

The Dystopian Testimony
In
Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*

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Samandrag

The Handmaid's Tale (1985) og *The Testaments* (2019) av Margaret Atwood følgjer fire kvinner som fortel deira historier frå republikken Gilead, eit teokrati der det meste av lovar og verdiar er baserte på Bibelen, og der kvinner er svært undertrykte. Som eit dystopisk verk reflekterer *The Handmaid's Tale* Atwood sine bekymringar om samfunnet si utvikling på 1980-talet, og Atwood har teke inspirasjon både frå hennar eiga samtid og frå fortid. *The Testaments* følgjer i desse fotspora og tek inspirasjon blant anna frå det amerikanske presidentvalet i 2016 og MeToo-røyrsla.

Oppgåva analyserer korleis dei to romanane på forskjellige måtar utforskar det kvinnelege vitnesbyrd. Den argumenterer for at *The Handmaid's Tale* kan bli lesast som ein allegori, sidan ein kan sjå mange parallellar mellom hovudkarakteren Offred si historie og slavefortellingane frå 1800-talet. *The Testaments* droppar allegorien, men held fram med forgjengaren sitt fokus på det kvinnelege vitnesbyrd gjennom å bygge forteljinga gjennom tre karakterar frå forskjellige bakgrunnar. Oppgåva nyttar omgrepet «herstory» – ein kontrast til «history.» Med dette omgrepet meiner ein historie som er skriva frå eit feministisk perspektiv, som vektlegg kvinna si rolle i historie, eller som er ytra frå ei kvinne sitt synspunkt. Ved å legge like mykje vekt på fortid som notid, kombinert med bruken av allegori, kommenterer Atwood på korleis historia og historiografi tradisjonelt har behandla det feministiske vitnesbyrd som underordna det maskuline.

Oppgåva analyserer maktstrukturane i Gilead ved hjelp av teoretikarar som Michel Foucault, Mikhail Bakhtin og Louis Althusser og teoriane deira, som hovudsakleg omhandlar makt, diskurs og ideologi. Analysen viser at ideologiske statsapparat, som Althusser skriv om, er hovudmålet for Atwood si samfunnskritikk, sidan dei reproducerer rasisme, sexisme og fundamentalisme. Oppgåve meiner også at ein kan sjå eit skifte i stil fokus med *The Testaments*, der Atwood lener seg meir mot feminisme, noko ho tidlegare har vore ambivalent til.

Abstract

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and *The Testaments* (2019) follows four female narrator-protagonists from the Republic of Gilead, a theocracy which bases its laws and values are on the Bible, and in which oppresses its female population. As a dystopian work, *The Handmaid's Tale* reflects Atwood's concerns regarding contemporary trends of the 1980s, inspired by her own time and the history of the US. *The Testaments* follows suit and draws on, among other things, the US presidential election of 2016 as well as the MeToo movement.

The thesis examines the different ways in which the two novels approach the theme of the female testimony. It argues that *The Handmaid's Tale* can be read as an allegory, as it draws parallels between the story of Offred the slave narratives of the 1800s. *The Testaments* examines the theme of the female testimony by constructing its narrative through three characters of different backgrounds. The thesis adopts the term "herstory" – opposed to "history" – a word that denotes history written from a feminist perspective, emphasizing the role of women, or told from a woman's point of view. Drawing as much on the past as she does on the present, besides the use of allegory, Atwood comments on how history and historiography traditionally treat the female testimony as inferior to the masculine one.

Using theories and concepts by thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Louis Althusser, mainly revolving around discourse and ideology, the thesis examines the power structures of Gilead. It claims that ideological state apparatuses, that are central to Althusser's writing, are the main targets of Atwood's critique, as they reproduce racism, sexism, and fundamentalism. However, the thesis also finds that *The Testaments* is more overtly feminist, which is a label Atwood largely dismisses.

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For my sister and niece.

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Introduction

He has something we don't have, he has the word. How we squandered it, once.

– Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985)

This thesis aims to examine Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and *The Testaments* (2019) and their exploration of the theme of the female testimony. Both novels are part of the "Gileadverse," referring to the setting of the novels, the Republic of Gilead. At the root of Atwood's dystopian vision is a theocracy in which the individual's freedoms, particularly those of women, are severely restricted. A few select men, called Commanders, rule the rest of the population, which is divided into different groups, including but not limited to Wives, Marthas, and the titular Handmaids.

The Handmaids are essentially surrogate mothers who bear children for the Commanders and their Wives. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Handmaid Offred takes its readers on a journey detailing the workings of the Republic of Gilead not long after the regime's birth. Already an adult when the so-called Sons of Jacob came to power and formed the Republic, the memories of pre-Gileadean life are juxtaposed against the new life under the oppressive regime. The novel belongs in the pantheon of dystopian fiction, its continued significance strengthened by the popularity and cultural impact of its 2017 TV adaptation, on which Atwood has served as a consulting producer. Thirty-four years after the publication of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood returned to the Gileadverse with *The Testaments*. Set fifteen years after its predecessor, it follows three female character-narrators, all of which serve as foils to Offred in different ways. Their narratives are interconnected and eventually merge as the downfall of Gilead grows nearer.

Like most dystopian literature, Atwood's novels are not in essence about the future but stand for the author's frustrations regarding the contemporary society of her time. Dystopian writers look at worrisome trends in the power structures of their contemporary society and speculate on the potential outcome of these trends, usually through a bleak imagined future. In the 1980s The West saw the political impact of the religious Right growing alongside the resurgence of conservative thought with the election of Ronald Reagan as President of the United States in 1980 and Margaret Thatcher elected as Prime Minister of Great Britain in 1979, besides the Sexual Counterrevolution, a response to the sexual revolution of the sixties and seventies. Those fighting for women's rights feared that the achievements of previous

decades – widespread access to contraception, legalization of abortion, and an increased political influence of women – would be reversed. *The Handmaid's Tale* was written partly as a response to these developments (Booker 1994b, 78).

The publication of *The Testaments* in 2019 could be perceived as Atwood taking advantage of the original novel's increased popularity following the TV adaptation, but in fact, Atwood started writing *The Testaments* in early 2016, when she became aware that “we were going towards the world of *The Handmaid's Tale* rather than away from it” (in Bethune 2019). That same year saw the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States, and many of the fears that surfaced in the eighties resurfaced. Some proved to be justified; the Christian Right rose to power yet again, advocating a ban on contraception, abortion, and LGBTQ rights. Trump himself has been accused of sexist attitudes towards women, and a number of allegations of sexual harassment, assault, and rape made against him have led to protest marches led by women.

Developments such as these are indeed part of the reason why the television series has become as popular and relevant as it is. It is, in particular, the issues surrounding gender and gender equality that has made women and men alike gather in front of their television screens. Female protesters campaigning for women's rights and equality of the sexes can be seen all over the world, donning the now-iconic red garb of the Handmaids. One can thus argue that *The Handmaid's Tale* is more relevant in 2019 than it was in the eighties. While this is in part due to the television series, it is also clear that the novel and its themes still resonate with readers. This continued and increasing relevance prompted Atwood to return to the Gileadverse. In the “Acknowledgements” section of *The Testament*, she writes: “The citizens of many countries, including the United States, are under more stresses now than they were three decades ago” (Atwood 2019, 417). What, then, are we to make of the fact that *The Testaments*, all things considered, is a remarkably optimistic novel?

The Handmaid's Tale and *The Testaments* are, as expected, similar in terms of style and themes, but there are differences that make for an interesting comparison between the two. While the former describes the experiences of one of the most repressed parts of the population, the latter gives us insight into the enforcers of the regime. While the former reflects Atwood's view on the eighties, the latter takes into consideration how the present in many ways resembles the world of 1985 but is different in others. While the former is a narrative defined in part by the passivity and powerlessness of its protagonist, the latter is a narrative defined by the actions and agency of its three protagonists.

There are, however, numerous correspondences. Like every dystopian work, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* concern themselves with the power structures of society, particularly as they relate to gender and language. One of Atwood's key strengths as a writer is her view of language. This aspect of her writing comes through not only in her wordplay, puns, and deliberate musings on the complexity of language but also in her exploration of the role language plays in power structures. Language, to Atwood, is never value-neutral, a notion that evokes the ideas of Michel Foucault. His writings on power, knowledge, and discourse lend themselves to the thesis' examination of the Gileadverse, as do Louis Althusser's ideas on ideology and interpellation. Meanwhile, the language of Atwood's novels recalls the dichotomy of dialogism and monologism, conceptualized and discussed in the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin.

Another thread running through both novels is the theme of the female testimony. The narratives of the four protagonists are all examples of testimonies, and the novels question whether society and indeed history believe in women and their stories. This idea of the female testimony lies at the heart of this thesis. However, the thesis also argues that in order to create her dystopic vision of the future, Atwood looks not only to the present – as is the modus operandi of dystopian authors – but to the past as well. She does this to draw parallels between the “herstories,” an alteration of *histories*, and the slave narratives, to the point that *The Handmaid's Tale*, in particular, becomes allegorical. *The Testaments*, on the other hand, features less in the way of allegorical parallels, which could suggest a shift in style, motivation, and possibly intent on Atwood's part in the time that passed between the writing of the novels.

The thesis aims to explore the allegorical connection by examining *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*. It argues that Atwood, in exploring the discourse and power structures of the Republic of Gilead, looks to both the past and the present to draw parallels between the “herstory” and the slave story to comment on the theme of the female testimony in a dystopic future reflecting contemporary society. This statement needs unpacking as there are several elements at play. First is the matter of discourse, a term that usually denotes the interplay between power and language, which is an aspect Chapter One will expand upon. Examining the novels' discourse is a key component of the thesis. Second is the fact that Atwood looks as much to the past as to the present to envision a dystopian future. Influences from early American Puritanism and the US history of slavery merge with trends of Atwood's own time in her conceptualization of the Republic of Gilead. Hence the third element, the

allegory. Finally, the allegorical parallels lend themselves to an interpretation of the “herstories” as reflections of the slave narrative.

Through four different “herstories,” Atwood explores the theme of the female testimony and, by extension, woman’s place in society and history. An additional element to consider is the fact that while *The Handmaid’s Tale* is filled with allegorical allusions to slavery, *The Testaments* is not. Thus, in considering dystopian fiction’s function as extrapolations of contemporary trends and attitudes, an underlying question is how all these different elements and the interplay between them relate to the times at which the novels were published. Do the differences between *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Testaments* tell us anything about Atwood’s concerns and motivations?

The thesis comprises three chapters. Prefacing these chapters is a brief overview of the dystopian genre, allegory, “herstory,” and the slave narrative. Chapter One presents the theoretical framework of the thesis. The analysis of the power structures and discourse in the two novels primarily draws on the works of Foucault, Bakhtin, and Althusser. Chapter Two examines *The Handmaid’s Tale* while shedding light on the novel’s allusions to slavery. Chapter Three examines *The Testaments*. In addition to examining Atwood’s novels through the lens of the theoreticians mentioned above, Chapters Two and Three explore the similarities and differences between the two novels. The third chapter is followed by a conclusion, which discusses what we can make of the findings in the preceding chapters.

Before engaging with the theoretical framework which informs my analysis, a definition of dystopia is in place in order to understand the novels’ generic affiliation. Helpful in this respect is Gregory Claeys’ *Dystopia: A Natural History* (2017) as well as *Utopia & Anti-Utopia in Modern Times* (1987) by Krishan Kumar. A detailed discussion of the literary genre of dystopia is an undertaking too vast for the scope of this thesis. What follows is instead a brief overview of the typical traits of the genre, and its developments in the last two centuries, during which the dystopia truly came into its own, eclipsing its older utopian brother.

A brief discussion of Margaret Atwood’s contributions to the dystopian genre, particularly her focus on gender – somewhat neglected in dystopian fiction before her entrance to the scene – will follow. Other concepts that require unpacking are the allegory, the “herstory,” and the slave narrative. The thesis focuses mainly on the fundamental elements of these concepts and how they relate to each other in the context of this thesis. The remaining two essential concepts, power structures and discourse, are discussed in Chapter One.

Visions of the apocalypse are age-old, but according to Gregory Claeys, “such nightmarish scenarios [now] occupy an increasingly prominent position in our vocabulary and our mental world, but without the hopeful outcome promised by theology” (2017, 4). Our idea of dystopia is a more modern phenomenon, rooted in the political and social scene rather than the theological one. Though primarily used in relation to dystopian literature, the adjective *dystopian* “implies fearful futures where chaos and ruin prevail. So there are non-literary, empirical usages of the term” (Claeys 2017, 5). The term *dystopia* derives from the Greek words *dus* and *topos*, meaning “a diseased, bad, faulty, or unfavourable place” (Claeys 2017, 4), and appeared first in the middle of the nineteenth century, but only gained traction in the twentieth century, a development we will return to.

The word was first used by John Stuart Mill in an 1868 parliamentary debate (Claeys 2010, 16), and is a contrast and reaction to the word *utopia*, introduced by Sir Thomas More in his 1516 novel, *Utopia*, which depicts a seemingly ideal state on an island in the Pacific Ocean (Sisk 1997, 2). The novel is, however, plagued with ambiguity, as is its title. It derives from *eu* and *topos*, meaning “no place,” but since *eu* is homophonic of *ou*, meaning “good,” one is left to wonder if there is indeed no such place as a good place. Additionally, as Claeys observes, More’s “utopia” is founded on imperialism, war, and surveillance: “Utopia provides security: but at what price? In both its external and internal relations, indeed, it seems perilously dystopian” (2017, 6). In an ironic twist, then, the book that gave the genre of utopia its name might be one of the first examples of dystopian fiction. Although ironic, it is certainly not inconceivable, as the lines between utopia and dystopia are blurred, so much so that Claeys considers the two genres as twins (2017, 7). In the case of More’s *Utopia*, these twins might have been swapped at birth, a swap that went unnoticed until the twins got older. Whether or not More intended his imagined society to be a utopia or a dystopia is ultimately irrelevant for this thesis; what matters is the intrinsic relationship between the two genres. Dystopias can indeed be born from what some would consider utopic since one person’s utopia is another’s dystopia. *The Handmaid’s Tale* makes references to different feminist utopian impulses and ideals taken to their logical extremes which end up being dystopian instead. Regarding her mother, a former radical feminist, Offred comments: “You wanted a women’s culture. Well, now there is one. It isn’t what you meant, but it exists” (Atwood 2010, 139). The teachings of Gilead also emphasize how its women are almost never assaulted or raped compared to the time before Gilead. This “freedom from”, as one character calls it, comes at the expense of “freedom to”.

“Anti-utopia” is often employed instead of “dystopia”; the terms have often been used indiscriminately to denote the same thing. In *Utopia & Anti-Utopia in Modern Times*, for example, Krishan Kumar prefers the term “anti-utopia,” using the term “dystopia” only in passing. Since dystopian fiction is ripe with satire, “utopian satire” is yet another popular term, even though it is not a dystopia. The anti-utopia and the utopian satire are, in fact, ancestors of what became the dystopia. All three are reactions to utopian thought, but according to David W. Sisk, there is a difference in intent: “Utopian satires, by definition, ridicule specific utopian visions; anti-utopias merely criticize more generalized utopian ideals, while dystopias aggressively target contemporary social structures without direct reference to utopias” (1997, 5). This thesis uses Sisk’s distinction to clarify why novels like *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Testaments* are dystopian in nature and *not* anti-utopian. These novels portray the dystopian “bad place” instead of merely criticizing the failure of the utopian “good place,” all the while critically commenting on the contemporary political and social climate of their time.

To Sisk, the societies depicted in dystopian fiction are “fantastic only in the sense that they do not literally exist in the writer’s contemporary world – they could easily come about, given current patterns extrapolated by the writers” (1997, 7). With this, Sisk proclaims that dystopian literature has what one can describe as a moral mission urging us to think of the mistakes of our past when contemplating our future. A successful dystopia does not pose problems that will be perceived by its readers to be impossible to solve. The dystopia’s mission is to horrify, but also motivate (1997, 11). Sisk’s claim aligns with Claeys’ assertion that literary dystopias are understood as being primarily concerned with portraying societies where the majority of the population suffers oppression as a result of human action (2017, 290), which implies the possibility of preventing the dystopic future from occurring. The avoidance of repeating such human actions is part of the lesson. Thus, despite the pessimism imbedded in the dystopian narrative, there must be room for hope. One might consider a dystopian work a failure if it does not compel its readers to make a comparison between the dystopian fictional world and the “real world,” and contemplate how the former might inform the latter (Sisk 1997, 9). This moral aspect is ultimately part of what separates dystopia from anti-utopia: “Because of these altruistic and didactic intentions, *dystopia* connotes a genre actively defining itself. In a nutshell, all dystopias are anti-utopias, but not all anti-utopias are dystopias” (Sisk 1997, 6, emphasis in original). Where the anti-utopia simply criticizes utopian ideas, dystopias like Atwood’s Gilead novels aim to warn their readers and make them aware of their real-life conditions.

Since the writers usually present their extrapolations of current trends through a bleak future, the dystopian genre is often confused with science fiction, and many dystopian novels are simply put under the science fiction label. This thesis will not attempt to solve this generic conundrum, nor will it discuss it, but it will point out that Margaret Atwood herself has vehemently opposed the label, as she deems science fiction to be “fiction in which things happen that are not possible today” (in Claeys 2017, 287).

A source for further generic confusion is the fact that dystopian, utopian, and science fiction are often considered under the rubric of “speculative fiction,” which also encompasses genres like fantasy and horror. Accordingly, speculative fiction features elements that do not exist in the real world. It changes the laws of what is real and possible in the world as we know it and speculates on the outcome. In simpler terms, speculative fiction takes our existing world and changes it by asking “what if?” Margaret Atwood herself defines speculative fiction similarly. In a lecture on the American online education platform MasterClass, with which the Canadian author is closely associated, Atwood gives several tips on how to write speculative fiction, the first being “Take an idea from current society,” She defines speculative fiction as “literature that deals with possibilities in a society which have not yet been enacted but are latent” (MasterClass 2019).

The fact that speculative fiction was associated with science fiction specifically – since its designation is ascribed to famed science fiction author Robert A. Heinlein – has often led *The Handmaid’s Tale* to be lumped into that category. Atwood has, as noted, been quick to challenge the assumptions that any of her works are science fiction, preferring instead to use the term speculative fiction, or occasionally, dystopian fiction. In one of her articles, Atwood explains that she once made a rule for herself: She would not include anything that human beings had not already done in one form or another, or for which the required technology did not already exist. “I did not wish to be accused of dark, twisted inventions” (Atwood 2018).

It was partly because of the rise of science fiction that both utopia and dystopia saw a rise in popularity in the last 150 years, though the scientific progress that fueled utopian fiction with optimism would eventually be overshadowed by dystopian fiction, fueled instead by pessimism. According to David Sisk, H. G. Wells has been “the central figure in the development of both science fiction and dystopian fiction as separate genres” (Sisk 1997, 9). Wells’ 1895 novel *The Time Machine* is one of the most important novels within both genres. Predominantly considered a science fiction novel, Wells’ extrapolations on the class differences of his time, between the Eloi (the bourgeoisie) and the Morlocks (the proletariat) display traits of dystopian fiction (Claeys 2017, 277). Interestingly, many later dystopian

novels were written partly as parodies of, or at least in response to, Wells' novels, as his dystopian output was followed by an embrace of utopian thought and ideas, expressed in particular through his optimism towards scientific and technological progress. Wells' utopian visions provoked attacks and responses to such an extent that Sisk ironically attributes much of the growth and evolution of the dystopian genre to him (Sisk 1997, 10).

After Wells, the dystopian novel eclipsed the utopian, and dystopian literature saw a marked increase in popularity in the twentieth century. The first half of the century brought Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1924), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell's *1984* (1949), three novels that, in the eyes of Claeys, define the dystopian genre (2017, 271). Orwell's novel, in particular, has had such an impact that many of its linguistic inventions, like "doublethink," "doublespeak" and "Big Brother" have entered the pop culture lexicon; some have even entered *actual* sanctioned lexicons. Orwell's name has become its own adjective – "Orwellian" – which, according to Oxford English Dictionary, is "characteristic or suggestive of the writings George Orwell, esp. of the totalitarian state depicted in his dystopian account of the future, *Nineteen Eighty-four*" (OED).

The great emergence of dystopian literature in the twentieth century was by no means a coincidence. In *Utopia & Anti-Utopia in Modern Times*, Krishan Kumar asserts that the dystopia has been a literary and intellectual possibility ever since More published his *Utopia*, although it was not until the nineteenth century the possibility of dystopia began to enter the consciousnesses of writers and philosophers alike (1987, 104). In the last half of the century, at which point Kumar contends the modern dystopia had been firmly established, dystopia was for many already reality. Unlike the utopia, "which was only too aware of how much still needed to be done, the anti-utopia was often no more than a thinly disguised portrait of the contemporary world, seen as already more than halfway on the road to damnation" (Kumar 1987, 110).

How, then, was the contemporary world on its way to damnation? According to Claeys, authors of dystopian fiction have tended to express "liberal" or "humanist" values, values that expressed apprehension about two twentieth-century developments: the rise of a new form of despots that, in the authors' minds, threatened to be worse than the despots they aimed to dethrone, and science and technology – previously sources optimism – which threatened to bring destruction in the twentieth century (2017, 270). The two World Wars proved these fears to be justified.

The writers of dystopia were not principally against modernity and progress. They endorsed and believed in equality, science, and reason; it was the practices and misuse of

these principles they questioned. Says Kumar: “There seemed no way to make the practice fit the principles. Every attempt ended in the grotesque inversion of its promise – democracy produced despotism, science barbarism, and reason unreason” (1987, 110). Kumar’s remark evokes Claeys’ assertion that dystopian fiction portrays societies in which the majority of the population suffers oppression as a result of human actions and decisions.

The two major themes of dystopia since the two World Wars have thus been totalitarianism, and scientific and technological progress. According to Claeys, it is “generally conceded that in the twentieth century dystopia becomes the predominant expression of the utopian ideal, mirroring the colossal failures of totalitarian collectivism” (2010, 108). In the wake of totalitarianism, it has been suggested that the “utopian impulse” is in itself dystopian; that the pursuit of an improved society, “in which human behavior [is] dramatically superior to the norm implies an intrinsic drift towards punitive methods of controlling behavior” which will result in a totalitarian state (Claeys 2010, 108). Scientific and technological progresses and their roles in the establishments of such states have, in turn, been explored in numerous dystopian works, including *We*, *Brave New World*, and *1984* – the holy trinity of dystopian literature. Technology does not, however, play that big a role in Atwood’s Gileadverse.

Margaret Atwood, arguably the most influential contemporary dystopian writer (Claeys 2017, 475), has written well over thirty books, ranging from poetry, non-fiction, and children’s books, though she is at present best known for the dystopian vision in *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Testaments*. The former was an immediate success after its publication in 1985 and has never gone out of print. It has won several awards, among them the first-ever Arthur C. Clarke award for best science fiction novel in 1987. Referencing her oft-mentioned opposition to the science-fiction label, literary critic David Langford jokingly noted that “She’s been trying to live this down ever since” (2003).

Regardless of genre, *The Handmaid’s Tale* is remarkable for several reasons, chief of which is the gender discussion Atwood brought to the dystopian table. Atwood was by no means the first female author to write in the dystopian genre; works of Katharine Burdekin and Joanna Russ, for instance, preceded *The Handmaid’s Tale* by several years. Burdekin’s *Swastika Night* (1937) does indeed feature elements similar to Atwood’s Gileadverse, among them depriving women of their rights, their sole function being reproduction. *Swastika Night*, however, features a male main character. According to Carol Ann Howells, Atwood’s choice of a female narrator “turns the traditionally masculine genre upside down” (2006, 164). Alessa Johns argues that even in the utopian genre, women “have been forced to labour endlessly and bow to humourless patriarchs” (in Claeys 2010, 174).

David Sisk asserts that while female characters have played key roles in dystopian literature before Atwood, like *1984*'s Julia, they are characters never fully explored, their importance limited beyond the effect they have on the male characters. Julia is important to advance the story of Winston Smith, but the character herself is sparsely explored. In *Brave New World*, Aldous Huxley uses the character of Linda to explore her son, John, not Linda herself. Clarisse McClellan from *Fahrenheit 451* is a different and interesting example as she exhibits an independence and clear-sightedness that almost every other character in the novel lacks. The numerous meetings with her gradually open Guy Montag's eyes to the state of their society. She then disappears. We are told she was hit by a car and killed, after which her family moved away. The news of her death is what sparks Montag's journey, ultimately confining Clarisse's role to one similar to those of Julia and Linda.

Thus, the dystopian genre's exploration of female characters has been limited, which is partly why *The Handmaid's Tale* is considered such a milestone. "Atwood is among the first writers – if not *the* first – to publish a critically successful and popular dystopia in which women are oppressed more than men and the narrative is centered within a woman's perceptions" (Sisk 1997, 108). Though heralded as a feminist icon, Atwood has a complicated relationship with the term "feminism" and prefers not to label her works as feminist. Her hesitance stems partly from her worry that feminism no longer denotes equality of the sexes, but rather women's superiority over men. Atwood thinks instead that women, just like men, are human, which also means that they are flawed (Newman 2017).

Even so, it is not difficult to see why *The Handmaid's Tale* has been considered a feminist work. While *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* portray a form of totalitarianism, it differs from the totalitarianism of her dystopian predecessors, including that of Orwell's *1984*, whose influence on Atwood was instrumental. The totalitarianism of Atwood's Gileadverse has its roots in religious fundamentalism, not Stalinism. The oppressors are almost exclusively men, headed by the Commanders of the Faith, who exercise their power to subjugate the female part of the population.

Many of Atwood's influences stem from contemporary time. Some, such as the rise of the Christian Right, came from the US, the setting of the Gileadverse novels. Others came from Europe. One example is Decree 770, issued in Romania in 1966 under the regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu, which illegalized abortion and contraception. *The Handmaid's Tale* directly alludes to the policy (Atwood 2010, 319), which was still in effect at the time of the novel's publication, discarded only after the fall of the Ceausescu regime in 1989. The practice of forcing the so-called "Unwomen" to clean up radiation-infested areas, has

precedent in history as prisoners of the Soviet Union were used as manual labor in uranium mines to gather material for building atomic bombs (Quinn 2018). Thus, while the target of Atwood's satire differs from that of Orwell, her writing, like Orwell's, finds inspiration in Communism and Stalinism. Finally, Atwood's writing shows influences from outside America and Europe, more specifically the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran (Guardian 2017a). Gilead's theocratic rule greatly resembles that of Iran, and the garbs worn by Handmaids share similarities with the hijab.

Though Atwood's writing was, in dystopian fashion, influenced by contemporary issues, other influences are found in history. Part of the inspiration for Atwood's dystopian vision came from her time studying early American Puritans at Harvard. In an interview with *New York Times*, Atwood explains:

We're often taught in schools that the Puritans came to America for religious freedom. Nonsense. They came to establish their own regime, where they could persecute people to their heart's content just the way they themselves had been persecuted. If you think you have the word and the right way, that's the only thing you can do (Rothstein 1986).

Atwood's connection to the Puritans is personal because she believes Mary Webster, accused of witchcraft in Puritan New England, was her ancestor (Rothstein 1986). *The Handmaid's Tale* is indeed dedicated to Webster, as well as to Perry Miller, a noted historian of Puritanism. Many aspects of the Republic of Gilead are based on American Puritanism, such as the modest clothing and its banishment of any "deviants" and dissenters. Other practices and rituals, such as the Ceremony, are based on Biblical precedent. Gilead's connection to American Puritanism is well documented. However, this thesis argues that there is yet another aspect of history permeating Atwood's writing: that of slavery. There are numerous parallels between the lives of the Handmaids and those of US slaves, especially in *The Handmaid's Tale*. The parallels are so numerous that this thesis argues that Atwood's novel is allegorical.

An allegory uses a character, place, event, or idea about real-world issues. In this respect, the dystopia and the allegory share some DNA features. A typical allegorical device in Medieval times was the personification of virtues and vices, such as Chastity and Avarice, though later allegorical works tend to revolve around worldly, often more political or social, matters. Two known modern examples of allegorical works are *The Crucible* (1953) by Arthur Miller, in which the Salem witch trials is an allegory of McCarthyism and its

blacklisting of possible Communists, and George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945), in which the animals represent different political figures in the Russian Revolution.

According to Jean O'Grady et al., "[w]e have allegory when the events of a narrative obviously and continually refer to another simultaneous structure of events or ideas, whether historical events, moral or philosophical ideas, or natural phenomena" (2009, 171). The use of the word "obviously" calls for caution in labeling a work allegorical: Atwood's Gilead novels are not generally considered allegorical either in the academic or literary world. If the allegorical elements only appear intermittently and are dropped soon after, we can say that the work in question has allegorical tendencies but not an allegory in and of itself. If, however, "the allegorical reference is continuous throughout, the fiction 'is' an allegory" (O'Grady et al. 2009, 171-172). This thesis, therefore, argues that since the allegorical references are so numerous, *The Handmaid's Tale*, if not *The Testaments*, could be read as an allegory. Atwood's allegorical approach by drawing on the history of slavery potentially becomes problematic, however, as she otherwise refrains from directly engaging with the issues of race, and is instead more preoccupied with a totalitarian regime's oppression of women and their "herstories."

"Herstory" is an alternative term used for history written from a feminist perspective, which emphasizes the role of women, or is told from a woman's point of view. Though the "his-" in "history" is not etymologically related to the possessive pronoun "his," the term "herstory" was a reaction to the male-dominated field of historiography, in which "her story" has traditionally been marginalized by "his story." The term is no longer widely used, yet this thesis adopts as a designation that was much in circulation in the 1980s and reflects the author's focus on women's stories, highlighting not a possible future outcome of current trends, but trends that have been occurring for a long time. One of these trends is how historiography traditionally marginalizes women. In addition to befitting the theme of the thesis, "herstory" – with its satiric undertones and wordplay – sounds like a word Atwood herself might have used.

The thesis also argues that Offred's testimony – the "herstory" of *The Handmaid's Tale* – is allegorical of the slave narrative, an autobiographical account of a runaway's experiences of slavery. Written retrospectively, the typical arc follows the slave's transformation from dehumanized chattel to self-emancipated free individual. Slave narratives became the main genre of African American literature in the nineteenth century. Since slavery was a controversial issue in the US, literature engaged the issue on both sides of the argument. A defining characteristic of the slave narrative is a letter of authentication and/or postscript by

a white editor or abolitionist., without which a slave narrative would not have been published. Parallels can be found in the epilogues to both *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*, in which the narratives of women end up being scrutinized and appropriated by white men. These epilogues are presented in the form of lectures held by Professor James Darcy Pieixoto. *The Handmaid's Tale's* epilogue is especially interesting as a self-declared note of authentication, judging by its title: "Problems of Authentication in Reference to *The Handmaid's Tale*" (Atwood 2010, 314). However, as Chapter Two will elaborate, Atwood flips the idea of the letter of authentication on its head, since Offred's story is put under heavy scrutiny by the male professor and his colleagues.

Like "herstory," the slave narrative is here understood more liberally than its established implication. The slave narrative is a historical genre with several characteristics, characteristics that *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* do not adhere to. While Atwood does draw parallels, she does not equate the experiences, no matter how horrific, of an exclusively white cast with those of black slaves. The novels are not slave narratives, nor does the thesis claim them to be. However, it will argue that, in reading *The Handmaid's Tale* as an allegory, the "herstory" becomes the Gileadverse's equivalent of the slave narrative. Commanders have replaced the slave masters, Mayday the abolitionists, the Handmaids the slaves. Examining *The Handmaid's Tale*, the thesis aims to prove that Atwood uses allegory to explore the theme of the female testimony. Said theme is explored in *The Testaments* as well, though it appears that Atwood's 2019 novel abandons the allegorical approach.

With the fears concerning gender inequality that resurfaced with the election of President Donald Trump, also accused of racist remarks, the future portrayed in *The Handmaid's Tale* might not seem distant. This was the reason for Atwood's return to Gilead with *The Testaments*. But if *The Handmaid's Tale* can be read as an allegorical novel, what of *The Testaments*? Has Atwood's attitude changed in the time between the two novels, and if so, how?

Chapter One: Power Structures in the Dystopian Novel

Our big mistake was teaching them to read. We won't do that again.

– Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985)

Dystopian literature is essentially about the power structures of society. It critiques how various systems of power inherently produce – and reproduce – inequality. Atwood's Gilead novels are no exception. The totalitarianism of the Republic of Gilead comes in the form of a theocracy. It is a web of structures that produces inequality by systematically oppressing its women, grouping them by way of clothing that signifies their station and function in society. The Handmaids are forced into sexual unions with their Commanders in what is essentially institutionalized and systematic rape. In other words, their lives are locked and rendered powerless within a tangle of systems. Such are typically the conditions in the literary dystopia.

“Futuristic dystopias are stories about language,” claims Ildney Cavalcanti (2000, 153). On the surface, this is a peculiar claim. But power and language cannot be separated, for what is language, if not a system of grammar, syntax, and semantics? Whether in writing or speech, we must follow a set of rules to communicate. Language is not as free as one would like to think, but just as one can undermine power structures, one can undermine language. As such, Cavalcanti's claim that futuristic dystopias are stories about language in no way challenge our common understanding of dystopia.

Language has always been an important mechanism and theme in dystopian literature, particularly its censorship. Ironically, many dystopian works have been subjected to censorship or banned outright, as they critique and thus pose threats to the existing power structures. The most extreme example, Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1921), was published in English in 1924, and in the Soviet Union as late as 1988, during the *glasnost* era of Mikhail Gorbachev. Besides George Orwell's *1984*, the theme of language and words as ideology is most explicitly explored in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953). The so-called “firemen” in the novel do not put out fires but start them instead, burning “outlawed” books that could generate debates and promote contradicting ideas and philosophies.

Censorship plays its part in Atwood's novels as well. The Republic of Gilead uses the Bible to legitimize the way power structures operate. That Eve was made from the rib of Adam, for example, justifies men's superiority. At the same time, the Bible is unavailable to

the majority of Gilead's population, since writing and reading are forbidden. A discussion of Atwood's Gileadverse thus needs to acknowledge the gendered dimensions of power structures and language. Idlney Cavalcanti's essay focuses specifically on how contemporary feminist dystopias, "overtly thematize the linguistic construction of gender domination by telling stories about language as instrument of both (men's) domination and (women's) liberation" (2000, 153). Among these dystopias is *The Handmaid's Tale*. Cavalcanti maintains that men in feminist dystopias have traditionally silenced the voices of women by way of:

...strongly regulated forms of address and turn-taking, enforced use of formulaic or contrived speech (sometimes reaching the extreme circumstance in which the female protagonist has to communicate by following a script), prohibition of access to public speech, reading and/or writing, specially creative writing, denial or representation in political forums, or more effectively, the cutting out of women's tongues. (2000, 152).

The power of language and discourse in dystopian literature is most apparent through the ways in which governments use it to exert control over the populace, though the Gilead novels emphasize how power can be used to subjugate women in particular. The Commanders set strict parameters for the linguistic freedom of Gilead's women, and barring the cutting of tongues (which, incidentally, was included in the television series adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale*), the women are subjected to all of the procedures outlined by the quote above.

However, as Cavalcanti states, language is also explored in dystopian literature through how its protagonists use it to undermine the systems of power. In *1984*, for example, Winston Smith acquires a book in which he starts writing his diary, eventually repeating the line "DOWN WITH BIG BROTHER" (Orwell 2008, 20). While that is a literal example, Atwood's dystopian novels subtly suggest both oppression and resistance through language. In Carol Ann Howells' words, "it is Offred's attempt to 'seize [the language], to make it hers' which gives her narrative its appeal as one woman's story of resistance against patriarchal tyranny" (2006, 165). Trapped within language just as she is within power structures, this resistance must also come from within. Offred is passive-subversive; she cannot outwardly rebel, so she rebels inwardly. Playing with words in her head, Offred upsets the Gileadean language, and thus the very power of Gilead.

Howells also notes the historical dimension of Atwood's novel: "[b]y an irony of history, it is Offred the silenced Handmaid who becomes Gilead's principal historian when

that oral ‘herstory’ is published two hundred years later” (Howells 2006, 165). What Howells refers to is the epilogue of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, which like the Appendix of *1984*, takes place years after the main narrative. Such an epilogue also appears in *The Testaments*, and both sections yield interesting results upon examination, particularly as relates to their discussion on the reproduction of fundamentalism, racism, and sexism through the different power structures in Gilead.

A term often used to discuss the innate relationship between power and language is “discourse.” According to the functionalist paradigm, one cannot analyse language without analyzing the purpose and functions of language in human life. “Discourse is therefore seen as a culturally and socially organized way of speaking” (Mayr 2008, 7). The view of language as a form of social practice is shared with Critical Discourse Analysis, which analyses the way individuals and institutions use language. More relevant to this thesis, Critical Discourse Analysis specifically examines how language produces and reproduces domination and inequality. A proper discourse analysis is not, however, the goal of this thesis. The functionalist paradigm and Critical Discourse Analysis are instead evoked to establish the intrinsic nature of the relationship between language and power. Another relevant name in this discussion is Michel Foucault. For him, discourse “governs the way a topic can meaningfully be talked about [and] influences how ideas are put into practice and used to regulate the conduct of others” (Mayr 2008, 8). Interestingly, he also stated that discourse “is a form of power that circulates in the social field and can attach to strategies of domination as well as those of resistance” (in Diamond and Quinby 1988, 185).

This thesis’ concern is with discourse in the dystopian novel. If language is a system of communication and power is the control over others, discourse is the link between them; the system of communication used in practice to establish, maintain, and exercise the ability to control other individuals. Expanding on Foucault’s line of thinking, however, this definition embraces other aspects of discourse, such as culture, history, ideology, and politics. As such, the thesis’ definition is not limited to the linguistic aspect of discourse. Gilead’s implementation of formulaic and contrived speech is not an example of subtle linguistic manipulation that a student of Critical Discourse Analysis would analyse. It is a restriction of free speech and thought, an example of power exercised to suppress the language of others, which, as already established, also means crushing the power and freedom of others. Non-linguistic elements, such as the enforced dress-code and the segregation of classes, are also part of the Gileadean discourse as they point to the power structures of the regime. With a

definition of the dystopian discourse established, the remainder of this chapter is devoted to theories and concepts that will aid in examining *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*.

We continue with the aforementioned Michael Foucault, as Atwood's Gilead novels invite a Foucauldian reading even beyond that of discourse analysis. There are three ideas put forward by Foucault that can be discussed in relation to the dystopian discourse. One concerns discipline and punishment, to which the chapter will return. The other two concern "general politics" of truth and discourse as something "already-said," ideas that are applicable to the dystopian genre, and particularly relevant to any discussion concerning dystopian discourse. Foucault writes:

Each society has its regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth – that is, the types of discourse it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances that enable one to distinguish true and false statements; the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (Foucault, Faubion, and Rabinow 2001, 131)

While Foucault would have a few words to say about Orwell's *1984*, in which what is considered truth changes constantly and the concept of doublethink requires that one accept as true what is clearly not, or to accept two contradicting beliefs as correct at the same time – the case of Atwood's Gileadverse is, mercifully, not as complex. In a society such as Gilead, to state that women should dress according to the rules set by the Commanders instead of themselves choosing what to wear would be within the accepted "truth," the accepted discourse. The notion of "general politics" of truth, however, is imbued with ambivalence if we take into account the concept of discourse as something "already-said." In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault claims that "all manifest discourse is secretly based on an 'already-said'" (2002, 27). Discourse does not give birth to itself but finds its roots in what came before. As if on a mission to confuse, Foucault complicates this claim by stating that the "already said" is also a "'never-said,' an incorporeal discourse, a voice as silent as a breath, a writing that is merely the hollow of its own mark." Everything formulated in discourse was articulated in this "semi-silence" that preceded it. This "semi-silence" then continues "to run obstinately beneath" the discourse (Foucault 2002, 27). Put in simpler terms, what has been said before about an idea or object will consciously or subconsciously influence how we think of and view the idea or object in the present.

The idea of discourse as "already-said" ties neatly into the nature of dystopian fiction as extrapolations of the author's contemporary time. It is never specified exactly when *The*

Handmaid's Tale and *The Testaments* take place, but we can hypothesize that they take place in a not-so-distant future – some speculate the year 2005 (Armstrong 2018) – which means that the “already-said” may be referring to Atwood’s own time. As such, Atwood could be warning the readers that the foundations of Gilead in some ways already exist, as if to say: “We are standing at the crossroads, and the choices we make next will decide whether or not Gilead becomes a reality.” The idea of discourse as “already-said” leads to interesting insights regarding *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*. In the former, Offred is part of what Aunt Lydia calls the “transitional generation,” meaning that while she is in the process of indoctrination by the Gileadean discourse, she also has memories of the pre-Gileadean discourse. *The Testaments* features another similar example in Aunt Lydia, but in Agnes, it also features a protagonist who is completely indoctrinated by the Gileadean discourse, creating an interesting foil to Offred.

Discourse is also central in the work of Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin, one of its most influential theorists. In his essay “Discourse in the Novel,” Bakhtin examines, among other things, two dimensions of language: the monologic and the dialogic. As the terms imply, they refer to the monologue, a speech by a single person, and the dialogue, a conversation between at least two people. Monologism, in crude terms, aims to suppress other voices: the truth or falsehood of a statement exists independently regardless of who utters it. Christopher Hays refers to monologic discourse as “discourse in which only one point of view is represented, however diverse the means of representation” (2008, 70). Living in Stalinist Russia, Bakhtin was a witness to – and victim of – monologism, as whatever the government said was construed as a truth no one could oppose. Monologism can only be achieved through exclusion and separation, and the way to counter this, Bakhtin surmised, is by way of dialogism. Dialogism refers to a larger linguistic context in which all speech and text exist. Dialogism resists exclusion and separation, as everything is connected, though not necessarily unified. Michael Holquist writes that dialogue is multifaceted but can, in essence, be reduced to a minimum of three elements: “[A] dialogue is composed of an utterance, a reply, and a relation between the two.” The relation is most important, “for without it the other two would have no meaning” (2002, 38).

Closely related to monologism and dialogism is heteroglossia, Bakhtin’s term that indicates that any language is composed of several types of speech. Simply put, in the sphere of literature, heteroglossia occurs when characters or narrators in a novel use different styles of speech, such as religious and political discourses, or class-marked discourses. Heteroglossia and dialogism may be similar, but they are not the same. One way to put it is

this: dialogism focuses on the way languages interact, while heteroglossia describes the languages themselves. Dialogism thus paves the way for heteroglossia.

Bakhtin considered the traditional poetic genres, such as the tragedy and the epic to be monologic, manifesting a single style and a single world view. He claimed that the poet “must assume a complete single-personed hegemony over his own language, he must assume equal responsibility for each one of its aspects and subordinate them to his own, and only his own intentions” (Bakhtin, Emerson, and Holquist 1981, 297). The discourse of the novel, however, admits to a multitude of styles, one style working in dialogue with another. The novel, therefore, is dialogic, an observation that led Bakhtin to write “Discourse in the Novel.” The dystopian novel is no exception; Bakhtin’s concepts are indeed relevant to any discussion concerning discourse and power structures in dystopian literature. In a world such as that of *1984*, the Party wants to remove heteroglossia from the equation altogether. Monologism is its ultimate goal, dialogism its enemy. That is the reason why Winston Smith repeatedly states that “If there is hope [...] it lies in the proles” (Orwell 2008, 72). The “proles” of Oceania are the lowest class, which presents no threat to the Party, being “beneath suspicion” (Orwell 2008, 75). However, unlike the rest of the population in Oceania, the “proles” have the freedom to read, paving the way for dialogism, which, in turn, might have caused the downfall of Oceania, alluded to in the Appendix section of the novel.

Another example can be found in *Fahrenheit 451*. The practice of burning books is justified on the grounds of books being a source for confusion and dissent, which would disrupt the monological nature of Bradbury’s dystopian society. The group of exiled book-lovers Guy Montag eventually joins pledges themselves to memorizing books. On the day of their society’s fall – as happens at the end of the novel – the exiles are ready to build a new society embracing history and literature, and all the contradicting ideas and philosophies that come with it, and are thus ready to “reinstate” dialogism.

The Handmaid’s Tale and *The Testaments* both display a struggle between dialogism and monologism. Aunt Lydia’s sections in *The Testaments*, for instance, feature markedly different styles of speech, creating the heteroglossia that Gilead wants to exterminate. Like many totalitarian states, Gilead is monologic in its discourse, basing most of it on a book the majority of the population does not have access to. The Word of Gilead is the Word of God, and is thus indisputable, regardless of who utters it. However, the protagonists of *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Testaments* demonstrate that dialogism is not easily defeated, to which Chapters Two and Three will return.

As discourse is intrinsically linked with ideology, a few select theorists and their theories concerning ideology will aid us in examining Atwood's novels. The theories and concepts in question need to be introduced since they do not specifically focus on language and discourse. The selection of theories turned out to be exclusively Marxist, which was not my intention, but research made me aware that these theories and ideas are not only applicable to the two Gilead novels but are also compatible with the thesis' focus on language and discourse.

First is the issue of ideology itself. Robert Dale Parker states that in ordinary English usage, ideology "refers to a conscious, deliberately chosen set of political beliefs" (2015, 231). However, within Marxism, the term is used differently. French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, for example, sees ideology not as a deliberately chosen set of political beliefs, famously defining ideology as "the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (Althusser 2001, 109). As ideology is an unconscious set of beliefs and assumptions, we cannot explain our ideologies, and the reasons that lead us to act the way we do are unknown to us or misunderstood at best. In the Althusserian sense, we may speak of a system that appeals to our aspirations of individual selfhood, but in essence recruits us into being cogs in an already existing machine that reproduces and replicates through generations. This system, says Parker, "needs to remain unconscious and imaginary, because if it were conscious, no one would go along" (2015, 233). Keith Booker notes that within dystopian thought, Althusser's most important concept is that of "interpellation," which is the engine that keeps this system reproducing itself (1994b, 14).

Interpellation means "calling" or "hailing," the word Althusser adopted to allude to an imagined dialogue between us and the system. Althusser suggests that "ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' among the individuals [...] or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects [...] which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: 'Hey, you there!'" (Althusser 2001, 118; parenthesis in original). The system calls to us, and in answering back, we become subjects of interpellation. Through interpellation, we are unconsciously drawn into the dominant social and cultural assumptions. Though Althusser referred mainly to the reproduction of capitalist ideology, interpellation can be examined through a variety of lenses. Parker uses the example of heterosexuality and whiteness, stating that one immediately assumes that people are heterosexual and white unless indicated otherwise (2015, 234). Unconscious social and cultural assumptions are reproduced from generation to generation, and thus the dominant ideology remains mostly unchallenged.

Relevant to a discussion about *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* is Althusser's assertion that the interpellation begins prior to a subject's birth. M. K. Booker writes that dystopian works often explore linguistic domination through naming, which according to Booker, recalls Althusser's argument that "interpellation of a subject begins even before birth in the complex of expectations that the family and society develop concerning the infant-to-be" (Booker 1994a, 168). Booker quotes Althusser: "[I]t will bear its Father's name, and will, therefore, have an identity and be irreplaceable" (in Booker 1994a, 168). This is an aspect explored in Atwood's *Gileadverse*, in which names are taken away, and new ones are given.

Related to interpellation is a system of institutions that Althusser dubs *ideological state apparatuses* (ISA) and *repressive state apparatuses* (RSA), the latter often simply called *state apparatuses*. These are the institutions through which the system of interpellation works. RSAs include regulative institutions like the police, courts, prisons, and the military. In other words, institutions that can directly enforce certain behaviors. Despite seemingly speaking of different institutions, Althusser considers the repressive state apparatus to be one collective unit, i.e., the state. ISAs, on the other hand, are multiple separate units, though Althusser admits that there is a unifying dimension to their shared goal. This goal is the recruitment of people to the ruling ideology, and ISAs are more subtle in this regard than RSAs.

Althusser divides the ISAs into different institutions: the religious ISA, the educational ISA, the family ISA, the legal ISA, the political ISA, the trade union ISA, the communications ISA, and the cultural ISA (Althusser 2001, 96). Without direct and overt force, these institutions generate ideologies that individuals and groups of individuals internalize. Several of these ISAs play significant roles in the society of Gilead. An example of the educational apparatus in Gilead is the Rachel and Leah Center, where the Handmaids are "educated." The religious apparatus in Gilead, meanwhile, is difficult to define, as Gilead, in many ways, *is* the religious apparatus, which could make it an RSA instead of an ISA. Though ISAs and RSAs are explored in both Gilead novels, a discussion about them is saved for Chapter Three, since *The Testaments* offer more insight in this regard than its prequel.

The reason it becomes tricky to speak of the religious apparatus of Gilead is that the Republic is a theocracy. Its discourse is, in large part, based on both Biblical and legal precedent, and while parts of Gilead's population are indeed firm believers, there is also a great deal of religious hypocrisy. Not only is the Bible, unavailable to the majority of Gilead's population, the basis for dehumanizing rituals like The Ceremony, but it is regularly misquoted and misinterpreted, so much so that even a quotation from Marx that is

appropriated and altered, sounds as if it were a quotation from the Bible! Speaking of Marx, he famously declared religion the “opium of the masses,” a view also endorsed in the “Priests or Despots” theory, laid forth and immediately debunked by Althusser in “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”:

Priests or Despots are responsible. They ‘forged’ the Beautiful Lies so that, in the belief that they were obeying God, men would in fact obey the Priests and Despots, who are usually in alliance in their imposture, the Priests acting in the interests of the Despots or *vice versa*, according to the political positions of the ‘theoreticians’ concerned (in Rivkin and Ryan 2017, 769, emphasis in original).

Again, Althusser did not believe this was correct. The P or D theory is the first of two potential answers given to the question of why we need an imaginary relation to real conditions of existence. The second answer, which in the eyes of a Marxist would be correct – though Althusser considers it “just as false” as the first answer – concerns material relations. The material relations of capitalist production alienate people, a prospect which is difficult for people to accept, so they tell themselves they are not alienated, and in doing so, alienate themselves even more (in Rivkin and Ryan 2017, 769).

In the context of this thesis, however, we stick to the first answer. False or not, the P or D theory is certainly not a farfetched one when discussing *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Testaments*. The Priests or Despots in this context are the novel’s Commanders, and their template – their “general politics” of truth, as it were – is the Bible, more specifically the Old Testament.

Notionally related to Althusser’s ideas are those of Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist who distinguished between the *state*, meaning government and politics, and *civil society*, meaning culture. According to T. B. Bottomore, Gramsci “redefines the state as force plus consent, or hegemony armoured by coercion [...] in which political society organizes force, and civil society provides consent” (Bottomore 1991, 222). A political prisoner under Benito Mussolini’s regime, Gramsci wrote his most influential works in prison, wondering how the Right had risen to dominance in Italy. He concluded that the right managed to maintain its hegemony – its dominating cultural influence and power – not by violence or coercion, but through cultural leadership, which, to Gramsci, stands for more effective coercion. If necessary, the government can – through the police and army – step in with

coercion, but through civil society, one might win the consent of the masses without using force.

The Republic of Gilead definitely utilizes violence and coercion, but there is something to be said about civil society as well. “The bourgeois capitalists’ cultural prestige makes their way of thinking seem like common sense to the masses, and so the masses come to identify with bourgeois ways of thinking, leading them to consent to bourgeois dominance” (Parker 2015, 228). In Gilead, the “bourgeois capitalists” are the Commanders, the sole source of civil society, their culture being based on religion. *The Testaments* explores this aspect in two different ways. Firstly – as evidenced through Lydia’s flashbacks – one of the first procedures undertaken by the Sons of Jacob is to round up at least forty women at a sports stadium. Lydia immediately notices that every woman there has an academic background and/or a distinguished occupation. She surmises that this is a preliminary precaution on the part of the Sons of Jacob: “The opposition is led by the educated, so the educated are the first to be eliminated” (Atwood 2019, 116). In doing so, the Sons of Jacob has ensured that the only cultural leadership in the newly formed Republic would be the Commanders. Secondly, in swapping the bourgeois capitalists with the greedy, misogynistic Commanders, Atwood illustrates how their rules and norms eventually seem like common sense to characters such as Agnes, one of the narrators of *The Testaments*. This leads us to another Marxist term, closely related to interpellation – false consciousness.

Within Marxist thinking, false consciousness refers to the notion that the proletariat is interpellated to such a degree that they act against their own interest, embodying the will of the ideology of the oppressive ruling class. It has become a somewhat contested subject among Marxists, however, since using the term may presuppose one’s own superiority over others in “knowing” their best interests better than they do themselves. Nonetheless, false consciousness is a much-used trope in dystopian literature, in which an absolute majority of the characters are unaware of the reality of their repression. *Fahrenheit 451* is again a good example. In Bradbury’s novel, the populace is led to believe books are bad for them; protagonist Guy Montag initially believes this too. Likewise, the Gileadverse features numerous displays of false consciousness. It is particularly evident in *The Testaments*, in which narrator Agnes has grown up within the Republic of Gilead. The teachings of Gilead, both concerning religion and gender division, have at the start of the novel become firmly ingrained in her consciousness.

Before delving into Atwood’s novels, we return to Michel Foucault, this time to his influential book, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. The book is, per Foucauldian

tradition, not easily digested. What follows, then, are some condensed and simplified elements, which might help us in examining the societies in dystopian literature. In *Discipline & Punish*, Foucault looks at the history of the modern penal system. More specifically, he examines the profound change in attitudes toward and practices of punishing crime that occurred in Western penal systems between the mid-eighteenth and the early nineteenth century. Punishment in the late eighteenth century usually came in the form of public torture or execution, but the beginning of the nineteenth century saw more “delicate” and less public means of punishment, as “[p]unishment had gradually ceased to be a spectacle,” culminating in imprisonment, similar to the modern penal system of most Western countries today (Foucault 1977, 9). The inflicting of pain on the body of the criminal, for instance, was no longer a goal pursued as a way of establishing power. Instead, imprisonment aimed to reform the individual to prevent crimes from happening in the future.

In Foucault’s line of reasoning, however, this transition did not take place out of any humanitarian ideals formulated by reformists. It was simply a more efficient and modern way of subjugating the individual. The objective was no longer to break a criminal’s body. The target was instead their minds, their thoughts, and their will. Reformists advocating this transition felt that the sovereign power to punish and judge should become more evenly distributed and that the state’s power should be a form of public power. Eventually, a criminal act was not considered an attack on the sovereign as it had previously been, but instead an attack on society itself.

The book’s titular “disciplines” refer to a series of techniques by which the body can be controlled. In the Foucauldian sense, disciplines replaced the pre-modern society of kings and developed a new economy and politics for bodies. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, individual punishment as a spectacle for a public audience ceased to exist. Criminals were instead transformed into what Foucault dubs “docile bodies”: “A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved,” claimed Foucault (1977, 136).

Docile bodies are achieved through discipline. The “molding” of docile bodies required a new disciplinary system and a particular form of institution. The isolated dungeons were the products of a bygone age. The ultimate example of disciplinary power, Foucault argued, was the Panopticon, a model made by Jeremy Bentham. Bentham conceptualized a circular compound, a tall tower centered in the middle, with lower buildings set around it. The tower would be occupied with a guard, while the lower buildings would function as cells for the inmates. The idea was that while it would be impossible for a lone guard in the tower to

monitor every inmate at all times, the inmates would behave without the possibility of knowing whether they were being watched or not at any given moment. “Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (Foucault 1977, 201).

The last chapter of *Discipline & Punish* is devoted to “the Carceral.” The carceral system could be argued to be the Panopticon adapted to extend beyond the prison walls and into society as a whole. “The carceral texture of society assures both the real capture of the body and its perpetual observation” (Foucault 1977, 304). Dystopian literature often takes the idea of this carceral society to its extreme, and constant surveillance is a common trope. In *1984*, Winston Smith and the other inhabitants of Oceania are constantly reminded that “BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU.” A section taking place in the opening pages of the novel is a perfect example of the carceral society, and specifically Foucault’s Panopticon metaphor:

There was of course no way of knowing whether you were being watched at any given moment. How often, or on what system, the Thought Police plugged in on any individual wire was guesswork. It was even conceivable that they watched everybody all the time. But at any rate they could plug in your wire whenever they wanted to. You had to live – did live, from habit that became instinct – in the assumption that every sound you made was overheard, and except in darkness, every movement scrutinised. (Orwell 2008, 4-5)

Passages in *1984* like the one above, invoke the concept of the Panopticon so vividly that a panoptic set was constructed for the movie adaptation – released, fittingly, in *1984* – to portray the Inner Party’s constant surveillance of its workers. The concepts of carceral societies and the Panopticon are not beholden to Orwell’s novel, however, as we shall see when examining Atwood’s Gileadverse. With *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Testaments*, however, Atwood brings a gendered dimension to the ideas of Foucault, whose work treats bodies as sexless, without any particular regard to gender.

Chapters Two and Three examine *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Testaments*, focusing on the aspects of discourse discussed in this chapter. Foucault, Bakhtin, Althusser, and Gramsci have different thoughts on discourse, power, and ideology, but in relation to dystopian literature and its focus on discourse, they all offer interesting and productive insight. Taking into consideration the fundamental elements of dystopian literature, allegories, and slave narratives – discussed in the introduction – the thesis’ definition of discourse is thus broadened to emphasize the theme of the female testimony in Atwood’s Gileadverse. This

thesis, therefore, takes into consideration both the linguistic and ideological aspects of discourse, but also adds a gendered and historical dimension.

Chapter Two: The Handmaid's Tale

There was truth and there was untruth, and if you clung to the truth
even against the whole world, you were not mad.

– George Orwell, *1984* (1949)

The Handmaid's Tale presents a future dystopic version of the US. Atwood envisions the Republic of Gilead, a theocratic totalitarian state in which a few select men, called Commanders, rule the rest of the population. Only a year or two before the beginning of the novel, a group called the Sons of Jacob – whose highest-ranking members would become the Commanders – assassinated the President and killed the entire US Congress. Officially blaming “Islamic fanatics,” the army declared a state of emergency, and the US Constitution was suspended, ostensibly only temporarily (Atwood 2010, 185). Before long, bank accounts of female holders were frozen, and women were fired from their jobs. A new paramilitary force, the Guardians, began forcibly rounding up women, some of which would be “schooled” into becoming Handmaids in the newly named Republic of Gilead.

The Handmaids are fertile women appointed to Commanders, whose Wives (capitalized in the novel) are infertile. That is at least the official word of Gilead; it is implied that male sterility is just as common as female infertility. The Handmaids' function is to bear children for their Commander and Wife. After giving birth to a child, they are assigned to another Commander's household to bear them children. Other classes include “Aunts,” trainers of the Handmaids, and fully devoted to the regime; Marthas, older infertile women serving in a Commander's household; and Econowives, women married to lower-ranking men.

Even lower still are the classes of “illegitimate” women, the Unwomen, and Jezebels. Unwomen are women exiled to “the Colonies,” where they are forced to clean environments plagued by deadly pollution in the hopes that the areas might be used for agriculture. The moniker of Unwomen is a general one, and individuals labeled as such include lesbians, female political dissidents, and Handmaids who have failed to give birth to a child after three two-year assignments. In short, Unwomen are women who, for whatever reason, fail to integrate into the Republic of Gilead successfully. In turn, the Jezebels are women who “choose” to become prostitutes or entertainers, available only to Commanders and their guests. I put the “choose” in quotation marks as these women are essentially Unwomen who – because of their attractiveness – are given a choice to be Jezebels instead of being sent to the

Colonies. As life in “the Colonies” rarely lasts beyond three years or so because of the toxic materials and radiation, calling it a choice is generous.

One of the most popular and influential pieces of dystopian fiction, *The Handmaid’s Tale* is an unnerving and claustrophobic read. Readers can feel protagonist Offred’s sense of isolation and helplessness, as well as the fears that led Atwood to write the novel, accounted for in the thesis’ introduction. This was the case in 1985 and is still the case in 2020, with Donald Trump’s election and the resurgence of the religious Right alongside the rise of the alt-right. Such relevance is often a trait of quality dystopian writing. However, as much as Atwood wrote out of contemporary concerns, much of *The Handmaid’s Tale* derives from history. One of Atwood’s axioms for writing the novel was that everything that happens in the novel had already happened somewhere and at some time in history:

The group-activated hangings, the tearing apart of human beings, the clothing specific to castes and classes, the forced childbearing and the appropriation of the results, the children stolen by regimes and placed for upbringing with high-ranking officials, the forbidding of literacy, the denial of property rights – all had precedents, and many of these were to be found, not in other cultures and religions, but within Western society, and within the “Christian” tradition itself (Atwood 2018).

This quote seems to target Christianity, and indeed the early American Puritan form of Christianity – which Atwood studied at Harvard – was an influence on her writing. However, Christianity is not a specific target of Atwood’s. Though she refers to Christianity in the above quote, it is never directly referenced in the novel itself. Atwood’s choice to write about a totalitarian theocracy is likely caused by the rise of the religious Right in the US in the 1980s and the historical precedent of using religion as a means of oppression. In creating a world in which the majority of the population suffers as a consequence of human decisions and choices – which Gregory Claeys in the previous chapter highlighted as the key component of dystopian fiction – religion is instead a vehicle to drive the story Atwood wants to tell.

The Handmaid’s Tale explicitly concerns itself with themes like religion and sexuality. Less explicit, but nonetheless present, is a critique of the language and rhetoric making a regime like that of Gilead plausible, and thus frightening. However, as we shall see, language is not only used as a means of suppression; it is also used to fight back. According to M. Keith Booker, “Atwood depicts language as an aspect of both patriarchal tradition and feminine resistance” (1994b, 83). This Atwood does by highlighting the role of language in

the patriarchal regime of Gilead, as well as through Offred and her small but crucial acts of resistance.

As is implied in its title, *The Handmaid's Tale* focuses on the lives of the Handmaids, the lowest class in Gilead, the possible exception being Econowives, who are barely explored at all in either Gilead novel. However, as also implied by the placement of the apostrophe in the title, it is presented from the perspective of one specific Handmaid, Offred. This is a matter of importance, as Offred's attempts to hold onto her identity plays an important role in the novel. Even so, through Offred's narration, we are given insight into the daily life of the Handmaids and are thus led to believe that the lives of other Handmaids are not too different from Offred's.

The language of the Handmaids is shown to be restricted, limited, and ultimately oppressive. Chapter 2 of the novel brings us along as Offred and fellow Handmaid Ofglen go shopping and presents us with several examples of their limited discourse, such as their prescribed greetings: “‘Blessed be the fruit,’ she says to me, the accepted greeting among us. ‘May the Lord open,’ I answer, the accepted response” (Atwood 2010, 31). In addition to the prescribed, robotic, and restricted nature of their verbal exchange, the references to fruit are indicative of how the Handmaids in Gilead are defined by – and reminded of – their sole function of giving birth.

The conversations that follow these greetings are shown to be equally superficial. “‘We’ve been sent good weather.’ ‘Which I receive with joy’” (Atwood 2010, 31). *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* thus exemplify one of the ways dystopian fiction thematize the linguistic construction of gender, according to Ildney Cavalcanti: through “enforced use of formulaic or contrived speech (sometimes reaching the extreme circumstance in which the female protagonist has to communicate by following a script)” (2000, 152), the women of Gilead are deprived of any notion of free speech. The enforcement of this linguistic restriction is furthermore upheld by the Handmaids themselves because the carceral nature of Gilead means that, as Offred herself notes, one can never really know who can be trusted, even within the ranks of the Handmaids. When Offred and Ofglen learn to trust each other later in the novel, they have far more meaningful, and therefore dangerous, conversations, for instance discussing their pre-Gileadean lives or talking about rebel group Mayday.

When the Handmaids part ways for the day, they do so uttering the accepted phrase: “‘Under His Eye,’ she says. The right farewell. ‘Under His Eye’ I reply, and she gives a little nod” (Atwood 2010, 56). It is a multilayered phrase. Being under “His” eye could be

interpreted as God watching over you and protecting you as long as you are on the path of virtue. It could also imply that God will punish you if you stray. Being under his “Eye,” with a capitalized E, however, means that your every move is being watched, not necessarily by God himself, but the Eyes of God, Gilead’s secret police, and Atwood’s version of Orwell’s Thought Police. Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon, invoked by Michel Foucault in the previous chapter, thus looms large in Gilead. Individualism can hardly thrive under Panopticism, that ultimate exhibitor of disciplinary power. Under heavy scrutiny, the citizens of Gilead (because that also includes the men, though to a lesser degree) take great care in making their every move, and in saying every word.

The Commanders were from the very offset aware of both the power they could have by wielding the word and equally aware of the word’s potential for instigating rebellion. In the epilogue of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, titled “Historical Notes,” Professor Pieixoto notes that one of the main architects of Gilead, Commander Judd (who does not appear as a character in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, but plays an important role in *The Testaments*), was reported to once have said “Our big mistake was teaching them to read. We won’t do that again” (Atwood 2010, 322). The quotation calls to mind the slave narrative of Frederic Douglass, who was taught how to read by Mrs. Auld, his slave mistress, only for Mr. Ault to exclaim: “Learning would *spoil* the best nigger in the world. [...] if you teach that nigger how to read, there would be no keeping him” (Douglass, Andrews, and McFeely 1997, 29; emphasis in original). There are obviously some differences, chief of which is that the women of Gilead, unlike Douglass, already know how to read. Instead of being refused education, they are forbidden from making use of previously earned knowledge and reading abilities. There is still an undeniable parallel in the enforced illiteracy, a parallel drawn by Atwood to emphasize the silencing of voices of both slaves and women throughout history.

Thus, when Aunt Lydia speaks of how it will be easier for the generations following the “transitional generation” which Offred is part of, it is not just because the following generations will not have the pre-Gilead experiences to compare with their present experiences, but because language, or at least part of it, will have died alongside these experiences. Dialogism will have been erased, and only monologism will remain.

The struggle between Mikhail Bakhtin’s dialogism and monologism is on full display throughout *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Testaments*. This is particularly evident in Offred’s remark on Aunt Lydia, one of the novel’s foremost representatives of the Gileadean ideology. “Where I am is not a prison but a privilege, as Aunt Lydia said, who was in love with either/or” (Atwood 2010, 20). Her infatuation with “either/or” is emblematic of the

deterministic rhetoric of Gilead, in which every aspect of life is reduced to its basic function. Offred is defined by her role of childbearing; labels such as “mother,” “wife,” and “worker” have all been substituted for her current label, “Handmaid.”

Another telling quote comes from Offred’s Commander, who, jokingly or not, declares that women cannot add. “For them, one and one and one and one don’t make four [...] Just one and one and one and one” (Atwood 2010, 197). A few pages later, Offred notes that the Commander was only half-right in his observation: “One and one and one and one doesn’t equal four. Each one remains unique, there is no way of joining them together” (Atwood 2010, 203-204).

The Commanders remark, a product of a purely logical and deterministic rationale – thinking mathematically but failing to consider the individualist aspect – speaks to the broader discourse of Gilead. To the Commander, the first woman is not a mother, the second woman a worker, the third a wife. They are all simply women, which in Gilead also means they are inferior. In the Gileadean discourse, the dialogical “and/but” is replaced by the monological “either/or,” plurality by singularity. However, as Offred herself notes, this singularity is not real. One and one and one and one does indeed make one and one and one and one, despite Gilead’s attempts to prove otherwise. Offred attempts to seize language, not necessarily to “make it hers,” as stated by Carol Ann Howells (2006, 165), but to strip Gilead of its monopoly of language. By seizing language, Offred demonstrates that reality cannot simply be “either/or,” no matter how much the Commanders of Gilead want it to be. There will always be “and/but”; dialogism is inevitable. This aspect is more prevalent in *The Testaments*, discussed in the next chapter.

In several instances, Atwood directly references the nuances of language. Before Offred and Luke plan to leave their home to escape the coming of the Gilead rule, they realize they have not considered what to do about their cat. When Luke says he will “take care of it,” Offred knows he intends to kill the cat: “That is what you have to do before you kill, I thought. You have to create an it, where none was before. [...] So that’s how they do it, I thought. I seemed never to have known that before” (Atwood 2010, 204). Later in the novel, Offred realizes that a man sentenced to death “has become an *it*” (Atwood 2010, 294).

Her observation shows how replacing a word, in this case, “him” or “her” with another, immediately changes the cognitive perception of what is said. It is a prime example of dehumanization or, in the case of the cat, objectivization. The man sentenced has been reduced to something less than a person, a non-entity. The horror in this particular section is that this mental exercise works: the Handmaids are brutal as they execute the man accused of

rape. Adding insult to injury is the fact that the man is not a rapist, according to Ofglen, but simply a political dissident working to undermine Gilead. Thus, this section provides us not only with how Gilead makes “him” or “her” an “it,” but also the added dystopian insight that we are all capable of doing it, given a little push.

Offred’s last remark – “So that’s how they do it” – concerning the power of replacing one word with another is also interesting: at this point in the narrative, while not yet fully formed, the Sons of Jacob had begun to establish their regime. Offred’s comment indicates a dawning realization of how the foundation of Gilead was possible in the first place – through language, rhetoric, and discourse. The discourse of Gilead, or at least its foundation, was established well before Gilead itself came into being, and calls to mind Foucault’s ideas on discourse as based on something “already-said.” Offred’s thoughts as the Commander’s household prepares for “The Ceremony” serve as a case in point: “I wait, for the household to assemble. Household: that is what we are. The Commander is the head of the household. The house is what he holds. To have and hold, till death do us part” (Atwood 2010, 93). Most people would, at first glance, not take particular note of a word such as “household.” Oxford English Dictionary defines it simply as “a group of people (esp. a family) living together as a unit” (OED), which corresponds with most people’s definition of the word. What is also taken for granted, however, is that the so-called “head” of the household is the patriarch.

Considering the patriarch of her assigned household, Offred notes: “He has something we don’t have, he has the word. How we squandered it once” (Atwood 2010, 101). It is an interesting remark; there are many things the Commander has access to that the Handmaids do not, yet to Offred, “the word” is the one thing that fundamentally determines their different standing in society. On a basic and literal level, Offred is referring to how the Commanders have control over language, while the Handmaids and the other women of Gilead (save the Aunts) do not. Ildney Cavalcanti, however, notes the ever-present religious and biblical connection, stating that “‘the word’ is singular, monolithic, and biblical because originated by God, the father” (2000, 168). John 1:1 opens with the widely known phrase, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1 KJV). “The Word” is traditionally interpreted to mean Jesus, the son of God, though it has also had the dual meanings of both the authoritative word of God as well as God himself. And though God is by many considered to transcend any human concept of sex and gender, God is typically thought of in masculine terms – the Holy *Father*. Therefore, the Word takes on a masculine character as well. As such, divinity and language are conjoined in Gilead, where the Commanders control both the Word and the *word*, i.e., language, both written and spoken.

The “already-said” of Gilead is thus heavily rooted in religion and theology. In the novel’s epilogue, Professor Pieixoto invokes both the idea of “already-said” and Atwood’s remark on writing about events and attitudes that have already existed. “[T]here was little that was truly original or indigenous to Gilead: its genius was synthesis” (Atwood 2010, 321). This synthesis was one of both historical and biblical elements.

The division of both class and labor is neither original nor indigenous to Gilead, either; it is essentially a system of slavery. The Commanders are the slave masters, the Handmaids their slaves. This is reflected most obviously in the hierarchy. The relationship between Offred and Commander Waterford is not unlike the relationships that existed between many slave masters and their female slaves. Such relationships were characterized by their uneven power dynamic, the slave being in no position to refuse or resist the masters’ advances. Offred is obviously afraid of defying Commander Waterford, of being sent to the Colonies, or simply killed. At the same time, such relationships were not necessarily without its advantages for the slave. Waterford clearly takes a liking to Offred, inviting her to play Scrabble with him in his study, where not even his Wife is allowed.

It was also not uncommon that slaves lived in relatively comfortable homes. Such was the case, for instance, of Harriet Jacobs in the early years of her life (McKay et al. 2001, 9), and such is the case of the Handmaids, being assigned to the households of the most powerful men in Gilead. Jacobs actually lived a number of years before even realizing the circumstances she found herself in. This is an aspect more relevant to *The Testaments* and is covered in more detail in Chapter Three.

According to Aunt Lydia, there is more than one form of freedom: “Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don’t underrate it” (Atwood 2010, 36). Lydia follows that statement by declaring pre-Gilead as a society dying from too much choice (Atwood 2010, 37). Both are interesting remarks. The latter, for one, invoke the rhetoric of those advocating slavery of black people by white people on the grounds that white people were superior to and more civilized than the other races and therefore had a responsibility in colonizing them, civilizing them and rule over them.

However, Lydia’s remarks also speak to the larger carceral system of Gilead. Recall how Michel Foucault’s ideas of Panopticism and the carceral revolved around the concept of “docile bodies.” In Gilead, where the female body is national property, Foucault’s theories are applicable. One example is in the clothing. The government of Gilead appoints the appropriate dresses for the various classes, signifying where they belong in the hierarchy, and

as properties of the state. The Handmaids are red, “the color of blood, which defines us” (Atwood 2010, 20), and their garb is more than a uniform; it is part of their body. Their bodies, in turn, are national properties in terms of function, which, as stated, is to give birth. Foucault wrote that the “carceral texture of society assures both the real capture of the body and its perpetual observation” (1977, 304). The Eyes, Guardians, the Aunts, even the fellow Handmaids, all enforce this carceral texture.

The bodies of the Handmaids in Gilead are to be one collective body. Handmaids are taught at the Red Center to reverse any notion of having the “freedom to.” They instead have the “freedom from”; their bodies are restrained, not liberated. A more literal example of female bodies recontextualized as a single unit is during the Ceremony, in which a Handmaid lies with her head in the Wife’s lap as if forming one body. The ceremony recontextualize Offred’s body as being Serena’s. It is so because Serena has a higher rank, but her body, just like Offred’s, is nonetheless part of the collective female body of Gilead. Preparing for the Ceremony, Offred thinks to herself: “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 2010, 78). It is an interesting quote, as it illustrates Gilead’s suppression of Offred’s self – she has herself become an *it* in Gilead – but it also shows her resistance by way of her separating herself from her body.

As briefly noted in Chapter One, Foucault’s theories can be problematic in that they do not consider gender, treating bodies as sexless. In Atwood’s work, she draws attention to this hole in Foucault’s theory, invoking the Panopticon and the carceral society as being particularly oppressive to women. Wives, Marthas, Econowives, and even Aunts (although *The Testaments* calls Aunt Lydia’s docility into question) are all subject to the carceral Gilead, their bodies rendered docile. The Wives and Marthas are confined to the household, Wives spending most of their time knitting and Marthas working in the kitchen.

The carceral system of Gilead is also gendered to a degree by the oppression of women by other women. This aspect of the Gilead novels is interesting since it is one area in which Atwood seems to have changed stances between the two novels. The inclusion of Aunts in *The Handmaid’s Tale* was a choice made by Atwood to highlight how women can oppress women, but there are other examples as well. We do not get to know very much about Serena Joy, the Wife of Commander Waterford, and Offred’s mistress. What we get to know, however, is of significance: She is religious, once being the lead soprano on a Sunday-morning religious television program. Once her singing career ended, she became a spokeswoman advocating the sanctity of the home, telling women to stay home instead of

working, something Offred comments upon: “She does not make speeches any more. She has become speechless. She stays in her home, but it doesn’t seem to agree with her. How furious she must be, now that she’s been taken at her word” (Atwood 2010, 58). It is the ultimate irony: the reason for Serena’s speechless state is that she once exercised the power of language in speech – and that her voice was heard.

Barring the Aunts, Serena Joy is the best example of women oppressing women in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Professor Pieixoto also makes note of this in the novel’s epilogue. “For this there were many historical precedents; in fact, no empire imposed by force or otherwise has ever been without this feature: control of the indigenous by members of their own group” (Atwood 2010, 322). Using members of a group to control said group is not new, not in historical terms nor in the academic writing on *The Handmaid’s Tale*. With the publication of *The Testaments*, however, the question of women oppressing women in *The Handmaid’s Tale* is called into question. The idea of a female sphere governed by Aunts is in the epilogue of *The Handmaid’s Tale* attributed to Commander Judd. However, *The Testaments* reveals that the idea of female governance was the brainchild of Aunt Lydia.

In keeping with this thesis’ focus on language and discourse, *The Handmaid’s Tale* is full of wordplay, puns, and linguistic inventions. Thinking about a movie theatre she used to visit in her youth, Offred comments on the women in the movies: “They wore blouses with buttons down the front that suggested the possibilities of the word *undone*. These women could be undone; or not. They seemed to be able to choose. We seemed to be able to choose, then. We were a society dying, said Aunt Lydia, of too much choice” (Atwood 2010, 37; emphasis in original). Atwood puns on the word “undone”; the buttons of the blouse can be loosened to remove it. But Offred adds that the women themselves could be “undone,” indicating that undoing the blouse also means that the women are morally ruined, thus “undoing” them. These dark undertones are not hidden by Atwood’s penchant for puns.

Atwood’s humor and infatuation with language and wordplay also come through in one of the many sayings in Gilead: “Pen is Envy.” It is a blatant reference to Sigmund Freud’s concept of “penis envy,” which postulates that the penis is the center of psychological interest to both sexes during what he dubbed the phallic stages. Young girls would, according to Freud, experience anxiety upon realizing they do not have a penis, leading to envy and frustration (Cherry 2020). After Freud, the theory has been reformulated by many theoreticians to signify social envy for the social trappings that come with the penis, instead of envy for the organ itself.

In the Gileadverse, the concept of penis envy gains yet another meaning. The theory – both Freud’s original conceptualization of it and its later reformulation – remain essentially the same: the penis, and the social trappings that come with it, are what separates the men from the women of Gilead. However, Atwood’s pun emphasizes not only what separates the two gender but also what separates the Commanders from the rest of the men. “Pen is Envy”: the object of envy in Gilead is language.

“The pen between my fingers is sensuous, alive almost, I can feel its power, the power of the words it contains. Pen Is Envy, Aunt Lydia would say, quoting another Centre motto, warning us away from such objects. And they were right, it is envy. Just holding it is envy. I envy the Commander his pen. It’s one more thing I would like to steal” (Atwood 2010, 198)

It echoes the earlier instance of Offred lamenting the loss of “the word,” and in doing so, calls attention to how Gilead does not only look to biblical scripture, but to less churchly sources as well in forming their discourse. It is not the only example. After dessert, the Handmaids are to recite a particular phrase three times: “*From each, says the slogan according to her ability; to each according to his needs.* [...] It was from the Bible, or so they said. St. Paul again, in Acts” (Atwood 2010, 129; emphasis in original).

It is Atwood using her ironic sensibilities in showcasing the hypocrisy of Gilead: the phrase is meant to comment on the ability of the Handmaid to produce children according to the Commander’s need. The actual phrase, however, is not from the Bible; it is a phrase made famous by Karl Marx, in which the first “his” has been changed to “her”. In the Marxist phrase, both instances of “his” are general and do not necessarily refer to men. In changing the first “his” to “her”, the Gileadean appropriation makes the statement gender-specific, favoring “his” needs. It is doubly ironic as the original Marxist phrase is, per communist ideology, about equality. The Gileadean phrase is most certainly not.

As seen with Gilead’s appropriation of Freud and Marx, Atwood’s writing is full of irony and satiric bite. Following in the footsteps of Orwell, this is also evident in her linguistic inventions. One such invention is “Participation,” a portmanteau of “participate” and “execution,” simply meaning many people participate in an execution. The more ironic “salvaging” is often used instead. It is similar to Orwell’s Two Minutes Hate, in which the inhabitants of Oceania unite in hatred for Emmanuel Goldstein, the number one enemy of the state, who may or may not even be real. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the target of a Participation is very much real, and the ritual itself is gruesome. It involves numerous Handmaids given

free reigns on how to execute a person accused of a crime, and as mentioned earlier in the chapter, the execution is gruesome. As the Handmaids are not allowed weapons, the death of the accused may come from a mass beating, as illustrated in *The Handmaid's Tale*, or from being literally torn to pieces, as depicted in *The Testaments*.

Also, like Orwell's *1984*, with its Ministry of Peace and Ministry of Love (concerning themselves, respectively, with war and torture), Atwood's novels are full of ironic allusions. The Aunts, for instance, are anything but maternal and nurturing. The Republic is no republic, but a totalitarian state. The Salvagings are not rituals of salvaging, but of destroying. The blunter "unbabies" is a particularly Orwellian term that refers to stillborn children or children who are born with severe deformities. Like the low fertility rate, "Unbabies" are likely the results of widespread pollution.

The thesis has already accounted for the Commanders of the Faith and the various classes into which the Republic divides the female part of the population. There are, however, several other labels that designate the occupations of the male enforcers of Gilead with origins in the Bible, including Angels, Guardians of the Faith, and the Eyes of God. The names are carefully chosen. The Angels are soldiers who fight on the front lines, while the Guardians are the Gilead version of the police. The Eyes – the most terrifying of the various groups – are, as previously stated, the secret police of Gilead.

Just like the Thought Police in *1984*, the Eyes of God and the Guardians are the institutions rendering the Republic of Gilead carceral in nature, invoking the society described by Foucault in *Discipline & Punish*. While the Guardians are placed on the streets for all to see and fear, the inhabitants of Gilead are also under perpetual surveillance by the Eyes, who operate covertly in the shadows. And it is all done in the name of "God"; the religiously connotative naming of these institutions is done with the intent of inducing the population with false consciousness, as if to say "these institutions are good for you, they are here to keep you from straying off the path of Virtue." Gilead itself is named after a location mentioned in the Bible. The name could also refer to the Balm of Gilead, a rare perfume, in the Bible used for medicinal purposes. It is sometimes referred to as a universal cure in figurative speech, which would fit the Republic's ostensible virtuous way of life.

Using the Bible to achieve political goals and to keep a population under control is not new; it has been done for centuries. To some, the Bible has held the ultimate truth, never to be questioned. Such is the rationale in Gilead as well, in which the "general politics of truth," as Foucault referred to it, is rooted in Biblical scripture, most specifically the Old Testament. Almost all aspects of Gilead; every law, every institution, every ritual is based on the Old

Testament. One example is the Ceremony. During this monthly ritual, a Handmaiden has to have sex with her Commander in an effort to produce children. The Ceremony has a biblical precedent in Genesis 30:1 of the King James Bible, in which Jacob's wife Rachel is unable to bear children. She convinces Jacob to impregnate her handmaid, Bilhah, to give him children who will be raised as Rachel's children, not Bilhah's. In addition to legitimizing what is essentially ritualized rape, the biblical story also serves as the origin of the "Handmaid" label given to fertile women in Gilead.

Althusser's Priests and Despots theory holds that people, believing that they were obeying God, were, in fact, obeying the priests or despots. Though challenged by Althusser himself, the theory comes to mind when reading *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*. Because while the Bible has been used to achieve political goals in totalitarian regimes, its use in Gilead differs in two closely related respects. Firstly, the Bible is not utilized in its entirety, just a few select excerpts, excerpts which serve as the ultimate and indisputable truth. Secondly, and more crucially, the general populace does not actually have access to the Bible, only the Commanders and the Aunts have. As accounted for in Chapter One, Ildney Cavalcanti identifies "prohibition of access to public speech, reading and/or writing" as one of the ways men may be silencing women in dystopian literature. In Gilead, it extends to most of the male population as well. The Republic is thus enabled to rule out of fear, evoking not a loving and forgiving God of the New Testament, but instead a vindictive and wrathful God of the Old Testament.

Circling back to the theme of naming, there is also the naming of the Handmaids. The names they had before the foundation of the Republic of Gilead are taken away, and they are given new ones. The main character's name, "Offred," signifies that she is a possession "of Fred," to whose household Offred is appointed. Other examples include Ofglen and Ofwarren. The patronymics let us know that they are assigned to Commanders named Glen and Warren, respectively. Of course, the practice of stripping people of their names and giving them new ones is not a Gileadean invention. Slave masters often replaced a slave's given name with a new one. Like the new names given to the Handmaids, the names given to slaves often identified them as property of their masters/Commanders.

This practice of naming recalls a quote by Louis Althusser's concerning the concept of interpellation. He declared that "it is certain in advance that [the child] will bear its Father's name, and will therefore have an identity and be irreplaceable. Before its birth, the child is therefore always already a subject" (in Booker 1994a, 168). An individual's identity is, before its birth, already partly formed, and this part of the identity is theirs, inalterable. The

interpellation of a subject prior to its birth is explored in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* in at least three ways.

Firstly, the naming of individuals, and the power it holds, is explored through the already mentioned Gileadean practice of stripping the Handmaids of their given names and renaming them in a way that emphasizes their function as property of their Commanders. Gilead aims to rid the Handmaids' of their identity, dehumanizing them in the process and making them extensions of their Commanders. Paradoxically, this process of renaming is an attempt to interpellate subjects that have already been subjects to interpellation through an earlier process of naming. The palimpsest of "already-said" keeps getting new layers, without erasing what came before.

Secondly, the Commanders and their Wives name their children, given to them through "God's Grace" via their assigned Handmaid. It might seem a more innocuous example of interpellation, as it resembles real-life practices of a couple adopting a child or becoming parents by way of surrogacy. In Gilead, however, the surrogacy is forced, and the question of identity and identity's relation to naming poses a new conundrum. Though not the focus of this thesis, the television series adaptation includes a scene that emphasizes this aspect. Handmaid Ofwarren vehemently opposes the name her assigned Commander and Wife give to the child she has born for them. Ofwarren insists instead on calling the child by the name she has chosen. No such scene occurs in the novel, but it is not hard to imagine that a Handmaid's resistance – at least on a mental level – regarding the naming of a newborn baby is common in Gilead.

Thirdly, we have Offred's attempts at resistance by holding onto the name she had before Gilead. Her name is unknown to us, and as pointed out by Professor Pieixoto in the "Historical Notes" section, it remains secret. Her name is implied to be June in a few scenes in the novel, something the television series chose to adopt. The first hint comes at the end of the first chapter, in which the Handmaids-to-be exchange their names. The names we are given are "Alma. Janine. Dolores. Moira. June." (Atwood 2010, 16). Though by no means a confirmation, June is the only name of these not belonging to characters Offred encounters throughout the novel, indicating that *she* is June. We are not given more information in *The Testaments*, in which the name "Offred" is not mentioned at all until the epilogue. However, Atwood does make a reference to the name "June," as "There's a June moon" is a code phrase used by the underground resistance May Day, which implies that Offred/June made it out of Gilead at the end of *The Handmaid's Tale*, and became a kind of revered figure as a result. (Atwood 2019, 362)

Nevertheless, the fact that Atwood chooses not to divulge the name to the readers may tell us that we do not need to know Offred's original name. In fact, it could be considered a narrative device in and of itself. Offred repeatedly reminds herself of her original name throughout the novel, not because she has trouble remembering it, but rather because it is a way of holding onto her own sense of identity. "I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I'll come back to dig up, one day" (Atwood 2010, 96). When she tells Nick her pre-Gileadean name, it is a significant moment for Offred, a declaration of trust, whether Nick himself realizes it or not. He has become privy to something that not even we, the readers, know. Readers are left in the dark, and Offred is more powerful for it.

On the other hand, the choice not to reveal Offred's real name could be Atwood illustrating to us how Offred and the other Handmaids are just cogs in the machine called Gilead. Their anonymity heightens the tension of knowing the circumstances of countless other Handmaids. In the epilogue, Professor Pieixoto declares that Offred "was one of many, and must be seen within the broad outlines of the moment in history of which she was a part" (Atwood 2010, 319). He dismisses a possibility of her individuality: "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" (Atwood 2010, 319-320). Rendering Offred somewhat nondescript, Atwood allows her to represent all the women forced into their position as Handmaids, whose stories are unknown to history.

The character of Offred has been a source for some contention regarding Atwood's magnum opus. The protagonist of an influential dystopian novel as well as a popular television series, she is widely considered an iconic character – and a sympathetic one at that – yet readers and scholars alike disagree as to whether or not Offred is a heroic figure. Elisabeth Moss' acclaimed portrayal of Offred in the television series has done much to influence the popular perception of Offred as a feminist icon actively resisting the oppression she is subjected to by the powerful patriarchs of Gilead. It would not be false to say the same for Offred in the novel, but there are some differences between the two. The chief one is that the novel's Offred is more passive than her television counterpart.

At one point, she even emphasizes the passivity "I enjoy the power; power of a dog bone, passive but there" (Atwood 2010, 34). That Atwood intended Offred to be passive is made clear through the inclusion of characters like Moira, Ofglen, and Offred's own mother. Moira, whose friendship with Offred predates Gilead, is a lesbian – and therefore a "gender traitor" – who is characterized as stubborn, fiercely independent, and rebellious. She is the

only character in the novel who attempts, albeit unsuccessfully, to escape Gilead. Ofglen, Offred's "shopping partner" is a member of the May Day resistance, and Offred's mother was a political activist and feminist.

Atwood's juxtaposition between Offred and Ofglen renders Ofglen as the more heroic and daring of the two. Atwood even draws attention to the concept of "doubling," a device typically used in Gothic literature to represent the duality of a character or two characters with significant differences. Chapter Five of *The Handmaid's Tale* starts with "Doubled, I walk the street" (Atwood 2010, 35). Later, when walking in the street with her "double," a man is suddenly seized by the Eyes and taken into a car, presumably never to be seen again. While Ofglen is composed and calm, Offred is petrified. Tellingly, she thinks to herself: "What I feel is relief. It wasn't me" (Atwood 2010, 181).

After Offred and her Commander's driver, Nick, form a sexual liaison, Offred finds that her motives have changed: "The fact is that I no longer want to leave, escape, cross the border to freedom. I want to be here, with Nick, where I can get at him" (Atwood 2010, 285). Offred's interest in the Mayday, of which Ofglen is part, starts to wane, something that leads Ofglen to lose faith in Offred. Later, Offred is met by a different Ofglen (since any Handmaid of Glen is given the patronymic "Ofglen") and finds out her friend has hanged herself before she could be taken alive. While saddened to hear of the death of her friend, Offred also feels relief, since Ofglen died before the Eyes could extract information regarding Offred from her (Atwood 2010, 300). If Offred and Ofglen could be considered doubles, Ofglen certainly comes off as the more heroic of the two.

Offred's relationship with her mother and Moira reveals that Offred was, to at least some degree, politically passive even before Gilead. Her passivity is juxtaposed with her mother's activism. An adamant second-wave feminist, the character of Offred's unnamed mother is our window into what many consider to be Atwood's critique of second-wave feminism. More specifically, Atwood seems to be critical of radical feminism, a more militant branch of feminism, and that their intolerant attitudes are not different from those that led to Gilead. That is ultimately not a debate this thesis will enter, but contrasting Offred with characters that arguably act with more agency, while having Offred be not only the main character but also the one who seemingly escapes Gilead is nonetheless an interesting choice by Atwood.

All this is not to say that Offred is fully passive, or that she submits to Gilead. She does resist her oppressors in the ways she can without compromising or exposing herself. These small acts of resistance are not performed to pose any overt challenge to Gilead, but

rather to hold onto whatever autonomy of self she has left. This thesis will thus dub Offred a “passive-subversive.” In some instances, we can connect this passive-subversive nature to the earlier discussion about docile bodies. One such example is her using butter she stole from the kitchen as face and hand lotion. (Atwood 2010, 109). Since women in Gilead are to be one collective unity, they are not allowed to make use of “vanity” products; their function is to make children, not care for their appearances. By secretly caring for her body, Offred is distancing her own body from the collective female body the male hierarchy of Gilead strives for.

No matter where one stands on the issue of Offred’s passivity or agency, there is no doubt that she experiences growth and character development throughout the novel. Unsurprisingly, this becomes evident through language. Early in the novel, Offred ponders her lack of ownership over anything she can call her own in life. “The door of the room – not my room, I refuse to say my – is not locked. In fact, it doesn’t shut properly” (Atwood 2010, 20). The Republic has evidently suppressed her sense of individuality, and with it, her sense of ownership. The room she has lived in for months by this point is not hers. Later in the novel, however, when returning to the same room, Offred finds the Commander lurking around. “Was he in my room? I called it *mine*” (Atwood 2010, 61). At this stage in the novel, Offred has started to resist the status quo. The last remark indicates Offred herself is just realizing her newly growing rebellious streak.

The rebellion in question is mostly a mental exercise, not necessarily followed by action. When waiting for the Commander to arrive for The Ceremony, Offred observes: “I would like to steal something from this room [...] It would make me feel that I have power” (Atwood 2010, 92). It does not matter that she does not steal anything in the room, but the idea of doing it as well as her choice to do it or not is enough to fill her with a sense of agency, and more than likely a sense of thrill.

The character development of Offred is undeniable, as is her resistance, however passive it may be. It is, therefore, an interesting choice by Atwood to have Offred be almost devoid of agency in the final pages of the novel. When Offred is told by Nick to enter a van at the end of the novel, Offred does not know whether she is walking to her death or her escape. The epilogue indicates – and *The Testaments* confirms – the latter, but Offred’s escape is facilitated by other people; Offred had no part in it, being told by Nick in the second to last page of her narrative to trust him. And Offred does. “I have given myself over into the hands of strangers, because it can’t be helped. And so I step up, into the darkness within, or else the light” (Atwood 2010, 309).

Surprisingly for some readers, *The Handmaid's Tale* does not end there. Instead, the last few pages of the novel are devoted to a metafictional epilogue – “Historical Notes on *The Handmaid's Tale*.” This epilogue has been mentioned in this thesis a few times already and gets its own section here because it is – despite its brevity – truly one of the most telling sections of the entire novel. It is presented as a partial transcript of “the proceedings of the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies” (Atwood 2010, 313). The conference takes place on June 25, 2195, around two hundred years after the main narrative, and is introduced by Maryann Crescent Moon. The main speaker at the conference is Professor James Darcy Pieixoto, whose lecture is dubbed “Problems of Authentication in Reference to *The Handmaid's Tale*.” It is tempting and not at all farfetched to assume that Atwood’s epilogue is inspired by the Appendix of Orwell’s *1984*: they are both metafictional devices that change our reading of the novels, set in an even more distant future than the main narratives. Their references to Gilead and Oceania in the past tense, hint that both regimes were eventually overthrown.

The epilogue of *The Handmaid's Tale* implies that in the wake of Gilead’s fall, a restoration of women’s rights and religious freedom have taken place, and a more democratic society has emerged. However, while the epilogue of *The Handmaid's Tale* – like Orwell’s Appendix – injects some much-needed optimism into the narrative, there are still hints that the attitudes toward women have not entirely changed post-Gilead. Professor Pieixoto makes several jokes, which the helpful transcript – in parenthesis and cursive font – often lets us know are followed by laughter. The very opening of his speech makes the readers pause, as we are left to wonder how optimistic we ought to be in this post-Gileadean society: “Thank you. I am sure we all enjoyed our charming Arctic Chair last night at dinner, and now we are enjoying an equally charming Arctic Chair. I use the word ‘enjoy’ in two distinct senses, precluding, of course, the obsolete third. (*Laughter*)” (Atwood 2010, 314).

Professor Pieixoto’s vulgar and sexist joke regarding the looks of Crescent Moon lets us immediately know that this society, though definitely an improvement over Gilead, is not a society in which men and women are equal. Earlier layers on the palimpsest of “already-said” have not been erased. In another instance, he notes that “The Underground Femaleroad,” the name given to the previously mentioned escape route to Canada, was given a new name by male historians: “The Underground Frailroad” (Atwood 2010, 315). The transcript lets us know that this remark was met with both “laughter” and “groans,” suggesting that not everyone in the audience found it funny or appropriate. The Underground Femaleroad is also Atwood’s most blatant allusion to the history of slavery. It is obviously named after the

Underground Railroad, a network of routes and safe houses, established in the early to mid-nineteenth century in order for enslaved African Americans to escape, either to the free states of the USA or to its neighbor to the north, Atwood's own Canada. Its historical connection to the Handmaids and the Mayday movement does, however, not stop the professor from cracking his inappropriate joke.

Even more telling, but equally inappropriate, is the revelation that the title "The Handmaid's Tale," given to the tapes on which Offred's account was recorded, was provided by Professor Wade, who discovered the tapes and helped Pieixoto in arranging the order of them. Adding insult to injury, Pieixoto points out that to anyone who knows Professor Wade "informally," it is very likely that "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." (Atwood 2010, 315) The transcript, ever helpful, adds "(*Laughter, applause*)."

Thus, while the actual body of the novel is narrated by Offred, a woman living in a misogynist society, it ends up being scrutinized and analysed by men. The question is whether or not the epilogue strips Offred and her narrative authority. The professor's use of words and phrases such as "we" and "our saga," and his designation of Offred as "our author," certainly suggests white male authority over Offred's story. Matters are made worse by the fact that Pieixoto not only shows little interest in Offred but he also directly belittles her despite the horrific circumstances she found herself in. "She could have told us much about the workings of the Gileadean empire, had she had the instincts of a reporter or a spy." There are also other, smaller details that indicate indifference, even disapproval towards Offred's narrative, such as using aggressive words, for instance calling the names accounted for in the tapes "useless" to the wider research of Gilead. (Atwood 2010, 320)

More important to Pieixoto is Offred's superior, Commander Waterford: "What would we not give, now, for even twenty pages or so of printout from Waterford's private computer!" (Atwood 2010, 324) Only a page before, the professor had commented that both Commander Judd and Commander Water were men of "considerable ingenuity" (Atwood 2010, 323). Two hundred years after Gilead, history continues favoring the masculine point of view.

Speaking of history, *1984*'s Appendix might not be Atwood's only inspiration for the epilogue. One particular characteristic of the slave narrative that Atwood adopts is the letter of authentication. For a slave narrative to be considered credible and authentic, it needed a white editor, often an abolitionist friend of the slave in question, to provide credence to the slave

narrative. Atwood does something similar in the novel's unusual epilogue, but with a twist. Like the slave narratives, Offred's story does not get to stand on its own. It needs affirmation by a white male professor.

But if *The Handmaid's Tale* is an allegorical novel, the epilogue takes the letter of authentication and flips it on its head. The letter of authentication was used to legitimize not only the events of the slave narrative but the character of the slave in question as well. The epilogue of *The Handmaid's Tale* is somewhat ambiguous in this regard. Professor Pieixoto is no friend of Offred. He and his male colleagues are constantly undermining "The Handmaid's Tale" – and by extension *The Handmaid's Tale* – and its narrator. By drawing parallels between *The Handmaid's Tale* and slave narratives, Atwood may pessimistically stipulate that the female testimony will continue to be ignored in favor of the male one.

As readers, however, we must make our own deductions. Professor Pieixoto's perception of Offred and her story need not be ours. However, the fact is that while Pieixoto makes several tasteless jokes based on gender and seems needlessly critical of Offred because of her gender, Offred is indeed an unreliable narrator. In numerous instances, the novel makes sure to let readers that her recounting her story is a recollection, and recollections, as we know, are colored by imperfections. Offred is aware of her narrative's imperfections and seems to instead appeal to emotion and compassion. Like Harriet Jacobs, she often talks directly to the reader/listener. "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 2010, 281).

What is left unspoken is "You hear, therefore I am." In saying this, Offred is hopeful, and the quote will to many readers be an uplifting one. Offred has faith that someone will hear her story. It is also, this thesis argues, an example of interpellation, but without the oppressive and ideological undertones. Offred is "hailing" us, the readers, but all she wants is for someone to listen. Throughout the novel, Offred often speaks of a "we." She is no doubt referring to the women that suffer the same circumstances she found herself in. One could argue that Offred should not claim to speak for all women; the thesis has showcased that characters like Moira, Ofglen, and Offred's mother arguably did more than Offred to resist the patriarchy. In the last pages, it is not by Offred's own efforts that she escapes, but Nick's.

Then again, Offred's wish is not to be a hero. She simply wants a "herstory" born from within the Republic of Gilead – a society that suppresses the voices, identities, and histories of women – to reach the ears of others.

The Twelfth Symposium – and thus the novel – ends with one of the most iconic lines of *The Handmaid's Tale*: “Are there any questions?” (Atwood 2010, 326) Ending the novel with that particular line seems almost to be a taunt towards its readers; the readers are indeed left with many questions. These questions were, at least at the time, left open, Atwood seemingly having no interest in providing answers.

Chapter Three: The Testaments

Bearing false witness was not the exception, it was common.
Beneath its outer show of virtue and purity, Gilead was rotting.
– Margaret Atwood, *The Testaments* (2019)

This chapter examines *The Testaments*, the long-awaited yet unexpected sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale*. The novel was published as recently as September 2019 – a month *after* the writing of this thesis commenced – and as such, a brief discussion on the contemporary conditions which led to its creation is necessary. Additionally, we have no academic publications on Atwood's latest novel. The thesis, therefore, largely leans on the same theoretical framework from which it examined *The Handmaid's Tale* in the previous chapter. It is also necessary to account for some fundamental differences between the two novels and how they relate to the thesis' themes of testimony and allegory. It is for these reasons *The Testaments* has an extensive introduction compared to that of *The Handmaid's Tale* in Chapter Two.

The Testaments is set fifteen years after *The Handmaid's Tale*. If one interprets the latter to take place in 2005, as many do (Armstrong 2018), the former is set in 2020, only a year after its publication, which is unusual for a dystopian novel. Instead of one narrator – or two, if one includes Professor Pieixoto – *The Testaments* tells the stories of three female narrators before the professor turns up yet again. Gilead has not yet fallen, but the regime is rotting from within as Commanders plot against Commanders, Wives against Wives, and Aunts against Aunts. Keeping records of all this is Aunt Lydia. Recording her memories and thoughts in her diary, she provides the readers with new insights about Gilead. The second narrator is Agnes, who has been brought unaware that her biological mother was a Handmaid. Finally, there is Daisy, who lives in Canada, Gilead's neighbor to the north, and discovers that she has ties to Gilead.

Like *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Testaments* was written as a reaction to contemporary trends of Atwood's time. "Instead of moving away from Gilead, we started moving towards it, especially in the United States," exclaimed Atwood in an interview with *Variety* (Chu 2019). Her remark leads us to one interesting point concerning the time between the publications of the novels: even though Atwood seems to consider a hypothetical Gilead to be closer in 2019 than it was in 1985, *The Testaments* is, all things considered, a remarkably optimistic novel. It

is a novel in which truth prevails, in more ways than one. Truth is what brings down Gilead, and in the novel's epilogue, the same professor who doubted Offred's narrative in *The Handmaid's Tale* ultimately cannot dispute the narratives of Lydia, Agnes, and Daisy. Even before one opens the book, *The Testaments'* cover is indicative of a newfound optimism. Its prequel has always been associated with the color of red, a recurring motif in the novel. Red can symbolize many things, including passion, love, and violence. In the context of Atwood's Gileadverse, it also symbolizes sexual sin and the menstrual cycle, which in turn is why red is the color of the garb the Handmaids wear. It is also, naturally, the color of the cover of *The Handmaid's Tale*. *The Testaments'* cover art, on the other hand, is bright green.

On a narrative level, this suggests a few things: firstly, this is not *The Handmaid's Tale*, nor is it any Handmaid's tale. The Handmaids are, in fact, barely featured in this book; they are mostly relegated to a few mentions. In the Gileadverse, in which the different castes and classes are designated by their colors, green is the color of the outfits worn by young girls of marriageable age (Atwood 2019, 160). Green is thus a sinister reminder of the fates of so many young girls and can symbolize jealousy and envy, negative attributes that are prevalent in the repressive Republic of Gilead. Primarily, however, green suggests more positive aspects, including renewal, youth, fertility (a double-edged sword in Gilead), and, as Atwood herself states, "spring hope" (Feldman 2019). That Atwood herself makes a point of this is certainly indicative of a more optimistic disposition.

Some optimism is perhaps needed. As dystopian fiction often does, *The Testaments* arrived at an opportune moment. Take, for instance, the MeToo movement, which can be traced back to 2006, but was relaunched in 2017 as the hashtag #MeToo spread virally in social media. The catalyst was the widespread sexual abuse allegations against highly influential movie producer Harvey Weinstein, which triggered similar allegations against other men in powerful positions. Many women were inspired to come forward and share similar experiences on social media through the hashtag. Atwood has neither confirmed nor denied her novel's connection to the MeToo movement, but the timing of *The Testaments*, its narrative and its title – from which the main theme of this thesis derives – coincide with the countless testimonies and allegations from all over the world against accused perpetrators of sexual harassment and assault. In attributing the fall of Gilead to the testimonies of three women, Atwood seems to champion ideas of truth, action, and sisterhood.

Even if one takes MeToo out of the equation, Atwood's emphasis on truth aligns with a contemporary political culture many have dubbed "post-truth," or "post-factual." Said culture frames debate by appeals to emotions, thus ignoring factual rebuttals. Post-truth

differs from a typical discourse of totalitarian regimes. In such regimes, it is not uncommon to falsify information which, admittedly, is not far removed from post-truth. A defining characteristic of post-truth, however, is that fact and expert opinions are deemed to be of lesser importance, relative to appeals of emotion. In totalitarian regimes, fact and expert opinions are not relegated; they are silenced – an aspect that is often portrayed in dystopian fiction.

Though not a new phenomenon, post-truth has become notable with the advent of the internet and social media and was chosen as Oxford Dictionaries' Word of the Year in 2016, the year before Atwood started writing *The Testaments*. According to Oxford Dictionaries, the term refers to as “circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (Oxford Languages 2016). It is difficult to determine whether or not post-truth directly influenced *The Testaments*, but what is indisputable is the novel's focus on truth, which suggests that post-truth is lurking behind the scene.

Towards the end of *The Testaments*, when all the information Aunt Lydia has collected on Gilead's top men is published in Canadian media, the Gileadean media refer to the news as “fake” in an obvious allusion to Donald Trump's penchant for calling unfavorable news reports “fake news.” In a related 2017 incident, Kellyanne Conway, the then counselor to President Trump, defended a false statement made by White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer, stating that he offered “alternative facts.” This infamous phrase many likened to the Newspeak of Orwell's *1984* (Freeman 2019). According to a *Guardian* article, sales of Orwell's magnum opus skyrocketed, becoming the sixth best-selling book on Amazon. The highest-rated comment on the same article reads: “*1984*, *Brave New World* and *Fahrenheit 451* are, at this point, sold as non-fiction” (Guardian 2017b). While the comment may be of a hyperbolic nature, originating from a source of no identifiable academic repute, it serves to illustrate a growing discomfort concerning recent developments in the contemporary political and social scene. *The Testaments*' reference to “fake news” makes it obvious that, regardless of the scope, Atwood has been influenced by the current culture of “post-truth” politics and the Trump administration, whose head is also subject to accusations from the MeToo movement.

Regardless of the political developments that informed *The Testaments*, fans from all over the world had high expectations of Atwood's latest novel. Even when excluding the recently increased relevancy of *The Handmaid's Tale* and its TV series adaptation, following up on one of the most influential dystopian novels of all time is not an easily undertaken task.

To that end, while *The Testaments* is a good read, filled to the brim with Atwood's satiric and ironic bite, it is doubtful that it will reach the status of its prequel, either in terms of impact or its quality. For better or worse, *The Testaments* does many things differently than its precursor. Most apparent is the difference in structure, with *The Testaments'* three different narrators, unlike *The Handmaid's Tale's* claustrophobic first-person narrative. *The Testaments'* three narrators provide the readers with different insights that lessen the mystery of Gilead. Besides the three narrators, *The Testaments* features a larger cast of characters than *The Handmaid's Tale*, which was a character study of the lone protagonist, Offred.

Atwood's decision to cast Aunt Lydia, one of the cruelest characters in *The Handmaid's Tale* – a character readers loved to hate – into an ostensibly more heroic role, arguably removes some of the ambiguity of the original novel, in which Atwood wanted to highlight how women oppress women. Despite the overall positive critical reception of *The Testaments*, Atwood's casting Aunt Lydia in a more heroic light was considered by some to be diminishing of this aspect of *The Handmaid's Tale* (Tausz 2020). Also subject to criticism has been the fact that where the male characters of *The Handmaid's Tale*, like Commander Waterford, had moments of humanity mixed with depravity, most Gilead-based male characters in *The Testaments* are unquestionably evil – including a pedophilic dentist who sexually abuses his young female patients, including his daughter.

The Testaments is also a fast-paced novel compared to its prequel, which was more of a slow burn. This is likely Atwood's attempt to emphasize the sequel's themes of truth and action. While Offred was mostly passive, the protagonists of *The Testaments* are endowed with agency, which culminates in a complicated plan to undermine Gilead in the second half of the novel. The latter half of *The Testaments* is reminiscent of a spy thriller featuring an undercover mission, the success of which some readers deemed implausible. It is indeed hard to imagine *The Handmaid's Tale* including such a section.

But as Professor James Darcy Pieixoto somewhat dubiously said in the epilogue of *The Handmaid's Tale*, "Our job is not to censure, but to understand" (Atwood 2010, 317). The purpose of the last few paragraphs is not to pass judgment on how the second Gilead novel does or does not live up to its prequel; rather it sheds light on the differences between the two novels, and how these differences might relate to the thesis' larger theme of the female testimony in Atwood's Gileadverse. This theme is front and center in *The Testaments*, even more so than in its predecessor. Less visible, however, are the allegorical parallels to the history of slavery, so prevalent in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Going forward, we must ask ourselves if this is of significance.

For most readers, the most intriguing narrator of *The Testaments* is likely to be Aunt Lydia. A hovering presence in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the character was expanded upon in the television series, in which the highly acclaimed performance of Ann Dowd provided some nuance to the character. In an interview, Atwood admits to not thinking much about the inner life of Aunt Lydia in *The Handmaid's Tale*, likening the character to Bertha Mason, Mr. Rochester's wife in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. For Atwood, Bertha was little more than an "impediment to Jane Eyre getting married" until she read *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a Jean Rhys prequel to *Jane Eyre*. (Gilbert 2019). Rhys' novel discloses Antoinette Cosways' inner thoughts and feelings, before her husband changes her name to Bertha, thus erasing her identity and turning her from a character in *Wide Sargasso Sea* to the ghost in *Jane Eyre*.

As Rhys gave Brontë's Bertha a voice in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, so does Atwood give a voice to Aunt Lydia in *The Testaments*. There are differences between the two, of course, the most important being that Aunt Lydia, unlike Bertha, played the role of oppressor and not the oppressed. Even so, the reader is aware that the Aunts would have been as oppressed as the Handmaids had they not seized the opportunities the government of Gilead offered them. Still, the readers of *The Handmaid's Tale* could hardly have had a good impression of Aunt Lydia.

Aunt Lydia is, therefore, arguably the most interesting character in *The Testaments*. Her accounts of the rise of Gilead make for a chilling read, mostly because of the systematic and gruesome ways in which the women are subjugated and dehumanized, but also because the reader witnesses Lydia's transformation into the character many readers came to despise in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Like Offred's in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Aunt Lydia's memoirs jump back and forth between the present and the past. The memories of the past go back to the Gilead coup, during which the Sons of Jacob murdered the entire US Congress, suspended the Constitution, and established the system that would define the Republic of Gilead. Some of the best insights concerning the rise of Gilead come from Lydia's recollections of the past, and we see how she leaped at the chance of survival by quickly becoming its highest-ranking female enforcer.

Chapter Five of *The Testaments* offers the first of Lydia's flashbacks, in which she was arrested shortly after the Sons of Jacob attacked and killed the entire Congress of the United States. Taken into a van and brought to a sports stadium, Lydia is joined by forty other women. She immediately notices that many of them are judges or lawyers, and none of them particularly young. It becomes evident that these are women who have been deemed unfit for the coming institution of Handmaids. Lydia and the other women are also considered a potential threat due to their background. "Any forced change of leadership is always followed

by a move to crush the opposition. The opposition is led by the educated, so the educated are the first to be eliminated” (Atwood 2019, 116). If Aunt Lydia’s hypothesis is correct, the most educated women not fit for the service as Handmaids were the first to be rounded up to be killed or sent to the Colonies. Not everyone, however; some were recruited to be female enforcers, part of the institution soon to be known as the Aunts. Gilead’s “elimination” of the educated brings to mind Antonio Gramsci’s view on civil society. As discussed in Chapter One, Gramsci distinguishes between civil society (culture) and the state (government and politics). The government can use coercion and violence if they deem it necessary, but Gramsci considers cultural leadership to be a more effective way of sustaining hegemony. The Republic of Gilead has no qualms about using coercion and violence, as the state is favored over cultural leadership in sustaining the status quo, but that is not to say that Gilead is without its cultural leadership as well.

Gramsci imagined what he called “organic intellectuals” by which he did not mean traditional intellectuals who think they are different from or better than other people, but leaders “who arise from within the people and can use civil society – education and the media – to express the people’s ideas that the people might not be ready to express for themselves” (Parker 2015, 228). Barring the media, which is monopolized by the government and subject to censorship, Robert Dale Parker’s quote helps shed light on how the Sons of Jacob went about implementing its new regime.

There are two dimensions to Gramsci’s concept of civil society in *The Testaments*: first is what Lydia refers to as the elimination of the educated parts of the opposition, thus preventing any influence they might have in challenging or overthrowing the new Republic. Second is the fact that once the educated opposition is “crushed,” the Commanders would be the lone members of Gilead’s civil society, ensuring and maintaining the new Gileadean discourse and power structures. If, as in Chapter One, we swap “the bourgeois capitalists” with the Commanders, we see how they eventually make their way of thinking “seem like common sense to the masses, and so the masses come to identify with [the Commanders’] ways of thinking, leading them to consent to [the Commanders’] dominance” (Parker 2015, 228). This aspect was not prevalent in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, but leads to false consciousness in *The Testaments*, to which we will return.

The focus on language – a subject Offred directly engaged with on multiple occasions in *The Handmaid’s Tale* – is of lesser concern in *The Testaments*, though there are examples. Until the Sons of Jacob decide on what to do with the detained women, the women are subject to horrific treatment. On at least two occasions, Lydia comments on the young Republic of

Gilead's dehumanization of the women held at the stadium: "I describe it as a herd because we were being herded" (Atwood 2019, 115). She later describes this conditioning of women in similar terms: "They were reducing us to animals – to penned-up animals – to our animal nature. They were rubbing our noses in that nature. We were to consider ourselves subhuman" (Atwood 2019, 143). Like *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Testaments* showcases how single words can be used in character building. In one example which harkens back to Offred's husband Luke referring to their cat as an "it," her daughter Agnes also makes note of the word "it" when a Martha refers to an Unbaby. (Atwood 2019, 94) Other more telling examples come in Aunt Lydia's stadium sections. When Anita, Aunt Lydia's former colleague and friend from her days as a lawyer, is taken away one night, Lydia's mechanical reaction and impersonal register the event. "...I was asleep when she was *deleted* [...] Anita had been noiselessly *abstracted*..." (Atwood 2019, 145; emphasis added). However, as in the case of Offred's tapes, what we are reading are recollections, and not necessarily how Lydia actually reacted. Lydia's impersonal language could be the result of a traumatic experience or her later maintaining the persona of the stern and zealous leader of the Aunts, if it indeed is a persona. Regardless of Lydia's personality and motivations, it is hard to imagine Offred using the kind of language Lydia uses.

The two character's discourses largely differ from one another. For Mikhail Bakhtin, the novel differs from other literary genres in that the novel was more likely to be dialogical. And in order to be dialogical, the novel needs to include several discourses. By having three narrators, *The Testaments* is by default more dialogical in nature than *The Handmaid's Tale*; the three narrators have their own style and speak from different ideological backgrounds, as does Professor Pieixoto in the epilogue. Agnes speaks as Atwood envisions a young, timid, and sensitive girl from Gilead would, while Daisy speaks with the voice of a rebellious and outspoken teenager growing up in Canada. Aunt Lydia's discourse is dialogic, split between the private and free discourse that renders her thoughts and feelings at Ardua Hall and the official Gileadean discourse she espouses in public. Thus, *The Testaments* emphasizes heteroglossia and its role in undermining the monologism of the state and those who enforce it.

That is not to say that dialogism is not met with adversity in *The Testaments*. A monological discourse is a discourse of power, an oppressive one at that, and the monological and sexist discourse of Gilead is on full display in *The Testaments*. In one extreme and almost comical example, Commander Judd verbally undermines women's ability to think. In addressing the four women who would become the Four Founders of the Aunts, Vidala,

Elizabeth, Elena, and Lydia, Judd appeals to their intelligence (refusing to use the word “professions,” preferring instead “experiences”). Judd remarks: “You know how [women] are likely to think, or let me rephrase that – how they are likely to react to stimuli, both positive and less positive” (Atwood 2019, 175). Judd needs to rephrase himself as this was uttered during the Gilead takeover, thus when the recently appointed Commanders were still adjusting to the new sexist discourse. As readers know, Gilead would only become more monological in nature; verbal discourse for women would be restricted, often prescribed as if they were reading from a script; written discourse for women would become forbidden altogether (save for Aunts); and as we see through Judd’s remark and will see through Agnes’ “education,” Gilead enforces monologism in thought as well. The latter, however, is not easily achieved, as evidenced by Offred’s mental exercises in *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

Aunt Vidala, who neither appeared nor was mentioned in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, seems to be a representative of what many readers believed Aunt Lydia represented in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. A woman actively working with Gilead and aiding them in their oppression of women, she is both Lydia’s colleague and her rival. She deems it natural to be the leader of the Aunts since she genuinely believes in Gilead and may have been the first woman to join the Sons of Jacob willingly. Vidala appeals to a toxic dimension of sisterhood and the bond between women, unsurprisingly invoking the Bible: “So many regimes have done these things badly. So unpleasantly, so wastefully! If you fail, you will fail all women. As Eve did” (Atwood 2019, 176). In Gilead, it is only logical that the notions of Eve being made from the rib of Adam, the first man, and of Eve performing the original sin by eating the forbidden fruit are used to legitimize the superiority of man. Aunt Lydia, however, considers Vidala’s zealous nature to be an advantage. “I was not blinded by ideology. This would give me a flexibility she lacked, in the long game ahead of us” (Atwood 2019, 177). This “game” starts early on as Aunt Lydia makes the first power play in front of Commander Judd.

Said power play is her suggestion that a separate female sphere, already partly conceptualized by the Sons of Jacob, needs to be a *truly* female sphere, in which women have command. As seen in the epilogue of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the idea was officially attributed to Judd (Atwood 2010, 322). By gaining Judd’s stamp of approval, Lydia “tried for more power than [the other Aunts] would have dared to ask for, and [...] won it” (Atwood 2019, 176). Lydia’s motivations for this can be interpreted in different ways. Some will see it as an understandable yet inherently selfish attempt to gain power and stay alive, while others will interpret it as the first step of Lydia’s undermining of Gilead. Conversely, Vidala disagrees with Lydia, claiming that “women are weak vessels” (Atwood 2019, 176). It is unclear how

and why she developed the false consciousness, but we can surmise that she is heavily religious and had been involved with the Sons of Jacob even before their coup. A generally antagonistic character, Vidala's primary purpose seems to be a representative of women who oppress other women and a foil to Lydia.

The Testaments arguably succeeds in painting a more nuanced and sympathetic picture of Aunt Lydia. At Ardua Hall, the "sacred sphere" of the Aunts, Aunt Lydia records her experiences during the rise of Gilead and its inner workings, and in the end, she is the most important piece in the fall of Gilead. She is still, however, surrounded by ambiguity. While a behind-the-scenes subversive, it is implied at several points that she is working to destroy Gilead from within, motivated by a wish for revenge rather than justice. Wondering when, not if, she will die, she adds: "Oh, and who to take down with me. I have made my list" (Atwood 2019, 32). Her motivation may be a mixture of the two, combined with a basic instinct for survival. "I numbered myself among the faithful for the same reason that many in Gilead did: because it was less dangerous" (Atwood 2019, 178). A third interpretation is also possible: that Aunt Lydia is not necessarily opposed to the vision of Gilead, but repulsed by the corruption which infests it. Ann Dowd, who plays the character in television series, seems to champion this interpretation (Kilkenny 2019).

Lydia's cynical, world-weary, and ultimately morally ambiguous nature might be the reason why Atwood chose to feature two young, in some ways naïve, girls to be the other two narrators in *The Testaments*. Agnes and Daisy are interesting foils to Offred, considering they are not only half-sisters but also Offred's daughters; Agnes' father is Luke, and Daisy's is Nick. While Offred was part of what Aunt Lydia referred to as the "transitional generation" that lived to see the rise of Gilead and became among the first of the Handmaids, Agnes is indoctrinated, having lived in Gilead for as long as she can remember. She has no memory predating Gilead, apart from a fleeting memory of running through a forest with a woman, who readers will understand is Offred. Tabitha, whom Agnes presumes to be her mother, has been kind and loving to her, giving her a comfortable childhood. On the other end, Agnes' father, Commander Kyle, is distant and spends little time with her.

Recorded after their escape from Gilead, the accounts of Agnes and Daisy are inarguably colored by the fact that they are now older than they were during the events of the novel, particularly its first half. Thus, while Agnes' narrative gives us examples of how her indoctrination shaped her during the first years of her life, her sections of *The Testaments* are not truly insights into an indoctrinated mind. That is not to say Agnes' indoctrination is not

embedded in the novel. Instances of interpellation and false consciousness can be found and are discussed further down.

Agnes displays some of her mother's traits in passively and mentally resisting the gender divide of Gilead. When baking with the Marthas of her household, Agnes makes a point of only making dough men, not dough women, "because after they were baked I would eat them, and that made me feel I had a secret power over men" (Atwood 2019, 20). In the kitchen, a designated female sphere, and one of the few places in Gilead where women rule, Agnes must use what means she has in mentally resisting the patriarchy. In the course of the novel, Agnes becomes more active, circumventing her upcoming marriage to Commander Judd by becoming an Aunt, before taking part in the plot that brings about Gilead's downfall. Though she has had much help from Aunt Lydia, Agnes proves to be resourceful, given the limitations of Gilead.

Daisy, on the other hand, has lived her entire life outside Gilead, or so she believes. One of the least surprising twists in *The Testaments* is that Daisy is Baby Nicole, who was smuggled out of Gilead into Canada when she was a baby. Baby Nicole has become a symbol for both sides of the conflict. While Gilead declared her a victim of kidnapping, Canada declared her a beacon of hope for those yearning for escape from Gilead. Being around sixteen-years-old at the start of the novel, Daisy is rebellious in nature, which might stem from the fact that she knew from a young age that something was "off" in the household, even if she did not know exactly how and why. Neil and Melanie, who Daisy believes to be her biological parents, are overprotective. They clearly love her yet have no pictures of her in the house.

The most noteworthy difference between Agnes and Daisy's chapters lies in the language they use. Daisy, as one would expect, has a liberal understanding of language, being free to speak her mind. This causes a clash of cultures when she successfully infiltrates Gilead. On the surface, Daisy's crude way of speaking (at least to Gileadean ears) suggests a difference in culture rather than discourse. However, culture, discourse, and ideology are interconnected, especially in Gilead, where the Bible is the basis for all three. Daisy's refusal to adapt to the Gileadean culture is to refuse the Gileadean discourse. Daisy sees no problem in shaving of her hair since "nobody sees your hair around here anyway," yet it is an affront to Gilead, where a woman's lack of hair is a mark of disgrace (Atwood 2019, 324).

A similar example comes a few pages later: by exercising to keep fit, Daisy defies the Gileadean order since women need to be physically fit only for childbearing. Becka's comment – "Men are strong in body [...] And in mind. Women are strong in spirit." – is not

enough for Daisy, who defends her exercise with a clear message: “In case some guy aggresses you. You need to know how to stick your thumbs in their eyes, knee them in the balls, throw a heart-stopper punch.” Becka and Agnes are not only horrified because of the bluntness of Daisy’s language, but because “[w]omen don’t hit men.” If a man “aggresses” a woman, it is “partly [the women’s] fault,” since one “shouldn’t entice men” (Atwood 2019, 327). In terms of cultural clashes, it is one of the most telling parts of *The Testaments*, especially for Daisy, whose reaction is more of calm disbelief than actual shock. “So you’re telling me it’s a lose-lose [...] We’re screwed whatever we do” (Atwood 2019, 327).

Daisy’s disbelief is warranted, but she has not had the same childhood as Agnes. *The Handmaid’s Tale* followed Offred, who alongside Moira, Janine and others formed the first “batch” of Handmaids (to use a Gileadean term) within the new social system. *The Testaments* thus explore how it might have been for a young girl to grow up in a totalitarian regime such as Gilead. Our vantage point is Agnes. She and the other girls of her age are indoctrinated to think that men are inherently superior to women, being taught in school that women have “smaller brains that were incapable of thinking large thoughts” (Atwood 2019, 15). It echoes Commander Judd’s earlier statement on women’s capability for thought, though the discourse has, by this point, been altered to at least acknowledge that women are capable of thought. Just not “large thoughts.”

The belief that women have brains inferior to those of men is enforced by the infusion of false consciousness, which, as discussed earlier, could be a symptom of the Commanders’ role as the sole wielders of power and “cultural prestige” in Gilead. The girls, however, are taught that some knowledge and information is better left untouched. Unsurprisingly, this is done using Biblical precedent, the only “culture” Gilead acknowledges. “Forbidden things are open to the imagination. That was why Eve ate the Apple of Knowledge, said Aunt Vidala: too much imagination. So it was better not to know some things. Otherwise your petals would get scattered” (Atwood 2019, 15). Knowledge is a poisonous apple, forbidden to the young, innocent girls of Gilead, and not to be pursued. Only the stronger, less corruptible men have this right. The monologism of Gilead thus extends beyond language, to include thought as well.

The girls are also taught that having best friends is a bad thing because it leads to whispering and secrets, which in turn leads to disobedience to God. Disobedience to God ultimately leads to rebellion, and “a rebellious woman was even worse than a rebellious man because rebellious men became traitors, but rebellious women became adulteresses” (Atwood 2019, 24). It is even worse if a friend is marked with disgrace; “another girl’s disgrace could

rub off on you if you got to close to it” (Atwood 2019, 162). Yet the sisterhood between Agnes and Becca is one of the cornerstones of *The Testaments*, in fact, its key theme. The sisterly bond between Agnes and Becca is just as significant as that between Agnes and her actual half-sister Daisy.

Naming, and the significance of naming, has played a key role in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. It has been used by Atwood to highlight both how religion permeated every aspect of Gilead, and how hypocrisy and greed ultimately betrayed this virtuous facade. Atwood also termed and designated the different classes and categories already in her prequel, to which she adds the Supplicants and Pearl Girls, both related to the Aunts, in *The Testaments*. While the former are essentially Aunts in training, thus a kind of junior Aunts, the latter act as missionaries, who visit countries outside the Republic to recruit more women to Gilead. These additions do not necessarily have the same poignant or ironic undertones as, for example, the Angels or Eyes. A supplicant usually refers to a religious person praying to God for help, and pearls are mentioned several times in the Bible and usually signify purity, judging by the word’s etymology.

Chapter Two has detailed how Gilead renames its Handmaids and how this could be considered an example of interpellation, according to Louis Althusser. *The Testaments* exemplifies how this is also the case when women are made Aunts. With help from Aunt Lydia, Agnes is accepted into Ardua Hall to escape an arranged marriage to Commander Judd, which is where she also gets a new name, Aunt Victoria. Becca is renamed Aunt Immortelle – a bittersweet foreshadowing of both her death and her immortalization through the efforts of Agnes and Daisy. Despite the renaming, however, Agnes still refers to her friend as Becca. In Agnes’ mind, that is who her friend is, a notion which points to Atwood’s emphasis on identity and smaller acts of resistance.

Thus, Agnes, like her mother, finds meaning in names. Years after the Handmaid of her household died giving birth to Agnes’ younger “half-brother” (in Gileadean terms), Agnes consults the archives to find the woman’s birth name, having only known her as “Ofkyle.” “Meaningless, I know, except for those who must have loved her and then been torn apart from her. But for me it was like finding a handprint in a cave: it was a sign, it was a message. *I was here. I existed. I was real*” (Atwood 2019, 104; emphasis in original). The Handmaid’s name was Crystal, and that is how Agnes will remember her. Meanwhile, Agnes’ sister grows up using the name Daisy, then Jade – once she is smuggled into Gilead under the guise of training to become an Aunt, and finally Nicole –once her past is revealed. The epilogue

reveals that she ended up choosing Nicole as her name, which can be interpreted as her embracing her Gileadean past and her lineage to Offred and Agnes.

Interestingly, similarly to Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale*, we never learn what Lydia's name was prior to becoming an Aunt. As discussed in Chapter Two, the novel's withholding Offred's birth name might have been to emphasize her anonymity as a reflection of how history tends to favor the masculine point of view, and how Offred's story was one of countless suffering women. On the other hand, we also saw how Offred's refusal to give up her name could work as an act of self-empowerment. Atwood's withholding Lydia's original name is different. Offred was very deliberate: the very subject of her name was, in fact, brought up numerous times, though the name itself remained elusive. In the case of Lydia, she may simply have deemed it unnecessary, an inessential detail in the larger scheme of things. It could also be that she wants to repress her past, pre-Gileadean, self from being condemned by history for actions performed in the name of Gilead. Regardless, it does not have the effect of self-empowerment that Offred's silencing of her name has. This relates to the discussion of Lydia's "herstory," to which I will return to before long.

Circling back to the subject of power structures, the second Gilead novel offers more insight on the ideological state apparatuses (ISAs) and repressive state apparatuses (RSAs) of Gilead than its prequel. As discussed in Chapter One, ISAs and RSAs are the apparatuses which ensure that the interpellated subjects are led to believe that the oppressive and dominant ideology of the ruling class is beneficial to them. In his essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus," Althusser lists different types of ISA that can help unpack Gilead's patterns of indoctrinating its population.

The institution of "family" into which one is born has been replaced with the concept of the "household." For a child growing up in Gilead, the household is the first ISA, which instills the values and norms of Gilead and ensures the regime's longevity. Among these norms is the Commander's position as the patriarch. As Offred remarked in *The Handmaid's Tale*, though the domestic sphere is nominally run by the Wife, the house "is what [the Commander] holds" (Atwood 2010, 93). The educational ISA is downplayed in Gilead, however, since schools as such do not exist. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the only educational ISA featured was the Rachel and Leah Center, in which Offred and other Handmaids were taught what was expected of them in the new regime. They are instructed how to be part of the "transitional generation" so that the following generations will embrace the teachings of Gilead. *The Testaments* explores the educational ISA through Agnes, who is taught that knowledge is damaging to women, and is available only to men. The communications ISA is

not very visible in either Gilead novel, but what little we can glean from them naturally portrays the communication ISA of Gilead as purely propagandistic, advocating the regime's repressive, misogynistic, and monological discourse.

Individually, the religious, legal, and political ISAs do not need extensive discussion; the thesis has already pointed out numerous ways in which these institutions are conjoined in the theocracy of Gilead. Using Gramsci, we can argue that the cultural ISA has been merged with the religious ISA as well, with religion largely replacing culture. However, combining these four ISA into one is interesting once we consider that the Republic of Gilead is a theocracy, thus blurring the lines between RSA and ISA. The army and police are renamed Angels and Guardians of the Faith. In the epilogue to *The Handmaid's Tale*, Professor Pieixoto comments on how different aspects of power structure merged into one, a comment that also invokes Foucault's theory of "already-said":

As we know from the study of history, no new system can impose itself upon a previous one without incorporating many of the elements to be found in the latter, as witness the pagan elements in mediaeval Christianity and the evolution of the Russian "K.G.B" from the Czarist secret service that preceded it; and Gilead was no exception to this rule. Its racist policies, for instance, were firmly rooted in the pre-Gilead period, and racist fears provided some of the emotional fuel that allowed the Gilead takeover to succeed as well as it did (Atwood 2010, 319).

It is not only an instance of "already-said"; it is an instance of several "already-saids" combined into one. Because of this merging of the ISAs and RSAs, Althusser's Priests or Despots theory – arguing that despots or other authority figures use religion and the word of God(s) to control the populace – becomes especially interesting with regards to *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*; in Gilead, Priest and Despot are the same. The theory is arguably even more applicable to the second Gilead novel than the first, as *The Testaments* tells us the story of Agnes who, unlike Offred, is indoctrinated in the Gileadean discourse from birth. More importantly, however, through Agnes, Daisy, and Aunt Lydia, we see that Gilead is permeated by corruption, and we are given insight that Offred could never have offered.

As in the prequel, however, Atwood takes great care not to target Christianity in and of itself as the root of evil, but rather human ambition and corruption. In fact, Christianity is never explicitly mentioned; outside countries declared Gilead a country of fanatics, and its religion the "faith of Gilead." As if to further separate the "faith of Gilead" and Christianity,

chapter six of *The Testaments* reveals that Gilead does not celebrate Easter (Atwood 2019, 32). Atwood's Gilead novels, invoking Gregory Claeys' thoughts on dystopias as results of human actions, demonstrate how religion could be a valuable tool for ambitious and power-hungry individuals who seek to control and oppress others.

The moral corruption in Gilead is so prevalent that even the young and pious Agnes starts doubting, eventually reaching a conclusion: "Bearing false witness was not the exception, it was common. Beneath its outer show of virtue and purity, Gilead was rotting" (Atwood 2019, 308). Even so, though shocked and disillusioned to discover just how deep the corruption has permeated Gilead, Agnes and Becka maintain their faith in God. For Becka, it becomes an important coping mechanism, which enables her to separate God from Gilead: "'God isn't what they say,' she said. She said you could believe in Gilead or you could believe in God, but not both. That was how she had managed her own crisis" (Atwood 2019, 304). This statement is a clear example of Atwood's distancing Christianity, or any specific religion, from her wider critique of the human condition.

Regardless of which religion is practiced in Gilead, it permeates every aspect of the lives of Gilead's citizens. After Agnes is tucked into bed, she and Tabitha pray, amongst other things, in the hope that angels will watch over Agnes as she sleeps. But Agnes is bothered: "I knew they were supposed to be the kind of angels with white nightgowns and feathers, but that was not how I pictured them. I pictured them as our kind of Angels: men in black uniforms with cloth wings sewn onto their outfits, and guns" (Atwood 2019, 18). Agnes even imagines the Angels violating her, should any part of her body stick out from under the blankets, like her feet. "Wouldn't that inflame their urges? It would, there was no way around it. So the four Angels were not a restful sight" (Atwood 2019, 18). Agnes' fear of the Angels paints them as predators, resembling demons instead of angels. It tells us that even for devout believers like Agnes, religion has been sullied and corrupted. If one chooses to interpret it in a certain way, one can also argue that the carceral nature of Gilead is so dominant that it has entered the subconscious level of the psyche, to the point where the notion of someone watching over you as you sleep extends to your dreams.

Through its exploration of the class of Aunts, *The Testaments* also adds a gendered dimension to the carceral society invoked by Foucault and Bentham's Panopticon, upsetting the notion that women hold no power in Gilead. While Aunt Lydia, in particular, holds tremendous power – as one of the most influential people in the Republic, regardless of gender – it is clear that the Aunts, in general, have more power than the citizens of Gilead might recognize. The power they wield is composed mostly of information and knowledge.

Some of that knowledge comes from the fact that Aunts are the only women in Gilead allowed to read. Another kind of knowledge comes from their considerable abilities in collecting dirt on the citizens of Gilead, of both higher and low stations. “That was how they got their power, according to the Marthas: from knowing secrets.” Later, in what is an oddly similar phrase, Agnes states: “It was how the Aunts got their power: By finding things out. Things that should never be talked about” (Atwood 2019, 286).

The female community of Gilead thus has its own Panopticonic dimension. The Aunts are always being watched by other Aunts, and little escapes the ears of those at the top. Aunt Lydia’s reach, in particular, extends far beyond the female sphere: “I’m discreet. Each one of the top men has always felt that his secrets are safe with me; but – as I’ve made obliquely clear – only so long as I myself am safe. I have long been a believer in checks and balances” (Atwood 2019, 62). Aunt Lydia stays true to her outlook: when Agnes and Daisy manage to escape, Lydia’s part in the plot is uncovered. True to her character, however, Aunt Lydia is one step ahead of the rest and dies on her own terms. Instead of being captured, tortured, and killed, she commits suicide by injecting herself with morphine.

Chapter Two has argued that *The Handmaid’s Tale* is allegorical in nature, which *The Testaments* is not. The reason might be simple: while the entire female population of Gilead is heavily oppressed, *The Testaments’* narrators are not enslaved like Handmaids, and their lives cannot be compared to the lives of Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass, for example. One might argue that Atwood misses an opportunity to enter either class or race issues by only focusing on relatively privileged, white individuals; Aunt Lydia is the most powerful of the Aunts, Agnes grew up in a Commander’s household, and Daisy, at least at the start of the novel, lives a comfortable, if sheltered, life in Canada.

Regardless, there are still some parallels with *The Handmaid’s Tale*. For example, the Underground Railroad/Underground Femaleroad reappears in *The Testaments* as an escape route. Another possible parallel might be found in Agnes’ narrative in that she, like Harriet Jacobs, grew up relatively unaware of the repressive state of her surroundings (McKay et al. 2001, 9). It is uncertain how much credence one should give to an analogous claim, considering that Agnes, while oppressed like the rest of the female population of Gilead, is not a slave like Jacobs was. However, their growing up in blissful ignorance of their surroundings are indeed similar. The enforced illiteracy discussed briefly in Chapter Two is also still in effect in *The Testaments*, as women in Gilead – barring the Aunts – are forbidden to read or write.

The parallels stop there, and the reasons for this may be manifold. Atwood's Gilead novels have received criticism because of a lack of discussion surrounding race, as has the television series adaptation, which presents Gilead as a totalitarian, yet post-racial, regime (Berlatsky 2017). *The Handmaid's Tale* seemingly handwaves away a potential race debate; in one sole instance, the novel refers to the "[r]esettlement" of the Children of Ham (Atwood 2010, 95), who have been sent to "National Homeland One" in North Dakota (Atwood 2010, 96). Children of Ham, of course, is another biblical reference. Ham was one of the sons of Noah, the latter casting a curse upon Ham's son, Canaan. The curse of Canaan is nonetheless more commonly known as the curse of Ham. Despite no mention of skin color or race in the Bible, over time, a conception of Ham as being black-skinned grew, and his descendants are perceived to have populated Africa. This, in turn, led to interpretations of the curse being black skin, interpretations that were later used by Southern US slave owners to justify slavery. "Resettling" the Children of Ham to designated areas has undertones of apartheid and can also mean that people of color are sent to camps where they are promptly killed. Accordingly, Atwood establishes Gilead as racist. Beyond that, however, the race issue is left untouched until the epilogue of *The Handmaid's Tale*.

The Testaments does not mention the Children of Ham by name, but Aunt Lydia ponders the large number of "refugee Homelanders from North Dakota" crossing the border to Canada. (Atwood 2019, 64). Otherwise, it seems as if Atwood is still deliberately avoiding the race debate. And if the presidency of Donald Trump – accused of racism as well as misogyny – truly played a part in the writing process of *The Testaments*, what better time to enter said debate? Atwood has been on record saying that racial dynamics have changed since she wrote *The Handmaid's Tale* (Tolentino 2019). She did not expand upon the meaning of this statement, but one can assume that drawing parallels to slavery without overtly engaging the topic in 2019 would be deemed less acceptable than it was in 1985 and that Atwood, therefore, scrapped the approach.

The passage from *The Handmaid's Tale* regarding the merger of ISAs and Foucault's concept of "already-said," quoted earlier in the chapter, however, suggests that Atwood, in an understated manner, postulates racism to be a decisive factor in the founding of Gilead. Gilead's racist policies, Professor Pieixoto says, "were firmly rooted in the pre-Gilead period, and racist fears provided some of the emotional fuel that allowed the Gilead takeover to succeed as well as it did" (Atwood 2010, 319). During the coup, for instance, the Sons of Jacob's assassination of the entire US Congress is blamed on "Islamic fanatics." In an interview discussing *The Testaments* and the television series adaption of *The Handmaid's*

Tale, Atwood remarks that while the Gilead of the TV series is multiracial, “[i]n the book they go full white supremacy” (Alter 2019). The racist element of Gilead seems firmly implanted in Atwood’s mind. Considering Professor Pieixoto’s quote, one might thus argue that while Atwood crafts a literary world that focuses on and empathizes with women living under an oppressive regime, it was racism that allowed the regime to manifest.

The Testaments ends on a similar note to *The Handmaid’s Tale*. It is perhaps fitting that in a sequel to *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies gets a sequel as well. The Thirteenth Symposium on Gileadean Studies takes place on 29-30 June 2197. The Symposium set-up is the same as before, with Maryann Crescent Moon and Professor James Darcy Pieixoto as chairs, and Pieixoto’s acknowledgment of his colleague Professor Wade for assistance in research. As was discussed in the previous chapter, the “Historical Notes” section of *The Handmaid’s Tale* suggested the eventual fall of Gilead and the return to a more gender-equal society. It also suggested, however, that many of the attitudes that enabled Gilead to rise in the first place, still lingered.

As a hint of optimism on Atwood’s part, Professor Pieixoto offers an apology to Crescent Moon. “I did take to heart your comments about my little jokes at Twelfth Symposium – I admit some of them were not in the best of taste – and I will attempt not to reoffend. (*Modified applause.*)” (Atwood 2019, 408). Like the rest of the novel, the epilogue of *The Testaments* may, therefore, indicate some optimism. Atwood’s Gileadverse post-Gilead seems to have seen some progress between the years 2195 and 2197. Professor Pieixoto’s apology, however, only comes after he comments on Crescent Moon’s promotion, quipping that now that “women are usurping leadership positions to such a terrifying extent, I hope that [Crescent Moon] will not be too severe on me” (Atwood 2019, 408).

However, while Pieixoto asks many of the same questions that led him to challenge Offred’s narrative, he and his colleagues are fundamentally convinced that the accounts of the three narrators of *The Testaments* are true. Perhaps it is precisely because of a multitude of accounts correlating with one another that he is convinced, a notion that is both optimistic and pessimistic at once. The optimist would champion a unified group effort in promoting truth, while the pessimist would stress the ostensible prerequisite for multiple accounts – versus the lone account – in order to bring forward said truth. Both the optimist and the pessimist would surely have something to say about the MeToo movement, for instance. The introduction of this chapter hinted at a possible connection between the MeToo movement and Atwood’s latest novel. In March 2020, around six months after the publication of *The Testaments*, Harvey Weinstein was convicted and sentenced to 23 years in prison. The timing of the

conviction is, of course, coincidental with the date of *The Testaments*' publication, but it is nonetheless convenient, injecting some legitimacy to the novel's optimism. And if one is correct in connecting *The Testaments* with MeToo, it adds to Atwood's reputation for prophetic foresight.

The optimistic nature of *The Testaments* is apparent in the very last pages of the novel. Where *The Handmaid's Tale* famously ended with the line "Are there any questions?", *The Testaments* ends with the inscription engraved on a statue risen in the aftermath of Gilead's downfall. The statue was risen as a memorial to young Becka, who was instrumental in bringing down Gilead but lost her life in the process. The inscription reads:

In loving memory of
BECKA, AUNT IMMORTELLE
This memorial was erected by her sisters
Agnes and Nicole
And their mother, their two fathers,
Their children and their grandchildren.
And in recognition of the invaluable
Services provided by A.L.
A bird of the air shall carry the voice, and which
Hath wings shall tell the matter.
Love is as strong as death. (Atwood 2019, 415)

It is a bittersweet moment. Unlike Agnes and Daisy/Nicole – referred to in the inscription as her sisters – Becka did not live to deliver her testimony. Yet, through the efforts of Agnes and Nicole and their families, Becka's legacy lives on. Her testimony has been relayed through Aunt Lydia, Agnes, and Daisy, and now Aunt Immortelle has been immortalized through a statue as well. Her "herstory" has been told. Thus, *The Testaments* is not only a book of testimonies; it is a memorial. Where Professor Pieixoto got the last line of *The Handmaid's Tale*, the last lines of *The Testaments* are, in a way, those of Becka, or Aunt Immortelle the Immortal.

More ambiguous is the "herstory" of Aunt Lydia. We know it is used to bring down Gilead: the "A.L." initials in the inscription indeed immortalize Aunt Lydia and her "herstory" as well as it does Becka's. It was not a foregone conclusion, as Lydia herself comments on: "Possibly you will view these pages of mine as a fragile treasure box, to be opened with the utmost care. Possibly you will tear them apart, or burn them: that often happens to words" (Atwood 2019, 403). Fortunately, Aunt Lydia's diaries, like the

testimonies of Agnes and Daisy – and Becka – are instead cherished as valuable historical documents, and integral to the downfall to Gilead. More importantly to this thesis, her diaries are cherished as testimonies.

However, Aunt Lydia is not interested in revealing who she was before Gilead, in a case both similar to and different from Offred's in *The Handmaid's Tale*. This thesis has argued that it may be to distance her pre-Gileadean self from the present self, in which case Lydia "herstory" becomes complicated. On the one hand, she wants at least parts of it to be told, but arguably only to bring down Gilead. On the other, her refusal – if indeed that is what it is – to disclose her name suggests she wants other parts of it left untold. Where Offred's withholding her name was a matter of pride and identity, Lydia's may be one of shame. It is in perhaps emblematic of the ambiguity surrounding Lydia that her testimony is purposefully incomplete.

Regardless, *The Testaments* delivers on its title; the three testimonies of its narrators bring down a totalitarian regime that terrified readers for over three decades. Where Offred's "herstory" in many ways was subordinated by *history*, the "herstories" of Lydia, Agnes, and Daisy have been left mostly unchallenged and – more importantly – become valued historical documents. The female testimony, throughout history often dismissed as apocryphal, prevails at last.

Conclusion

[T]here was little that was truly original or indigenous to Gilead: its genius was synthesis.

– Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985)

One person alone is not a full person: we exist in relation to others.

– Margaret Atwood, *The Testaments* (2019)

Having fascinated and haunted readers for years with *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood's return to Gilead with *The Testaments* came at an opportune moment. The prequel's axiom was that everything that happened in the Gileadverse had already happened at some point in history and could thus happen again. When *The Testaments* came out in 2019, Atwood was of the opinion that her 1985 dystopia seemed closer than ever. Many readers, myself included, therefore found themselves surprised by the novel's relatively optimistic tone.

Gone was the claustrophobia of Offred's narrative; the sequel instead features three narratives colored by different characters, outlooks, and discourses. The ambiguous ending of *The Handmaid's Tale* only hinted at Gilead's eventual downfall, while *The Testaments* leaves little room for uncertainty: what we see is the definitive dissolution of the regime that has terrified readers since 1985. The novel advocates themes like sisterhood, action, and truth to a degree that could have seemed naïve and idealistic in the original novel. While academic scholars dispute Offred's testimony in the epilogue of *The Handmaid's Tale*, the testimonies that form the narrative of *The Testaments* are not only believed, but ultimately integral to Gilead's downfall, and kept as valuable historical documents.

But if *The Testaments* is optimistic compared to *The Handmaid's Tale*, what are we to make of Atwood's stance on a hypothetical Gilead being closer in 2019 than it was in 1985? The answer might lie in the female testimony, a central aspect of this thesis, and one explored differently in the two Gilead novels. *The Handmaid's Tale* explores the theme by drawing parallels between the protagonist's "herstory" and African American slave narratives. Some allusions are blatant, like the Underground Femaleroad/Underground Railroad. Others are less blatant, but not necessarily less obvious: the hierarchal positioning of the Handmaids and their slave masters – the Commanders, the renaming of individuals, banning of literacy, and the

authentication requirements. Drawing such parallels, Atwood emphasizes history's and historiography's tradition in favoring the masculine account over the feminine one.

Atwood's choice to tell her story through the dystopian genre is appropriate. Underpinning every testimony, after all, is the question of credibility: a witness must be able to generate belief for – and secure the trust of – the reader/listener, a notion that applies to the dystopian genre as a whole. The ability to generate plausibility and belief is what separates dystopian literature from fantasy literature. Atwood achieves this plausibility by drawing on history beyond that of slavery, merging Biblical passages, American Puritanism, and trends of contemporary times – Ceausescu's abortion policies, the religious Right, Stalinism, etc. – in her creation of the Republic of Gilead.

The result is an unnerving but plausible narrative. The fundamentalist Republic of Gilead bases its every law and norm on the Bible – specifically the Old Testament – and in this respect, Louis Althusser's Priests or Despots theory is undoubtedly useful. Equally applicable are his writings on ideological and repressive state apparatuses, or ISAs and RSAs. Chapter Three has argued that Gilead merged the religious, legal, political, and cultural ISAs with the repressive apparatus of the state itself, conjoining ISA and RSA into the theocracy of Gilead. Thus, the coercion and violence of the RSA and the interpellation of the ISA come from the same concentrated source.

Combining her exploration of state apparatuses and an allegorical approach, Atwood portrays theocracy as a slave system in which women are oppressed in all possible ways, deprived of their rights to their bodies, thoughts, and words. Their bodies are what Michel Foucault would call “docile,” molded by the Panoptic and carceral system of Gilead. Their thoughts are interpellated by its ideological apparatus, and their language is restricted by Gilead's repressive apparatus with its monological discourse.

Atwood has been criticized for her handling of race in the Gileadverse (Berlatsky 2017). There are allusions to race in the novels, but considering the parallels to the history of slavery in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the novels understate the issue of race. Thus, it may seem that Atwood is equating the struggles of white women in the eighties with the struggles of black slaves, which obviously is alarming and problematic. However, I do not think this is the case. I believe instead that the reason for not explicitly featuring non-Caucasian characters is an attempt not to differentiate between the races. Rather, Atwood's use of allegory makes women and slaves synonymous regardless of color or race.

One could still argue that Atwood's approach is problematic, which could be why the allegorical approach is abandoned in *The Testaments*. The author has gone on record stating

that the racial dynamics have changed since she wrote *The Handmaid's Tale* (Tolentino 2019), and as such, she might have deemed allegory to be risky in 2019. Another possible reason is equally simple. With the second Gilead novel, Atwood's focus shifted towards collectivity and solidarity – more specifically, sisterhood. The slave narrative told the story of one slave, just as *The Handmaid's Tale* told the story of Offred. *The Testaments*, in turn, employs three different characters, with which a slave narrative would simply not be compatible.

The structural differences between the two novels allow for the coexistence of two different sets of discourses, as both novels are dialogical in different ways. *The Handmaid's Tale* is a remarkable showcase of the monological discourse typical of a totalitarian regime. As Offred herself notes, in Gilead “and/but” is replaced with “either/or.” Part of Offred's narrative trajectory is to resist this monologism. While the resistance comes partly by her interacting with other characters such as Ofglen, Offred is largely alone. Her resistance is, therefore, primarily on the level of thought, displayed particularly through her pontifications on language.

While the monologism of Gilead is on full display in *The Testaments*, the novel is more dialogical in structure, with its three narratives figuratively communicating as if in dialogue. Dialogism is further enforced by the three narrators' different social status. The plurality of voices featured in *The Testaments* thus counters the singularity of Offred's sole voice and points to the sequel's themes of unity and sisterhood. Bakhtin's ideas on dialogism and monologism lend themselves to the discussion about the female testimony as well. Offred's narrative ends up being challenged not by the monologism of Gilead, but by that of history itself.

Among the historical implications of the Gileadverse is the ostensible superiority of the written word over oral history, particularly when the voice of a woman is put up against the writing of a man. This is only amplified in Gilead, in which most of the population is forbidden to read and write. And though Chapter Two has argued that Offred's withholding her birth name was an empowering and deliberate move on her part, her anonymity relegates her role of narrator, authorship, and control to Professors Pieixoto and Wade, the men who arranged the order of Offred's tapes. While Offred's tale has one narrator, *The Handmaid's Tale* has two; Pieixoto and Wade. These two male narrators undermine Offred's testimony at almost every turn, belittling her intelligence and showing more interest in Commander Waterford.

In *The Testaments*, Agnes and Daisy's testimonies are oral as well, but within the context of a hearing, and with a neutral third party transcribing these testimonies verbatim. Alongside Aunt Lydia's memoirs, these accounts largely remain unchallenged by Pieixoto and Wade, though interestingly, it is Agnes and Daisy's oral testimonies that prompt the two professors to consider Aunt Lydia's written memoirs authentic. The main difference between the testimonies of Agnes and Daisy's and the testimonies of Offred and Aunt Lydia seems to be one of formality, and thus one should perhaps be careful in reading too much optimism into this aspect of *The Testaments*. However, that does not change the fact that the two novels approach the theme of testimony differently, nor that men's accounts, formal or otherwise, have taken precedence over those of women.

Drawing on the different concepts explored in this thesis – the allegory, the slave narrative, testimony, discourse, ideology, etc. – we may find the target of the Gilead novels, though the novels use different approaches. A key passage can be found in the epilogue of *The Handmaid's Tale*, in which Professor Pieixoto comments upon how various elements from a previous system will invariably remain in the new one. Chapter Three has discussed the passage's implications regarding Foucault's "already-said" and the merger of Althusser's ISAs and RSAs, as well as how racism played its part in the Gilead takeover. In terms of social and political commentary on Atwood's part, it is perhaps the most telling passage and makes it clear that the core problem lies in the ideological state apparatuses.

The Commanders' monological discourse of Gilead prohibits the population from freely using language. Such a discourse was established partly by abolishing, replacing, or merging the ISAs outlined by Althusser, resulting in a society in which the religious apparatus and the state are one, and in which only the ones in charge wield the word. Not only do the Commanders wield the word, i.e., language; they also wield "the Word" of the Bible, which is unavailable to everyone except the Commanders and Aunts. Additionally, any opposition from what Antonio Gramsci dubbed "organic intellectuals" has already been crushed. In such a society, indoctrination of the masses is unopposed, as media or culture has lost importance beyond furthering the Gileadean ideology.

Thus, with *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood seems to be warning us about the ISAs that surround us, be it in 1985 or 2019. Through ISAs, the US population was indoctrinated in a racist ideology that paved the way for Gilead. Atwood focuses more on the political and religious ISAs, in Gilead combined into one, but examples of other ISAs, such as the family and the educational ISAs, are also visible in the novels. All these ISAs invariably have traces of the past, ensuring the longevity of the less savory elements of history, including

fundamentalism, misogyny, and racism. And while the epilogue of *The Handmaid's Tale* has left readers with a hint of optimism, much in the vein of Orwell's *1984*, the epilogue has also made it clear that prejudices did not die with Gilead.

With *The Testaments*, however, Atwood encourages us to believe that the status quo, no matter how static it might seem, can be subject to change, as long as we keep our eyes open to the power structures surrounding us. This, I believe, is one of the key messages of Atwood's Gileadverse. However, with the second Gilead novel, Atwood's focus has also shifted to a more specifically feminist angle, which she earlier resisted. Unity between women is a central theme of the novel. Aunt Lydia, who in *The Handmaid's Tale* is portrayed as a brutal true believer, is now the mastermind behind the plot that brings about Gilead's downfall. Most of the male characters in *The Testaments* are portrayed as evil, predatory, selfish, and, ultimately, less nuanced than the male characters of *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Such developments arguably stem from the television series adaptation of the first Gilead novel, after which the novel's popularity reached new heights, and was heralded – even more than earlier – as an iconic feminist work. Additionally, Chapter Three deemed it likely that *The Testaments* was at least partly inspired by the MeToo movement. The idea of female testimony entered the public consciousness to an unprecedented degree, and even trial practices changed. In the case against Harvey Weinstein, the jury listened to testimonies that were not formally part of the charges against him in addition to those he was on trial for. This practice has since become more common in other cases as well (Levenson 2020). Thus, in addition to a growing social consciousness surrounding the gendered moral and ethical implications of whether society gives credibility to its women, we saw institutional changes as well.

When Weinstein finally was convicted in 2020, it was a victory that no doubt added to many people's perception of Atwood's prophetic foresight, even though one wonders whether a conviction would have taken place had it not been for the many testimonies backing up each other. To this, *The Testaments* cannot provide full answers. As stated in Chapter Three, the notion that the narrative is believed because it stems from three different female sources while Offred's lone testimony is not is optimistic and pessimistic at the same time. Atwood's Gileadverse optimistically encourages unity and collaboration in seeking truth and justice, but one could argue that it is also pessimistic, albeit unintentionally, since it diminishes the power of the individual, an aspect otherwise prevalent in dystopian literature.

Then again, the moral lessons offered by dystopian fiction, though simple in theory, are not simple in practice. They challenge us to be wary of the power structures around us

because just as history tells us how we have ended up where we are now, where we are now might indeed tell us where we might end up down the road. However, not only is history often written by the victors, as the saying goes; it is typically written by men. Just as Althusser highlighted the role of ideological state apparatuses in reproducing capitalist ideology, Atwood indicates that they reproduce fundamentalism, racism, and sexism, giving credence to another famous saying that “history repeats itself.” What also repeats itself is the silencing of certain voices and stories, and though these voices and stories are numerous, Atwood, in her *Gileadverse*, focuses specifically on the “herstories.” For these stories to be told and, equally importantly, listened to, the status quo must change.

Thus, despite the pessimist in Atwood considering a real-life Gilead to be closer in 2019 than in 1985, the optimist in her invites us to believe that such a change is possible. That change always starts with the individual, but for the change to occur, the individual must unite with other individuals.

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