



The problematization of maintaining identity and individuality in  
Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

BA Thesis

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## Abstract

My thesis will consider Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), which tells about the experiences of a woman who lives in a fundamentalist totalitarian state, where her sole purpose is to breed and obey. Whereas the totalitarian regime stands for an infallible belief in one truth and a replacement of plurality with sameness, the protagonist's style is ambiguous, metaphoric and associative. The protagonist resists the totalitarian regime by attempting to maintain her identity, individuality and subjectivity through the act of telling her story and creating her own world through meaning-making and storytelling. Moreover, I claim that the appropriation of the protagonist's voice in the epilogue functions as an appeal to the reader to read and think critically and take into consideration the mediated and constructed nature of texts. The thesis offers a close reading of the novel, starting from the philosophical frame of Hannah Arendt's work on totalitarianism and thinking.

Keywords: Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, feminism, meaning-making, Hannah Arendt

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## 1. Introduction

Since its publication in 1985, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* has been a widely popular and influential novel, selling over 8 million copies, including more than 3 million since the 2016 US presidential election (Boyd et al. 2019). Often compared to George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four* (1949) and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), the novel presents a dystopian world in the near-future in which women's wombs are regarded as national resources and women are enslaved in order to reproduce for the elite (Boyd et al. 2019). The Canadian novelist, poet and essayist Margaret Atwood (1939 -) has written a dazzling number of award-winning books and poetry collections, with themes like female subjectivity and the dangers of ideology and sexual politics recurring in her works (Turner 2009).

The recent launch of the successful television series about *The Handmaid's Tale* in 2017 has reinvigorated interest into the novel, and made it and its iconography into a popular culture phenomenon: the iconic red dress and white bonnet are widely recognized as feminist symbols, and used to protest against the withdrawal of women's reproductive rights (Alter 2019). After Donald Trump was elected president of the United States in 2016, the novel's popularity surged, and Atwood was revered by feminists for her prescience (Alter 2019). In 2019, 34 years after the initial publication of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood published a sequel called *The Testaments*, in which she describes the impetus for the eventual collapse of the totalitarian system (Boyd et al. 2019).

Now that political events have made people feel the urgency of *The Handmaid's Tale* and the themes it conveys once more, a close reading of the novel to re-assess what the novel is about and how it can be interpreted is made relevant. In my thesis, the main focus will be on how feminism and totalitarian ideology is presented in the novel and on how the I-narrator maintains her identity and individuality through language and storytelling, and how this is problematized in the epilogue. I have chosen to juxtapose my interpretation of the novel with two philosophical works by the German-American political philosopher Hannah Arendt (1906-1975), who fled Germany in 1933 because of Hitler's emerging totalitarian empire and who wrote extensively about totalitarianism, the nature of evil and the thinking activity (d'Entreves 2019).

The theoretical framework is built on Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of*

*Totalitarianism* (1951), in which the philosopher describes the workings of a totalitarian system and how all ideologies have the potential of becoming dangerous, a notion that I will apply to the different ideologies presented in the novel. I will also use Arendt's *Thinking and Moral Considerations: a lecture* (1971) to clarify what thinking is and how it is connected to meaning-making. Arendt's concept of thinking will be related to the concept of writing and telling a story, that we see performed in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Reading and interpreting a work of fiction and two philosophical texts alongside each other has two purposes in this thesis: first, I use Arendt's texts to reach more clarity about the novel, especially about the nature of totalitarianism and how meaning-making works. Second, I want to point out the remarkable similarities between these two different kinds of writing: whereas Arendt mostly describes, Atwood translates these notions into action and experiences to show how they work. As such, the texts 'belong' to each other, and each text becomes more interesting read together.

*The Handmaid's Tale* focusses on the life of an unnamed woman who narrates her experience living in a fundamentalist totalitarian state called Gilead, situated in what was once the United States. After a small group of religious fundamentalists has succeeded in committing a *coup d'état* by killing the president, shutting down the Congress and suspending the constitution, a totalitarian regime is installed in which women are reduced to their capacity to reproduce and are forced to have the babies of the men of the elite, the commanders. These women are called handmaids, and the protagonist, who is called 'Offred' because she is the possession of a commander called 'Fred', is a handmaid as well. The practice is justified by the falling birth rate as a result of contraception, environmental pollution and leakages of chemical and nuclear waste. The handmaids' sole reason of existence in Gilead is to reproduce; if they fail to conceive, they are sent to the 'Colonies', remote areas in which political dissidents and people who are deemed superfluous (for example women who are past childbearing age) are forced to clean nuclear waste and die slowly of radiation sickness. Gilead is extremely repressive and people live in constant fear of being falsely accused and executed. People's individual identities are replaced by their membership to a particular class: there are the commander's wives, women of the elite who can control the handmaids; there are marthas, women whose only function is housekeeping; and there are aunts, women who indoctrinate, punish and control the handmaids before they are owned by a commander. Men either function as

guardians, policemen that guard the streets; as angels, the soldiers that fight wars with other countries; or as eyes, the secret police that control everyone and can decide who is to be executed.

Thinking of her previous life and trying to make sense of her new one, the novel's protagonist Offred depicts the corruptness and hypocrisy of the regime and attempts to maintain her identity that has been taken away from her. It is illegal for women to read or write, but language is nonetheless Offred's escape: to compensate for her lack of freedom, Offred has a rich and vivid imagination and turns towards meaning-making and storytelling to be able to cope with the everyday circumstances. Interestingly, the epilogue called *Historical Notes* provides a different perspective: in this final chapter that is set about 150 years after Offred's narration, an academic called James Pieixoto claims to have found and transcribed Offred's manuscript, and trivializes and contests the reliability and utility of it. Professor Pieixoto, speaking for an academic audience, pleads to look at the story in its historical context and look at the good things of Gilead as well. By focussing on the factual aspects of the story and neglecting Offred's voice, the narrator of the *Historical Notes* puts forward a very narrow and false interpretation of Offred's narrative.

As this summary demonstrates, the composition of the novel and the *Historical Notes* already contains a specific interpretation of the text. Nonetheless, I aim to analyse the novel as a whole and counter the interpretation already given in the epilogue. The main research question of my thesis is:

How are the main themes of the novel (identity, individuality, subjectivity and complexity) preserved through language and storytelling in *The Handmaid's Tale*, and how is the narrator's attempt to maintain her identity, individuality and subjectivity problematized?

Sub-questions are:

How is the totalitarian ideology presented in the novel?

How does the protagonist challenge the fundamentalist regime by maintaining her sanity, identity, individuality and subjectivity through meaning-making and storytelling?

How does the constructed and mediated nature of the text problematize the I-narrator's preservation of her identity, individuality and subjectivity?

In the second chapter, I explore the nature and ideology of Gilead, using Hannah Arendt's characterization of totalitarianism and ideology. I also describe what the criticism of radical feminism, antifeminism and postfeminism means for Atwood's stance concerning ideology.

In the third chapter, I will argue that through Offred's meaning-making and storytelling, she attempts to preserve her sanity, identity, individuality and subjectivity. In this chapter I demonstrate how complexity in language is maintained in a system that enforces sameness.

In the fourth chapter, I describe how in the *Historical Notes* the dominant interpretation that is put forward must be read as a warning on how *not* to read the novel. I argue that the epilogue should be read ironically, and that because the constructed and mediated nature of the story is thematized, the distinction between fiction and reality is drawn into question and the reader is urged to read and think critically.

## 2. Gilead's totalitarian ideology and feminism

In this chapter, I use Arendt's conceptualization of ideology to show how Gilead's fundamentalism is totalitarian and a simplification of reality. Moreover, I explore the context in which totalitarianism could emerge. I subsequently show what the criticism of radical feminism, antifeminism and postfeminism means for Atwood's stance concerning feminism, ideology and a possible safeguard against totalitarianism.

### **2.1 Totalitarian ideology: denying complexity and imposing simplicity**

As Hannah Arendt has conveyed, it is in the nature of an ideology to deny reality's complexity. Ideologies claim to understand and explain everything that happens, but conceive the world as being determined by one idea, and in that way ideologies essentially provide an incomplete and biased view of reality (Arendt 1951/2017: 615). As such, ideologies are internally logical and consistent, meaning that from within the ideology, explaining everything in the world as relating to one central idea makes perfect sense (Arendt 1951/2017: 601). Because of this internal consistency, ideologies are entirely self-referential, and necessarily essentialist and prejudiced abstractions of the real world (Tormey 1995: 40-42). This consistency makes them very attractive to people that want to understand the world, because the world is not consistent or predictable at all. According to ideologies, reality is consistent, and we can uncover the true reality behind the reality that we perceive by believing in the tenets of the ideology (Arendt 1951/2017: 618).

Because of this promise of a consistent reality and the coercive logic that goes along with it, Arendt claims that all ideologies contain traces of totalitarianism, and are thus potentially dangerous if their systems are taken literally (Arendt 1951/2017: 600/618). What characterizes a totalitarian ideology is that it changes reality by force, to comply with the ideology's beliefs or 'fictitious world' (Arendt 1951/2017: 458/460). The hallmark of totalitarianism is terror: everyone can become a target of the regime, and people are punished arbitrarily (Arendt 1951/2017: 450/566). Because terror permeates every aspect of life, people are suspicious of everyone around them, and as a result, people become completely isolated from one another, which makes individuals even more powerless in standing up to the regime (Arendt



1951/2017: 623). Since humans are complex, unpredictable and all have the capacity to think, and therefore the capacity to reflect on the ideology, their very existence subverts the plausibility of the totalitarian ideology (Arendt 1951/2017: 563). In order to prevent this, any spontaneity and individuality must be eliminated (Arendt 1951/2017: 598-599). Only when people have lost the capacity to think and to discern between fact and fiction and between true and false, they are able to be dominated entirely and are thus ideal subjects in a totalitarian regime (Arendt 1951/2017: 622). For Arendt, a government is fully totalitarian if it has reached total terror and total domination, and then is able to terrorize and dominate people from within, or in other words, control their thoughts (Arendt 1951/2017: 552/426).

Arendt's definition of totalitarianism is quite narrow, and one could question if the examples that Arendt herself gives, of Hitler's National-Socialism in Germany and Stalin's communism in the USSR, have ever reached this stage. Tormey claims that Arendt's understanding of totalitarianism makes the concept an ideal-type or dystopia, something that reality can only approximate, but never realise (1995: 66). He thinks that terror cannot be total, as people will always have a time and place to be alone with their thoughts (Tormey 1995: 52). In this chapter, I will ask if Gilead as described by Atwood is a totalitarian state; does it display the characteristics that Arendt describes? How can we understand the novel by using Arendt's philosophy?

## **2.2 Totalitarianism in *The Handmaid's Tale***

Atwood's Gilead is a fundamentalist government in which people's freedom is heavily restrained and people are under constant threat of being falsely accused or executed. Gilead's ideology is based on religious fundamentalism, which is all about going back to the fundamentals of the religion and an infallible belief in the scriptures (Gamble 2006: 284). The practice that handmaids should bear children for other women is taken literally from a text from the Old Testament. This text tells the story of two sisters, Rachel and Leah, both married to Jacob, and whereas Leah can get pregnant Rachel is unable to conceive, and therefore tells her husband: "*Behold my maid Bilhah. She shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her*" (Atwood 1985/1996: 95). Bilhah has no say in this in the Bible; this story is taken literally and legitimizes the systematic rape that the protagonist has to endure. The regime claims to go back to the fundamentals, but the particular selection and sometimes complete

alteration of Bible texts reveals that Gilead uses the Bible for its own purposes and takes whatever it needs to support its ideology. Firstly, the Bible is never read as a whole, and the handmaids are only read excerpts without context, focussing around the topics of procreation, as is the case in “*Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth*”, (Atwood 1985/1996: 95) or focussing around servitude, leaving out a part of the text that radically alters its meaning: “*Blessed are the meek. She didn’t go on to say anything about inheriting the earth*” (Atwood 1985/1996: 70). Secondly, the Bible is locked up: the ultimate proof that the regime is not based on the Bible, because how can you completely determine people’s lives based on a book that no one has access to? Offred notices that “*It is an incendiary device: who knows what we’d make of it, if we ever got our hands on it?*” (Atwood 1985/1996: 94). This shows that a text like the Bible has multiple meanings, and that it’s crucial for the regime to prevent people from discovering this, because otherwise the plausibility of the ideology’s fictitious world is at stake.

Gilead’s ideology not only centres on the Bible, but on the all-defining element of procreation, and belonging to it, fertility and sex. This determines all relations between people and even people’s identities, if you can still speak of personal identity when people have become completely interchangeable within their group, as is the case for the handmaids. The state determines who gets sex and when, with those at the top of the pecking order, the commanders, having a vast supply of it; the guardians have to earn merits in order to receive sex and ‘earn’ a wife; marthas are unfit for it, which makes them almost redundant apart from their housekeeping activities; and handmaids like Offred see their whole existence being determined by their ability to procreate, which forces them into a separate class of people that are used as resources but shunned by society. This all-determining structure of society makes that nuances and differences between people are lost, for the promise of a simple, unequivocal and comprehensive world.

To create this image of reality that corresponds to the ideology, everyone needs to be controlled in every aspect of life. Aunt Lydia tells the handmaids that “*The Republic of Gilead (...) knows no bounds. Gilead is within you*” (Atwood 1985/1996: 29). This shows that the regime strives towards total domination and control of people, towards the situation in which people have internalized the terror that the state inflicts on them, something that is characteristic of totalitarianism. One occasion on which this totalitarian dynamic becomes clear is during the public

execution called the 'Salvaging'. During this ceremony for women (there are separate ones for men), women are executed as penalty for their supposed crimes; the word 'salvage', meaning to save or rescue (Collins Dictionary n.d. 1), implies that the rest of the women are saved because of the 'removal' of dissident subjects. Apart from the mortal fear of being chosen next to be executed to restore unity, there is a particular element in the ceremony that makes every woman present complicit in the execution of these women, because the rope that sets the gallows in function, must be pulled by all women together:

*"I've leaned forward to touch the rope in front of me, in time with the others, both hands on it, the rope hairy, sticky with tar in the hot sun, then placed my hand on my heart to show my unity with the Salvagers and my consent, and my complicity in the death of this woman."* (Atwood 1985/1996: 284).

Everyone is made complicit; but at the same time, no one is responsible, because they all do it together. There is no possibility to do good in this situation, and women like Offred who are victims in everyday circumstances are now forced to be perpetrators, thereby reinforcing the 'total' aspect of the totalitarian state that everyone is involved. This phenomenon is called 'consciously organized complicity', and is a key characteristic of totalitarianism (Arendt 1951/2017: 593).

Because victims are made perpetrators and people are set up against each other, the regime succeeds in having terror permeate everyone's lives and at the same time prevent people from addressing the underlying issues. This becomes apparent in the second part of the ceremony called the Particicution, a contraction of the words 'participate' and 'execution'. The particular Particicution that Offred attends involves the execution of a man who is accused of having violently raped a handmaid, who as a result lost her baby:

*"It is too much, this violation. The baby too, after all we go through. It's true, there's bloodlust; I want to tear, gouge, rend. (...) There's a surge forward, like a crowd at a rock concert in the former time, when the doors opened, that urgency coming like a wave through us. The air is bright with adrenalin, we are permitted anything and this is freedom, in my body also, I'm reeling, red spreads everywhere"* (Atwood 1985/1996: 287).

Offred later hears from a fellow handmaid who is in a resistance group that this man was innocent and was a political dissident; but aunt Lydia successfully incites rage in

the handmaids to the extent that they literally rip the man apart. By this, the categories of 'innocence' and 'guilt', as well as 'victim' and 'perpetrator' are confused, which has the effect of making it difficult for people to distinguish between 'true' and 'false' and 'fact' and 'fiction'; it becomes increasingly difficult for people to think for themselves. Similar to the hanging, everyone has to participate in order not to create suspicion about their loyalty, making them all complicit and partly responsible. Aunt Lydia claims "*The penalty for rape, as you know, is death. Deuteronomy 22:23-29*" (Atwood 1985/1996: 286). Obviously, this doesn't count for the commanders that rape handmaids on a monthly basis. By the public lynching of the accused 'rapist', handmaids are given an outlet to their rage and feeling of injustice of being systematically raped; but this doesn't address the underlying issue that rape is a government decree in Gilead. Because people are set up against each other, the attention is being cast away from what is really happening, and in a way, the terror that is involved becomes invisible. By granting the aunts the privilege to dominate the handmaids and the handmaids the privilege to occasionally lynch a man, Gilead uses a divide-and-conquer strategy which destroys solidarity between people and the option of revolting against the oppressor, making that totalitarianism persists.

The way that Arendt describes totalitarianism, as a system that strives for total terror and domination, in which people distrust one another and become totally isolated from one another, is very applicable to *The Handmaid's Tale*. Even though Gilead is not a totalitarian state according to Arendt's strict standards, because it has simply not existed for long enough to establish total domination, it displays much of the characteristics that Arendt describes, most notably the distrust, complicity, terror and powerlessness of the individual, as well as the constant striving to make this terror and domination total.

### **2.3 The context in which totalitarianism could emerge**

Against the backdrop of fundamentalism, the novel involves a discussion between radical feminist, antifeminist and postfeminist positions. The criticism of these ideologies implies Atwood's stance towards ideology and feminism. Radical feminism is criticized on the same points as fundamentalism: radical feminism is essentialist and entirely self-referential, even though it seems to be religious fundamentalism's polar opposite. Radical feminism is a type of feminism that emerged in the 1960s and

1970s in North America (Stone 2007: 12). Different from feminism in general, radical feminists believe that all women are harmed by male domination, and that women are not complicit but are all victims (Thornham 2006: 31). Moreover, because feminine qualities have been neglected and suppressed for so long, it is believed that there should be women-only spaces in which female culture can develop (Stone 2007: 13). By emphasizing that all women are victims and that all societies are patriarchal, radical feminism overgeneralizes and essentializes views of men and women. In the novel, radical feminism is voiced by Offred's mother, who says things like "*A man is just a woman's strategy for making other women*" (Atwood 1985/1996: 126-127). Here, Offred's mother claims that men only have instrumental value; her description of men denies plurality and nuance.

One striking similarity between Gilead's ideology and radical feminism is that both, for different reasons, aim for separatism between men and women. While the intention of this aim was to grant women space to be together, experience unity and create a women's culture, the novel shows that women's spaces don't further equality, they only create a further division. In Gilead, women and men have separate ceremonies, and women are not indoctrinated or punished by men but by women; the two spheres rarely interact, apart for the sake of procreation. Births are entirely the domain of women, and Offred experiences a female culture during the birth of handmaid Janine, that she attends with other handmaids:

*"Mother, I think. Wherever you may be. Can you hear me? You wanted a women's culture. Well, now there is one. It isn't what you meant, but it exists. Be thankful for small mercies."* (Atwood 1985/1996: 133).

This form of women's culture that Offred describes is one of shared ecstasy when a baby is born, because that is what their lives depend on; but also one of domination and control, in which women cannot trust each other and take away each other's babies. This example illustrates that for Atwood, what is dangerous about ideologies is not the content, but the rigidity, the extent to which the ideology's essentialism is taken literally: according to this criterion, fundamentalism and feminism are very similar, even though the content is not. Whilst the novel can be read as a feminist novel, warning people for what happens if women lose their rights, Atwood doesn't shun a critical reflection of second wave feminism as well. In my opinion, she would agree with Hannah Arendt who claims that "*Ideologies are harmless, uncritical and*

*arbitrary opinions only as long as they are not believed in seriously*” (Arendt 1951/2017: 600). Arendt means to say by this that you shouldn’t totally commit to one perspective, but always remain critical of your own position as well. This is exactly what Atwood does: she criticizes feminism as well as antifeminism, which is illustrated by the attacks of feminism depicted in the novel.

Just like in the period before Gilead, there are frequent attacks on feminism in the novel. By distorting feminism as well as the problems women face, the antifeminist critique on feminism clarifies how antifeminism in a fundamentalist government is not so different from antifeminism in the public debate in our world. One way in which this is done is by appropriating feminist topics and discourse and twisting its meaning, for example in the case of pornography. Radical feminists believe that pornography is misogynist, because it objectifies, degrades, and harms all women (Gamble 2006: 276). Aunt Lydia shares a similar contempt for pornography but for different reasons, what becomes clear when she shows the handmaids pornography:

*“Women kneeling, sucking penises or guns, women tied up or chained or with dog collars around their necks, women hanging from trees, or upside-down, naked, with their legs held apart, women being raped, beaten up, killed. (...) Consider the alternatives, said Aunt Lydia. You see what things used to be like? That was what they thought of women, then.”* (Atwood 1985/1996: 124).

We have already seen that aunt Lydia has no problem with rape; her concern with pornography serves the purpose of scaring the handmaids into embracing their new lives in sexual slavery, which has nothing to do with feminism. In contrast, aunt Lydia appropriates feminist discourse to further antifeminist measures and she uses the feminist critique on pornography, something that all women were familiar with, to indoctrinate them more effectively. This type of criticism is called the backlash to feminism, which is different from other types of attack because it blames feminism for the things that it seeks to overturn and for the problems women still have, for example by suggesting that women suffer from too much equality (Loudermilk 2004: 6). Instead of addressing underlying issues, feminist rhetoric is used to undermine feminism and to confuse women about what causes their problems.

Another example of how such a backlash argument works is when the

commander describes to Offred why arranged marriages are much better for girls, rather than free choice:

*“We’ve given them more than we’ve taken away (...) Think of the trouble they had before. Don’t you remember the singles bars, the indignity of high-school blind dates? The meat market. Don’t you remember the terrible gap between the ones who could get a man easily and the ones who couldn’t? Some of them were desperate, they starved themselves thin or pumped their breasts full of silicone, had their noses cut off. Think of the human misery. (...) This way they’re protected, they can fulfil their biological destinies in peace. With full support and encouragement.”* (Atwood 1985/1996: 227).

In this quote, the commander taps into feminist discourse when he talks about sexualisation and claims that women suffered from free choice. He points out that this choice wasn’t always free, because women felt forced to modify their appearance by starving themselves or plastic surgery. This is exactly the point of why feminism is needed; but he blames feminism itself for it, without addressing the underlying problems. By showing how antifeminist backlash arguments work to legitimize a totalitarian fundamentalist state that curbs everyone’s rights, Atwood points out the danger of the distortion of feminism and women’s experiences.

Even though it seems as if Atwood doesn’t take a stance by criticizing both feminism and antifeminism, I find that Atwood’s apparent refraining from judgement is a judgement in itself. Her pointing out of the distortions of radical feminism serves the purpose of making the reader aware that feminism can mean more things than radical feminism alone; and her depiction of backlash arguments serves the purpose of meticulously showing how they work, in order to prevent people from being fooled by them. The effect of this is that it is implied that genuine feminism is different, and that women’s individual voices and experiences must be heard and noticed. A consequence of Atwood’s practice of not directly showing what she believes is that she remains ambiguous, and people might interpret her stance as anti-feminist because of her criticism of feminism. However, Atwood’s stance of not taking any ideology literally does not lead to indifference and a total rejection of ideology and politics, a position the novel illustrates by having Offred describe her indifference to politics in the period before Gilead.

Offred used to live her life like so many people do: she was not particularly

interested in politics, she was mostly preoccupied with her own life and thought that things that happened to other women in the news did not affect her. Offred closes her eyes to unwanted truths to lead a peaceful life:

*“We lived, as usual, by ignoring. (...) There were stories in the newspapers, of course, corpses in ditches or the woods, bludgeoned to death or mutilated, interfered with as they used to say, but they were about other women, and the men who did such things were other men. (...) The newspaper stories were like dreams to us, bad dreams dreamt by others. (...) They were too melodramatic, they had a dimension that was not the dimension of our lives. We were the people who were not in the papers. We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of the print. It gave us more freedom. We lived in the gaps between the stories.”* (Atwood 1985/1996: 62-63).

The last line illustrates that Offred believed that what was in the news was not about people like her, and what happened to other women didn't say anything about her situation. Likewise, Offred denies that her personal actions carry any political weight or have significant influence on others in this respect, as becomes clear when Moira criticizes Offred for starting a relationship with Luke while he was still married:

*“She said I was poaching, on another woman's ground. I said Luke wasn't a fish or a piece of dirt either, he was a human being and could make his own decisions. She said I was rationalizing. I said I was in love. She said that was no excuse. (...) She said I had trivialized the issue and if I thought it was outdated I was living with my head in the sand.”* (Atwood 1985/1996: 176-177).

Moira confronts Offred here with her responsibility towards Luke's wife; Offred shifts responsibility to Luke and claims that her actions didn't affect his wife. Moira seems to allude here to sisterhood: one of the aims of second wave feminism was that women felt united 'through a sense of shared oppression' (Thornham 2006: 28). Offred rejects this: she considers this argument outdated and believes that it no longer applies. Offred's view seems to be postfeminist: postfeminists agree with feminists that women should not be treated as if they were inferior, but they find this inequality something of the past (Stone 2007: 9). Postfeminists think that feminism isn't necessary anymore and that women don't have to preoccupy themselves with such political problems of the past (Loudermilk 2004: 4). What Offred does in this quote is attempting to shut out feminism and the issues it raises, in this case solidarity between women, to pretend that feminist issues are not part of reality



anymore. By denying the enclosing in a bigger, political reality, it is as if Offred denies that there is a certain lens through which she sees the world, and claims that she doesn't need one.

Offred's way of seeing reality in the period before Gilead is influenced by her rejection of the feminism of her mother's generation:

*"She expected too much from me, I felt. She expected me to vindicate her life for her, and the choices she'd made. I didn't want to live my life on her terms."* (Atwood 1985/1996: 128).

Offred is constantly resisting her mother's influence, and because of this, she doesn't see that she actually needs feminism in her life. Only when Offred's rights are taken away from her, and women cannot hold property or money anymore, Offred realises that her relationship with Luke wasn't based on equality and that political and feminist issues affect her personally as well. This is shown when Luke wants to have sex with Offred while she feels completely numb and indifferent:

*"But something had shifted, some balance. I felt shrunken, so that when he put his arms around me, gathering me up, I was small as a doll. I felt love going forward without me. He doesn't mind this, I thought. He doesn't mind it at all. Maybe he even likes it. We are not each other's, any more. Instead, I am his. (...) Was I right? Because we never talked about it. By the time I could have done that, I was afraid to. I couldn't afford to lose you."* (Atwood 1985/1996: 187-188).

This illustrates that there were already issues between Offred and Luke that Offred didn't want to see, because it would confirm her mother's view that women need feminism in their lives and that men dominate women. By showing Offred's internal struggle and her remorse now she realises that she was wrong, the novel points out that turning away from reality and refusing to take a stance is not a good alternative to ideological blindness as well.

Something not explicitly mentioned in both *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is what could function as a safeguard against totalitarianism. Both texts illustrate in what context a totalitarian state can come about: a context in which some people are blinded by ideology, and some are totally indifferent to ideology and politics, just like the protagonist. I believe that both texts, by meticulously describing the essentialism and infallibility inherent to all ideologies, as well as indifference to this, imply a safeguard against totalitarianism: to see and

tolerate the full complexity of the world, to withstand the urge to categorize everything and to only scrutinize other people's standpoints, all without becoming indifferent to reality.

### 3. How the I-narrator attempts to preserve her sanity, identity, individuality and subjectivity through meaning-making and storytelling

In order to understand the world around her, remain sane and keep the world at a safe distance, Offred engages in meaning-making and thereby challenges the regime and its concomitant belief in one truth. The protagonist asserts her individuality and maintains her identity and subjectivity by meaning-making and storytelling, intending to preserve her text for future generations.

#### **3.1 Thinking as a ‘quest for meaning’**

For Hannah Arendt, thinking is subversive to the rigidity of ideology. Thinking is non-instrumental: genuine thinking doesn’t involve that you expect to gain results or knowledge from it; instead, thinking involves an ongoing reflection and examination of your life (Arendt 1971: 418). As such, thinking is contrary to daily life and ordinary activities, as it has no practical purpose (Arendt 1971: 423-424). This doesn’t mean that the thinking activity can never have results: but only unintended results, that are “incidental by-products” of the thinking process (Arendt 1971: 439). Despite that thinking is not very practical in daily life, it is a natural urge, present in all humans, to do more with their natural capacity to reason than only using it as an instrument, for example to know certain things (Arendt 1971: 421).

If thinking is in principle without results, why engage in it? The thinking activity is about examining those structures that are fixed, for example language. There is a tension between language and the words that we use to describe the world with, and the world itself: it is not possible to adequately describe what we see or hear (Arendt 1971: 419). This is the basic argument for why interpretation is possible and needed. If language can only approximate, and never convey truly or completely what I really experience, then it is impossible to reach closure on the level of meaning. Arendt calls thinking ‘a quest for meaning’: it constantly undoes itself and is self-destructive, and its results are uncertain, unverifiable and provisional (Arendt 1971: 424-425). In contrast to ideology, thinking isn’t accompanied by a promise of a logical, comprehensive and consistent world; instead, it actively undermines it.

Arendt uses the concept 'house' to show that even simple words that we use without thinking are actually difficult to define. First, in contrast to examples of the word 'house', the concept itself is never seen, and we can only approximate our understanding of the concept by having the experience of 'having a home' or 'being dwelt in' (Arendt 1971: 430). You can only know what the concept of 'house' refers to if you have these experiences. Second, when we try to define such concepts, we realise that what appeared to be simple and straightforward is actually complicated and ambiguous: when we try to define concepts, *"they get slippery; when we talk about their meaning, nothing stays put anymore, everything begins to move"* (Arendt 1971: 429). This doesn't only count for simple words, but also for norms, values, doctrines and customs: these are fixed but can be 'defrosted' through thinking, and thought anew (Arendt 1971: 434).

Thinking actively undermines ideology, and Arendt's conceptualization of thinking is all about critically evaluating what is taken for granted, including your own opinion: *"Thinking is equally dangerous to all creeds and, by itself, does not bring forth any new creed"* (Arendt 1971: 435). However, that thinking doesn't make one 'choose a side' among ideologies doesn't mean that it is apolitical:

*"The purging element in thinking (...) that brings out the implications of unexamined opinions and thereby destroys them – values, doctrines, theories and even convictions – is political by implication."* (Arendt 1971: 446).

Thinking is political because it involves a critical, non-instrumental stance towards reality, and as such it doesn't grant knowledge but it's more the ability to tell right from wrong (Arendt 1971: 446). Just like thinking, this ability is subjective and provisional, and an ongoing process.

The danger of fixed structures of thought shows the importance of non-instrumental thinking, that is able to tolerate the inherent complexity in reality and language. As we will see in the next paragraph, this is exactly what Offred does.

### **3.2 Meaning-making and the ambiguity of language as resistance**

Offred's descriptions of her experiences in Gilead are often metaphoric, resisting closure of meaning, and hence defying the rigidity of the regime. Offred uses language to make sense of the world around her and at the same time to keep it at a safe distance. This is meaning-making, the ongoing attempt to understand the world,

which involves imposing meaning on the world and contesting existing meanings (Kurzman 2008: 5). Meaning-making is something that we all engage in because people are constantly interpreting the world around them, but in Offred's case it is far more urgent; she is on the verge of losing her sanity and uses language as a way to cope. This is illustrated when on her daily walk with another handmaid they encounter the bodies of men who have been executed and put on display on 'the Wall':

*"It [the bags over their heads] makes the men look like dolls on which faces have not yet been painted; like scarecrows, which in a way is what they are, since they are meant to scare. Or as if their heads are sacks, stuffed with some undifferentiated material, like flour or dough."* (Atwood 1985/1996: 38).

Offred comments that the bags over their heads makes the men look less human; but by using similes and comparing the bodies to 'dolls' and 'scarecrows', and their heads as being filled with 'flour' or 'dough', she is making the bodies look unhuman as well, in order to cope. By conjuring up images through imagery, Offred is able to project these images on reality in order to distance herself from it. The imagery doesn't only provide distance, this meaning-making is also necessary for the protagonist to make sense of reality; she needs to compare the horrible things she sees to things she knows, dolls, scarecrows, flour and dough, in order to try to grasp what is going on. This is proven by the fact that she studies the bodies extensively, as if she can extract some meaning or reason out of this scene if she looks carefully: *"The heads are the heads of snowmen, with the coal eyes and the carrot noses fallen out. The heads are melting"* (Atwood 1985/1996: 38). She dehumanizes the men and pictures a nonsensical and almost comical scene, in order to understand something that cannot be understood. Moreover, when Offred notices some blood on one of the bags, it becomes clear why she studies this horrible event extensively; she makes connections between phenomena that are seemingly unrelated in order to make meaning and maintain her sanity:

*"I look at the one red smile. The red of the smile is the same as the red of the tulips in Serena Joy's garden, towards the base of the flowers where they are beginning to heal. The red is the same but there is no connection. The tulips are not tulips of blood, the red smiles are not flowers, neither thing makes a comment on the other. The tulip is not a reason for disbelief in the hanged man, or vice versa. Each thing is*

*valid and really there. It is through a field of such valid objects that I must pick my way, every day and in every way. I put a lot of effort into making such distinctions. I need to make them. I need to be very clear, in my own mind.*" (Atwood 1985/1996: 39).

Here it is illustrated that Offred studies reality so meticulously in order to be sure of the existence of certain phenomena. Even though she denies any connection, Offred associates the blood of the executed man with the tulips in Serena Joy's garden. When Offred imagines Luke being tortured, she again uses *"the colour of tulips, near the stem end"* (Atwood 1985/1996: 111) as a metaphor for blood. Blood and tulips are connected in meaning in other ways apart from their red colour: both involve life, and whereas one is ugly and the other is beautiful, the metaphor indicates that even though the appearance of Gilead might look beautiful, as is resembled by the tulips, it is actually rotten and dying, as is represented by the blood. The redness of the tulips is again mentioned when Offred describes them when she walks past the garden:

*"The tulips along the border are redder than ever, opening, no longer winecups but chalices; thrusting themselves up, to what end? They are, after all, empty. When they are old they turn themselves inside out, then explode slowly, the petals thrown out like shards."* (Atwood 1985/1996: 51).

Offred attaches great significance to these tulips and to the fact that they eventually wither and die. The word 'chalice' is meaningful here because she uses it to describe herself later in the novel when she is filled with terror after she has heard that a handmaid that she used to have contact with has committed suicide, and she is afraid that the eyes will come after her now:

*"Dear god, I think, I will do anything you like. Now that you've let me off, I'll obliterate myself, if that's what you really want; I'll empty myself, truly, become a chalice. (...) I'll stop complaining. I'll accept my lot. I'll sacrifice. I'll repent. I'll abdicate. I'll renounce. I know this can't be right but I think it anyway."* (Atwood 1985/1996: 294).

By 'empty myself' and 'become a chalice', she means to become empty in order to be fertilized and have a baby, the one thing that can save her. What the tulips and the handmaids have in common is that both are red, and both are empty chalices, waiting to be filled. And just like the tulips, the handmaids will soon wither and die when they

will be disposed of.

Offred's style of meaning-making is associative, and therefore highly subjective and personal. A characteristic of her narrative is the wordplay and ambiguity involved, something that is illustrated when Offred sees the dirty yellow teeth of aunt Lydia when she is crying and places them in a metonymic relationship with a dead rodent:

*"She blinked, the light was too strong for her, her mouth trembled, around her front teeth, teeth that stuck out a little and were long and yellowish, and I thought about the dead mice we would find on our doorstep, when we lived in a house, all three of us, four counting our cat, who was the one making these offerings.*

*Aunt Lydia pressed her hand over her mouth of a dead rodent. After a minute she took her hand away. I wanted to cry too because she reminded me. If only she wouldn't eat half of them first, I said to Luke.*

*Don't think it's easy for me either, said Aunt Lydia."* (Atwood 1985/1996: 61).

Offred associates aunt Lydia's teeth with the image of the dead rodents that used to appal her: this is metonymic language, because what the dead rodent as well as aunt Lydia have in common is having dirty, yellow teeth. Offred even calls aunt Lydia's entire mouth a 'dead rodent'; a funny image given the unequal distribution of power between the two. This is the protagonist's way of offering resistance: she uses imagery and humour in order to cope with the injustice and inequality that she experiences on a daily basis and to feel that she has still some kind of power over her life.

Offred's meaning-making resembles the quest for meaning that Arendt describes when she ponders the meaning of a simple word whose meaning we all take for granted, just like Arendt does with the word 'house':

*"I sit in the chair and think about the word chair. It can also mean the leader of a meeting. It can also mean a mode of execution. It is the first syllable in charity. It is the French word for flesh. None of these facts has any connection with the others. These are the kinds of litanies I use, to compose myself."* (Atwood 1985/1996: 116, emphasis original).

Again, she stresses that there is no connection or meaning in what she is saying, but that she does this to compose herself, remain calm and maintain her sanity. However, by making these associations she creates meaning, and by explicitly stating that there is no connection, the reader is urged to become active in interpreting and questioning

what is being said. This enumeration of possible meanings of the word 'chair' serves the purpose of showing that meaning depends on context and is subjective: for some, 'chair' is just the thing you sit on; but for those that fear for their life, like the protagonist, it is a more ominous symbol for death and execution. Likewise, for Offred, her flesh is the only thing that the people around her are interested in, and charity is the thing that the society she lives in lacks. By showing the plurality of meaning, the novel is a resistance to all kinds of structures in which meaning is presented to be fixed, and as Offred's meaning-making tolerates complexities and ambiguity, it is a good illustration of thinking as a quest for meaning.

### **3.3 Asserting identity, individuality and subjectivity through meaning-making and storytelling**

These examples of meaning-making are not just resisting the fixed meanings of Gilead: they are also Offred's attempts to preserve her identity, individuality and subjectivity. Offred's meaning-making consists of her personal associations, and she uses them, as well as her ability to narrate her story, in order to maintain her sense of self. Whether it is for the purpose of making fun of those in power, like she does when she places aunt Lydia's mouth and a dead rodent in a metonymic relationship, or to explore the multiplicity of meaning as in the case of the word 'chair', Offred's quests for meaning reflect and establish her sense of self. Offred's fantasies are minor acts of self-assertion, and through these fantasies, "*she resists the reduction of Gilead (...) thereby constructing a self*" (Stein 1992: 270). Offred refers to this practice of constructing a self as well, when she is anxious and alone in her room:

*"I wait. I compose myself. My self is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech. What I must present is a made thing, not something born."* (Atwood 1985/1996: 72).

In this context, 'compose' can mean to become calm (Collins Dictionary n.d. 2); but she also refers to composing her self in the sense of constructing her self 'as one composes a speech', that is, just like a self, composed through language. Moreover, as 'present' in this context means to present oneself in a certain way, Offred says that she must come across as something lifeless, like a tool or instrument, and be completely void of emotion in order to survive. She wants to compose her identity, and at the same time keep the dangerous world she lives in that denies her



personhood at a safe distance. This quote illustrates that the inherent ambiguity of language to express the multiplicity of meaning that Arendt describes, is also part in constructing an identity and asserting individuality. Language is the domain where we construct our subjectivity: therefore, Offred's meaning-making and 'litanies' help her to reconstruct her identity (Hogsette 1997: 266).

In addition, to be an individual means to be able to differentiate yourself from others through your preferences and opinions (Tormey 1995: 42); something a totalitarian system seeks to eliminate, as it thrives on uniformity and sameness. Through the act of telling her story, the protagonist differentiates herself from others and maintains her own self. Her narration is in itself an act of self-assertion: *"By creating her own text, her own narrative, Offred similarly creates and validates her existence, her humanity, and her vision of reality and preserves her experience for future audiences"* (Hogsette 1997: 269). Through constructing a narrative with subjective associations, the narrator preserves her voice, with the intention of preserving it throughout history. She wishes to assert her individuality and be validated and seen by others, and in that way establish communication. The narrator refers to this when she notices the initials of romantic couples carved into the desks at the Rachel and Leah Center:

*"This carving, done with a pencil dug many times into the worn varnish of the desk, has the pathos of all vanished civilizations. It's like a handprint on stone. Whoever made that was once alive."* (Atwood 1985/1996: 119).

These traces of people who lived in the past mean a lot to Offred; through the impact that it has on her, she knows that some form of communication with a future audience is possible. In fact, she also experiences this when she discovers in her bedroom carved into the closet the sentence *"Nolite te bastardes carborundorum"*, 'Don't let the bastards grind you down' in mock Latin, a message presumably left by the handmaid living in the room before her. Offred sees this phrase as an act of defiance, a small example of agency of a woman who was once in her position:

*"It pleases me to ponder this message. 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 (...) Sometimes I repeat the words to myself. They give me a small joy."* (Atwood 1985/1996: 58).

Reading this phrase is thrilling for Offred because it is subversive, and because it enables her to communicate with someone else: she tries to interpret this message, and she uses it as a litany, in order to support herself. The fact that the woman before her was able to communicate her subjectivity to the protagonist, further thematizes resisting to be forgotten by history: *"Those words grant Offred the faith that her own narrative may be uncovered by some future reader"* (Hogsette 1997: 269). Offred attempts to communicate with someone else through the narrative as well:

*"I wish this story were different. I wish it were more civilized. (...) I'm sorry there is so much pain in this story. I'm sorry it's in fragments, like a body caught in a crossfire or pulled apart by force. (...) 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 on in Heaven or in prison or underground, some other place. (...) 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."* (Atwood 1985/1996: 275).

Offred contemplates the nature of the story she's telling and voices the need to have an audience in order to maintain her identity and individuality through her narrative. Interestingly, she turns it around: not the reader grants the character existence, but the character claims to create an audience: *"In storytelling she creates a self and an other, a listener"* (Stein 1992: 272). This illustrates how dependent any message is on the availability of an audience: just like the Latin phrase could only be used for some kind of communication if it was to be discovered by the next handmaid to live in the room, Offred's self-assertion and preservation of her individuality depend on whether there is an audience for her narrative.

The protagonist asserts her subjectivity by presenting a subjective view of truth, that is multifaceted rather than one and infallible. This is illustrated when she thinks about three different scenarios for what happened with Luke; she reasons that he either got killed during their escape, or was captured and is being tortured, or that he escaped and is planning on saving her:

*"The things I believe can't all be true, though one of them must be. But I believe in all of them, all three versions of Luke, at one and the same time. This contradictory way of believing seems to me, right now, the only way I can believe anything."*

*Whatever the truth is, I will be ready for it. This is also a belief of mine. This also may be untrue.*" (Atwood 1985/1996: 112).

This illustrates that for Offred, there isn't just one truth, multiple truths can be true all at once; something that is logical in her situation given the fact that she is being denied so much information. Truth is presented as multifaceted, as something that relies on the context. That Offred's conception of truth is different from how truth is seen in Gilead is illustrated when she thinks about her time in the Rachel and Leah Center: *"Where I am is not a prison but a privilege, as Aunt Lydia said, who was in love with either/or"* (Atwood 1985/1996: 14). For aunt Lydia, truth or meaning is 'either/or': either this or that, and nothing else. The fixed expression 'either/or' is used in situations to indicate that there are no alternatives to the two options given (Collins Dictionary n.d. 3). This rigidity characterizes the regime, and is in stark contrast with Offred's belief in truth as multifaceted, ambiguous, interpretable and dependent on context.

4. How the constructed and mediated nature of the text problematizes the I-narrator's preservation of her identity, individuality and subjectivity

Throughout *The Handmaid's Tale*, the constructed, mediated and fictional nature of the text is emphasized, which one realises by reading the *Historical Notes* epilogue at the end of the narrative in which suddenly another narrator presents himself as the author of Offred's text. The effect of this is that the attempt of the I-narrator to construct and preserve her identity, individuality and subjectivity is problematized and to some extent undermined, and that the distinction between reality and fiction is drawn into question. What could be the explanation for this, and why is it that Atwood has made this composition?

#### **4.1 How the I-narrator's identity, individuality and subjectivity are undermined in the *Historical Notes***

In the *Historical Notes* epilogue, a successful scholar called James Pieixoto holds a speech at a symposium on 'Gileadean Studies' called "*Problems of Authentication in Reference to The Handmaid's Tale*" in the year 2195. Offred's narrative has succeeded in receiving an audience, and Gilead is something of the past, a topic of study for historians. Besides from studying the narrative that we have just read, it is presented as if Pieixoto has written the protagonist's narrative: because Offred has recorded her narrative on cassette tapes and never got the chance to write it down, Pieixoto, together with a colleague called Knotly Wade, has transcribed, annotated and appended a title to it, as well as imposed a structure on the manuscript because the tapes weren't ordered or numbered. As for the title, Pieixoto says that:

*"The superscription "The Handmaid's Tale" was appended to it by Professor Wade, partly in homage to the great Geoffrey Chaucer; but those of you who know Professor Wade informally, as I do, will understand when I say that I am sure all puns were intentional, particularly that having to do with the archaic vulgar signification of the word tail; that being, to some extent, the bone, as it were, of contention, in that phase of Gileadean society of which our saga treats. (Laughter, applause.)"* (Atwood 1985/1996: 309, emphasis original).

Just like Offred, Pieixoto is very fond of wordplay and punning, albeit for different reasons. As the speech cue suggests, Pieixoto as well as his audience like this kind of humour and don't seem to take Offred's story very seriously; she is once more defined by her sex. From this quote it becomes clear that Pieixoto uses Offred's narrative to confirm his own views, instead of wanting to learn from it.

This is not the only place where his bias, which influences his interpretation of Offred's story and undermines her identity and individuality, becomes obvious. Pieixoto is either not aware or actively ignores Offred's intention to communicate with an audience in order to preserve her identity, individuality and subjectivity, something that is clarified when he shows no personal interest in Offred:

*"We held out no hope of tracing the narrator herself directly. It was clear from internal evidence that she was among the first wave of women recruited for reproductive purposes and allotted to those who both required such services and could lay claim to them through their position in the elite."* (Atwood 1985/1996: 312).

Given his sole interest in the factual and historical aspects of Offred's narrative, her personality, thoughts and feelings conveyed in her narrative are deemed irrelevant. Moreover, the evasive euphemistic language that Pieixoto uses, like 'required for reproductive purposes', shows that his distanced and 'objective' stance leads him to trivialize and play down important issues. That Pieixoto is convinced of his objectivity and neutrality is conveyed when he exposes his relativist point of view:

*"If I may be permitted an editorial aside, allow me to say that in my opinion we must be cautious about passing moral judgement upon the Gileadeans. Surely we have learned by now that such judgements are of necessity culture-specific. Also, Gileadean society was under a good deal of pressure, demographic and otherwise, and was subject to factors from which we ourselves are happily more free. Our job is not to censure but to understand. (Applause.)"* (Atwood 1985/1996: 311, emphasis original).

In contrast to the essentialism of religious fundamentalism and radical feminism, and opposed to Atwood's and Arendt's critical, anti-ideological stance, Pieixoto claims not to commit to any particular viewpoint at all. Instead, he argues that refraining from judgement is the same as being neutral. By not passing judgement, Pieixoto gives his implied approval to the atrocities committed by a totalitarian regime in the past, and his failure to condemn these crimes makes that he condones the practices and the

sexism behind it.

In his attempt to be objective and scientific, Pieixoto misreads Offred's narrative and undermines Offred's attempt to retain her individuality:

*"Our author, then, was one of many, and must be seen within the broad outlines of the moment in history of which she was a part. But what else do we know about her, apart from her age, some physical characteristics that could be anyone's, and her place of residence? Not very much. She appears to have been an educated woman, insofar as a graduate of any North American college of the time may be said to have been educated. (Laughter, some groans.) But the woods, as you say, were full of these, so that is no help."* (Atwood 1985/1996: 313-314, emphasis original).

Through constructing her narrative, Offred attempts to differentiate herself from others and present herself as an individual to an unknown reader, but this seems to fall completely flat in the epilogue. Pieixoto is blind to Offred's meaning-making and storytelling, that are connected to her thinking and feelings. Pieixoto's overt superior attitude about Offred and her contemporaries reveals that he is very clearly passing judgement and leaving his mark on Offred's narrative. That Pieixoto's affiliation with objectivity and his sexist views distort reality becomes clear when he discusses how the identities of the handmaids were taken away:

*"'Offred' gives no clue, since, like 'Ofglen' and 'Ofwarren,' it was a patronymic, composed of the possessive preposition and the first name of the gentleman in question. Such names were taken by these women upon their entry into a connection with the household of a specific Commander, and relinquished by them upon leaving it."* (Atwood 1985/1996: 314).

By presenting as if the women had the agency to do this themselves, he makes them complicit in their sexual slavery. Moreover, Pieixoto's decision to call the commander possessing a handmaid 'the gentleman in question' shows that he does show respect to the elite of Gilead, whereas he barely shows any interest in or respect for Offred, and trivializes everything she has had to endure. On the basis of the *Historical Notes*, one could argue that Offred's attempt at preserving her identity, individuality and subjectivity has failed: her voice is appropriated by a male authority who uses her narrative for his own purpose and shows no interest in being an engaged reader.

## 4.2 Irony in the *Historical Notes*

At first reading, the epilogue shows that women's voices will always be appropriated by male authorities, and that the neutral voice of the male commentator will be decisive in the end. However, this is not the only message that Atwood sends out at the end of the novel. Further reading indeed confirms that Pieixoto's 'neutral' interpretation of Offred fails: by showing and mocking this position, it is clarified that a neutral interpretation is not possible. The irony in the novel supports this reading of the text:

*"The irony of the epilogue not only points out Pieixoto's interpretive shortcomings, but it also serves as a negative directive on how to read Offred's narrative. In other words, Pieixoto's compilation and description of Offred's text is an illustration of how not to read her text."* (Hogsette 1997: 272).

By providing a wrong interpretation of the text, the *Historical Notes* actually shows what a good reading of the text involves: being an engaged listener and a critical interpreter to Offred's narrative and the ideologies described in the novel. Pieixoto's obsession with objectivity while he is actually very prejudiced is an example of irony. Something is ironical when there is a discrepancy between what is being said and how it is intended (Van Boven & Dorleijn 2015: 173; own translation, like all references to this text). Moreover, irony always involves a certain norm that speaker and listener share: the speaker distances herself from a norm by saying it in a particular way, through which the reader understands that it shouldn't be taken literally (Van Boven & Dorleijn 2015: 174). Consequently, recognizing irony in a text always depends on the point of view and norms of the reader. Pieixoto's speech is ironical because what is being said is opposed to what Atwood conveyed in first instance through her critical examination of the different ideologies in the novel: that you should be critical of all ideologies and be aware of their inherent essentialism, and that totalitarianism can only be prevented by committing to a certain stance, and at the same time critically assessing your own position. By offering an ironical perspective in the *Historical Notes*, Atwood instructs her readers on how to be a good audience to her novel and how to read it properly.

Given that Offred's narrative is presented to be a historical testimony, the irony in the *Historical Notes* is also used to critically examine our notion of history:

*“In the epilogue, Atwood uses irony to assert that historical representation is itself a fiction and that the historian can never achieve objective distance from his or her narrative subject.”* (Hogsette 1997: 272).

Objectivity is not possible; if you do not acknowledge your own biases, you are bound to let them influence your interpretation. This is being referred to when Pieixoto describes the process of verifying the authenticity of Offred’s narrative:

*“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. It appears that certain periods of history quickly become, both for other societies and for those that follow them, the stuff of not especially edifying legend and the occasion for a good deal of hypocritical self-congratulation.”* (Atwood 1985/1996: 310).

Pieixoto refers to the practice of creating forgeries of histories in order to make the current historical period look better. If something is not very edifying, it is unpleasant or unacceptable, just like Gilead’s history of exploitation and subjugation (Collins Dictionary n.d. 4). ‘Edifying’ can also mean that something benefits you or teaches you something (Collins Dictionary n.d. 4). Read with the second meaning, the second sentence means that certain histories become legends that people indulge in not to learn from but for entertainment, to feel better about themselves. It is ironic that Pieixoto criticizes this in others, while he clearly does it himself: he trivializes and jokes about Offred’s experiences, and uses her words to further his own career. This quote illustrates that the purpose of the *Historical Notes* is to make the reader question the neutrality and legitimacy of history. Just like fiction, historical accounts are also constructed and mediated: *“History does not really happen in the past but must wait until someone narrativizes the past”* (Abbott 2008: 155). History is not just a neutral account of what happened: it only comes into existence after it has been interpreted, and is therefore something that we construct. In a sense, history is fictional as well.

#### **4.3 The constructed and mediated nature of *The Handmaid’s Tale***

Because of the comments on the fictionality and mediated nature of history, and because the protagonist’s narrative is embedded in a framing narrative, something one only realises at the end of the novel, the constructed and mediated nature of the



entire novel is thematized. One way in which this is clarified is by the omission of quotation marks for direct speech: because of this, one can doubt whether it is truthfully reported what is being said by the characters, or that this is mediated by the narrator. Because of the omission of quotation marks, it is sometimes confusing who says what, for example when Offred thinks about what caused sterility among humans, and her thinking seamlessly flows into something aunt Lydia said:

*“Women took medicines, pills, men sprayed trees, cows ate grass, all that souped-up piss flowed into the rivers. (...) Some did it themselves, had themselves tied shut with catgut or scarred with chemicals. How could they, said Aunt Lydia, oh how could they have done such a thing? Jezebels! Scorning God’s gifts! Wringing her hands.”* (Atwood 1985/1996: 118).

In the first sentence, the protagonist is enumerating different factors that caused the sterility. The second sentence indicates a split between Offred’s thoughts and aunt Lydia’s ‘direct’ speech, but it is unclear who uttered this sentence. Given the way in which sterilization is described, it seems to be aunt Lydia’s lexicon; but it could also be Offred, that as a result of all the indoctrination has started to use aunt Lydia’s language as her own. There is no way of finding this out, and what this quote illustrates is that the omission of quotation marks functions to point out the reconstructed nature of the text, as well as emphasize how Offred’s language is more and more infiltrated by Gilead’s language. After this sentence, it seems as if this is direct speech, given the exclamation ‘oh’ and the exclamation marks. However, the omission of the quotation marks undermines this reading, and confirms the view that all characters and their voices are reconstructions.

However, that the mediated and constructed nature of the novel is thematized doesn’t mean that narrative must be read like a palimpsest: it is not the case that Offred’s story is lingering underneath Pieixoto’s alterations, and that an interpretation of the novel involves discerning the ‘original’ or ‘genuine’ meaning from what was added later. In fact, the point of the novel is to show that finding an ‘original’ or ‘genuine’ meaning is impossible because of the inherent constructed and mediated nature of interpretation and texts. The protagonist, who through flashbacks tries to structure what happened in her past, acknowledges this as well:

*“This is a reconstruction. All of it is a reconstruction. It’s a reconstruction now, in my head, as I lie flat on my single bed rehearsing what I should or shouldn’t have*

*said, what I should or shouldn't have done, how I should have played it. If I ever get out of here –*

*Let's stop there. I intend to get out of here. It can't last forever. (...)*

*When I get out of here, if I'm ever able to set this down, in any form, even in the form of one voice to another, it will be a reconstruction then too, at yet another remove. It's impossible to say a thing exactly the way it was, because what you say can never be exact, you always have to leave something out” (Atwood 1985/1996: 140).*

By drawing attention to the constructed and mediated nature of the story, this quote functions in a similar way as the epilogue: it emphasizes the fictional nature of the text and at the same time underlines the power of fiction and imagination. We could call this metafiction: by commenting on the practice of narrating itself and on the way in which the narrative is structured, the narrator emphasizes the fictionality of the text (Van Boven & Dorleijn 2015: 215). In this quote, we notice various examples of metafiction: the repeated acknowledgement that the text is a reconstruction, the description of herself lying in bed as she is constructing the narrative, her editing her story and interrupting herself as she is narrating it, as is exemplified by the hyphen, as well as her admittance that however hard she tries, she will fail at correctly conveying her story. The effect of metafiction is that it startles the reader: it denies the reader the comfort of encountering fiction at a safe distance for entertainment or as a temporary escape from reality only. The metafiction in *The Handmaid's Tale* appeals the reader to do something with the text: to examine other texts and histories for their mediated and constructed nature, and to take caution from what is conveyed in the book by trying to prevent something like that from happening in reality. The metafiction invites the reader to think and to construct meaning.

Moreover, because Offred edits and revises her story as she is narrating it, she is to some extent problematizing her own narrative, for example when she revises her fantasies about killing the commander:

*“I think about the blood coming out of him, hot as soup, sexual, over my hands. In fact I don't think about anything of the kind. I put it in only afterwards. Maybe I should have thought about that, at the time, but I didn't. As I said, this is a reconstruction.” (Atwood 1985/1996: 146).*

By intervening in the construction of the narrative while it is being narrated, the fictionality and the constructed nature of the novel is emphasized. To some extent, this undermines the protagonist's attempt to maintain her identity, individuality and subjectivity: after all, if reading and interpreting only involves making reconstructions of reconstructions, then there is no way of coming closer to the character itself. However, by emphasizing the fictionality of the text and describing how non-fiction is interpreted and mediated as well, the novel effectively shows how fiction can be 'real' and have an impact on the real world, something that is exemplified by the novel's success in inspiring and instigating societal and political change.

## 5. Conclusion

In this thesis, I have argued that Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* can be read and interpreted in at least three different ways: as a reaction and safeguard to totalitarianism and war and as a criticism of ideology; as a personal and subjective story of a marginalized woman who attempts to retain her voice; and as an ironic account that confronts the reader with her or his own role in interpretation and that subverts the generally accepted distinction between reality and fiction. The core of my thesis is the struggle within the novel of Offred attempting to maintain her identity, individuality and subjectivity, and the constructed and mediated nature of the text problematizing this effort. What characterizes the entire novel is ambiguity and complexity in language, with the ambiguity culminating in the epilogue, where themes like women being silenced throughout history, the power of fiction, and the constructed and mediated nature of texts and interpretation come together. The novel is besides a story also a consideration of how to read, interpret and think, and has as such a larger scope than the themes conveyed in the novel.

Reading the novel in conjunction with Hannah Arendt's work offers a relevant perspective on our time and space. Through reading *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, I came to realise how much *The Handmaid's Tale* is influenced by the collective experience of totalitarianism and war in western culture. Although not a historical document, the novel brings the reality written in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* to life in a time and context that is close to our own, to confront us with the possibility that it might happen again. Through reading *Thinking and Moral Considerations: a lecture*, I realised how important art is for freedom, and how its non-instrumental aspect makes us free from utility and opens the way for creativity. By highlighting how the ambiguity and complexity of language can function as subversive powers, *The Handmaid's Tale* is a good example of this. Given the increased concern about the disintegration of women's rights, it is not strange that this novel, with its hopeful message that resistance is always possible, has become more popular and is more widely read in recent times.

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