. Although Offred is one of millions disempowered by this system, she does in fact push back against the system which ensnares her, refusing ultimately to be another cog in Gilead's social machine.

Philosophical Background: Foucault

Michel Foucault was a 20th century philosophical historian wanting to learn about the mistakes of the past and apply them to his own times. His major works include *Madness and Civilization*, *The Birth of the Clinic*, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, and *The History of Sexuality*. In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault analyzed social and political mechanisms to explain the development of the Western penal system. Although our current penal system seems more civilized as discipline and punishment techniques have moved away from the public torture or executions of earlier times, Foucault argues that the private aspects of modern discipline tactics are more barbaric as the abuses of power often go undetected. One of the main differences between classical and modern forms of discipline is the public versus private aspects of the punishment. In classical discipline, punishment tactics are a public act in which one power source enacts retribution on the body of the guilty. In modern discipline, the tactics are private as the act is usually done by any part of society through re-education and normalization.

The focal point of this work is Foucault's analysis of the social implementation of the Panopticon. The Panopticon is late 18th century philosopher Jeremy Bentham's architectural design for an ideal prison system in which the prisoners internalize the rules of the prison and regulate themselves. In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault describes how the Panopticon functions as a:

laboratory of power. Thanks to its mechanisms of observation, it gains in efficiency and in it the ability to penetrate into men's behavior; knowledge follows the advances of power, discovering new objects of knowledge over all the surfaces on which power is

exercised...[it] must be understood as a generalized model of functioning; a way of defining power relations in terms of everyday men...it is a diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form...it is in fact a figure of political technology that may and must be detached from any specific use. (204-205)

Power merely passes to other social groups, not one that can entirely dissipate once a new group implements their own ideology. The ingeniousness of the Panopticon is that punishment is transformed from an active discipline to a passive one, making the power source almost impossible to track.

Foucault sees the Panopticon as an explanation of how humans in general function and relate to one another in a surveillance state. Yet, in applying it to the power dynamics of a society he fails to address the individualistic imagination capacity of humans to create alterations to its operations and rebel against its oppressive control. During a historical debate entitled *Human Nature: Justice versus Power* between Foucault and rival social philosopher, Avram Noam Chomsky, Foucault admits he has “given very little room to what you might call the creativity of individuals, to their capacity for creation, to their aptitude for inventing by themselves, for originating concepts, theories or scientific truths by themselves.” According to Foucault, philosophical historians have wrestled to find the balance between giving individual attribution to those who’ve made historical discoveries and maintaining separation between history’s truth and the subject in whom discovered it. Foucault comprehends the extraction of the truth from history as a “matter of superimposing the theory of knowledge and the subject of knowledge on the history of knowledge” and insists that in order to maintain the truth, one must “analyze the productive capacity of knowledge as a collective practice; and consequently replace individuals and their ‘knowledge’ in the development of a knowledge which at a given moment

functions according to certain rules which one can register and describe” (15-16). To Foucault, individuals obstruct the comprehension of history because they want credit for their findings which often distracts from the truth he and other philosophical historians seek to find.

Because of its unspecified nature, Foucault’s analysis of the Panopticon and its discursive practices can be used to analyze any enclosed state whose power derives from the anonymity of a main source of power. His emphasis on the depersonalized discourses directing the behavior of the larger population parallels the political system Margaret Atwood creates in her novel, making panopticism a way to comprehend how the new social structure of Gilead builds and maintains power.

Panopticism in Gilead

In addition to using the discourse of Christian Fundamentalism to organize and manage the state, Gilead also employs panopticism to internalize the patriarchal hierarchies of the state within the citizenry and thereby discourages political resistance. Foucault explains in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* that the major strength of the Panopticon lies in its ability to “induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (201). Gilead exhibits the effectiveness of Foucault’s panoptic model through the general anonymity of its power structure, the specialization of individuals in its gendered bureaucratic social structure, the internalization of its new gendered rules and regulatory efforts through rehabilitation in the Rachel and Leah Re-education Center, surveillance through the use of the “Eye” organization and the flexibility to allow political adjustments that ensure efficiency while re-enforcing the power structure. By using this foundational element of disciplinary power to replace the democratically constituted former

United States, Gilead renders the sources of its power invisible while putting the objects of this power on display.

The anonymity of the source of the state's power lays the foundation for the panoptic system in Gilead. According to Foucault "power should be visible and unverifiable" as "any individual, taken at random, can operate the machine" (201-2). After a military coup declares martial law and suspends the Constitution in the wake of mass assassinations of governmental leaders in the Washington D.C., the new regime expels lawyers, closes universities and curtails access to the monetary system. Offred describes the little that she knows regarding the overthrowing of the United States:

[the military coup] was after the catastrophe, when they shot the president and machine gunned the Congress and the army declared a state of emergency. They blamed it on the Islamic fanatics, at the time. That was when they suspended the Constitution. They said it would be temporary. There wasn't even an enemy you could put your finger on.

Although the changes described above were gradual, the new power system (headed by a vague "they") urged people to "continue as normal" while restricting access to newspapers, adult shops, public pools, and finances (174). This illustrates the power structure's reliance on anonymity as necessary for the normalization of its rules and regulations within the population. Gilead's rise to power unfolds amid the public's ignorance of its agenda over its logic.

Although the novel acknowledges there are some who protect the erosion of rights, they fail to stir any wide-spread action; the state's cultivation of a crisis mentality in the populace fosters acquiescence in exchange for "security." The absence of effective opposition to the rules and regulations in a panoptic system is a sign of complacency, giving more legitimacy and hence

more power to the system to enact its will. When Offred and her coworkers are released from their library jobs and denied access to their own money, she understands that their previous passivity has contributed to the relatively easy rise of the new regime's totalizing authority. Offred asks herself, "What was it about this that made us feel we deserved it?," indicating that the panoptic structure of Gilead is built on existing willingness of individuals to cede ultimate authority to the state (177). Foucault mentions that part of what makes the seamless transition is "that the productive increase of power can be assured only if...it can be exercised continuously in the very foundations of society in the subtlest possible way" (208). Key aspects of Gilead's patriarchal system existed in the United States itself, for example, and the new group in power needed only to ratchet them up by degrees until they had become absolute and unquestionable.

After democracy is distinguished in Gilead, people within the new society become more regally specialized according to predetermined functions, a key characteristic of the panoptic structure. Gilead's patriarchal values dictates separation of men and women into two different hierarchies with members of each gender assigned social positions and occupations according to the procreative viability of their physical bodies. On the men's side, the Commanders (governmental elites heading their own household and assigned Handmaids for reproduction purposes) represent the top of the social hierarchy, followed by the Angels (military men), then the Guardians (local police) and lastly the gardeners and chauffeurs (household assistants to the Commanders). On the women's side, the Commanders' wives stand at the top of the social hierarchy, followed by the Aunts (in charge of "rehabilitating" fertile young women to become Handmaids), then the Marthas (in charge of domestic affairs), the Econowives (wives of low level Guardians) and lastly the Handmaids (the reproductive vessels for the propagation society). According to Foucault, the Panopticon "is a menagerie; the animal is replaced by man, individual

distribution by specific grouping” used to “make it possible to note the aptitudes of each worker, compare the time he takes to perform a task and if they are paid by the day, to calculate their wages” (203). The panoptic structure relies on the individuals within it to regulate themselves and others through their knowledge of the different roles of each class specification.

Common knowledge of these roles include the assigned women’s clothing, mandatory attendance at rituals such as the Ceremony, Salvaging and Birth Day as well as strict control over their access to and behavior within public and private spaces. To erase individuality and reinforce roles, men and women wear clothing in colors signifying their social status. Wives and Commanders wear blue, Guardians and Marthas wear green, Econowives wear multi-colored stripes, Angels wear black and Handmaids wear a red cloak and a headpiece with white wings. Offred describes how the Handmaid’s red cloak is “the color of blood, which defines us” (referring to menstruation and childbirth) and how the white wings “keep us from seeing, but also from being seen,” referring to her erased personal appearance and the restricted visibility characteristic of the Panopticon (8). Offred and the other Handmaids must attend prescribed rituals such as the Ceremony (a legalized rape also including a Commander’s wife and a Commander intended for reproductive purposes), Salvaging (public execution of insubordinate men and women) and Birth Day (a gathering in which one Handmaid gives birth while other Handmaids enact sympathetic birthing pains). Lastly, strict parameters operate in public and private spaces. For example, Offred is not “allowed inside the [city] buildings anymore” but is allowed to go out “for our walks, twice daily, two by two around the football field” (166, 4). The routine acceptance of these practices by these involved demonstrate how thoroughly even the transitional generation has internalized the rules and regulations of the state, increasing the efficiency of the system overall.

Such specialization and internalization of the new social system initially requires re-education practices of a populace. Re-education, according to Foucault involves “the spread of disciplinary procedures...as centers of observation disseminated throughout society” (212). Although re-education centers themselves are limited to a small number of physical places, the effects of their teachings can be felt throughout the entire society. In *The Handmaid’s Tale* the Rachel and Leah Re-education Center plays a crucial role in transitioning these women from a liberal democratic value system to Gilead’s patriarchal theocratic values. The ritual of “Testifying” offers an example of this re-education process in action: Handmaids are forced by the Aunts to admit stories of sexual transgression and violence in order to be shamed into accepting a more restrictive code of female behavior which empowers Gilead’s patriarchal system. In this encounter, Janine, a Handmaid in training, is forced to retell a story about her alleged gang rape and consequential abortion. The response of her peers demonstrates the Panopticon’s re-education agenda’s full effect: “But whose fault was it? Aunt Helena says, holding up one plump finger. Her fault, *her* fault, *her* fault, we chant in unison. Who led them on? Aunt Helena beams, pleased with us. *She* did. *She* did. *She* did. Why did God allow such a terrible thing to happen? Teach her a *lesson*. Teach her a *lesson*. Teach her a *lesson*.” The group continues to taunt Janine ritualistically until she finally learns the appropriate response expected of her: “It was my fault, she says. It was my own fault. I led them on. I deserved the pain” (72). Although Gilead exploited anxieties about escalating sexual violence against women in the late 20th century as a means of legitimizing its social controls, blame for such violence could only be placed on women in order to keep their voices marginalized and maintain the patriarchal balance of power. “Testifying” episodes ensure that the Handmaids become compliant in their

subordination as reproductive vessels “protected” from random sexual assaults, the “chastity” paradoxically essential to their monthly ceremonial rape by their assigned Commander.

Another characteristic of the panoptic system is a pervasive culture of surveillance. General knowledge of the assigned roles within the population operates as its own form of internal policing, but beyond this lies an anonymous gaze of the state itself ensuring compliance. According to Foucault “faceless gaze...transformed the whole social body into a field of perception” making it a permanent and omniscient totalizing force (214). A key feature of this surveillance culture is personal as well as public anxiety, a state Offred consistently voices. Even amid her sister Handmaids she feels threatened. As she and Ofglen take their daily walk to the store, her internal monologue notes how they “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 others will be accountable” (19). This anxiety also surfaces when Offred speaks of the Eye Organization, the mysterious all-powerful, secret police that enforces the rules and regulations of Gilead. Offred identifies the signifier of this organization as “a black van, with the white-winged eye on the side. It doesn't have the siren on, but the other cars avoid it anyway. It cruises slowly along the street, as if looking for something: shark on the prowl.” Ofglen urges her to “keep moving” and “pretend not to see,” but Offred negates the brutal efficiency of its sudden but brief intrusion into daily life and the impact of such moments on observers:

Right in front of us the van pulls up. Two Eyes, in gray suits, leap from the opening double doors at the back. They grab a man who is walking along, a man with a briefcase, an ordinary-looking man, slam him back against the black side of the van. He's there a

moment, splayed out against the metal as if stuck to it; then one of the Eyes moves in on him, does something sharp and brutal that doubles him over, into a limp cloth bundle.

They pick him up and heave him into the back of the van like a sack of mail. Then they are also inside and the doors are closed and the van moves on. It's over, in seconds, and the traffic on the street resumes as if nothing has happened. What I feel is relief. It wasn't me.

(169-170)

Here, Offred conveys the terror this type of surveillance imposes on Gilead's citizens, whose immediate concern becomes their own safety and not the welfare of the individual served: guilt by accusation becomes normalized. The panoptic structure builds anxiety and thus motivates mass compliance with the rules they have already been conditioned to follow by this mysterious policing body.

Lastly, Gilead's hold on power can also be attributed to the Panopticon's efficiency as it adapts to defeat the rebellions rising up in different regions. According to Foucault, the panoptic system "arranges things in such a way that the exercise of power is not added on from the outside, like a rigid, heavy, constraint, to the functions it invests, but is so subtly present in them as to increase their efficiency by itself increasing its own points of contact" with inhabitants (Foucault 206). In Gilead, the Eye Organization has flexibility to permit select individuals the illusion of freedom all the while maintaining surveillance on the exercise of such "freedoms." This illusion of freedom convinces citizens such as the Commander and Offred to better tolerate their situations, though with varying degrees of compliance.

An example of this illusory freedom involves the Jezebels, a state-sanctioned prostitute class not formally recognized as part of Gilead's social hierarchy. The Commander

enthusiastically explains the appeal of this unauthorized class of women to Offred while they are in the brothel that houses the Jezebels: “It’s like walking into the past” and “[the brothel] stimulates trade. It’s a good place to meet people.” He even suggests it as a viable option for Offred instead of her Handmaid role: “You might prefer it yourself, to what you’ve got” (235-38). The Jezebels offer a temporary solution to what is missing in the system for powerful men and younger women alike. In the case of the Commander, Gilead has stripped physical pleasure and desire from his sexual encounters with his Handmaid and he retreats to the brothel to help fill that void. Although Offred is not attracted to the possibility of becoming a Jezebel, it is clear the Commander has made this offer to Handmaids before her. Moreover, for some women, including Offred’s best friend, Moira, life as a Jezebel provides some sort of choice in how to put their bodies in the service of the state and allows them perks forbidden to Handmaids like drugs, alcohol and lesbian relationships. This sort of illusory freedom offers participants the added allure of transgression without punishment. But it is merely a short term respite from a pervasively oppressive gender management, not a true deviation from it.

Foucault also talks about the Panopticon’s flexibility in applying its discipline tactics, saying “to emerge in from the closed fortresses in which they once functioned and to circulate in a ‘free’ state; the massive, compact disciplines are broken down into flexible methods of control, which may be transferred and adapted” (211). Such adjustments promote the continual self-regulating nature of Gilead’s panoptic system. An example of this occurs through the adjustment of the Salvaging Ceremony protocol. Late in the novel, Aunt Lydia tells the Handmaids that in order to discourage acts of rebellion, she has been directed to withhold information about a soon-to-be executed woman’s acts of treasons:

In the past...it has been the custom to precede the actual Salvagings with a detailed account of the crimes of which the prisoners stand convicted. However, we have found that such a public account, especially when televised, is invariably followed by a rash, if I may call it, an outbreak I should say, of exactly similar crimes. So we have decided in the best interests of all to discontinue this practice. The Salvaging will proceed without further ado. (275)

By limiting the very information these women rely on to guide their own behavior within panoptic system, this change creates a state of paranoia, confusion and hyper-awareness among the Handmaids causing them to question if they are now guilty of the same fatal mistake as their sister Handmaid.

However, Foucault's Panopticon does little to address the general worth of individuals in this system which is unsurprising given that Foucault was more focused on the functionality of the system rather in a more general sense than a particular one. According to Foucault, respect for individuals is not what defines the rules and regulations of the power structure. Indeed individualism as the bi-product of a temporary power vacuum that needs to be filled, control reasserted:

There is a machinery [set in motion by the Panopticon] that assures dissymmetry, disequilibrium, difference. Consequently, it doesn't not matter who exercises power....Similarly, it does not matter what motive animates him...the more numerous those anonymous and temporary observers are, the greater the risk for the inmate of being surprised and the greater his anxious awareness of being observed. The Panopticon is a

marvelous machine which, whatever use one may wish to put it to, produces homogenous effects of power. (202)

Because of Foucault's focus on the general implementation of the panoptic system, he fails to discuss the possibility of large scale rebellion because he does not believe it possible given its machinery of self-perpetuation, a subtle but key part of Gilead that is rarely addressed in the novel. It is no secret that the majority of men and women alike are oppressed and unhappy with their constricted lives within Gilead. Within Foucault's theory, individuality driven resistance proves futile. Yet, Offred's narrative reveals there to be numerous rebel cohorts operating throughout the land and determined to defeat the totalizing control of the state. *The Handmaid's Tale* documents Offred's evolution from a dutiful Handmaid to rebel propagandist. To understand this transition, one must move beyond Foucault and turn instead to another political philosopher, Isaiah Berlin, whose *Two Concepts of Liberty* is quoted in the novel as an additional reinforcement of Gilead's oppressive ideology.

Philosophical Background: Berlin

Unlike many political philosophers at his time, Isaiah Berlin saw political theory as a branch of moral philosophy inherently inclusive of individualism. According to William A. Galston, Berlin advocated for an understanding of how individual moralism influences the political system in addition to how those systems are reflective of the individuals they represent: "On the one hand, we take an understanding of liberty as central to human being and human agency into politics. On the other hand, the practice of politics raises unique questions about the scope of liberty. Obedience and coercion are, he claims, the "central question" of politics, but they are hardly the central question of individual morality." Unlike Foucault, Berlin was

interested in the “ends of politics” rather than the system in which political matters take place. In this way, he also believed in the power that political ideas have to change the world. Berlin “was a relentless critic of what he dubbed ‘vulgar historical materialism’” and insisted that ideas “are anything but epiphenomenal. They are at the heart of what makes us human, and they reflect our primordial liberty to shape (and reshape) our lives” (88). Isaiah Berlin’s view of the individual’s role in creating one’s own political landscape differentiates him from the Foucauldian view of an anonymous system mechanically policing itself where temporary power vacuums alone explain “individual” glitches which then the system eliminates through recalibration.

Although respectful of the theorists who came before him, Berlin pushed back on popular theorists such as Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel for what he and many other skeptics saw as the general misunderstanding of the concept of freedom: “Hegel’s real error was to suppose that the whole of the universe...was creating itself....As a result he imposed upon mankind a great erroneous views; for example, that values were identical with facts, and that what was good was what was successful....His great crime was to have created an enormous mythology in which the States is a person and history is a person...(Berlin, *Freedom and its Betrayal: Six Enemies of Human Liberty* 111). Berlin extends his critique of Hegel with an additional call for emphasis on an individual’s sense of freedom, a perspective lacking in Foucault’s panoptic system. According to Berlin, Hegel (like Foucault) fails to see an individual as an actor helping to shape the system in which s/he finds him/herself:

There can be no liberty where obedience to the pattern is the only true self-expression, where what you call liberty is not the possibility of acting within some kind of vacuum, however small, which is left for your own personal choice, in which you are not interfered with by others. Hegelian liberty simply consists of conquest or possession of that which

obstructs you, until you have conquered and possessed everything, and then you are identical with the master of the universe. Until you have done that, the best that you can do is try to understand why you must be as you must be, and instead of groaning and moaning and complaining about the appalling burdens upon you, welcome them joyously. But the joyous welcome of burdens is not liberty. (111-112)

Instead Berlin defines freedom as antithetical to conformity and recognizable through one's ability to refute the system of which one is a part:

The essence of liberty has always lain in the ability to choose as you wish to choose, because you wish so to choose, uncoerced, unbullied, not swallowed up in some vast system; and in the right to resist, to be unpopular, to stand up for your convictions merely because they are your convictions. That is true freedom, and without it there is neither freedom of any kind, nor even the illusion of it. (212)

Berlin's definition of freedom is not limited to one particular realm of politics or social organization. Rather, one's relation to one's socio-political space is an option for each individual who has the responsibility to choose either to follow or disregard the rules with which one is presented.

This general idea of freedom provided much of the philosophical framework for his most famous work nearly six years later, *Two Concepts of Liberty*. In it, Berlin analyzes freedom within a liberal democratic framework. Using the terms liberty and freedom interchangeably, Berlin defines negative liberty as "the answer to the question 'What is the area within which the subject...is or should be left to do or be what he is able to do or be without interference by other persons?'" Positive liberty on the other hand, questions "What

or who is the source of control or interference that can determine someone to do, or be, this rather than that?." According to Janos Kis, Berlin was not just concerned about defining the differences between the two interpretations of liberty but also the potential of each form of freedom to be manipulated by corrupt leadership:

Berlin's worries responded to two fatal tendencies of his times: to the rise of powerful external enemies of liberal democracy on the one hand, and to the internal erosion of the liberal thought itself on the other. He was particularly concerned about the second phenomenon; he saw it as allowing totalitarian dictators to parade as fighters for total freedom, and as undermining the force of conviction necessary for the defense of the more limited but genuine freedoms secured by liberal constitutions. (32)

Both of the fatal tendencies to liberal democracy Berlin describes are found across Atwood's narrative. "The rise of powerful external enemies" takes the form of the threat posed by a terrorist assault on the U.S. government that provides the pretext for the right wing power grab leading to Gilead. More subtly, the "internal erosion of the liberal thought" underpinning the U.S. Constitution occurs through Gilead's emphasis on negative freedom as the only reliable form of freedom. To Atwood's credit, her tale reflects Berlin's deepest fears brought to life in this work of speculative fiction.

Gilead's Distortion of "Freedom from"

Professor Piexoto, the academic historian of the future who discovers and reconstructs Offred's oral history recorded on cassette tapes, is right to suggest that "no new system can impose itself upon a previous one without incorporating many of the elements to be found in the latter" (305). Gilead's "racist policies... firmly rooted in the pre-Gilead period," offers a case in

point, and so does its emphasis on a “freedom from” orientation. Yet this comes alongside a jettisoning of positive freedom that balances negative freedom in Berlin’s overall analysis of freedom in the general sense. Berlin explains that successful democracies reach a balance between the freedom to act upon one’s will (positive liberty) and the freedom from outside interference (negative liberty). Democracies constantly struggle to determine “how wide the area could or should be” and in the Gilead era, the expansion of positive liberties goes beyond the white males who had historically exercised them, producing the backlash that results in Gilead’s hardening of patriarchal norms in a theocratic emphasis on “thou shall not,” with its accompanying distortions of negative liberty (3).

The new political regime is effective in the sense that it refuses to acknowledge positive liberty as anything but a nuisance to the sovereignty of the current political system. Although Aunt Lydia is correct when she explains how “there is more than one kind of freedom...freedom to and freedom from,” she inaccurately characterizes the former United States as “the days of anarchy” which had only followed the notion of “freedom to.” However, liberal democracies such as the United States are in a constant struggle to balance both positive and negative senses of freedom and the former United States’ domestic-political struggles were merely a sign of a liberal democratic order at work, not a lack of a formal authority. But to prove that “freedom from” is the only acceptable definition of freedom, the Aunts must paint the former United States as a society that has become unmoved by the influence of positive liberty. By characterizing the United States as an unstable and potentially dangerous world for women, the Aunts are able to promote that women continue allowing the state to compromise their own freedom for safety.

The advantages for Gilead’s elites in reifying negative liberty is that its association with natural rights benefits the already privileged in the society: those who do not face racial, class or

gender barriers and simply want freedom from interference with the continuation of that privilege. Gilead's imposition of patriarchal constraints on women's positive liberty initially benefit non-elite males whose gender bestows unquestioned privilege, and for that reason men like Offred's husband, Luke, do not share women's alarm when, for example, the electronic banking system, Compubank was restructured to deny them access to their own funds. Offred's real fear about such disempowerment is worsened by Luke's patronizing response to her loss of positive liberty:

Luke knelt beside me and put his arms around me. I heard, he said, on the car radio driving home. Don't worry, I'm sure its temporary. Did they say why? I said. He didn't answer that. We'll get through it, he said, hugging me...It's only a job, he said, trying to soothe me. I guess you get all my money, I said. And I'm not even dead. I was trying for a joke, but it came out sounding macabre. Hush, he said. He was kneeling on the floor. You know that I'll always take care of you. (179)

Luke fails to understand that Offred's insecurity and unhappiness cannot be eased simply by erasing her of the good will of individuals like him who still freely navigate the new political system; she needs to remain a free actor as well. Instead, Luke discourages Offred from participating in political demonstrations, telling her that her efforts would "be futile" and urging her to "think about them, my family, him and her [Offred's child] (180). In other words, he reinforces the degree to which her positive liberty no longer operates.

According to Berlin, individual freedom is not tied to one's achieving happiness or complacency within a system but is simply the ability to choose, uncoerced, one's degree of commitment to the system in which one finds oneself. Offred recognizes that Luke is not seeing her as an equal political agent in the state after he wants to make love after losing her job. Offred

notices the irony of Luke referring to the couple as “we” as admits “that he shouldn’t be saying *we*, since nothing that I knew of had been taken away from him.” She finishes his sentence, half-heartedly reassuring him that they still “have each other” and Luke reacts with excitement that their relationship would not suffer due to his wife’s restricted stance in society. However, Offred understands that “something has shifted, some balance,” and that she now felt “small as a doll,” finally coming to the conclusion that “He doesn’t mind [her being oppressed] at all. Maybe he even likes it. His normalizing of his wife’s subjugation not only allows for Gilead’s eventual spread, however, but leads to the suppression of positive liberty for all citizens.

After Gilead gains its footing as a new political force, the individuals within the system begin to have trouble deciphering between both the positive and negative senses of freedom while advocating for “freedom from” ideology. During re-education, Aunt Lydia explains to Offred that “Men are sex machines...and not much more. They only want one thing. You must learn to manipulate them, for your own good. Lead them around by the nose; that is a metaphor. It’s nature’s way. It’s God’s device. It’s the way things are.” Here, Aunt Lydia seems to be advocating for Handmaids to follow a positive sense of liberty while exposing the very reasons that make the positive sense of liberty so threatening to Gilead. One of the main arguments against a society’s wholesale implementation of positive liberty is that it is impossible for individuals to advocate exclusively for their own rights without imposing on the rights of others. Although Offred admits that the above quote is not the exact language Aunt Lydia uses, she insists that “it was implicit in everything she did say.” The ideology Offred has internalized suggests that the Commander’s freedom needs to be sacrificed in order for the Handmaids to implement theirs. Of course, this is a paradox as Gilead makes sure to strip the Handmaids’ access to positive freedom. However, Offred recognizes this inconsistency by wittingly

suggesting that “Context is all,” eliminating the nuance of the two concepts of freedom in a social setting (142). Though this is not an explicit political act but merely a gross distortion of positive liberty, this example proves the fragility of both senses of liberty at the hands of outside actors.

By encouraging the Handmaids to seduce their Commanders physically, the Aunts simultaneously encourage the internalization of patriarchal values that suppress the women in Gilead to begin with. The Aunts’ claim that men are nothing more than their instincts to reproduce and that the women’s duty is to capitalize on that instinct also insinuates that the only power women can hope to project in this society is limited to their gender based role within it. Because Handmaids are only recognized in Gilead by their ability to reproduce viable offspring, the Aunts are belittling the Handmaids further by communicating their restricted navigation within the sphere of Gilead in terms of the role they are forced to play. The Aunts also legitimize the seduction of the Commanders by claiming the action as a natural, religious and cultural normality. This is not only excessive, but it unapologetically legitimizes the practice by means that are presumably more important than the individual, perpetuating the collectivist culture of Gilead and its erasure of women’s individual rights and freedom.

Gilead eliminates the positive sense of liberty from the society by utilizing elements of visual culture to distort the more favorable effects of the positive sense of freedom. In the Leah Re-education Center, Offred and her peers are forced to watch a film clip of pre-Gilead feminists (including Offred’s mother) participating in a “Take Back the Night” protest:

FREEDOM TO CHOOSE. EVERY BABY A WANTED BABY. RECAPTURE OUR BODIES. DO YOU BELIEVE A WOMAN’S PLACE IS ON THE KITCHEN TABLE?

Under the last sign there's a line drawing of a woman's body, lying on a table, blood dropping out of it. Now my mother is moving forward, she's smiling, laughing, they all move forward, and now they're raising their fists in the air. (120)

At first, the Handmaids-in-training are confused, thinking they are watching illegal footage. However, Aunt Lydia uses it to claim, deceptively, a continuity of purpose between Second Wave feminists and the Gilead hierarchy, even while she points to its "anarchistic" elements that required curtailment. While reinforcing centrality of women's bodies as reproductive vessels, Aunt Lydia underscores the contrast between Gilead's ordered safety for women and the excesses that arise when positive liberty is ceded to the wrong hands: feminists who are actually fighting for the right to control their own reproductive systems, the women bleeding on the table, the victims of illegal abortions. Yet the violent image remains and in Aunt Lydia's hands, positive freedom is framed as a potential threat to women. Such moments allow the Aunts to more easily convert their pupils to an ideology that claims to return them to a protected status but in fact systematically suppresses them.

Isaiah Berlin advocates that a democracy is a constant struggle to find balance between the positive and negative senses of liberty, and unsurprisingly, Gilead has become a totalizing theocratic state due to its initial manipulation of the rhetoric advocating freedom from interference. By convincing both men and women of the anarchistic dangers of unchallenged positive liberty, Gilead's leaders convince its subjects that can keep one safe is that which protects citizens from an interfering force. This creates the conditions for the patriarchy to spread its totalizing agenda by replacing promises of security (negative liberty) with the pervasive threat of police state oversight. In this way, the delicately balance surfacing of freedoms that Berlin

identifies as the foundation of a successful democracy gives way to the panoptic system accurately described by Foucault.

But despite Gilead's erasure of opportunities for individual self-assertion, Atwood gives Offred the opportunity to voice (first to herself and then to an assumed future audience) her growing anxiety within the Panopticon and the subversive cultivation of a self still seeking connection with her past while trying to survive her present. Eventually, she chooses truly dangerous personal indulgences that represent individualistic rebellion against Gilead's social control, demonstrating an insistence on Gilead's citizens to channel Berlin's negative sense of freedom. Though these moments are brief, Offred's actions exhibit a demanding resurgence of individuality that Berlin argues inevitably surfaces in any social context where the balance of freedom is highly contested. Because of the repressive nature of Gilead, the true indicator of a character's agency is persistence to rediscover and acknowledge one's own subjectivity, despite the dire repercussions faced if their transgressions are exposed. The next chapter will analyze three main ways in which Offred defies Gilead's totalizing structure by the simple piecing together of her fractured identity.

Chapter 2

A Defense of Offred's Agency: Sexual Transgression, Manipulation of Language and Authorizing the Self

By using Foucault and Berlin's analysis, it becomes clear that Gilead operates using complex political systems and ideologies to entrap its citizens into an invisible surveillance state, distorting the concept of negative liberty and coercing its citizens to become complacent in their own oppression. Offred, who is also a part of this totalizing system, is often criticized as she fails to be the traditional hero within her constrictions within the new world order. Because Offred is a cautious character whose anxiety proliferates throughout the novel, many readers find her narration disappointing as it seems that her passive life in the United States carries on even after the radical Christian rebels overthrow the United States government and establish their theocratic totalitarian regime. Although Offred seems to lack the ability to create opportunities for herself, when other characters of higher social standing offer her a service that is against the values of the state she is able to recognize and manipulate those opportunities in order to sustain herself and sensibly rebel against the state. Her agency in this sense disrupts the social fabric of Gilead in addition to challenging the new republic's vulnerable theocratic value system. The arguments that are presented in this section are her deliberate sexual transgression against Gilead's strict separation of emotion and sexual activities, manipulation of language and literary activities and her ability to authorize her existence into the text. By consciously transgressing against a hopelessly totalizing regime, Offred is able to demand for her individual subjectivity in a way that undermines the very values of collectivity Gilead uses to legitimize its abuses.

Sexual Transgression

The most explicit evidence of Offred's defiance and assertion of self against the state's erasure of her subjectivity involves her ability to disregard first example of Offred's defiance against the state is her ability to disregard the strict rules regarding heterosexual relationships by engaging in two separate emotional and sexual relationships. Whether or not Offred completely understands, as Babamiri et al assert that "sex in the republic of Gilead doesn't include in itself a matter of emotion but may be considered as a pure political power" (6). This thesis argues that Offred's ability to forge emotional relationships with both her Commander and Nick (a Guardian who is the Commander's chauffeur) exposes cracks in her re-education in Gilead's gendered absolutes as a whole. Facts regarding Offred's past are revealed as she mulls over the situation as a Handmaid whose failure to conceive in two previous postings makes the third assignment her last chance before a more ominous fate in the colonies. Her marriage had resulted from an extramarital affair with Luke, suggesting that Offred had in her pre-Gilead life let sexual appetite prompt her to transgress cultural norms. As a handmaid, she utilizes the Commander's sexual appetite to gain small pleasures, trusting in his ability to protect them both. More daringly, she pursues the emotional release provided through her truly life-threatening sexual relationship with Nick. Offred's sexual relationships with these men exemplify a will to assert her own personality despite the societies tenacity to standardize individual wills.

Offred's cautious friendship with the Commander allows her to join him in flouting Gilead's strict gender laws proving her willingness to resist the influence of the newly instated theocratic system. The ritualized rape of Handmaid by Commander precludes any emotional connection and it is forbidden for the Handmaid to have any other sexual partner accept for him. Commander Fred's emotional invitation to join him in a taboo game of scrabble leads to more

selectively tame “dates” through which she can capitalize on his desire to again “fall in love” (220). Offred recognizes this opportunity even before she first enters the Commander’s study noting “there must be something he wants, from me. To want is to have a weakness. It’s the weakness, whatever it is, that entices me....If I press my eye to it, this weakness of his, I may be able to see my way clear” (136). Offred’s ability to take advantage of this hole in Gilead’s social fabric proves that the same personality traits lurk her past and present despite the Red Center’s indoctrination. These traits help her fight off the self-suppression threatening to encompass her. Offred even fantasizes about killing Fred through her access to him:

I could approach the Commander, to kiss him, here alone and take off his jacket, as if to allow or invite something further, some approach to true love and put my arms around him and slip the lever out from the sleeve and drive the sharp end into him suddenly, between his ribs. I think about the blood coming out of him, hot as soup, sexual, over my hands.
(139-140)

Here, even in one of Offred’s most vulnerable moments, she understands how her Commander’s desire for her may serve her own ends.

As Offred’s visits to the Commander become more frequent, she continues to notice his weakening allegiance toward Gilead’s oppressive regime. Before their second meeting, Offred admits that she was expecting “something unspeakable....At the very least some minor sexual manipulation...prohibited by law and punishable by amputation.” She underestimates his own willingness, however, thinking initially that the Commander’s desires “weren’t obvious even to him” and that “this [meeting with her] was something he certainly had not done” before (155). However, after the Commander lures her into the Jezebel brothel, it becomes clear that she has

been intended for sexual pleasure just like the Handmaid before as he rapes her inside the brothel outside of the oversight of the legalized rape within Gilead. Although Offred paid a huge emotional price for this underestimation, their interactions before their secret trip to the Jezebels does not discount the emotional connection she made with him previously. The Commander showed vulnerability, for example, at the end of their scrabble playing as the Commander handed her an outdated issue of a women's magazine admitting, "who else could I show it to?" alluding to his failing marriage and his growing dependence on Offred for both sexual release and companionship (158). More importantly, the Commander also explicitly tells Offred the vital flaw of Gilead is the absence of love, a rare recognition rarely admitted by subjects in Gilead let alone a member of the elite class.

Recognizing the opportunity to take advantage of her commander's emotional void, Offred engages in a variation of sexual transgression in the presence of the literary activities such as Scrabble which allows her to be connected with the Commander without the subjugation of her physical body. Because it is illegal for women to participate in any kind of literacy, the board game becomes as erotic exercise for both Offred and the Commander, but for different reasons (Stein 272). Offred describes the Commander's room as "an oasis of the forbidden" and the game of scrabble as a brief moment of "freedom" (137-139). She finds pleasure in spelling words such as "larynx," "valance," "quince" and "zygote" describing the "glossy" and "voluptuous" tiles as "candies" and the act of playing the board game "delicious." As noted by Babamiri et al, Offred "hungers for language" because holding on to written words and their meanings provides her a way to "hold her connection with people and achieve her salvation" (6). This sort of pleasure escalates when Offred is allowed to write words for the first time since the indoctrination. When the Commander allows Offred to spell out the phrase "Nolite te bastardes

carborundorum” on a notepad, she describes the feeling of the pen between her fingers as “sensuous” and almost alive. It is clear here that Offred understands the power in writing the phrase she had found hidden away in the room, continuing the communication that unknown women had initiated. Although the Commander dismisses its importance by claiming that the translated phrase “don’t let the bastards grind you down” is bad schoolboy Latin, the conversation that follows exposes his partial responsibilities for prior Handmaids’ suicide, information Offred hopes to use as emotional leverage against him. She challenges his “kindness” to her telling him blatantly, “You want my life to be bearable to me,” and he admits he does care about her happiness. Offred now recognizes that she has “guilt on him” and may be able to use it to maintain the equity in her relationship with the Commander while also unintentionally defying the patriarchal values of the state (186-8).

Offred’s balanced relationship with Nick, a low level male Guardian in the novel, is the true vehicle for her resurgent selfhood and its inevitable alignment with the resistance Nick represents. Although Offred is not sexually attracted to Nick during their initial meeting, she does feel as if “a protective arm were being withdrawn” after he leaves her alone with Serena Joy, a phrase alluding to her developing sexual and emotional connection to Nick during the course of the novel (14). This sort of initial trust eventually builds into defiant sexual attraction when Offred runs into Nick as they are both sneaking in the living room without the consent of their superiors after the rape ceremony. After running into each other, Offred and Nick passionately kiss, an act leaving them both “shaking” with desire but also feeling threatened as they quickly “push each other away” in fear of being caught and punished for their illegal contact. Later, the sexual tension increases as “his fingers move feeling [Offred’s] arm under [her] nightgown sleeve” and she finds herself wanting to “reach up [and] touch his skin” (98-99).

Although Nick does have an edge in their mutual attraction because of his gender, because they are both servants of the Commander, they hold equal in terms of power dynamics, physical attraction and the desire to rebel against the state. The couple's shared sexual desire not only disrupts the formal subordinate relationship the two characters have with the Commander but also exemplifies Offred's defiance against Gilead's commandeering of her body for exclusive service to the state of the pure and submissive female.

Although the couples' next interaction results from Serena Joy's plot to successfully impregnate Offred and remove her from the household, it is clear that Offred's vulnerability also builds her emotional connection to Nick. As mentioned earlier in this section, after Offred's sexual encounter with the Commander at Jezebel's her morale declines significantly. She turns to Nick for an emotional comfort as he strokes her back and hugs her warmly. Although they still engage in sex as directed by Serena Joy, Nick provides a private signal of affection by kissing her behind her ear; he "even turns down the blanket first" before laying her on the bed (262). Even within this orchestrated activity, Offred's relationship with Nick deepens in defiance not only of the laws dictating her life as a Handmaid but also of both Fred and Serena's separate effort to co-opt her for their own respective agendas.

Although Foucault argues that the conventions policing human sexuality has historically been manipulated to advance the values of any given society, Offred's sexual relationship are not a symptom of a working suppressive government but is instead a clear indication of the inevitable derailment of Gilead's social value system (Booker 276). The critique made by some scholars of Offred's fearing formal organizations such as the Eye but "frequently gives in to powerful people or strong emotions" does not hinder Offred's effectiveness in disrupting household politics and acting against Gilead's values (Stillman and Johnson, 74). In fact, Offred

defies the system more blatantly as she becomes exposed to the inequalities and injustices she faces as a Handmaid simply by increasing the passion and frequency of her visits with Nick. Offred describes how “[She] went back to Nick. Time after time, on [her] own,” even describing the experience as “mak[ing] love.” It is also clear that the couple comes to cherish every moment together given their mutual fear “that there will never be any more.... And then when there is, that too is always a surprise, extra, a gift” (266-9). In this instance, Offred’s increased sexual interactions with Nick illustrate how Gilead’s fall will inevitably happen from within, as the corrosive challenges from the private sphere by unremarkable individuals like Offred and Nick will continue to subvert the power structures on which the panoptic state depends.

Manipulation of Language

Offred’s subjectivity shows its persistence most strikingly through her manipulation of language. One of the novel’s most prominent themes involves the power of language. Gilead’s main source of political power stems from the society’s own manipulation of language as the new political leadership “simplifies and manipulates language, eliminates the written word where possible, generates its own form of Newspeak, debar[s] women from writing and keeps sacred texts locked away” (Stillman and Johnson 72-3). However, Offred challenges Gilead’s strict anti-literacy sentiment by pondering and questioning the usage of specific words, participating in writing and therefore creating language and by the act of storytelling itself. Although Offred is still a prisoner of a society that advocates for restricted access to education for women, she is ultimately able to prove her resilience simply by the insistent recording of her story. Just as every word on the page is significant for the reader trying to understand her life, Offred learns, writes and says aloud every word as crucial to her own survival and the subversive political impact of her story.

Offred makes clear throughout her account that even in her oppressed status as a Handmaid she craves knowledge and finds excitement in the manipulation of words. Although her “critical play with language” seemingly “leads to no action,” her persistent curiosity about language demonstrates her ability to defy Gilead internally as this form of rebellion occurs only in her own mind (Stillman and Johnson 75). Before the ceremonial raping, Offred ponders the word “household” thinking to herself “that is what we are. The Commander is the head of the household. The house is what he holds. To have and to hold, till death do us part” (81). Here, Offred acknowledges the traditional connotation of the word as the people in a family or other group who live together in one house. She also divides the word in half creating a biting pun on heterosexual marriage. Since the household the Commander controls consists of three people, two of whom he engages in intercourse, Offred cleverly underscores the hypocrisy of a state that simultaneously mandates traditional marriage and the violation of traditional wedding vows to revive the birth rate. Offred also finds herself contemplating the word *chair*, taking notice of its dual meaning as an object to sit on and to also “the leader of a meeting,” but then segues into its slang usage for “a mode of execution, and recalls that it is the first syllable in *charity*” as well as the “French word for flesh.” Although she admits “none of these facts has any connection with the others” she immerses herself in the plasticity of words as a tactic to “compose [her]self” and maintain her sanity by allowing her natural curiosity for language to go unregulated (110).

Offred’s dissection of words also begins to expose the limitations of language on a semiotic level as she discovers how specific meanings of words often fail to describe present reality or provide meaningfully connections between herself and her intended audience. During a mundane afternoon in the household, Offred remembers the word “fraternize” (a term from the

Pre-Gilead reality) to describe how “The Marthas are not allowed to fraternize with us.” What follows is a minor flashback to the pre-Gilead world and its haunting relationship to her dystopian present: “*Fraternize* means to behave like a brother. Luke told me that. He said there was no corresponding word that meant *to behave like a sister*. *Sororize*, it would have to be, he said. From the Latin. He liked knowing about such details. The derivations of words, curious usages. I used to tease him about being pedantic (11). Given Gilead’s drastically gendered socio-political system Offred recognizes that the vocabulary of Gilead English fails to describe its coerced female communities. Offred realizes that her own narrative “is both shaped and threatened by political repression, interpretation and the fundamental instability of language itself” (Stein, 270). Despite this awareness, Offred’s unwillingness to abandon language as meaningless allows her to push through the constrictions of Gilead to articulate her own reality as honestly as she can through the recording of her audiotapes.

Offred illustrates the importance of language to her own internal survival through her discovery and eventual translation of the phrase “*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*” (52). When she finds the phrase scratched onto the corner of a cupboard wall in her bedroom at the Commander’s house, she draws comfort in believing that the author’s identity must have been her predecessor “Offred,” reaching out despite restrictions against written contact among Handmaids. Although she does not understand the meaning of the Latin phrase, “it pleases me to think I’m communing with her, this unknown woman.... It pleases me to know that her taboo message made it through, to at least one other person, washed itself up on the wall of my cupboard, was opened and read by me” (52). Her desire to make such connections with others who share her oppression leads her to recite the phrase to herself as a way of keeping her spirits up, a subversive substitute for traditional prayer. Before the ceremonial Handmaid raping, she

prays silently, “Nolite te bastardes carborundorum,” admitting “I don’t know what it means, but it sounds right and it will have to do, because I don’t know what else I can say to God” (90). By channeling the protest of another victim of the system, Offred privately repudiates the political structure in which she feels trapped. Directing a phrase containing “bastard” toward God is ironic considering Offred’s subordination by rabidly patriarchal theocracy. Despite her inability to comprehend the exact meaning of the words in that moment, simply reciting them to herself gives her a sense of comradeship she has previously lacked as she continues her demeaning duties as Handmaid.

Offred eventually is given the opportunity to bring the phrase to life and obtain ownership of her words by the act of writing. As her relationship with the Commander evolves, she asks for the English translation of the phrase, though she does not know how to pronounce it. After the Commander fails to recognize what she is trying to say, she convinces him to let her write the words onto a notepad, a doubly transgressive act that permits her to engage in forbidden literacy. Exercising the power of the pen serves as the first step toward becoming the author of her own words, although in this case the words are not her own. As she writes them she can “feel the power of the words [the pen] contains,” confirming that the real power she gains from the experience is the opportunity to make language visible (185-6). Although she is disappointed when the Commander dismisses the phrase as simply schoolboy mangling of Latin and a “mere joke,” it is apparent by the conclusion of the novel that Offred remembers the strength she felt in bringing language to life given her later decision to record her story onto audio record tapes. Through that act, Offred validates her own subjectivity and makes it an artifact of history. Recording her story is a way for Offred to claim her own narrative and make her narrative an artifact of history. Despite later editorial intervention of Professor Piexoto, who

discovers, rearranges and transcribes the audio tapes in order to disseminate Offred's story to a wider academic audience, it is Offred's voice describing her struggle to persevere in a radically theocratic and socially oppressive society that ultimately brings the text to life. The novel results from her ability to finally verbalize her own story, craftily challenging her listeners to interpret its implications.

Once Offred can imagine an audience that may exist beyond the repressive reach of the theocratic state, she can direct her words forward by explicitly addressing the audience as "you"; an act that displays both her hope that her narrative will be found and her desire to connect with others in her own time and into the future. Offred most notably illustrates this hope before she attends her final Salvaging ceremony:

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, if I meet you or if you escape, in the future or in heaven or in prison or underground, some other place. What they have in common is that they're not here. By telling you anything at all I'm at least believing in you, I believe you're there. I believe you into being. Because I'm telling you this story I will your existence. I tell therefore you are. (267-68)

Although a moment of desperation this is unquestionably a moment of desperation for Offred, she conveys her desire to believe in the future and validate an audience's interest in her personal story, an act of imagination that effectively brings her readers "into being," proving that "in storytelling she creates a self and an other, a listener" (Wang 14; Stein 272). The strength she

draws from that imagined audience help her fight despair and loneliness. Because Offred realizes “that the society of Gilead uses the language both to subordinate and baffle women,” she uses her own narrative to tell as true a story as she can through her own reclamation of language (Babamiri et al 7). In a sense, Offred “commits the crime of theft” by stealing back the power of words that the leaders of Gilead had restricted to themselves in securing their political dominance.

Offred continues to refer to her imagined audience up until the end of her narrative, even engaging readers one final time in a sort of dark-humored word play. Before Offred steps into the white van and her narrative ends completely, she admits to her audience, “whether this is my end or a new beginning I have no way of knowing: I have given myself over into the hands of strangers, because it can’t be helped” (295). Offred thus concludes her narrative with a double entendre as to who those strangers might be. As such, she brings full circle the postmodern self-awareness regarding the construction of identity that she had referenced: “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). Therefore, Offred directly addresses the audience she can only imagine as she records the tapes that become her narrative the identity of this otherwise unidentifiable Handmaid (as Piexoto concedes) only comes through the “strangers” who, in the future, complete the portrait of the unique subjectivity yet to be transcribed by equally anonymous academics onto these pages.

Perhaps Offred’s most impressive skill involves her masterful storytelling ability. Offred’s account resembles postmodern recreations of slave narratives as it “challenge[s] our impulse to bury the past with willful ignorance or abstraction [by] emphasiz[ing] the historical foundations of our current cultural condition (Spaulding 25). In Atwood’s dystopia, the legacies

of Puritanism and late 20th century right wing attacks on women's reproductive rights hover over Gilead's present and make the novel's cautionary tale not so much backward looking as forward-looking: a warning to readers about a possible future where reactionary gender politics gain political ascendancy in the U.S. By recording her story onto audiotapes, Offred validates both herself and a presumed audience, asserting her subjectivity and evolving an initial private defiance against Gilead to a provocative political statement against the state.

Authorizing the Self

Writing oneself into an authentic existence can only be accomplished through honesty and self-awareness. Offred's continuing comprehension of the current political system's tyranny remains her most defining feature. She demonstrates her unwillingness to subordinate her interior life to the constraints of the new totalitarian regime by holding on, privately, to her own name: the cornerstone of self-authorship. Offred is not only a prisoner of an oppressive new political system but has been victimized by Gilead's systematic de-legitimization: 20th century liberalism's equalitarian democratic values. Essentially, the true indication of Gilead's success is the degree to which all citizens adopt the normalized theocratic values that define the state. Although at scattered moments Offred slips into the numbed responses of that mindset, her ability to recognize and use her own name, recollect past memories and struggle to reconstruct a narrative of her life before and within Gilead indicate her overall awareness of Gilead's toxic effort to erase her personhood within a standardized panopticism. The tapes and Offred's narration also rescue her from the anonymity of panopticism and reaffirm Berlin's argument about the inescapable primacy of individualism as a facet of human nature and hence any political system.

Because Offred does not resist the serial renaming that accompanies each new Handmaid posting, she seems to accept “the infinite interchangeability of the handmaids” and “the deprivation of their self-identities in Gilead.” However, her narrative makes clear she secretly holds on to her given name— a name she protectively withholds from the implied reader:

My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it 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 it 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.

Offred repeats her given name to herself in order to “remind myself of what I once could do, how others saw me.” Returning it privately makes her feel as if she is “stealing” back something of her uniqueness as retaliation against Gilead's repressive political system (84).

Interestingly, she also shares her name early on with some of her female colleagues in the re-education process who “learned to lip-read” by “watching each other's mouths” and successfully “exchanged names, from bed to bed: Alma. Janine. Dolores. Moira. June.” (4). Because the names Alma, Janine, Dolores and Moira all make appearances in relation to specific characters during the course of the novel, only “June” remains unclaimed, making it her likely identity. After she develops a deep physical and emotional connection with Nick, Offred discloses her “real name” to him and feels that she is finally recognized for who she is by another individual (270). She does not do the same for her hypothetical readers perhaps because of the

value she places on her real name and her determination to only share her name with individuals who truly value her life. More mundanely, she may also be protecting those who helped her escaped, another way in which Offred's story parallels the traditional slave narrative.

Offred continues to exemplify her awareness of the new totalitarian regime through her frequent flashbacks of her life before the Gilead age. She often calls upon memories of her husband Luke as a way to both remember the times before Gilead and to better understand how the new political leadership came to power. Offred is able to reconstruct Serena Joy's crucial involvement in Gilead's ideological history during a flashback where Serena Joy is preaching on a televised evangelical program:

We'd watch her sprayed hair and her hys-teria, and the tears she could still produce at will, and the mascara blackening her cheeks. By that time she was wearing more makeup. 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. (46)

Through this flashback, Offred now understands how Serena Joy's message to preserve "the sanctity of the home" and recuperating the status of the housewife has been manipulated by Gilead's new political leadership to promote a purely patriarchal agenda that has, ironically, disempowered women like Serena themselves.

Offred's recollection of her daughter also helps her remember the losses inflicted upon her by the new political order. The mystery of her daughter's whereabouts and the possibility that she has died during the political transition torments Offred enough that she refuses to claim her where she appears. In one case, Offred even describes her daughter as "The little girl who is

now dead sits in the back seat,” only hinting at their relationship by describing the girl’s “two best dolls, her stuffed rabbit, mangy with age and love.” Offred admits that she “know[s] all the details” but that she can’t think about them without the threat of crying publicly and therefore exposing a yearning for a repudiated past that would signal her need for additional re-education (84). She is able to piece together one of the most traumatizing moments reflective of the society’s transition as she remembers slipping her daughter a “sleeping pill so she’ll be asleep” while Luke drives the family across a security checkpoint along Gilead’s border to escape the society’s growing repression. Offred wants to spare her daughter from the fear that Offred describes as “tightening my muscles, tensing my spine, pulling me so taut that I’m certain I would break if touched” (85). The memory of her child and an insistent hope that she still lives not only reminds Offred of the emotional damage Gilead caused during the revolution, but also provides Offred with motivation as Serena Joy offers a picture of Offred’s daughter in exchange for Offred illegally conceiving a child with Nick.

Arguably the most revealing set of flashbacks Offred experiences involve her mother as she recalls the repressive aspects of feminist ideology that provoked an even more repressive backlash leading to Gilead. Offred’s mother is a feminist activist who often took Offred as a child to political demonstrations advocating for the end of patriarchy and espousing female essentialism that claimed moral superiority for women. In this context they advocated for the censorship of pornography for its degradation of women. Offred remembers her mother telling her one day that they were going out to “feed the ducks” but instead arrived at a political book-burning of pornographic magazines. But when Offred was given a magazine to throw into the fire, she looked through it and instead of seeing male objectification of women she naively thought the chained naked woman on the front cover was merely “swinging, like Tarzan on a

vine”: the magazine failed to teach her anything about female oppression (38). In Gilead, Offred concludes her mother’s desire for a “women’s culture” has been realized: “It wasn’t what [she] meant, but it exists” (127). This flashback allows Offred to recognize the dangers in any biological essentializing of women, as patriarchy rests on just such reductionism and underlies Gilead’s enforcement of traditional roles such as housekeeping, conceiving and rearing children and populating the state.

Though Offred struggles with self-doubts throughout her narrative, she finds strength in admitting her difficulties in sorting facts from wishful thinking to her audience. Despite Offred’s doubts about the merit of her narrative, however, she is not just another example of women acting as “objects [of others’ broader stories] rather than the creators of narrative,” in their own right. Offred’s persistence in voicing her suspicions regarding her own reliability grants her ownership not only of the narrative but of her life itself and the way she views it (Stein 269). These metafictional interventions are when Offred exhibits her most agency as a character because she is no longer chained to a mechanical progression of traditional storytelling. In the fashion of a true postmodern “author”, Offred foregrounds the false starts alongside the revisions to underscore the tenuous nature of the subjectivity she is determined to reinvent into the human record Gilead seeks to wipe clean. Before she concludes a memory she had with the Commander, Offred asserts that “[her narrative] is a reconstruction. It’s a reconstruction now, in my head, as I lie flat on my single bed rehearsing what I should or shouldn’t have done, how I should have played it.” She sets the correction alongside the overall version stating that even “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” (134). Offred’s ability to recognize the

inevitable fictionalization of self that becomes her memoir and, paradoxically, earns her greater credibility as the authorizing narrator of her experience.

Offred's narrative is a memoir ultimately dependent on "the integrity of intention" of the writer. According to William Zinsser, "memoir is how we try to make sense of who we are, who we once were, and what values and heritage shaped us" (6). Offred tries to reach that level of truth, as her correction of her account of her first scrabble night with the Commander demonstrates. Although Offred's fantasy of driving a knife into the Commander and describing his blood as "hot as soup, sexual over my hands" has the potential to become fact if she chooses not to correct it, Offred quickly admits to not thinking "about anything of this kind" at the time and that the Commander's infatuation with her was completely fictional (140). Offred also admits that the Commander's sadness and eventual request that she stop kissing him were also a fabrication. Although this false memory gave Offred an opportunity to voice defiance against the state by embedding the lie into the narrative, Offred chooses to place it alongside the truth, however ordinary and unheroic it reveals her to be.

Offred's obsession with creating a map of her subjective confusions about her life as a Handmaid is illustrated through her inability to determine her husband's fate. She believes that Luke is either (1) dead "laying face down in a thicket," (2) imprisoned by the Eyes and looking "ten years older" and "bent like an old man," or (3) a survivor currently plotting to rescue her from the sexist theocratic nightmare he was able to escape. Although Offred admits that the "things I believe can't all be true," she makes the decision to believe in all of Luke's potential fates because she is unable to imagine a scenario that she cannot also disprove. As Offred's life (and by extension the truth of her husband's fate) is merely a reconstruction that relies on the integrity of her authorship, her "contradictory way of believing" is simply another way Offred

rejects the temptation to falsify her narrative to create a more optimistic tale. Instead of choosing to believe Luke has survived after their separation at the Canadian border, she first claims, “Whatever the truth is, I will be ready for it,” but then concedes that even this belief in her ability to face reality “may also be untrue” (105-6). Offred’s confession of inconsistency confirms the authenticity of her attempt to convey her confused and conflicted sense of self in the present as its own truth given her life’s chilling unpredictability. By acknowledging that her life is full of threat and uncertainty, Offred provides her readers with a haunting reminder that their lives are just as subject to shocking change, no matter what measures one takes to minimize it.

Offred lives in a world in which her value is determined by a theocratic government that labels females strictly based on their reproductive functions grants them safety only as long as their allegiance to the new political leadership. Considering that Offred risks losing her life if caught navigating in any capacity against the values of Gilead, it is clear that the actions she does take against the regime are calculated and well executed. Offred learns about Gilead’s obsession with the enforcement of the newly instated social norms and makes an effort to break them, finding sexual and emotional escapes in her relationship with Nick and her Commander, utilizing the forbidden English language to sustain her suspicions of the political system and willingness to question herself as an individual to recreate a text that is (in her view) the most authentic form of herself.

However, Offred’s true power as Atwood’s protagonist is only visible through the engagement of her text. It is in fact through Offred’s storytelling that she “grows more politically aware and self-conscious” resisting the growing power of Gilead through modest acts of self-assertion (Stein, 270). Offred recognizes that her existence relies critically on her ability to share her narrative and is hence relentless in fighting against her former passive self to forcibly

reconstruct her narrative, retelling the truth of her struggles with integrity throughout the course of the novel. Tirelessly, she rebels against the silence Gilead imposes upon her, realizing that her tale “needs to be told and retold” as a way to combat future oppressors that threaten the hope for the continual progress of women’s social issues and the overall sanctity of humanity (277).

However, Margaret Atwood’s inclusion of *Historical Notes* complicates the way in which we interpret the narrative we’ve just read. The third and final chapter of my thesis will analyze Professor Pieixoto’s tactics as a historian and how his manipulation and disregard to Offred’s personal story plays more into the hands of Offred than of the misogynistic historian.

Chapter 3

Offred v. Pieixoto - Who has the last word?:
A Brief Analysis of Pieixoto's influence on Offred's
Narrative

The conclusion of *The Handmaid's Tale* is complicated by Atwood's inclusion of an additional section entitled *Historical Notes* which makes the readers question the effectiveness of Offred's agency in leaving a record of her resistance to the patriarchy. The final section documents the futuristic of the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies, highlighting Professor James Darcy Pieixoto's work entitled "Problems of Authentication in Reference to *The Handmaid's Tale*." In his keynote address, he identifies what he views as the shortcomings of Offred's narrative: her primary account as a Handmaid in Gilead does not complement his past historical findings of the former society. Many critics view this as a pessimistic or at least a cautionary conclusion to Atwood's work of speculative fiction. However, Pieixoto's own shortcomings as an expert on Gilead's history we actually give more power to Offred at the end of the novel. Despite being an accomplished scholar, Pieixoto is not able to fit Offred's narrative into his already established findings. As a result, Offred's audiotapes challenges not only Gilead's patriarchy but also the male dominated culture which contextualizes her narrative of the past Gilead world. By exposing Professor Pieixoto's self-serving nature and inability to recognize the significance of Offred's narrative, Atwood gives Offred's readers the authority to keep her words and her character alive.

Despite Professor Pieixoto's misogynistic tone throughout his speech, his commentary does fill in many narrative holes about Gilead's history missing in Offred's personal account. Pieixoto talks more extensively about the immediate pre-Gilead period where the R-strain of syphilis, the AIDS epidemic and conditions in the chemical and biological warfare stockpiles and

toxic waste sites led to a stark increase in still births, miscarriages and genetic deformities. He also confirms that Offred belonged to “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” (304). Pieixoto also informs his audience that Gilead was not a single example of how ecological and biological disasters had led to the subjugation of women: “Rumania for instance, had anticipated Gilead in the eighties by banning all forms of birth control, imposing compulsory pregnancy tests on the female population and linking promotion and wage increases to fertility” (305). Finally, Professor Pieixoto also informs the audience indirectly that Gilead had spread across the United States as he found other personal accounts of life under the regime such as “‘The A.B. Memoirs,’ located in a garage in a Seattle suburb, and the ‘Diary of P,’ found near what was once Syracuse, New York” (301). This information puts Offred’s struggle into a broader perspective, allowing the readers to gage the full scale of the abusive political system that came to power and spread through the U.S.

But despite Pieixoto’s status in the Gileadean Research Association, his expertise does not translate to a coherent understanding of the importance of Offred’s narrative. Throughout his speech, Pieixoto shares his frustrations over the difficulty of accurately identifying Offred and the people she mentions as specific individuals who match his earlier findings. He begins by challenging Offred’s authenticity after he discovers the audiotapes: “As you know, there have been several instances of such forgeries, for which publishers have paid large sums, wishing to trade, no doubt on the sensationalism of such stories” (302). He voices more discontent with Offred’s inability to provide more detail since “the other names in the document are equally useless for the purposes of identification and authentication” (302). Instead of taking the narrative at face value and embracing the ambiguities of her text, Pieixoto initially pushes Offred

aside as he fixates on the identity of the Commander narrowing the character's identity to either Frederick R. Waterford or B. Frederick Judd. However, when Serena Joy does not match what has already been published by these men, he questions the authenticity of Serena Joy instead of the identity of the Commander, ultimately claiming that her name was likely a "malicious invention by our author" (309). It is clear here that Pieixoto is more interested in studying the patriarchic model of Gilead and bringing Serena Joy's name into question is an example of the scholar focusing his analysis towards details that do no benefit the reader. However, Pieixoto is basing his claims using information from the Limpkin material, an archival collection documenting a man who "did not survive the inception of Gilead" as bases for identifying the Commander and dismissing the viability of Serena Joy's character (304). This inconsistency proves that he is only willing to add Offred's narrative into the canon of Gileadean studies if it fits the knowledge that he has thus far of the society.

This is problematic for both the readers and for Professor Pieixoto's character because Pieixoto's actions resemble the very sin that Foucault warns historians against committing. Foucault believes in giving "very little room to what you might call the creativity of individuals, to their capacity for creation, to their aptitude for inventing by themselves, for originating concepts, theories or scientific truths by themselves" and implores that the maintenance of the truth relies on the analysis of "the productive capacity of knowledge as a collective practice; and consequently replace individuals and their 'knowledge' in the development of a knowledge which at a given moment functions according to certain rules which one can register and describe" (Chomsky and Foucault 15-16). Pieixoto does not understand that history is the messy product of multiple perspectives coming together. The marriage of multiple voice often illuminate more complicated aspects of the truth and the threat of this complication comes

especially with studying the realm of Gileadean studies as more historical artifacts are discovered and more historians study different aspects of the former society.

Although Pieixoto is focused more generally on how the Gileadean system operated in a broader sense, he should, as a historian, be attentive to more than how Offred's audio tapes confirm what already exists in Gileadean studies. According to Trenton Hickman, Foucault believes that an archive "functions both to 'defin[e] at the outset *the system of its enunciability*' and 'to defin[e] the mode of occurrence of the statement-thing, it is the *system of its functioning*.'" For Foucault, "the archive's most important purpose might be the way it determines *how* to speak of that which has occurred, and how understanding of that which is archived is to be deployed into larger sociohistorical contexts" (Hickman 115). Unfortunately, Pieixoto does not follow Foucault's advice- if he did, he would not relegate Offred to Handmaid status yet again by giving her voice impotence only to the degree that she served the master narrative he was already advising about Gilead. Towards the end of his speech, he blames Offred for her limited knowledge of the state, saying "Some of them [the gaps within Gilead's narrative] could have been filled by our anonymous author, had she had a different turn of mind. She could have told us much about the workings of the Gileadean empire, had she had the instincts of a reporter or a spy." He continues voicing his disappointment by admitting, "What we would not give, now, for even twenty pages or so of print-out from Waterford's private computer!" (310). Instead of treating Offred's narrative as a piece of history that provides a rare perspective of a woman within this totalizing state, Pieixoto diminishes Offred's voice as it fails to give him the answers that he wants.

Part of what makes it difficult for Pieixoto to recognize the value of Offred's narrative is the subjective nature and motivation of a first person narrative. Throughout the novel, Offred

tries to reconstruct herself against the state's standardizing agenda through the retelling of her story. Gilead has stripped her and all women of an identity outside of their new social identifications. The state's totalizing collectivism aims to eradicate female subjectivity but Offred's narrative allows her to reintegrate her past and present instead by painfully reliving the abusive life in which she has just escaped. This reassertion of self represents an individualistic rebellion against the state, even if it does not explicitly lead to its political overthrow, and Piexoto should consider her audiotapes an invaluable contribution to the historical preservation of primary documents on which his work depends. His obliviousness to that fact alerts readers to their own importance to Offred's project: her power derives from people interacting with her humanity struggling for survival against a panoptic totalizing state. Because Piexoto is only concerned with Gilead's general functionality, he fails to understand the power of this first person narrative, which is ironic considering his previous work included a study entitled "Iran and Gilead: Two Late-Twentieth Century Monotheocracies, as Seen Through Diaries."

Piexoto's myopia does not compromise the impact of Offred's story, however. At the end of his lecture, he asks the audience "are there any questions?" In this painfully ironic way Atwood prompts her readers to think back to Offred and reflect on how Piexoto has really missed the impact of her story. Many readers experience disappointment and even hopelessness because of the way Piexoto undervalues Offred's text as if his opinion stands in for all who will attempt to make sense of Gilead. Despite his scholarly credentials, however, perspective is not what matters at the end of the novel- it is the readers' investment in her struggles and small victories as well as her will and hunger to love. That she has connected in this way across time and despite patriarchal erasure. Offred has indeed transcended the gendered oppression she faced through her efforts to document her story.

A closer analysis of the effects the Historical Notes section thus produces a more hopeful ending to this cautionary tale. Although it is no question that Professor Pieixoto has failed in many respects to give Offred's audiotapes the justice it deserves as a rare historical artifact, the readers' response to his inability to recognize the value in her personal narrative indicates that the readers believe in Offred and believe that she is an individual who has a valuable story to tell. Within her narrative, Offred claims that by "telling you [the reader] anything at all I'm at least believing in you, I believe you're there. I believe you into being. Because I'm telling you this story I will your existence" (268). At the end of the novel, the readers are bringing Offred into existence by believing in her, bringing the narrative in full circle, proving that Atwood's cautionary tale does have a more optimistic ending after all.

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