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Learning About the Constructivism of Gender in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*

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English Department
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Learning About the Constructivism of Gender in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*

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Introduction: Literature and Gender

> Yeah, that's her. With the gold. I better use some Tic Tacs just in case I start kissing her. You know, I'm automatically attracted to beautiful—I just start kissing them. It's like a magnet. Just kiss. I don't even wait. And when you're a star, they let you do it. You can do anything. . . Grab 'em by the pussy. You can do anything. (Trump quoted in Bullock)

These are the words of Donald J. Trump, President of the United States of America, talking with Billy Bush, the host of *Access Hollywood*. In 2005, the two men are sitting on a bus, off camera, but their microphones still recording, waiting to go on a film set for Trump's cameo. Unaware that the conversation is being taped, the President offers an enlightening example of misogynist discourse. He objectifies a woman walking by, reducing her to only one element: her body. Trump considers every woman through this lens, as the shift between the singular pronoun in "kissing her" to the plural "them" indicates. His words could be a case study of sexual harassment, he does not "even wait" for the women's consent before kissing or "grab[bing] 'em by the pussy" and confuses lack of response with agreement. He shamelessly uses his power as a famous rich white man to dominate others through sexuality. Moreover, he justifies his behavior as being automatic and "like a magnet," hiding behind an essentialist discourse in which male sexuality is wild and beyond control. Trump later attempted to play down his statement by describing it as "locker-room banter" (quoted in Fahrenthold); however, his defense only highlights how normalized such discourses and actions are because he does not question them and suggests they are acceptable in certain contexts. Made public during the electoral campaign in October 2016, this recording did lower Trump's chances of being elected—a Wisconsin poll showed a fall of 24 percentage points after its release (Boatright and Sperling 58)—yet the Republican Party did not renounce him. He won the presidency a month later.

Trump's election shows that gender inequality is deeply ingrained in our societies and, despite impressive improvements, a long route lies before reaching equality. To delegitimize such sexist behavior, we need to understand the component of these discourses and the mechanisms of power behind them. As Drobac explains, "consciousness regarding systemic discrimination is the first step to effective eradication" (405). In this essay, we would like to participate in the conversation in our humble way and examine how literary texts can raise awareness about the constructiveness of gender and the influence of power. Indeed, literature is "un instrument dont nous disposons afin de mieux comprendre notre propre univers" (Esquenazi 17). It raises issues that cross our world, singles them out, exposes their roots, illustrates their consequences, shows avenues of reflection and solutions. In this mémoire, we want to advocate for this tool, often overlooked in our society, which is increasingly driven by technology, data and science. To link these two aspects, we chose to work on Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and *The Testaments* (2019)[1] and study them with a gender perspective and reader-response approach.

Margaret Atwood, born in Canada, wrote *The Handmaid's Tale* while residing in West Berlin in 1984. Inspired by the "wariness, the feeling of being spied on [and] the silences" of East Germany (preface, *HT* IX), she imagined a dystopian world set in a near future. In her fiction, the Sons of Jacob, a group of Christian extremists, overthrow the American government and establish the Republic of Gilead, a totalitarian state based on Puritan values. The Commanders of Gilead organize a society based on the separate sphere theory: women stay at home and men evolve in the public domain. To accentuate this sexed division, the Commanders delegate some of their power to the Aunts, who are in charge of reeducating and controlling women. The two spheres only overlap in the family homes, where men spend most of their time in their private offices. The Commanders are married to Wives and have servants named Marthas. Due to the high infertility rates caused by environmental degradation, they institute the Handmaids' system: supposedly fertile women live for two years in a Commander's house and have sex with him in the hope of bearing his children.

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[1] When quoting *The Handmaid's Tale,* we will use the abbreviation *HT,* and *TT* for *The Testaments*.

The narrator is a Handmaid called Offred—her name is composed of the prefix "of" and the Commander's first name, in this case "Fred," to mark his ownership and deny her identity. Offred recounts her existence under Gilead, her former life as an independent woman and the transitional period when she was brainwashed to accept her new role. At the end of the novel, Offred might finally be pregnant, but she is taken away in a dark van which either belongs to the Angels, the regime's police, or Mayday, a resistant group which helps people escape Gilead. In an appendix called "Historical Notes," the readers access the transcription of a historical conference given by Professor Peixioto in 2195. The historian discovered Offred's story on tapes, which he then transcribed and arranged into the text the readers just finished to read. In his talk, he questions the narrative's authenticity and wishes the account were more detailed.

To compose her dystopia, Margaret Atwood only used historical or existing technological capacities as she wanted "the toads in it to be real" (preface, *HT* x). In 1985, inspiration was near with the Iranian revolution of 1979, which led to a theocracy impeding women's rights, Afghan women who could not access education (Neuman 859), and "the enforced childbearing of Romania" (Bethune). In the USA, the eighties are marked by Ronald Reagan and his association with New Right and the Christian New Right. They promote conservative and religious discourses which blame women's careers for their unhappiness and demand the revocation of the abortion rights. Atwood pushes their logic to their extreme consequences to create Gilead and thus illustrates that "*it can't* *happen here* could not be depended on: anything could happen anywhere" (emphasis in original, preface, *HT* IX). Her readers are warned that they cannot take their rights for granted.

Acclaimed as a feminist novel, even if Atwood rejects this label[2], *The Handmaid's Tale* is recognized for its literary value, won two awards—Governor General's Award in 1985 and Arthur C. Clarke in 1987—, was a Booker Prize nominee, and is largely studied in academia. The novel came back under the spotlights in 2017. Indeed, Trump's election sparked a wave of panic that caused the public to read more dystopias and the successful Hulu television series[3] based on Atwood's novel contributed to popularizing *The Handmaid's Tale* (Sacks). Atwood decided to write the sequel in 2019 because "for a long time we were going away from Gilead and then we turned around and started going back towards Gilead" (Atwood quoted in Allardice), so that an actualization of her warning was necessary.

Left without a conclusion, the readers had to wait thirty-five years before Margaret Atwood expanded her dystopic universe. *The Testaments* is set sixteen years after Offred's final words and follows the stories of her two daughters and Aunt Lydia. Agnes, who was born before Gilead and stolen from Offred, only remembers her life under the regime. Raised in the Gileadean ideology, Agnes believes her destiny is to be a Wife; however, she rebels when facing her husband-to-be and choses to become an Aunt instead. After years of training at Ardua Hall, Agnes meets her half-sister Daisy. The latter, also known as Baby Nicole, is Offred's second daughter, who was smuggled out of Gilead with her mother. Raised in Canada, she learns about her real identity after her step-parents are killed in an explosion. Members of Mayday convince her to infiltrate Gilead and retrieve confidential documents prepared by Aunt Lydia, the third narrator of *The Testaments*. Offred, in the first novel, describes her as a violent woman enjoying her power over others. In the sequel, Aunt Lydia offers her own version and, while acknowledging her faults, takes pride in her achievements. She is secretly collaborating with the resistance and plans Daisy's infiltration and escape with Agnes. The sisters successfully flee Gilead with the damning information that will bring the regime down and are finally reunited with their mother.

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[2] In the introduction, to the question: "is *The Handmaid's Tale* a feminist novel?" she answers, "If you mean an ideological tract in which all women are angels and/or so victimized they are incapable of moral choice, no. If you mean a novel in which women are human beings . . . and what happens to them is crucial to the theme, structure, and plot of the book, then yes" (*HT* xii).

[3] In this dissertation, we are not going to study the television series and will only focus on the books.

We chose to work on Atwood's novels because of the contemporaneity of their themes. The gender issues that *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* deal with are very current, as their recent success indicates. Indeed, the books explore the position of women in society and how they are constructed as inferior beings, which is still a reality nowadays. Moreover, the thirty-five-year gap offers an interesting perspective on the evolution or recurrence of societal trends. As dystopias generally reflect the anxieties of their authors' time, they are a genre suitable for studying society in literature, which is one of our aims.

The first part of this essay focuses on the Gileadean society and how the people in power transform gender through discursive means and bodily control. Judith Butler's theory on the performativity of gender provides a useful model to study how Gilead could be established so rapidly. "For Butler," Brady and Schirato explain, "gender is a performance, and a performance is not something one has or something one is, but rather something one does" (49). Indeed, through the repetition of certain actions sanctioned by society, gender solidifies over time and appears natural when it is actually constructed (Butler, *Trouble* 45). We will study how the Commanders of Gilead hijack this process by restricting women's movements, which then influences their gender. They also employ discourses to redefine women, discourses being “a kind of language that is specific to, and authorised by cultural fields, and which categorises the world” (Brady and Schirato 138). A discourse is like a lens that filtrates information and provides a specific perspective on the world, a perspective which is influenced by the people in power. Hegemonic discourses determine which behaviors are considered normal and which gender expressions are deemed appropriate. Discourses are composed of words but “also [of] social action, even violent social action” (Butler, *Trouble* 225), for example sexual violence. To analyze the link between sexuality and power and how the Commanders harness sexuality to dominate women, we will use Michel Foucault’s theory on the “apparatus of sexuality.” This model explains how power hides its origin and influence behind essentialist rhetoric.

In this section, we will not differentiate *The Handmaid’s Tale* from *The Testaments* because our aim is to study the structure of Gilead, which remains the same in the two novels. We have chosen to focus on the social system rather than on the individuals composing it for several reasons. First, Offred’s character has already been largely studied by critics (Grace, Hogsette, Neuman, Rubenstein, Somacarrera, Tolan), but most importantly *The Testaments* offers a new perspective on the establishment of Gilead. Indeed, Aunt Lydia explains how the Commanders and Aunts constructed the Gileadean system and gives an insight into the structure of power. This point of view was inaccessible to Offred, who could only talk from her subordinate position. She illustrates how discourses are internalized and how her repeated actions slowly modify her gender. But to understand the wider mechanisms shaping gender, we have focused on the societal level and not the individual one. This approach is also shaped by present concerns; indeed, the #MeToo movement has oriented the debate about how sexual harassment is structurally favored—women’s testimonies on social media have revealed that harassment pervades every level of society—and cannot be reduced to individual behavior.

In the second part, we will examine the relationship the texts create with the readers and how they respond to their contexts. In *La Littérature en Péril*, Tzvetan Todorov regrets that literary studies sometimes focus more on the tools used to analyze the texts and not enough on "les œuvres elles-mêmes, leur sens, le monde qu'elles évoquent" (20). We agree with Todorov's perspective and think it important to consider issues that resonate with society, like gender, and not to analyze texts as an end in itself. Indeed, literature is a means of communication which "tells us something about reality by ordering its conventions so that they become objects of our reflection" (Shi 984). We have therefore decided to focus on the readers and how the texts create a connection with them. Without abandoning the tools developed by literary critics—for instance, the notion of the implied reader developed by Wolfgang Iser—, we will examine how the two novels interact with their readers. By analyzing and comparing the narrators' stance, the appendices and the genre, we will see how the novels regulate the readers' immersion by favoring either their identification or their critical distance with the characters. Because of their endings, *The Handmaid's Tale* engages the readers' critical thinking to help them recognize dangerous discourses that cross the American eighties, whereas *The Testaments* triggers the readers' identification with the strong female characters to empower them against open sexism.

While responding to their specific contexts, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and *The Testaments* (2019) highlight the constructivism of gender and how power shapes it through bodily control and discourses, thus teaching the readers about mechanisms that influence their lives.

1. On the Transformation of Gender in Gilead: Control over Bodies and Discursive Means

> If gender is constructed, could it be constructed differently, or does it constructedness imply some structure differently, or does its constructedness imply some form of social determinism, foreclosing the possibility of agency and transformation?
>
> Butler, *Trouble* 11

"Gender" defines Judith Butler, "is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (*Trouble* 45). Contrary to essentialist understanding, Butler claims gender is culturally constructed because it is not "an 'essence' that gender expresses . . . the various acts of gender creates the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all" ("Performative" 522). Gender is constituted only through the repetition of performative acts, which solidify over time until "the authors of gender become entranced by their own fictions whereby the construction compels one's belief in its necessity and naturalness" (Butler, "Performative" 522). Gender thus appears as normal and unchangeable when it is actually socially constructed and can be altered.

With *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*, Margaret Atwood experiments with gender and the consequences which would arise if the "highly rigid regulatory frame" suddenly changed, as the government of Gilead installs a regime with completely reshaped gender norms. To implement this new hierarchy, the people in power concentrate their effort on female bodies forcing them to respect the laws, which, in turn, enable them to control gender as it is only through the "set of repeated acts" that gender exists. The "stylization of the body" also occurs at a discursive level, the Commanders appropriate this discursive power to redefine women's bodies and deny their humanity facilitating violence toward them. Violence, often sexual, is used to accelerate normalization until it creates an "appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being." Foucault's frame of reference about sexuality will clarify how power attempts to mask its origin behind essentialist rhetoric—here, the Commanders foreground Nature as the cause guiding their behavior.

In *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*, Margaret Atwood explores how a coercive government can transform gender by physically controlling women's bodies and the discursive means describing them, and, consequently, highlights the constructivism of gender.

1.1. The Appropriation of Women's Gender: From Body to Thoughts

In Gilead, the Commanders consider women fundamentally different and inferior to men, they consequently conceive a society which limits the interaction between the two sexes by recycling a preexisting theory: the separate spheres. Beatrix Kiss, who studied how the regime eliminated gender equality, explains that:

> the Commanders' plan was not just to save society from extinction but also to recreate covertly a strong patriarchy where women are dependent on men. This was achieved by taking natural differences of female and male bodies, strongly foregrounding these, and erecting an impenetrable wall between genders. (59)

The architects of the ideology therefore use physical differences to argue fundamental behavioral dissimilarities between men and women; for them, different means separate. In *The Testaments*, Commander Judd states Gilead's project when he demands that the future Founding Aunts "organize the separate sphere—the sphere for women. With, as its goal, the optimal amount of harmony, both civic and domestic, and the optimal number of offspring" (*TT* 175). For him, "harmony" will emerge from this division as they "have seen the disastrous results of the attempt to meld those spheres" (*TT* 174), in reference to the pre-Gilead time. The Commanders idealize gender segregation and connect it to a mythical past where society was harmonious. However, the theory of the separate sphere also originates from a historical process. Its development "coincided with industrialization, and the replacement of domestic with factory production" (Hunter 331), and has nothing to do with a "natural" manifestation of gender. The Commanders nevertheless recycle this discourse to anchor their new society in a larger tradition.

To implement this change of regime, the government of Gilead passes new laws; however, its objective is for those rules to become normative, meaning implicit and internalized, for the citizens to comply without coercive means. Gileadean elite uses a considerable amount of violence and surveillance to impose its rules onto its citizens[4]. Laws are easier to enforce because they are explicit, one's misbehavior is objectively visible and punishable; yet, less energy would be required if the laws were internalized and became norms. Indeed,

> norms are usually implied rather than explicitly articulated; they are neither rules nor laws, and are discernible "most clearly and dramatically in the effects that they produce" (Butler 2004:41). Moreover, and as Foucault makes clear, regulatory norms are not to be understood simply as forms of prohibition or constraint; rather, they are productive in the sense that they allow, facilitate and dispose socio-cultural practices, and render those practices as intelligible or otherwise. (Brady and Schirato 105)

Whereas the laws are repressive and can be understood only as a negative force, norms are "productive," they create behaviors corresponding with societal rules. They are not, however, contradictory as "Foucault notes that the norm often appears in legal form" (Butler, *Undoing* 49); indeed, laws express in words what norms imply. In Gilead, the government did not adapt their laws to preexisting norms, they propose "a new set of norms that are perpetuated in society through enactment of laws" (Moosavinia and Yousefi 163), "enactment" in the sense of the officialization of a law, but also in a Butlerian understanding of acting and performativity. Indeed, through physical applications and repetition, the laws will become internalized.

---

[4] Pilar Somacarrera analyzes how "the Gileadean regime, which aims to be ubiquitous and internalized by the population, . . . imposes its power through brainwashing and strict surveillance undertaken by security forces: the Angels (army), the Eyes ('invisible' police), and the Guardians" (52); she uses Foucault's model of the panoptic state to understand its mechanisms.

Normalization usually occurs "over time" (Butler, *Trouble* 45), but, because of the fracture with the American society of the eighties, the Gileadean government attempted to speed this process through violence. Yet, the leaders aspire to reach a state where norms regulate their citizens without physical coercion. For instance, Aunt Lydia shows disappointment about her use of force when she describes the statue representing her:

> Hanging from a belt around my waist is my Taser. This weapon reminds me of my failings: had I been more effective, I would not have needed such an implement. The persuasion in my voice would have been enough. (*TT* 4)

Aunt Lydia associates her violence, symbolized by the "Taser," with her "failings" and expresses regrets signaled by the use of conditional. She wishes "the persuasion in [her] voice," or less violent means such as discourses, could have "been enough" to force the future Handmaids to submit to their new role. The dichotomy between the Taser and her voice represents the opposition between the enforcement of laws through violence and a more ideological normalization. One has to keep in mind, Aunt Lydia has a retrospective understanding of the situation when she expresses those regrets and that she "didn't used to mind a little blood" (*TT* 314) when the facts occurred. The Gileadean system does not seek normalization out of goodness, but because it would require fewer means to control the citizens if they self-regulate according to the ideology.

Violence speeds the process of normalization but also compensates Gilead's lack of implicit power necessary to rule when relying on norms; the difference between the transitional generation and the following one illustrates how Gilead gained in legitimacy. According to Derrida, for performative acts to be effective they must "explicitly or implicitly cite the power that enables them to produce their words as action" (Brady and Schirato 45). For example, not everyone may declare a couple married for this to be true, it needs to proceed from a figure of authority, such as a priest or a representative of the government. At first, the Commanders of Gilead lack this unspoken authority because they cannot rely on “a network of meaning that has a long and established history of citation . . . that gives a performative its force” (Brady and Schirato 47). The “citation” quotes norms or instances of power already established for a long time and which seem legitimate. The transitional generation, who lived in the American society of the eighties and under Gilead, knows the Commanders broke this long history and accepts their self-proclaimed authority out of fear. Their unapologetic use of force tamed any rebellion. For example, the demonstrations organized in protest quickly stopped because “the police, or the army, or whoever they were, would open fire almost as soon as any of the marches even started” (*HT* 189). Offred’s hesitation concerning who fired indicates she does not recognize the origin of this power, in any case, their ruthlessness was enough to quiet the opposition. This fear and experience of violence marked this generation who, in Agnes’s words, “had been hardened in the fire” (*TT* 288). The girl and her peers remember only the Gileadean system which appears normal and legitimate to them. They are submissive because they were educated according to Gileadean norms and not due to the violent implementation of laws. This generation represents Gilead’s objective to rule in “harmony” as Commander Judd phrases it. Gilead’s initial impediment is overcome through violence at first, then, because of time passing, the “network of meaning” is reinstated and their authority unquestioned.

The regulation of clothes in Gilead illustrates how a restrictive law is used to implement ideology as the codification of bodies ensure gender’s distinction, and how a new reality is normalized. Butler explains that “it is through the body that gender and sexuality become exposed to others, implicated in social processes, inscribed by cultural norms, and apprehended in their social meanings” (*Undoing* 20). Therefore, the government’s laws on clothing shape the inscription of cultural norms onto the citizens’ bodies. Men wear uniforms in dark colors—black for the Commanders and Angels, and green for Guardians—and women have dresses whose colors define their function: the Marthas are green, the Wives are blue, red for the Handmaids, the Aunts wear brown and the Pearls silver. “These characteristics ensure the differentiation of women from men by one glance at their clothing” (Kiss 60); consequently, the uniforms institute and reinforce the segregation between the sexes through the “stylization of the body” (Butler, *Trouble* 45). The law that imposes clothes will also affect how people look at themselves and contribute to the internalization of their new roles symbolized by the color of the fabric covering them. After a while, the robes will seem natural to wear. Offred, who often thinks about double meanings, ponders on the word “habits” when she sees “the store where [they] order dresses. Some people call them *habits*, a good word for them. Habits are hard to break” (emphasis in original, *HT* 34). The italicized noun refers to clothes, whereas the second occurrence is understood as an action repeated many times. Offred, by using the same word and playing with its double definition, underscores the interconnectedness of the two meanings which can appear incongruous at first. On the one hand, the type of clothes we wear is indicative of our habits, and, on the other, our habits or norms influence our clothing choices and render bodies intelligible for the society by respecting its rules. Moreover, Offred multiplies the meanings of the common saying “habits are hard to break,” employing it in the old sense of altering one’s routine, and simultaneously commenting on Gilead’s use of clothes to enclose bodies. The citizens of Gilead cannot break free from their prescribed uniforms, nor the norms they represent. Asserting their control over clothes through laws allows the Commanders of Gilead to reduce gender expression as bodies are unambiguously codified as male or female. Then, the uniforms become “habits” in both senses of the term and shape individuals’ understanding of themselves.

In *The Testaments*, Agnes's and Daisy's discomfort, when they change into unfamiliar clothes, illustrates the weight of norms in clothing choice. Both need to accommodate to the other's culture, Daisy when she infiltrates Gilead as a convert and Agnes when she flees toward Canada. The latter who only knows Gilead's dresses, feels very uneasy when she has to wear a pair of jeans:

> I found the clothing provided for us disagreeable in the extreme. The underwear was very different from the plain, sturdy variety worn at Ardua Hall: to me it felt slippery and depraved. Over that there were male garments. It was disturbing to feel that rough cloth touching the skin of my legs, with no intervening petticoat. Wearing such clothing was gender treachery and against God's law. (*TT* 365)

"Disagreeable," "slippery and depraved," "disturbing," those clothes contrast with her former uniform and unsettle her as "habits are hard to break." Moreover, she crosses, in her understanding, the natural distinction between men's and women's genders, a punishable crime in Gilead. In contrast, Daisy feels again like herself after giving up her Pearl dress (*TT* 364). The juxtaposition of their opposed attitudes demonstrates the subjectivity of what is considered normal and the weight of cultural constructions, a pair of jeans can be perceived as a crime or a reconnection with one's identity. The architects of Gilead, aware of the influence clothes can have, remove the freedom to choose one's appearance to reinforce gender distinction and further their grasp on gender.

Clothes but, more importantly, acts create gender; consequently, the Commanders and Aunts discipline body postures in function of people's roles and status in Gilead, through clearly defined rituals. They pay such attention to "bodily acts" (Butler, *Undoing* 198) because "the bodies we wear and the rules and restrictions applied to them by our participation in society do immeasurably color the experiences we have, and ultimately, shape the worldviews with which we identify" (Matthews 639). For instance, Offred describes how everyone is positioned in the room the night the household waits for the Commander's reading of the Bible. She is kneeling, the two Marthas and the Guardian stand behind her, whereas Serena Joy sits on the sofa. Offred comments "the posture of the body is important, here and now: minor discomforts are instructive" (*HT* 89). Offred—and the Aunts or Commander who devised this ritual—understands that the spatialization of bodies symbolizes the societal hierarchy. The Handmaid is kneeling to represent her lower status and the "discomforts" due to her position maintain her inferiority, her pain constantly reminds her she does not deserve to be comfortable, contrary to the Wife. Being on the floor changes her perspective: she is looked down on and she looks up to other people both physically and metaphorically. Her lower position concretely alters her viewpoint and will, in the end, modify how she understands herself in relation to others, which is exactly what is intended. This example illustrates how bodies' spatiality informs and contributes to creating social hierarchies.

To achieve body control outside formal settings, the appropriate conduct needs to be internalized and, to modify their behaviors, the transitional generation needs more force than the children socialized in Gilead. Aunt Lydia undoubtedly understands the impact bodily attitudes have on identities and Offred remembers how:

> Aunt Lydia strides along the rows of kneeling nightgowned women, hitting our backs or feet or bums or arms lightly, just a flick, a tap, with her wooden pointer if we slouch or slacken. She wanted our heads bowed just right, our toes together and pointed, our elbows at the proper angle. Part of her interest in this was aesthetic: she liked the look of the thing. . . . But she knew too the spiritual value of bodily rigidity, of muscle strain: a little pain cleans out the mind, she'd say. (*HT* 204)

The Handmaids' bodies are divided into parts, they are only "backs or feet or bums or arms" and not seen in their entirety. This fragmentation is visible in the text itself, composed of short phrases punctuated by commas that stress its rhythm, and represents the pace of Aunt Lydia walking among the Handmaids. This literary technique associating rhythm and visual imagery recreates a vivid scene and transmits the sense of dread felt by the Handmaids. Aunt Lydia uses this fear to format the women's bodies and inculcate submissiveness. The bowed head, for instance, signals and develops the humility expected from those at the bottom of the hierarchy and contributes to breaking the self-confidence women had in pre-Gilead time. According to Offred, Aunt Lydia's interest resides in the aesthetic and the spiritual value of this constraint, but she overlooks the effect it would have on gender as they start to link femininity to docility. The example of the Handmaids is extreme as their bodies are minutely codified, yet regulation of demeanors occurs in the society at large. For instance, social norms dictate how women and men sit, knees together with a skirt. Agnes and her friend Becka try to teach Daisy how to "sit patiently, with her back straight and her hands folded in her lap" (*TT* 323). Daisy's attempts and failure to conform illustrate how ingrained those attitudes are. The means the Aunts deploy to change behavior and the difference between Agnes and Daisy underscore the weight society has in personal attitudes and senses of normality.

The change in attitudes do not occur overnight, and repetition is a key factor in implementing a new behavior. In Gilead, women's lives are highly repetitive because their activities are limited, thus favoring the assimilation of new norms; Offred's routine even transpires in the structure of her narrative. For Butler, performative acts draw their force in their iteration:

> As in other ritual social dramas, the action of gender requires a performance that is *repeated*. This repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation. Although there are individual bodies that enact these significations by becoming stylized into gendered modes, this "action" is a public action. (Butler, *Trouble* 191)

Repetition is almost a second nature for the Handmaids whose lives are strictly planned, and their highly repetitive lives contributes to the internalization of Gilead's gender rules. This routine is even visible in the structure of Offred's narrative composed of forty-six chapters distributed in fifteen parts. The latter alternates between waking moments and periods of sleep which are called "Night," "Shopping," "Night," "Waiting Room," and so on; a "Night" part, or "Nap" in the case of the fifth section, separates each active period.

This organization symbolizes the routine and ordered life Offred leads. By structuring her time, Gilead's architects impose their definition of gender onto her and she becomes complicit of this creation as, every time she (or anyone else) complies, she reenacts and reexperiences their version of femininity; her small actions thus have a public impact all the more so since she constantly repeats the same ones.

By acting according to Gilead's standard, Offred progressively starts to believe in the regime's definition of gender even though, at first, she accepts Gilead's norm as a strategy to increase her chances of survival. Moosavinia and Yousefi explain that "despite the resistance in the face of power, Offred does absorb gender and social norms of Gilead because she performs them every day and watches others performing them too" (171). Through repetition of bodily acts, the newly defined gender gradually becomes her own. At the Red Center, Offred is surprised by the speed of her transformation: "already we were losing the taste for freedom, already we were finding these walls secure" (*HT* 143). The adverbs "already" underline how quickly the Handmaids' attitude change. If the Red Center's brainwashing techniques force her to comply, she also decides to follow the rules to survive. Early in her narrative, she declares, "I try not to think too much. Like other things now, thought must be rationed. There's a lot that doesn't bear thinking about. Thinking can hurt your chances, and I intend to last" (*HT* 17). She consciously blocks her previous memories and critical thinking to survive[5]. "Even though she lost her freedom, independence, control, identity and any personal sense of power, she is determined to protect her life by submitting to the norms" (Moosavinia and Yousefi 171), and under Gilead's rule no other alternative exists if one wants to live. At first Offred, like many other, physically comply out of fear, then, due to the performativity of her actions, she internalizes Gilead's ideology.

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[5] Shirley Neuman names this strategy "willed ignorance" (862).

After her normalization, Offred thinks according to Gilead's values and feels estranged from her former mindset. The encounter with Japanese tourists visiting Gilead reveals her deep transformation:

> Their heads are uncovered and their hair too is exposed, in all its darkness and sexuality. They wear lipstick, red, outlining the damp cavities of their mouths, like scrawls on a washroom wall, of the time before.
>
> I stop walking. Ofglen stops beside me and I know that she too cannot take her eyes off these women. We are fascinated, but also repelled. They seem undressed. It has taken so little time to change our minds, about things like this. (*HT* 38)

Offred interprets the women's bodies through the prism of Gilead's ideology; the hair and colored lips are considered sexual and should therefore be covered. The Handmaids' attitude, shared between fascination and repulsion, indicates the tension within them. On the one hand, this exposition of the flesh disgusts them, and on the other they are attracted and reminded of their previous life. Offred's last comment reveals again her surprise at the speed with which she changed her mind "about things like this." This recognition occurs on several occasions in her narrative, she recalls how women used to work and how "it was considered the normal thing" (*HT* 182). Or she remarks that "it's strange to remember how we used to think, as if everything were available to us, as if there were no contingencies, no boundaries; as if we were free to shape and reshape forever the ever-expanding perimeters of our lives" (*HT* 239). Her utilization of the past tense and construction "used to" marks how her sense of normality completely shifted and demonstrates how the Gileadean elite reached their goal in implementing new norms. Offred's spatial metaphor representing the possibilities in life echoes Gilead's restriction of her movement and her consequent lack of agency, "boundaries" are simultaneously physical and mental. The Gileadean norms prevent her from going where she wants but also from imagining herself differently, her former mindset is "strange" and remote to her already.

For Offred, Aunt Lydia is the voice of Gilead and she integrates her comments as a natural component of her narration revealing how she internalized the new norms. In *The*

Handmaid's Tale, Aunt Lydia represents the regime's ideology because she is in charge of the Handmaid's "reeducation" at the Red Center and dominates the other Aunts. Generally, no typographic signs distinguish Aunt Lydia's words from Offred's thoughts. It is only later, through the incise "said Aunt Lydia," that the statements are attributed to her. Her remarks are often called by association, for instance in the quote below, Offred describes the geographical position of her town and connects it to one of Aunt Lydia's teachings: "This is the heart of Gilead, where the war cannot intrude except on television . . . this is the centre, where nothing moves. The Republic of Gilead, said Aunt Lydia, knows no bounds. Gilead is within you" (*HT* 33). "The Republic of Gilead" is only retroactively ascribed to Aunt Lydia and, at first, Offred appears to take responsibility of the words because the lack of quotations marks blurs the attribution. The sentence "The Republic of Gilead knows no bounds" is clearly Aunt Lydia's, the following phrase "Gilead is within you" seems to be hers as well, yet one could argue Offred ironically added it. This doubt illustrates how well Offred internalizes Aunt Lydia's precepts, how Gilead is "within" the Handmaid's thoughts. This structure is repeated many times in the novel, so much that Offred "begun to think she existed only in [her] head" (*HT* 286). Infiltrating one's thoughts is exactly Aunt Lydia's goal and, if she disdained her previous use of violence[6], she rejoices in this power: "I'm also a model of moral perfection to be emulated—*What would Aunt Lydia want you to do?*—and a judge and arbiter in the misty inquisition of the imagination—*What would Aunt Lydia have to say about that?*" (Emphasis in original, *TT* 32). Aunt Lydia, due to her status, incarnates Gilead's ideology for many women, so much so that she becomes a "model" used to gauge one's behavior. She, as a representative of Gilead's norms, infiltrates women's psyche, so deeply that her words resonate in Offred's narrative as the Handmaid's own thoughts.

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[6] See page 11.

Gilead now controls Offred's movements and infiltrated her thoughts, as a consequence, she feels disconnected from her body, which performs a gender contrary to her former identity. Gilead's indoctrination and her everyday performative actions erode her original mindset and result in an identity crisis according to Moosavinia and Yousefi (163). A feeling of distance toward her body also emerges, an understandable consequence because "her body . . . exists literally to be used against her" (Rubenstein 103). Offred explains how her relationship with her body changed: "I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will. . . . There were limits but my body was nevertheless lithe, single, solid, one with me" (*HT* 83). In the pre-Gilead time, she had agency over her movement, her body was "an instrument," "a means," "an implement," a passive tool that obeyed her "will." The use of the past tense marks a difference from her present feelings, when her body is no longer "one with [her]," but is disconnected. Now her body expresses a gender identity that does not conform to her former beliefs. Consequently, she rejects this tool, which is not hers but Gilead's. When she takes a bath, liberated from her uniform, she cannot avoid confronting her body:

> My nakedness is strange to me already. My body seems outdated. Did I really wear bathing suits, at the beach? I did, without thought, among men, without caring that my legs, my arms, my thighs and back were on display, could be seen. *Shameful, immodest*. I avoid looking down at my body, not so much because it's shameful or immodest but because I don't want to see it. I don't want to look at something that determines me so completely. (Emphasis in original, *HT* 72-73)

Moosavinia and Yousefi analyze this quote as a moment of "self-reproaching" and guilt (170); however, Offred resists, in this case, Gilead's definition of her body as "shameful or immodest," those words are not hers, the italics signal they belong to Aunt Lydia. She struggles to reconcile herself to her former self, bathing at the beach with her actual imprisoned and imprisoning body. Controlled by Gilead, it now "determines [her] so completely" because her feminine condition condemns her to a lower status and her body performs a gender removed from her previous identity. Consequently, she prefers distancing herself from her body by not looking at it and, at the same time, attempts to ignore Gilead's power over it.

1.2. The Dehumanization of Women Through Discourses

So far, we have looked at bodies without questioning this category, however, in the Butlerian theory, bodies are constructed through language or "discursive means" (Butler, *Trouble* 185). Contrary to what one might instinctively think, bodies are not given or unproblematic but shaped by norms and constructed through language:

> bodies only make sense, only come to be understood, through a variety of descriptive regimes. In one sense, bodies only appear through the language we have to describe them. It is through the way bodies are described or spoken that they become intelligible, and it is in this description that bodies are constructed. (Brady and Schirato 38)

The means we possess to describe bodies condition their intelligibility; however, the people in power control those means and can impose their definition onto others. They exercise "symbolic violence," a concept coined by the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu who analyzed

> la capacité des agents dominants à imposer leurs productions culturelles et symboliques aux dominés, et à faire méconnaître l'arbitraire de ces productions (donc à les faire admettre comme légitimes). C'est ce qu'il nomme la violence symbolique, mécanisme premier d'imposition des rapports de domination par les représentations. ("Violences" *Glossaire du Féminisme*)

In Gilead, the Commanders appropriate language by forbidding women to read or write—except the Aunts—to own the discursive power and impose their representation onto women. Through this symbolic violence, the Commanders can redefine the limits of humanity because "the terms by which we are recognized as human are socially articulated and changeable" (Butler, *Undoing* 2) and "any biological or cultural combination not commensurate with gender norms is rendered unintelligible, and consequently not really human" (Brady and Schirato 105). The Commanders use this power to exclude women from the human realm and assert their power over them through a multitude of discourses and actions, ranging from simple but disempowering comparison to flower, to treating them with no more value than animals or objects.

Excluding someone from the realm of humanity facilitates the exploitation of this person[7]; thus the Commanders use this technique to debase women and everyone under them applies it as well to survive in this violent structure. At her level, Offred understands the necessity of dehumanization to execute brutal actions. The first time she perceives this process is when her husband kills their cat so it will not betray their escape:

> I'll take care of it, Luke said. And because he said *it* instead of *her*, I knew he meant *kill*. That is what you have to do before you kill, I thought. You have to create an it, where none was before. You do that first, in your head, and then you make it real. So that's how they do it, I thought. I seemed never to have known that before. (emphasis in original *HT* 202)

Luke needs to take away the cat's near-human status, denoted by the personal pronoun "*her,*" and return it to an animal, an "*it,*" before killing it. As Hogsette notices, "by simply changing the pronoun, one can delete another's personhood" (268). The repetition of "have to" underlines this sense of obligation and the markers of time—"before," "that first," "then"—divide the operation into two stages and indicate dehumanization is a prerequisite to violence. Offred's use of the second person means she distances herself from this action. Moreover, she does not apply this to herself as she concludes "that's how they do it" employing a vague "they" not referring to anyone in particular. However, she will soon have to resort to the same technique when she participates to the Particicution, a ceremony where she has to execute, with the other Handmaids, an alleged criminal (*HT* 290-293)[8]. Aunt Lydia recognizes this behavioral pattern in Commander Judd who abuses his young

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[7] The contrary is also true: when one starts caring for the other, it becomes harder to exploit him or her. The relation between Offred and her Commander exemplifies this, as they get to know each other, executing the Ceremony is more difficult for them (*HT* 170-172).

[8] Another example of dehumanization is when Offred "describes the hanged men as scarecrows and snowmen" (Hogsette 268).

Wives and kills them once they stopped amusing him. She describes a painting hung in his office that epitomizes his vision of women. The picture portrays

> a barely nubile girl without any clothes on. Dragonfly wings have been added to make her into a fairy. . . . She has an amoral, elvish smile and is hovering over a mushroom. That's what Judd likes [Aunt Lydia comments]—young girls who can be viewed as not fully human, with a naughty core to them. That excuses his treatment of them. (*TT* 315-316)

The painted girl is devoided of her humanity and belongs to the realm of magical creatures as she has "wings" that "make her into a fairy." The description gives the impression that those wings "have been added" at a later stage to excuse the painting of a naked "barely nubile girl." Aunt Lydia aptly articulates the connection between lack of humanness and maltreatment when she explains why Judd likes this painting and how it justifies the sexual exploitation of his child brides. Gilead's violent structure relies on dehumanization at every level, one has to destroy the other's humanity to comply with its order and survive.

As a first step to dehumanize women and to further their discursive power, the Commanders of Gilead take away women's ability to read, write or think. Indeed, by monopolizing this power, men control the terms in which women can define themselves. Consequently, they forbid any type of reading and writing for women, except the Aunts, who need these skills to run their "own womanly sphere" (*TT* 175). To prevent reading, the Commanders even change the shops' names replacing them with signs to avoid "too much temptation" (*HT* 35) and they strictly control writing devices as "Pen Is Envy" (*HT* 196). Moosavinia and Yousefi remark the potency of this method when they explain that "Offred's dehumanization was clearly caused by depriving her of all basic human rights, yet none of them worked as effectively as depriving her of language use" (170). Without language, Offred cannot counteract the symbolic violence exercised by the Commanders who redefine her as a subhuman, nor create her "own subjective reality" (Hogsette 264). An example of this discursive power is given in *The Testaments* when Commander Judd, who incarnates Gilead's ideology[9] denies women the ability to think. He addresses the future Founding Aunts and asks them to control the women's sphere:

> "You are all intelligent women. Through your former…" He did not want to say *professions*. "Through your former experiences, you are familiar with the lives of women. You know how they are likely to think, or let me rephrase that—how they are likely to react to stimuli, both positive and less positive. You can therefore be of service." (Emphasis in original, *TT* 175)

For him, women cannot "think," and he reformulates the word into "react to stimuli," a terminology used for animals. If he qualifies the Founding Aunts as "intelligent women," it is only to coax them into his service. However, he refuses to recognize their "professions," which would grant validity to their presence in the male public sphere. This occurrence only marks the beginning of a long disempowering process and denial of their thinking abilities.

The Aunts will later continue his sapping work with the girls of Gilead. To anchor this difference in bodily characteristics, the Aunts devise a discourse about the dissimilitude between female and male brains. For example, they are told that men do "important things . . ., too important for females to meddle with because they had smaller brains that were incapable of thinking large thoughts" (*TT* 14) or that women have "special brains, which were not hard and focused like the brains of men but soft and damp and warm and enveloping" (*TT* 87-88). The Aunts falsely equate the size of the brain with its capacity, justifying their claim about women's inability to think "large thoughts" by biological aspect. The adjectives qualifying male and female brains are placed in opposition as the men's are "hard and focused" and women's "soft and damp and warm and enveloping." The two registers translate the hierarchy of values and the difference of gender roles in Gilead. Men need to be focused to perform "important things," whereas women should take care of the children and be “warm and enveloping.” The biologization of their inability to think disempowers the girls who are meant to believe in their inherent inferiority to men and that no effort could change that.

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[9] In *The Testaments,* Commander Judd is the only male voice because he interacts with Aunt Lydia who reports incidents happening in the women's sphere. He also appoints the Founding Aunts during the coup and supervises how they create the new rules. As such, he incarnates the voice of Gilead and its ideology.

The imagery of empty female brains pervades *The Testaments*, symbolizing how the Gileadean ideology proceeds to void women of their capacities. For instance, Becka’s Handmaid gives birth to an “Unbaby,” a malformed girl who “didn’t have a brain” (*TT* 94). Her fatal deformity represents women’s status in Gilead whose heads are emptied by the discourses denying them the capacity to think. Another example is given when Commander Judd visits his future Wife Agnes. As the tradition directs, he comes to meet her and her family, after formal greetings, Agnes describes how

> The Commander advanced, arranged his face into a jowly smile, and stuck his mouth onto my forehead in a chaste kiss. His lips were unpleasantly warm; they made a sucking sound as they pulled away. I picture a tiny morsel of my brain being sucked through the skin of my forehead into his mouth. A thousand such kisses later and my skull would be emptied of brain. (*TT* 226)

Commander Judd incarnates Gilead’s ideology, an ideology which attempts to empty women’s brain. The “tiny morsel of [Agnes] brain” symbolizes women’s thoughts which are gently eroding under the Commander’s actions. He absorbs these pieces “into his mouth,” the siege of speech closely connected to discourses, thus suggesting that words fuel this absorption. Then, the “thousand such kisses” imply repetition, a necessary element according to Butler for an action to be effective and performative. The Commander, with his discourses or kisses, could completely empty Agnes’s brain of ideas. Her imaginary representation corresponds to Gilead’s reality where Commanders seek to diminish women’s capacity through their words and actions.

If women do not have the means to resist the discourses, then the people in power can use symbolic violence to change the representations about their bodies and capacities. One of these strategies is the construction of a rhetoric comparing young girls to flowers.

This image, although positive, is also disempowering as the Aunts insist on the frailty of flowers and their consequent need for protection. In the chapter "Precious Flower," Agnes remembers the Aunts' teachings:

> we were precious flowers that had to be kept safely inside glass houses, or else we would be ambushed and our petals would be torn off and our treasure would be stolen and we would be ripped apart and trampled by the ravenous men who might lurk around any corner, out there in the wide sharp-edged sin-ridden world. (*TT* 10)

The adjective "precious" signifies they are valued, a positive aspect, but also valuable as it includes an idea of rarity and Gilead needs fertile women to survive. The additional consequence of their preciousness is that they must be protected, or "kept safely inside glass houses" which means controlled as well. The mention of "glass houses" echoes their social position in the separate sphere theory, where they should look after the household and not wander in the public space. To further this distinction, the outside world is represented as a dangerous place. The construction "or else" changes the register and introduces a lexical field of threats composed of "ambushed," "torn off," "stolen," "ripped apart," "trampled," "ravenous men," "lurk," and the "wide sharp-edged sin-ridden world." Those terms impose their action onto the passive "flowers," which can only suffer from these horrific deeds. The Aunts use the flower metaphor to remain vague as to what exactly could be done to the girls, they only talk of "petals" or "treasure" to refer to their virginity. This "education" has a deterrent function and is rather effective; indeed, Agnes internalizes the metaphor and later imagines she will end up in "a pile of wilting green petals" (*TT* 224) if she goes outside to escape her marriage. This metaphor constructs the girls' bodies into something fragile and valuable which needs protection. Hence, Gilead's ideology shapes their understanding of their bodies and ensure they conform to the norms.

For women born before Gilead, stronger measures need to be taken to break them; one of them is to animalize women until they think of themselves as less than human. The transition to Gilead's government was violent and sudden. Aunt Lydia recounts how

Gilead’s agent burst into her office and sorted her female colleague by their age and reproductive abilities. They took her in a van without explanation, drove her to a stadium and placed her in a section with other middle-aged women lawyers. After witnessing an execution, the women were brought to locker rooms and kept in horrific conditions: clogged toilettes, no paper, no sanitary pads for menstruating women, no drinking water, lights on at all time and daily killings. Aunt Lydia recounts, “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” (*TT* 143). The mistreatment of women is not gratuitous, the soldiers, as Aunt Lydia is well aware, take away their comfort and basic needs to break them. Lydia’s repetitions of “animal” and “nature” are inscribed in a binary opposition with “human” and “culture,” and if women belong to one category, they are automatically excluded from the other: the cultured world. Not only does Gilead drive women out of the realm of humanity, but Aunt Lydia herself uses animal terminology to qualify women who share her misery. She talks about the “howling” (*TT* 141) or how some “wolfed and guzzled” (*TT* 142) their food and she represents herself as “a rat in a maze” (*TT* 142). These terms show how the animal treatment applied to women gradually penetrates her thoughts and within herself denies her female humanity.

After this transitional stage, the animalization process relies less on violent recategorization and integrates discourses or practices of everyday life. The Handmaids are particularly connected with animal farms because they are being impregnated like them. Daisy, who lives in Canada and studies Gilead from an external point of view, summarizes their conditions: “the Handmaids were forced to get pregnant like cows, except that cows had a better deal” (*TT* 46). This rhetoric of animalization is so potent that it crosses the border and is repeated by a sixteen-year-old girl. The imagery also integrated the thoughts of Offred who “wait[s], washed, brushed, fed, like a prize pig” (*HT* 79). She is marked like a farm animal with a tattoo on her ankle, or “a cattle-brand” (*HT* 266) as she names it. This animalization spreads to other women in society, for example the Aunts control Agnes’s teeth and body to see if she is fit to be married (*TT* 154), like an animal one would buy. All these elements, however, direct or indirect, participate in Gilead’s strategy to dehumanize women and lower them to an animal status.

Unable to think because of their “empty” brains, women are also considered in terms of lack and emptiness. Indeed, women, especially the Handmaids, are compared to objects that can be filled, thus reducing them to their mere uteruses, a symbol of their reproductive capacities. In Gilead’s rhetoric, Handmaids are “two-legged wombs, that’s all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices” (*HT* 146), “containers” (*HT* 107), they “must be a worthy vessel” (*HT* 75) and when they fail to become pregnant they are “just a boat with no cargo, a chalice with no wine in it, an oven—to be crude—minus the bun” (*HT* 172). These metaphors all equate the Handmaids with empty containers whose value only comes from their content, the baby in their uteruses. The injunction to be a “worthy vessel” emanates from Aunt Lydia but the other phrases are from Offred who uses Gilead’s discourse to describe herself as it is the most accurate way to qualify her current position. She is treated like an empty object that fails its role of being filled. “The imagery of woman as empty vessel,” explains Matthews, “is biblical in origin, but remains pervasive in traditionalist inscriptions of gender performance. Not only do the men of Gilead perceive these traits as essentially female, but the women also begin to internalize them as proper and natural” (645). Offred illustrates this internalization with the Gileadean vocabulary she uses to describe her function. Her attitude toward her body is complex, we saw previously how she distances herself from it because it performed a gender opposed to her former values[10]. Continuing with the bath episode, she explains how “now the flesh arranges itself differently" (*HT* 84) and revolves around "a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping" (*HT* 84), her uterus. Offred is reduced to her reproductive function and consequently her uterus appears "more real" than her, she acknowledges the re-hierarchization of her body that now directs her life. Being constantly compared to empty objects and treated as such, gradually integrates her thoughts and shapes her understanding of herself.

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[10] See page 20.

Animals, subhuman, objects, women are a "national resource" (*HT* 75) for those in power as their reproductive capacities are primordial in these times of rising infertility and consequently valuable. The words used to describe the Handmaids reflect their condition. For instance, Aunt Lydia thinks, "women are only one of the commodities—I hesitate to call them commodities, but when money is in the picture, such they are—that are being relocated under cover. Is it lemon in and women out?" (*TT* 210). Even if she "hesitate[s]" to name women commodities, they are indeed treated like merchandise in Gilead. This "resource," i.e. the Handmaids, is displaced every two years in another family to see if they can perform their duty and become pregnant, or they are smuggled in by the Pearl or out when someone helps them escape. Aunt Lydia pragmatically recognizes this reality and her word choice reflects this. In this world, women equal "lemon," another type of clandestine merchandise. Due to the high infertility rates, the Gileadean structure revolves around the need for more children which confers value and power to the women who can procreate. Offred understands this duality and declares, "I want to be valued, in ways that I am not; I want to be more than valuable" (*HT* 108). She is "valuable" because she can bring life into the world and is "valued" in the monetary sense for this capacity, but not "valued" for herself or recognized as a human being. As men want to appropriate all the powers, they dehumanize women to undermine the power conferred by their bodies. "By owning the bodies of fertile women," explains Kiss, "the male power elite in Gilead also owns the entire reproductive capacity of the nation, which instantly confers on them authority over the future of not just their nation but possibly the human race" (65). Men hijack this immense potential to ensure their control over the process, the sexual intercourse, and the product, the babies.

In theory, the Handmaid's function is purely reproductive and not recreative; pleasure is eliminated from sexual intercourse as desire involves recognizing the other as a human being. Handmaids "are for breeding purposes: we aren't concubines, geisha girls, courtesans" (*HT* 146), explains Offred. To enforce this definition, the Ceremony is conceived to remove any ambiguity. Lights on, all fully clothed, the Wife lies on the bed, the Handmaid rests between her spread legs, the Commander stands at the edge and "is fucking the lower part of [her] body" (*HT* 104). For Offred, the Ceremony

> has nothing to do with sexual desire, at least for me, certainly not for Serena. Arousal and orgasm are no longer thought necessary; they would be a symptom of frivolity merely, like jazz garters or beauty spots: superfluous distractions for the light-minded. Outdated. . . .
> This is no recreation, even for the Commander. This is serious business. The Commander, too, is doing his duty. (*HT* 105)

The first sentence corresponds to Offred's feeling about the Ceremony and her understandable lack of sexual desire. In the second, the passive voice indicates that Offred transcribes Gilead's point of view, where pleasure is dismissed as a "frivolity" and "superfluous distractions." This "outdated" attitude is opposed to the sense of "duty" associated with the Commander. The tone of the last sentences is strict: they are short affirmatives, structured by the repetitions of "this is" and "Commander" that express the seriousness of the matter at hand. The adverb "even" emphasizes the "surprising" fact that men do not need pleasure either[11]. The Gileadean ideology completely devoids sexuality of its pleasure because desire involves seeing the partner as a human. "The Hegelian tradition," explains Butler, "links desire with recognition, claiming that desire is always a desire for recognition and that it is only through the experience of recognition that any of us becomes constituted as socially viable beings" (*Undoing* 2), or a human in one's own right. Therefore, Gilead's interest in removing arousal from sexual activity is not only to conform to their puritan inspired ideology, but also to continue the dehumanization of women; they are not equals taking pleasure but objects one has to fill.

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[11] Unofficially, the Commander still seek sexual pleasure outside this arrangement; for example, in the Jezebel's club, a place where young women prostitute themselves in the more traditional understanding of the term. For more details, see the chapter "Jezebel's" in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

1.3. The Apparatus of Sexuality: Sexual Violence, Regulation of Bodies and Essentialist Justifications

Even if devoided of pleasure, sexual acts are performative and, in Gilead, sexual objectification and sexuality are used to reinforce the patriarchal structure founded on gender imbalance. The Gileadean discourses work to reduce the women to their reproductive function and avoid the notion of sexuality, for instance through the regulation of the Ceremony that "has nothing to do with sexual desire" (*HT* 105). If Gilead's rhetoric does not mention sexuality explicitly, the Commanders still employ it to dominate women, which participates in maintaining and furthering patriarchy. For example, sexual objectification plays into Gilead's strategy as it "involves the transformation of a human being into a one-dimensional sexual entity" (Wilson, Freidman, and Hengen 110), another means to belittle women. Several critics commented on the relation between sexuality and the subjection of women. Moosavinia and Yousefi point out that gender hierarchy is reinforced through the Ceremony because

> sexual intercourse in this manner requires women to be passive and subordinate, and men to be dominant and in control. . . . Men are the subjects of sex while women are regarded as the sexual objects. Sexual behavior of both genders at the Ceremony reflects their social place in the society. Women have a submissive role in this society, while men have more control and more chances of survival. (165)

Therefore, the position in the bedroom reveals and reinforces the hierarchy of gender in the society at large. According to Veseljević, "through institutionalisation of their sexuality, Handmaids are deprived of it and as women deprived of female identity. Sexuality becomes the main instrument of male domination of women and essential of gender inequality" (83). The government of Gilead furthers its control over women by stealing their sexuality and regulating it, as Foucault would say "le sexe, ça ne se juge pas seulement, ça s'administre" (35). Sexuality becomes a weapon in Gilead's arsenal to reduce women to their bodies and classify them as second-class citizens.

Sexual harassment, which is the normality in Gilead, is a further means to confine women to their lower status. Judith Butler, expanding on Monique Witting's theory, argues that

> the violence enacted against sexed subjects—women, lesbians, gay men, to name a few—[is] the violent enforcement of a category violently constructed. In other words, sexual crimes against these bodies effectively reduce them to their "sex," thereby reaffirming and enforcing the reduction of the category itself. Because discourse is not restricted to writing or speaking, but is also social action, even violent social action, we ought also to understand rape, sexual violence, "queer-bashing" as the category of sex in action. (*Trouble* 225)

This process of reducing bodies to their sex through violence is made particularly visible in Gilead. Indeed, the structure of the Republic is based on gender distinction and to maintain this state, gender categories need to be re-enforced constantly, with verbal discourses and violent implementation. As "the act of harassment may be one in which a person is 'made' into a certain gender" (Butler, *Trouble* XIII), the Gileadean government facilitates the possibilities of such harassment to "make" women into women fitting their definition. Men are never punished for assaulting women because four female witnesses are required to equal one male voice (*TT* 252), enabling them to act in impunity. According to Kołodziejuk, "in Gilead the ubiquity of sexist violence that encompasses all women regardless of their status is foregrounded by the sexual harassment" (82). Indeed, no woman is protected from such abuse, despite the Aunts' claim women are safer now, sexual harassment is omnipresent and normalized. For instance, if a girl speaks up she is not believed but blamed. Agnes recounts how two of her friends tried to report "such things"—one a Guardian touching her leg, and the other a man unzipping "his trousers in front of her"—and how they were punished afterwards (*TT* 97). Under these conditions, sexual harassment is rendered invisible, as women know better than reporting male wrongdoing, which, in turn, favors abuses.

Agnes's visit to the dentist, when Dr. Grove masturbates with the twelve-year-old's hand, illustrates the normality of sexual harassment and how it constitutes her as a sexed body. For the first time, Agnes goes to her appointment on her own, usually a Martha would accompany her because it was "more proper" (*TT* 95) and protected her. At first, the consultation goes "as usual" (*TT* 95), Dr. Grove finished checking her teeth when he suddenly put his hand on her "small but growing breast" (*TT* 96). Agnes recounts her reaction:

> I froze, in shock. So it was all true then, about men and their rampaging, fiery urges, and merely by sitting in the dentist chair I was the cause. I was horribly embarrassed—what was I supposed to say? I didn't know, so I simply pretended it wasn't happening. . . .
>
> The fingers found my nipple and pinched. It was like having a thumbtack stuck into me. I moved the upper part of my body forward—I needed to get out of that dentist chair as fast as I could—but the hand was locking me in. Suddenly it lifted, and then some of the rest of Dr. Grove moved into sight.
>
> "About time you saw one of these," he said in the normal voice in which he said everything. "You'll have one of them inside of you soon enough." He took hold of my hand and positioned it on this part of himself.
>
> I don't think I need to tell you what happened next. He had a towel handy, he wiped himself off and tucked his appendage back into his trousers.
>
> "There," he said. "Good girl. I didn't hurt you." He gave me a fatherly pat on the shoulder. "Don't forget to brush twice a day, and floss afterwards." (*TT* 96)

The discrepancy between the violence felt by Agnes and the matter-of-fact tone of Dr. Grove highlights how sexual harassment is normalized. His "normal voice," "fatherly pat" and the advice about her teeth afterwards strongly contrast with Agnes's "shock," her panic and embarrassment. Moreover, his preparedness signals he has experience in assaulting his young patients. Dr. Grove's unwanted touching of her breasts and use of her hand sexualizes Agnes's body in a new manner. For the first time, her body is constituted by acts as a sexed body: or, in Butler's words, he violently enforces the category of women upon her. To further control her, the dentist imposes his truth on her, he "didn't hurt" her, this simple statement denies her feelings and shapes how she is to understand what just occurred. Disempowered by what she has been told and overpowered by the man's strengths, Agnes physically experiences how women are inferior and unable to protect themselves.

If the dentist appointment was Agnes's first corporal experience of sexuality, she had been readied by the Aunts for such occurrences. The Aunts, by constantly teaching the girls how their bodies are dangerous and could "inflame" men's desire, do not tame their sexuality, on the contrary, they create it and render it preeminent in their thoughts. In *La Volonté de Savoir* (1976), Michel Foucault argues against his contemporaries who believed the State was repressing sexuality and people should free themselves from the restriction imposed on sexual behavior, what he calls "l'hypothèse répressive" (18). For him, the power does not repress sexuality but produces it because "ces discours sur le sexe ne se sont pas multipliés hors du pouvoir ou contre lui ; mais là même où il s'exerçait et comme moyen de son exercice" (Foucault 45). Foucault declares further that the power's repressive strategies are not actually controlling sexuality:

> En fait, il s'agit plutôt de la production même de la sexualité. Celle-ci, il ne faut pas concevoir comme une sorte donnée de nature que le pouvoir essaierait de mater, ou comme un domaine obscur que le savoir tenterait, peu à peu, de dévoiler. C'est le nom qu'on peut donner à un dispositif historique: non pas réalité d'en dessous sur laquelle on exercerait des reprises difficiles, mais grand réseau de surface où la stimulation des corps, l'intensification des plaisirs, l'incitation au discours, la formation des connaissances, le renforcement des contrôles et des résistances, s'enchaînent les uns avec les autres, selon quelques grandes stratégies de savoir et de pouvoir. (139)

Understood as "historique," "le dispositif de sexualité"[12] (Foucault 99) is thus constructed and changeable in function of the powers in place and the discourses or actions emerging from them. For instance, in Gilead, the long and covering clothes are meant to protect women of men's unrestrained sexuality "because the urges of men were terrible things and those urges needed to be curbed" (*TT* 9), explain the Aunts to the girls. This rhetoric entails an understanding of sexuality "que le pouvoir essaierait de mater" by using devices such as clothes. However, by holding such discourses, the Aunts underline the sexual aspect of the girls' bodies, thus constituting them as sexual beings. What seems at first a repressive strategy, the necessity to control latent sexuality, actually sexualizes bodies.

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[12] We will translate it as "the apparatus of sexuality," a term which encompasses all the strategies put in place by the power to control sex.

These discourses shape the schoolgirls' understanding of their bodies and inculcate a fear and a need to monitor their latent sexuality to avoid harm. The danger arises especially from women's bodies and "the shameful part of many elusive names" (*TT* 82), the female sex. Even before her encounter with the dentist, Agnes perceives her body contains potential for sexuality, although she cannot describe what it would entail. Because of this fear, Agnes wishes to stop the bodily changes of the adolescence:

> The adult female body was one big booby trap as far as I could tell. If there was a hole, something was bound to be shoved into it and something else was bound to come out, and that went for any kind of hole: a hole in a wall, a hole in a mountain, a hole in the ground. There were so many things that could be done to it or go wrong with it, this adult female body, that I was left feeling I would be better off without it. (*TT* 83)

Contrary to Offred who distrusts her body because it expresses a gender different from her former identity, Agnes feels estranged from her body because she fears it would entice a man and cause her harm. She refers to "the" or "this adult female body" which indicates she distances herself from it as she does not use the possessive determiner "my." She perceives the danger a fully formed body represents, even if she describes it in children's terms. Indeed, the pun of "booby trap," referring to a hunting device or women's breasts, and the comparison of the different holes are still innocent and exposed in simple terms. Yet, a feeling of dread is present as things could "go wrong" and the imagery of the booby trap is threatening. Agnes has a fuzzy understanding of the danger her woman body can represent if she met a man alone. Such thoughts would not have occurred to her if the Aunts had not insisted on her sexual potential, they instituted sexuality by seemingly repressing it.

In Gilead, the apparatus of sexuality does not administer female and male bodies similarly. Even if some restrictions are imposed on male sexuality, the male bodies are not constructed as shameful or dangerous for the other sex. Because the narrators are all women, the readers do not have much information about the boys' education or how men consider sexuality. We know that they are not supposed to masturbate and that having a wife is a privilege one needs to earn (*HT* 32). However, men do not need to hide their bodies contrary to women. They are constructed as the active agent of sexuality therefore they do not need to defend themselves from attacks like women, the passive object. Men's bodies are less problematic, for example Offred describes how Nick is "in his shirt sleeves, bare arms sticking shamelessly out from the rolled cloth" (*HT* 190). The skin is visible yet shameless. In *The Testaments*, Agnes's brother, Baby Mark, offers a snippet of boys' upbringing. Agnes explains how the Marthas, "loved to give [Mark] his bath and exclaim over his tiny fingers, his tiny toes, his tiny dimples, and his tiny male organ, out of which he could project a truly astonishing fountain of pee. What a strong little man!" (*TT* 108). This "worship" (*TT* 108) of the male body contrasts with discourse held about the female one. They rejoice in the details of male body and of the "tiny male organ," the description of male sexual attributes is here far from the female "shameful part of many elusive names" (*TT* 82). Male bodies are constructed differently from the female ones, they are unproblematic, not sexualized and do not define their entire existence.

One exception escapes this binary division of bodies: the Aunts. Indeed, even if women are regarded as lesser than men, the Aunts also possess intellectual capacities usually associated with men in Gilead: they emerge as a sort of third gender "neither female nor male" (*TT* 156). Their bodies are still codified as female, they wear dresses and "the ungainly babushka-like head covering," in Aunt Lydia's words, "to avoid inflaming men" (*TT* 212). Yet, they are given more freedom than other women and most importantly they can read and write; this knowledge confers them authority and power. The Aunts organizing Agnes's wedding impress the girl who reflects on their position with a new interest:

> I had begun to wonder how a woman changed into an Aunt. . . . How had they received their strength? Did they have special brains, neither female nor male? Were they even women at all underneath their uniforms? Could they possibly be men in disguise? Even to suspect such a thing was unthinkable, but what a scandal if so! I wondered what the Aunts would look like if you made them wear pink. (*TT* 156)

Agnes was taught since her childhood that men and women fundamentally differ; however, the Aunts are women who possess masculine characteristic, like the ability to read, which blurs the limits between sexes. Agnes sees them as different from other women as she thinks one "change[s] into an Aunt," into a separate category. Their capacity to read challenges Agnes's education on the feebleness of women's brain not capable of "large thoughts" (*TT* 14). To resolve this fundamental contradiction, Agnes imagine they "have special brains" or are "men in disguise" as it seems somewhat more plausible than women being able to think critically. She perceives how clothes codify bodies as she wonders about the Aunts wearing pink, the color of girls' uniforms. Such a transgression would bring the Aunts back into the realm of womanhood or femininity, whereas with their brown gowns their bodies are mysterious and might not be a female at all. This in-betweenness is acknowledged by Aunt Lydia who explains "I control the women's side of their enterprise with an iron fist in a leather glove in a woolen mitten, and I keep things orderly: like a harem eunuch, I am uniquely placed to do so" (*TT* 62). She compares herself to a "eunuch," those men who were emasculated to administer the women in harems. The Aunts assume a similar position, not castrated but unable to conceive a child, they are both lacking a fundamental biological element to fully enter their gender categories. The Aunts create a necessary bridge between the two spheres otherwise constructed as essentially different; the Commander, like Judd, can therefore interact with a more “neutral” gender and not debase himself by talking with women.

Gilead’s institutions concentrate their control of women by reducing them to their bodies and sexuality in an effort to manipulate gender. However, the Aunts, not defined by their corporality, escape this control and have more autonomy. Contrary to the Wives, defined in relation to their husband, the Aunts lead independent lives at Ardua Hall, a place where no men are allowed. Moreover, they possess a library and know people’s darkest secrets which confer them freedom and discursive power. Gilead cannot use sexuality as a means to administer the Aunts’s bodies, unlike to the Handmaids’ for instance. Not determined by their reproductive function, the Aunts are viewed as disincarnated women, women without sex, which is the condition for their power. Aunt Lydia ponders her situation:

> I’ve become swollen with power, true, but also nebulous with it—formless, shape-shifting. I am everywhere and nowhere: even in the minds of the Commanders I cast an unsettling shadow. How can I regain myself? How to shrink back to my normal size, the size of an ordinary woman? (*TT* 32)

Not defined by her body, she becomes “formless, shape-shifting” and out of herself. She cannot be “the size of an ordinary woman” she had to abandon her corporality to gain her power. Instead she symbolizes power in its immanence, as Foucault explains, “le pouvoir est partout ; ce n’est pas qu’il englobe tout, c’est qu’il vient de partout” (122). Hidden in the shadows, she is “everywhere and nowhere,” and uses her knowledge of secrets to operate discreetly. Paradoxically, her power also emerges from her gender; indeed, the Commanders who do not see women as threats underestimate her. “Simply by being female,” reflects Aunt Lydia, “I was excluded from the lists of potential usurpers, since no woman could ever sit on the Council of the Commanders; so on that front, ironically, I was safe" (*TT* 61-62). This relative safety lets her collect information on the Commanders and organize a channel to transmit them to Canada. Her document reveals the rampant corruption in Gilead which leads to its collapse. Out of necessity, to manage the women's side, the Commanders attributed some power to the Aunts, notably discursive abilities, which enabled them to resist, or at least understand, their effort to define them as non-human. Moreover, they could not police their female bodies through abusive sexuality like other Gileadean women. Due to their premises that women are inherently inferior, the Commanders underestimated the Aunts, creating a blind spot Aunt Lydia exploited.

Because the Aunts escape sexuality, they avoid the power it contains. Indeed, for Foucault, sexuality is intimately linked with power and, through the apparatus of sexuality, it hides the origin of its potency behind the idea of "sexe," the essentialization of the body. We mentioned before how the people in power, the Aunts and the Commanders, produce sexuality through discourses and actions—such as teaching young girls to monitor their bodies[13]. This production is not acknowledged as such and disguised behind "l'hypothèse répressive" (Foucault 18) or the idea that power has to tame a wild sexuality. Foucault dismantles this postulate in his work *La Volonté de Savoir*. He analyzes how the power actually produces sexuality through "la 'mise en discours' du sexe" (Foucault 21). With these discourses, the "sexe,"[14] the biological, appears as the origin of sexuality and the hierarchization of genders; however, this is only a strategy to hide and protect the source of power which actually resides in the apparatus of sexuality. Judith Butler explains that Foucault sees sexuality "as an open and complex historical system of discourse and power that produces the misnomer of 'sex' as part of a strategy to conceal and, hence, to perpetuate power relations" (Butler, *Trouble* 129). "Sexe" appears as a fixed state one cannot change—babies are generally born either with male or female attribute—; however, the interpretation of those bodies can be altered. To hide this fact, discourses foreground the biological as natural or as given and "when 'sex' is essentialized in this way, it becomes ontologically immunized from power relations and from its own historicity" (Butler, *Trouble* 129). This construction enables to hide the source of power or "l'idée 'du sexe' permet d'esquiver ce qui fait le 'pouvoir' du pouvoir" (Foucault 204-205). A necessity because

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[13] See page 35.

[14] In French "sexe" has different definitions, like in English, it refers to the genitals or the sexual activity; it now means "gender" as well; however, in Foucault's time this definition was not yet in use. Here, Foucault employs the word to talk about the bodily characteristics.

> c'est à la condition de masquer une part importante de lui-même que le pouvoir est tolérable. Sa réussite est en proportion de ce qu'il parvient à cacher de ses mécanismes. . . le secret n'est pas pour lui de l'ordre de l'abus ; il est indispensable à son fonctionnement. (Foucault 113)

The efficiency of this system results from its ability to hide its origin, protecting it from any contestation or questioning. Therefore, "sexe" is only a decoy which conceals behind its apparent naturalness the constructiveness of sexuality. Butler does not use the Foucauldian terminology, but his model inspires her, and one could equate the apparatus of sexuality with gender as it is also "a construction that regularly conceals its genesis" and seems necessary and natural (Butler, *Trouble* 190).

In Gilead, this framework also applies. So far, we looked at the apparatus of sexuality and how the Commanders and Aunts transformed the "system of discourse and power" (Butler, *Trouble* 129), they also present sex as natural and as the origin of gender hierarchy. Indeed, we saw how the Commanders use sexuality, understood as a discourse including words and actions, to enforce their version of femininity onto women. Through the Ceremony, sexual harassment and disempowering rhetoric, the people of power reduce women to their sex. But to hide the origin of their power and the constructiveness of gender, they use essentialist discourses which foreground biological characteristics as the source of gender; and, as it is presented as a given fact, it seems incontestable. The patriarchy in Gilead, explains Matthews, uses essentialism "to obscure the socially constructed nature of gender and to facilitate the ongoing oppression and control of womankind" (638). Essentialism is consequently employed to foreground "sexe" as the origin, as an innate essence, which cannot be questioned.

The Gileadean essentialism revolves around the concept of "Nature," understood as a force outside human control and as innate to people. The people of power in Gilead call upon Nature to justify the hierarchization of the sexes and hide the constructivism of gender, thus deflecting responsibility. They employ the concept of Nature because their ideology advocates for a return to traditional values and rejects science, another rhetoric which could ground difference in the body but would entail the use of technology, prescribed in Gilead[15]. Nature is understood as "the phenomena of the physical world collectively; esp. plants, animals, and other features and products of the earth itself, as opposed to humans and human creations" ("Nature" *OED*). If by definition Nature resides outside humans' influence, then they are not responsible for obeying its "plan" (*HT* 249). As such, Nature participates in the Foucauldian category of "sexe" because it appears as untouchable and original when it is only discourses that constructed this position. For example, Offred's Commander explains: "you can't cheat Nature, . . . Nature demands variety, for men. It stands to reason, it's part of the procreational strategy. It's Nature's plan" (*HT* 249). Here, Nature is the agent which "demands," sets the "procreational strategy" and conceives the "plan." Men, on the other hand, "can't cheat" and have to follow its orders. This construction underscores how Gilead's ideology projects the responsibility onto Nature and masks its real influence. Nature is also used in a more essentialist sense, where it is defined as "the innate or characteristic disposition of a particular person, animal, etc." ("Nature" *OED*), in other words, "women's nature." The second definition postulates that "innate" traits determine one's behavior and capacities.

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[15] They also justify their act through God and religion; however, we are not going to study this aspect of their discourse as we focus on the bodies.

Commander Judd expresses this idea: “It was always a cruelty to promise [women] equality . . . since by their nature they can never achieve it” (*TT* 175). The subordinating conjunction “since” correlates, in Judd’s rationale, women’s nature and their inherent inferiority, using their “essence” as his main argument. The Gileadean elite relies on Nature to legitimate their choices and hide the apparatus of sexuality they put in place to control women.

If the people in power attempt to conceal the apparatus of sexuality, or the constructiveness of gender, behind essentialist discourses, these words are in tension with their actions which are reshaping women’s role in society. This tension results from the accelerated normalization and sometimes resurfaces. At the same time, the Commanders and Aunts deny the constructiveness of gender, they create new norms and, consequently, new gender expressions. *The Testaments* recounts how the Founding Aunts composed the new rules for the women’s sphere. Aunt Lydia testifies that “week by week we invented: laws, uniforms, slogans, hymns, names” (*TT* 177). The verb “invented” confirms that these new norms do not reflect a natural order but are manmade, or womanmade in this case. This tension between essentialist discourses and constructivism is not acknowledged but sometimes reemerges in surprising places. Even if the official line claims to return to a natural manifestation of gender, or “sexe” for Foucault, Aunt Lydia supports the contrary when she responds to Aunt Helena. The latter is concerned about Agnes’s ability to fulfill her mission as a Pearl and imagines she will follow her mother’s steps and desert Gilead; Aunt Lydia answers her: “Is it your theory that nature will win out over nurture? In which case the original sinfulness of Adam will assert itself in all of us despite our rigorous efforts to stamp it out, and I am afraid our Gilead project will be doomed” (*TT* 345). Aunt Lydia’s response contradicts the main narrative where Nature commands everything, as here nurture outweighs nature. Furthermore, “Gilead project” is explicitly meant to change the “sinfulness” of humans, or their natural state, through “rigorous efforts,” or a societal influence. Even if Gilead attempts to hide the constructivism of gender in its rhetoric, this knowledge sometimes reemerges.

Gilead nevertheless maintains the two opposing discourses in its ideology, Nature dictates everything and one can correct one’s flaws, by rejecting the blame onto the American society of the eighties for perverting gender roles. Contradictions are not necessarily inconsistent; as Michel Foucault remarks, “les discours sont des éléments ou des blocs tactiques dans le champ des rapports de force ; il peut y en avoir de différents et même de contradictoires à l’intérieur d’une même stratégie” (134). The divergent views are consequently not undermining each other but working together. In one situation, like controlling women’s aspirations, claiming that they are inherently inferior is more effective, whereas in another, for instance to appreciate Gilead’s achievements, the emphasis about nurture is required. They alleviate the tension by accusing the liberated America of having reversed the natural order. In a ceremonial speech, a Commander declares: “Those years were just an anomaly, historically speaking . . . just a fluke. All we’ve done is return things to Nature’s norm” (*HT* 232). Those two sentences stand out on the page because they compose a paragraph by themselves, which highlights the importance of this idea. For the Commander, Gilead is not constructing a new gender model only restoring the true gender hierarchy. The term “return” presupposes a time when humans acted accordingly to Nature’s plan, a chimerical time they aim to emulate. This exemplifies how the Commanders use discourses to foreground Nature as the cause, the origin of gender hierarchy, thus masking their own involvement in the construction of gender.

1.4. On the Constructivism of Gender

Even if the Gileadean ideology maintains that their definition of gender role is natural and true, Agnes understands how coerced her behavior is and compares it to theater play, a comparison which inevitably reminds us of Judith Butler's theory. Her awareness crystallizes when she has to appropriate the Wives' norms. Once engaged with Commander Judd, Agnes enrolls in the "Rubies Premarital Preparatory" (*TT* 161) school to learn about her future duties. In this time of transition, she alters her sense of normality and has to adopt the "script" (Butler, "Performative" 526) of a Wife. These changes trigger her reflection, she sees the artificiality of her wedding preparation and compares it to a theater set or an act:

> The wardrobe team was in charge of what you might call the stage set: the costumes, the refreshments, the decor. (*TT* 158)
> They were supposed to teach us how to act as mistresses of high-ranking households. I say "act" in a dual sense: we were to be actresses on the stages of our future houses. (*TT* 161)
> I thought I was learning how to act; or rather, how to be an actress. Or how to be a better actress than before. (*TT* 166)
> As I say, I had learned how to act. (*TT* 225)

Her mentions of "act" entail a self-reflexive dimension signaled through the quotation marks in the second citation, her reformulation about being an actress rather than simply acting in the third, and the introductory comment "as I say" in the last one. This reflexivity arises from the new norms she adopts, her sense of alienation from the wedding that repels her and the distance due to her retrospective narration. By comparing her life to a "stage set" with its "costumes" and "decor," Agnes echoes Judith Butler's performativity concept about gender. However, Agnes is engrossed in reality and she cannot like in theater say " 'this is just an act,' and de-realize the act, make acting into something quite distinct from what is real" (Butler, "Performative" 527). She cannot get off stage and separate herself from this new role. Her awareness of a "dual sense" indicates she, on some level, comprehends the performativity of her "act." Under a regime which controls her every move, Agnes is especially well placed to notice how power infiltrates and shapes her movement. If Agnes is, of course, oblivious of Butler's theory, the implied author[16], on the other hand, can suggest this connection to the readers and does so through the repetition of "act" and the clear mention of theater. Even if the readers do not possess the reference, Agnes's self-reflexivity marks it as a key element in the text which challenges Gilead's discourses about women's innate behavior. Indeed, if they have to "act" and "perform" their role it does not emerge from an alleged natural essence. This example reveals the tension between Gilead's discourse on gender essentialism and the text's larger meaning that does not adhere to a Gileadean vision of women.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the word "act" is not used in the Butlerian definition, Butler's work had not been published yet; however the understanding about gender's constructiveness is present. For instance, Offred explains: "What I must present is a made thing, not something born" (*HT* 76). Conscious of the transformation she underwent, Offred senses the obligation, marked by "must," to conform and transform herself to fit Gilead's expectations. Although she does not use the word "act," she is aware of the preformative nature of her behavior and rejects the essentialist discourses that would imply she is "something born." The two women, Offred and Agnes, experience the performativity of gender especially in times when their "scripts" change and the readers witness their struggle to adopt and perform a prescribed identity.

The constructiveness of gender is also highlighted through the narrative construction of *The Testaments,* which shows how two sisters' perception of normality can be dramatically opposed. Indeed, the confrontation of points of view underlines the weight of socialization in one's behavior. Agnes and Daisy are half-sisters, if one thinks biology dictates behaviors they should act similarly, yet they could not differ more. Raised in Canada, Daisy thinks women are as independent and strong as men[17], she often exercises and enjoys physical activities (*TT* 327), contrary to Agnes who considers women as the feebler sex. The difference between the sisters is strongly marked when they have to live together and cannot understand each other. When Daisy infiltrates Gilead under the pseudonym of Jade, she is welcomed in Ardua Hall and shares the living quarters of Agnes and her friend Becka. The narration of the two sisters were beforehand clearly separated in different chapters when they described their respective lives. Once they start living together, the implied author alternates shorter sections of each narrator, offering their contrasting points of view on the same events. This alternation emphasizes the importance socialization has and how gender is constructed through language and formatted through repetitive actions rather than by an internal essence. When the sisters escape together toward Canada to deliver Aunt Lydia's message, Daisy feels reassured to go back to her normality and starts to understand her difference with Agnes: "I thought of asking her how long we had to keep it up, this Gilead way of talking—couldn't we stop and act natural, now that we were escaping? But then, maybe for her it was natural. Maybe she didn't know another way" (*TT* 361). She realizes that "act natural" has a different definition according to the culture one has been raised in. Through this reflection, she puts into words what the readers already perceived when the sisters' accounts were alternated and confronted their points of view. Daisy did not have access to Agnes's thoughts, or the other way round, and her comprehension arose from prolonged contact with her foreign sibling.

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[16] We use this concept, according to Chatman's definition: "the implied author is the agency within the narrative fiction itself which guides any reading of it. Every fiction contains such an agency. It is the source—on each reading—of the work's invention. It is also the locus of the work's intent . . ., a work's 'whole' or 'overall' meaning, including its connotations, implications, unspoken messages" (74). Chatman also specifies that "the implied author 'says' nothing. Insofar as the implied author (the text itself) communicates something different from what the narrator says, that meaning must occur between the lines" (85). On page 52, we develop this notion further.

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[17] Kołodziejuk describes her as a "self-aware feminist" and "self-empowered teenager" (80).

1.5. Conclusion

In this first part, we have seen how the Commanders, with the Aunts' help, implement new laws and force their internalization through violent means. How they hijack the performativity of gender by controlling women's actions until they believe what their bodies are performing. How they reconstruct bodies with language and exclude women from humanity by constantly comparing and treating them like animals, objects, or incubators. How they reinforce gender imbalance through abusive sexuality and continuous harassment. How they attempt to mask their reshaping of gender behind essentialist justifications. And how, despite their effort to pass off their hierarchization of gender as natural, Agnes feels she is forced to act according to a predetermined script.

Judith Butler's performativity theory helps explain the rapid behavioral change of women and their acceptation of the regime. Indeed, the readers could be surprised to see independent women become submissive in so little time. In addition to brainwashing and torture, the repetition of acts engrains a new identity and gender in women. On a larger scale, the Foucauldian "apparatus of sexuality" proposes a frame of reference analyzing the system of discourses and power established to control people. It highlights the duality of the structure operating on two levels: one where essentialist rhetoric is used to deflect responsibility, and the other, hidden by the first, where power resides and regulates conducts.

The two models enable us to dissect and understand the Gileadean techniques employed to reduce women to inferior beings. Because it is set in a transitional time, this work of fiction puts under a microscope the mechanisms which constitute gender, so that the readers can study them freely. *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* reproduce an accelerated gendering process and consequently underline the constructivism of gender and the relativity of normality. Through her work, Atwood answers Judith Butler who wondered “if gender is constructed, could it be constructed differently . . .?” (*Trouble* 11).

2. Margaret Atwood’s Responses to 1985 and 2019: Between Warning and Empowerment

> La littérature peut beaucoup. Elle peut nous tendre la main quand nous sommes profondément déprimés, nous conduire vers les autres êtres humains autour de nous, nous faire mieux comprendre le monde et nous aider à vivre.
>
> Todorov 72

If *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Testaments* “put under a microscope the mechanism of gender,” readers are at the other end and study its functioning. Fiction is a means of communication and a powerful tool proposing new perspectives on the world. “La fiction est souvent un détour nécessaire pour mieux comprendre la réalité” (15), claims Esquenazi in *La Vérité de la Fiction*. Indeed, fiction, or in our case literature, isolates specific issues too entangled in reality and offers the readers the time and means to analyze them. To do so, literature needs to immerse the readers in its universe. Despite its bad reputation dating from Plato (Esquenazi 102), immersion is necessary, or bored readers will simply close the book. For a literary work to have a lasting effect, it should question the world and its construction, thus trigger the readers’ reflection and their interest.

The narrators play a key role in the identification process as they can welcome the readers in their universe or keep them at a distance. In Atwood’s novels, the four narrators possess the attributes of distancing or engaging narrators but in different proportions. Aunt Lydia and Offred oscillate between the two postures, maintaining a complex relation with the implied reader, necessary to interpret these two complex characters. Agnes’s and Daisy’s narration do not contain distancing devices, which suggests the implied author favors the reader’s identification with these two strong female characters.

However, the appendices of the novels—the “Historical Notes” and “The Thirteenth Symposium”—shift this balance in two opposite directions. Indeed, the “Historical Notes” have a strong alienating effect which pushes them to reinterpret the main narratives, whereas the effect lessened in the sequel because of the readers' expectations. The genre of the novel also influences the immersive strategies. Indeed, dystopias aim to warn their readers about problematic tendencies in their societies and therefore incite an "attitude of critical detachment" (Baldick 7) in its readership, like *The Handmaid's Tale*. *The Testaments* blurs the limits of the dystopian genre by introducing convention belonging to the thriller novel, a genre that seeks to immerse its readers.

Because of their endings, *The Testaments* tends to immerse the readers in the fictional world more than *The Handmaid's Tale*, which favors critical distance. Atwood modified her strategy to respond to two readerships. Indeed, for her, authors interact with society and enrich the readers through their texts:

> Far from thinking of writers as totally isolated individuals, I see them as inescapably connected with their society. The nature of the connection will vary—the writer may unconsciously reflect the society, he may unconsciously examine it and project ways of changing it; and the connection between writer and society will increase in intensity as the society (rather than, for instance, the writer's love-life or his meditations on roses) becomes the "subject" of the writer. (Atwood quoted in Staines 22)

Engaged with their society, authors create a stronger link with the readers when they address issues that concern them directly. In the first part, we studied *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* as a seamless continuation, yet Atwood wrote the sequels almost thirty-five years later. This gap influenced her text because "the answers have changed as society itself has changed" (Acknowledgements, *TT* 417), explains Atwood.

In 1985, Atwood was inspired by the problematic trends present in the USA—the strengthening of the New Right and Christian Right that created a backlash against women—to compose the Gileadean society. In 2019, a worrying return of these tendencies—Donald Trump was elected despite (or because of) his misogynist discourse and many states limited access to abortion—compelled her to expand her dystopic universe (Allardice). One difference between those two moments, according to Susan Faludi, is that the eighties backlash was covert whereas today it is “loud and clear” (Faludi 337), but so is the women’s resistance, as the #MeToo movement illustrates.

Through the narrators’ stances, the appendices and the genre, Atwood adapts her narrative strategies to 1985 and 2019, favoring critical distance in *The Handmaid’s Tale* to warn her readers, and immersion in *The Testaments* to empower them through the identification with strong characters.

2.1. Between Immersion and Critical Distance

In *The Testaments*, the transformative power of reading is thematized through Agnes’s learning to read and the critical mindset she develops, which creates a certain self-referentiality, attracting the readers’ attention on their reading practice. Agnes illustrates the power of fiction when she shares her “inner storms and turmoils” (*TT* 302) triggered by the various texts she discovers. Her first textbook belongs to the pre-Gilead period and represents a world foreign to her[18]: a little girl wearing a skirt above her knees plays with her brother in their garden without, to Agnes’s surprise, high fences, Guardians or Angels (*TT* 292). A perfectly conventional situation for anyone not raised in Gilead; however, it completely disrupts Agnes’s understanding of normality. For the first time, she experiences the power of literature that “élargit notre univers, nous incite à imaginer d’autres manières de le concevoir et de l’organiser” (Todorov 14-15). Her reaction mirrors the readers’ initial response when discovering the Gileadean society, creating another *mise en abyme*. During her formation as an Aunt, Agnes accesses the Bible and compares the actual text to the interpretations she received as a child, “the story of the Concubine Cut into Twelve Pieces” (*TT* 78) particularly interests her. In the original version, a husband abandons his newly-wed wife to the hands of lustful men who rape her to death (*TT* 303); whereas, in the

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[18] Atwood makes an intertextual reference, as it is a standard American textbook called *Dick and Jane* to teach children in the first grade, which can reinforce the *mise en abyme* effect, if a reader used such book in his/her childhood.

Gileadean interpretation, the concubine is a "brave and noble" (*TT* 80) woman who willingly sacrifices herself to protect her husband. Agnes then realizes that "everyone at the top of Gilead has lied to [her]" (*TT* 303). She also discovers the widespread corruption of the Gileadean elite, because Aunt Lydia slips secret files of Commanders or Wives among the dossiers she has to copy. The discrepancies between the ideology and what she reads progressively refines her critical thinking. Reusing the imagery developed by the Aunts, Agnes wonders if her "soft, muddy brain [was] hardening?" (*TT* 328), as she acquires a sharper look on the world. The representation of her evolution, condensed in a few pages, enables the readers to examine how she masters this skill and, because of the *mise en abyme*, might question their own reading practice.

Before moving further into the analysis, we should distinguish three narrative levels to understand how literature creates a connection with the readers. The levels can be visually represented as follows:

[real author [implied author [narrator (story) narratee] implied reader] real reader][19]

Similar to a Chinese box, each level encompasses the one before. The inner level is constituted by the narrator who tells the story to a narratee, "an imagined person . . . within the 'space' of the text itself" (Baldick 219); for instance, in *The Testaments*, Agnes and Daisy talk to the people collecting their testimonies. Then, comes the "implied author"[20] that Chatman, basing himself on Wayne Booth, defines as "the agency within the narrative fiction itself which guides any reading of it, . . . a work's 'whole' or 'overall' meaning, including its connotations, implications, unspoken messages" (74). This notion can be "inferred by readers from the text, and [is] imagined as a personality standing behind the work" (Baldick 166). Despite Barthes's claim about the "death of the author," readers tend to reconstruct an auctorial figure and the implied author fulfills this role while avoiding interpretations established on the writer's biography (Chatman 75). The counterpart of the implied author is the implied reader:

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[19] This schema is drawn from Genette (408) who explains, in French, Chatman's theory. We kept the English terminology, because the translation in French hesitates between *implicite* and *impliqué* and neither offer an accurate translation of *implied*.

[20] See page 45.

> A term used by Wolfgang Iser and some other theorists of reader-response criticism to denote the hypothetical figure of the reader to whom a given work is designed to address itself. Any text may be said to presuppose an "ideal" reader who has the particular attitudes (moral, cultural, etc.) appropriate to that text in order for it to achieve its full effect. (Baldick 166)

The implied reader is entirely programmed by the text and, when critics mention "the reader" they usually refer to an implied reader—even if they do not specify it. Contrary to the implied reader, real readers[21] are the concrete person holding the book and their experiences shape their interpretations. They are also able to go against the text's plans, one could, for instance, jump at the end of a mystery novel and find out who the murderer is or if the hero survives. Rabaté wryly remarks that one can be "un lecteur paresseux ou distrait, à peine présent au texte qu'il survole ou feuillette" (para. 16). The real readers are, of course, on the same plane as the real author, in our case Margaret Atwood. These three narrative levels are deeply interwoven and sometimes difficult to distinguish, yet are useful tools to analyze the relationship between the text and its readers.

For literature to "say something about the world at large" (Atwood quoted in Staines 15), the readers should immerse themselves in the fiction by identifying with the characters. Indeed, "ce pouvoir que possède la fiction de nous éclairer ne dépend pas du texte fictionnel mais de *la relation qu'entretient ce dernier avec un destinataire*" (emphasis in original, Esquenazi 185). For Esquenazi, the appropriation of a story requires two components: the fictional universe needs to be coherent (in the sense of the Aristotelian verisimilitude) and readers should identify with at least one character (123). Concerning the first feature, Atwood was careful to compose a world the readers could adhere to and decided “not [to] put into this book anything that humankind had not already done, somewhere, sometime, or for which it did not already have the tools” (Atwood “Ustopia”). She hopes readers find “the story compelling and plausible enough to go along for the ride” (Atwood “Ustopia”), the two conditions of immersion. According to Esquenazi, identification follows a specific path: the reader adopts the perspective of one or several characters, discovers the fictional universe through their eyes, resulting in “l’idée d’une connexion entre deux mondes, l’un réel et l’autre imaginaire mais tous deux effectivement expérimentés” (Esquenazi 147). By sharing their experiences, the characters mediate the reader’s access to the fictional world and real readers can follow them if they are willing to “jouer le jeu de la fiction” (Esquenazi 59).

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[21] To accentuate the difference between the implied reader and the real readers, we will use the plural when referring to the latter and, as the implied reader is an imagine figure, we took the liberty of picturing her as a woman, thus will employ the feminine form.

However, immersion in a fictional world is not straightforward, as the implied author can encourage identification, creating a strong relationship with the characters, or discourage it, inducing an “attitude of critical detachment” (Baldick 7). The identification with a character presupposes a double movement, contradictory but complementary: recognizing another individual as “other” and becoming this other (Rabaté para. 13). Rabaté explains that both aspects are contained in the definitions of “identification.” In its first sense, it means “l’action d’identifier et de reconnaître,” and in the second, with the preposition “with,” “le processus par lequel je deviens identique à un autre” (Rabaté para. 13). When readers identify with a character, they feel for and through him and are immersed in the fictional world; whereas, when they see the character as an “other,” readers maintain a critical distance. The two sides of identification are generally present in literary text. The narrator directs this tension with narrative strategies either generating an empathetic relation with the characters, or “pushing” the readers out of the imaginary world by foregrounding its fictionality. Warhol distinguishes these two attitudes: “a distancing narrator discourages the actual reader from identifying with the narratee, while an engaging narrator encourages that identification" (812). The two modes create different relationships with the readers, one establishes an immersive world so powerful reality fades in the background, and the other maintains distance to stimulate reflection.

In her novels, Atwood plays with these two models, if both sides of identification are always present, each narrator can adjust the proportion of distance or proximity with the implied reader. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred possesses both characteristics of an engaging and distancing narrator. Unaware of whom will receive her message—she records her story while in hiding—Offred uses the conventions of the diary genre where the narratee is generally unknown and almost equivalent to the implied reader. Because she does not address someone directly, Offred has to construct her narratee:

> But if it's a story, even in my head, I must be telling it to someone. You don't tell a story only to yourself. There's always someone else.
> Even when there is no one.
> A story is like a letter. *Dear You*. I'll say. Just you, without a name. . . I'll say *you*, *you*, like an old love song. *You* can mean more than one.
> *You* can mean thousands. (*HT* 49-50)

As communication requires two entities, one speaking and one listening, Offred needs to imagine her narratee, "someone else," to share her story. She talks to a basic otherness, a "*you*," that can represent anyone, even "thousands." She thus qualifies as an engaging narrator who "will usually either avoid naming the narratee or use names that refer to large classes of potential actual readers" (Warhol 813). Her inclusiveness enables the implied reader to identify with her and adopt her perspective, an essential component of immersion. Throughout her story, she creates an empathic relationship with the implied reader, who shares her emotions and uncertainty about the future. Yet, "like any intervening narrator, the engaging narrator, too, intrudes into the fiction with reminders that the novel is 'only a story' " (Warhol 815). In addition to her interruption, Offred underlines the fictionality of this communication when she repeats "story," and establishes distance with the implied reader. This is reinforced when she acknowledges that her tale "is a reconstruction. All of it is a reconstruction. It's a reconstruction now" (*HT* 144). Her admission questions the implied reader: if it is a reconstruction, why would she believe Offred? Indeed, these comments shake the implied reader's trust and mark Offred as a distancing narrator. Through these punctual comments, Offred revives the implied reader critical thinking, in an otherwise generally immersive narration.

Offred uses this tension between involving the implied reader and inducing critical distance to create a compassionate but active audience. For Hogsette, Offred's open avowal of her revisions is a sign of trust in her reader (274), and in return "as members of her audience, we must learn to adopt a compassionate stance toward Offred" (274). Indeed, Warhol explains that engaging narrator's interventions remind that "the fictions reflect real-world conditions for which the readers should take active responsibility after putting aside the book" (815). Offred's narration immerses the readers enough for them to feel concern by her fate, while reminding them of their position in the world and their accountability for its state. A duality necessary if the real readers want to "correctly understand and appreciate Atwood's political message and Offred's political activism" (Hogsette 276). As the only voice in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred's narration contains both sides of identification and engages the readers in the story as well as their critical thinking.

In *The Testaments*, Aunt Lydia uses diary conventions like Offred, but she constructs various narratees, which complicates the identification process. The Founding Aunt secretly writes her confession and conceals the pages inside a book, away from the Aunts' prying eyes. Not knowing who will read her story, she imagines several scenarios where an "unknown reader" (*TT* 5) finds her account:

> Possibly you are one of our Aunts from Ardua Hall, stumbling across this account by chance. (*TT* 61)
> Or will you be a snoop from outside our borders, rooting through the archives of Ardua Hall once this regime has fallen? (*TT* 61)

> Perhaps you'll be a student of history. . . I picture you as a young woman, bright, ambitious. You'll be looking to make a niche for yourself in whatever dim, echoing caverns of academia may still exist by your time. (*TT* 402)

Aunt Lydia portrays specific narratees and includes many details. On the one hand, the precise descriptions can constitute an obstacle for the reader's identification, as it could highlight potential differences between the narratee and the real reader (Warhol 813). On the other hand, if the description matches the reader, then identification would be strong. Paradoxically, the more accurate the description is, the more the reader will be sent back to her own position, as it would create a *mise en abyme*. The figure of the "student of history" particularly reminds the implied reader of her duty to interpret the text correctly, as we will detail below. Because of the precise descriptions of potential narratees, the implied reader can either identify with them or not; however, she is, in both cases, reminded of her position of reader, thus favoring critical distance.

The dramatic shift between Aunt Lydia in *The Handmaid's Tale*—a violent woman who enjoys "reeducating" other women—and her self-depiction in *The Testaments*—an insider spy collecting information to bring down the country she helped to build—complicates the reader's adhesion with Aunt Lydia's narration. Because of her preconceptions, the implied reader approaches Aunt Lydia's story with caution and reserves her judgment. In the holograph, the Founding Aunt acknowledges her past and declares: "I am well aware of how you must be judging me, my reader; if, that is, my reputation has preceded me and you have deciphered who I am, or was" (*TT* 32). In the fictional world, she addresses people with previous knowledge of the Gileadean regime and who knows her as a mythical figure. At the level of the implied reader, the comment alludes to *The Handmaid's Tale* where her "reputation" comes from, reminding the reader of Offred's negative descriptions. Throughout her confession, Aunt Lydia builds up a relationship with her narratee. Her reader even becomes "somewhat of an obsession—[her]

sole confidant, [her] only friend" (*TT* 172), this avowal of solitude and vulnerability humanizes her. At the end, she calls again for a lenient judgment: "Goodbye, my reader. Try not to think too badly of me, or no more badly than I think of myself" (*TT* 404). This time, the implied reader, who established a connection with her, might respond more positively. In *The Testaments*, Aunt Lydia had to gain the implied reader's trust and counter her prejudices.

The intertextuality between the two novels, situated at the implied author's level, creates an ambivalent relationship with Aunt Lydia, between distance and identification. First, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the reader knows her as a fervent believer in Gilead, whereas she portrays herself as a resisting figure in *The Testaments*. Then, Aunt Lydia's and Offred's journeys share similarities: they both lived the transition from the United States to Gilead, underwent a brainwashing process, learned to act according to a new gender and secretly told their story to leave a trace for the future. The difference in their destinies was determined by their ovaries, as one's were still viable and not the other's. This implicit connection puts the blame on the Gileadean system and not on the individual. Yet, Aunt Lydia's motives and personality are difficult to apprehend. For example, she reflects

> Did I hate the structure we were concocting? On some level, yes: it was a betrayal of everything we'd been taught in our former lives, and of all that we'd achieved. Was I proud of what we managed to accomplish, despite the limitations? Also, one some level, yes. Things are never simple. (*TT* 178)

She is not atoning for her past fault and admits taking pride in her successes, while hating the system she created. Many of her actions are problematic which invite the implied reader to reflect on her character, rather than unquestioningly identify with her. By not offering a clear-cut judgment on this character, the implied author leaves the implied reader free to draw her own conclusions about Aunt Lydia. The real reader's response will then depend on their personality and interpretation.

In *The Testaments*, Agnes and Daisy are engaging narrators who focus on the event they expose and not on their narratee, which favors, at least formally, the implied reader's identification. Contrary to Offred's and Aunt Lydia's, the sisters' narratees are incarnated in the fictional world and quickly mentioned in their opening lines:

> You have asked me to tell you what it was like for me when I was growing up within Gilead. You say it will be helpful, and I do wish to be helpful. (Agnes, *TT* 9)
>
> You've said that you'd like me to tell you how I got involved in this whole story, so I'll try. (Daisy, *TT* 39)

Both refer to an anonymous "you," and the implied reader can infer it is the person transcribing their adventures and who requested their stories, not much more. Once established the narratee fades in the background and leaves space for the story to unfold. Without reflection about "the reader" or whoever will access their words, the sisters' narrations favor the implied reader's immersion, as no elements remind her that she is reading a story. The situation of communication is occasionally actualized when the sisters mention their own narration. For instance, Agnes comments, "at the beginning of the next period I am about to describe, I must have been eight at first, or possibly nine" (*TT* 19), or Daisy resumes "I was telling you about the moment when Elijah said that I wasn't who I thought I was" (*TT* 185). Those utterances remain marginal and do not abruptly interrupt the sister's flow, because they generally appear at the beginning of a chapter or section and accompany the transition between narrators. For Sacks, this "streamlining . . . flattens the writing. The girls' testimonies have been scaled back to strictly functional accounts of events." The narrative system is indeed simple; however, no interfering elements come between the sisters' stories and the implied reader which facilitates her immersion within the fictional world.

The implied author encourages identification with the narrators who set good examples and is more cautious when their behaviors are ambiguous. The sisters' narrations do not contain distancing devices, which suggests the implied author wants to favor identification with them. Indeed, they are active and strong female characters, a typology inexistent in *The Handmaid's Tale*, therefore identification with them can be empowering for the readers. Daisy, raised in Canada, is as a "self-aware feminist" and "self-empowered teenager" (Kołodziejuk 80) who agrees to infiltrate a dangerous country. Agnes, educated to be a submissive housewife, starts to question her world because of her readings and leaves everything she always knew to flee with her newly met sister. Through the identification with the two women, the implied and real readers can be inspired. Aunt Lydia's narrative equilibrates the immersion in *The Testaments* and triggers the readers' critical thinking, necessary to reflect on Gilead's techniques used to subordinate women. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred oscillates between passivity and resistance. Neuman explains that "her willed ignorance anaesthetizes any impulse to resist the increasingly repressive actions leading to the coup that establishes Gilead" (862). Then, under Gilead she "gained political awareness" (Neuman 861) and pays attention to details even if she tends to relapse (Neuman 863). Her hesitancy corresponds to the duality of her narration, between immersion and critical distance. The implied reader feels a connection with Offred, yet she is encouraged to reflect on the Handmaid's situation and the events that led her there. This is even more true for Aunt Lydia, because of her problematic actions, whereas the sisters' narrations are more straightforward, like their personality.

Both books feature an appendix of about ten pages which strongly influence the relationship built with the implied reader: *The Handmaid's Tale*'s appendix induces critical distance, whereas *The Testaments*'s favors immersion. Using the trope of the "found manuscript," the "Historical Notes" in the first novel and "Thirteenth Symposium" in the sequel contain the transcripts of historical conferences on "Gileadean Studies" set in 2195 (*HT* 311) and 2197 (*TT* 407). In these appendices, the Professor Pieixoto presents historical documents he recently discovered, i.e. Offred's recordings, the transcripts of the sister's testimonies and Aunt Lydia's holograph. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, nothing foreshadows this additional element at the end which, as we will see, favors critical distance, whereas in *The Testaments* the readers' expectation lessens the effect.

The differences of time, genre and narrator between the ending of Offred's story and the "Historical Notes" alienate the implied reader and pushes her to adopt an "attitude of critical detachment" (Baldick 7). Offred's tale finishes on a climatic note, as she is taken into a van which is either her "end or a new beginning" (*HT* 307). The indeterminacy of the ending leaves the reader, who shared Offred's perspective for the last three hundred pages, wondering and worrying about the character's fate. This deeply immersive ending strongly contrasts with the symposium's announcement concerning "fishing expedition," "Nature Walk and Outdoor Period-Costume Sing-Song" (*HT* 311). The implied reader is abruptly pulled away from Offred's universe and now reads the transcript of an academic conference which occurs hundred years after Gilead. The implied reader also discovers that Offred recorded her story on tapes, the historians copied them out and "arrange[d] the blocks of speech in the order in which they appeared to go" (*HT* 314). If Offred's admission about the reconstruction of her narrative could create an implicit trust with the reader, Pieixoto's interference has the opposite effect and weakens the reader's confidence. Those elements "invite us to question, rather than accept, the authenticity of what we have just read. These factors discourage suspension of disbelief, rather than encouraging it" (Grace 483). The appendix breaks the reading contract established with the implied reader at the beginning of the novel and incite her to revise her interpretation, favoring distance over immersion.

The "Historical Notes" provide an "example of how not to read the novel" (Hogsette 272), thus questioning the readers on their own practice. Professor Pieixoto interprets Offred's text with a sexist lens and disregards the value of her information, spending more time on what she does not mention—he comments “she could have told us much more about the workings of the Gileadean empire, had she had the instinct of a reporter or a spy” (*HT* 322)—than on the clues it offers. The appendix also illustrates how “the grotesque transformation of women’s bodies into passive receptacles . . . is itself grotesquely transmogrified, in the twenty-second century, into silly sexist jests” (Davidson 116). This sexist reading denies Offred’s female voice and undermines the empowerment she felt by telling her story (Hogsette 271). Moreover, Professor Pieixoto shows little respect for Offred’s hardship, focusing on the format of “this item” (*HT* 313) and not on its content. “For Pieixoto, history is artifact; for Offred, it is experience” (Grace 488), and it is experience for the implied reader who shared her perspective. Therefore, the implied reader’s feelings, along with Offred’s, are denied by the Professor, alienating her. For Hogsette, by providing an example of misreading, Atwood “encourages her readers not simply to finish the book but, instead, to reconsider the implication of their interpretations,” and become an active audience otherwise “women’s voices will forever be politically and historically silent” (Hogsette 277). The “Historical Notes” therefore engage the implied reader’s reflection and encourage her to have a better interpretation than the Professor.

In *The Testaments*, “The Thirteenth Symposium” has the same format as the “Historical Notes”; however, clues present in the main text and the reader’s expectation soften the alienation effect. First, the indications “*Transcript of Witness Testimony 369A*” (*TT* 9) for Agnes, “*369B*” for Daisy (*TT* 39) and “*The Ardua Hall Holograph*” (*TT* 3) for Aunt Lydia, inform the reader on the circumstances in which the records were produced. With Agnes and Daisy, the implied reader can infer that their “testimonies” were collected in an official context, as suggested by the number, and the technicality of the term “holograph” alludes to a formal or academic setting. Contrary to the “Historical Notes” not foreshadowed in Offred's narrative, these indications encourage the suspension of disbelief by relying on "pseudo-documentary framing [which] is more verisimilitudinous" (Murphy 27), as texts appear official there is less reason to question their content or origin. Because of these clues, "The Thirteen Symposium" has a weaker alienating effect on the readers. Moreover, the transition is prepared with Aunt Lydia's last imagined narratee: a "student of history" who "labour over this manuscript . . . reading and rereading, picking nits as [she goes]" (*TT* 403). The mention of an historical researcher reminds the implied reader of the "Historical Notes" and reinforces her expectation of an appendix explaining the transcripts' origin. The reader then encounters a similar figure in the "Symposium": Mia Smith who discovered the testimonies of Agnes and Daisy. This echo creates a continuity between the two parts and accompanies the implied reader in the transition. Even if the format of the "Symposium" is close to the "Historical Notes," its foreshadowing minimizes the distancing effect.

The Testaments's appendix closes the novel with an optimistic view of the future, comforting the implied reader. This time, the accounts are written documents, which means the implied reader accessed the original version and not one revised by historians. They only edited "these three batches of materials, which [they] have interleaved in an order that made approximate narrative sense" (*TT* 414), but did not modify the content. Then, although Professor Pieixoto focuses again on the format and origin of the texts rather than their substance, he does not negate or criticize their contents, as he did with Offred's narrative. He even apologizes for his "little jokes" at the previous conference and admits "some of them were not in the best of taste" (*TT* 408). The society of 2197 seems to have improved and is not as misogynistic as the "Historical Notes" portray it. Furthermore, women play an important part in the Symposium, as a woman presides the conference and a female graduate student, Mia Smith, discovered the documents. The "Symposium" is an attenuated version of the "Historical Notes" because of its foreshadowing, and, with its positive look onto the future, it offers a sense of closure to the implied reader.

The comparison between the closing words illustrates the different strategies used in *The Handmaid's Tale*, to question the implied reader, and in *The Testaments*, to immerse her. The first novel ends on Professor Pieixoto's demand: "Are there any questions?" (*HT* 324), a direct address to the reader who should have many. Indeed, the unsatisfactory ending of Offred's story leaves the reader wondering about her fate and how Gilead collapsed. If Offred maintains a balance between the distancing and immersive elements, the "Historical Notes" shift the scale toward critical distance. *The Testaments*' final words are the engravings of a statue erected in Becka's honor: "A BIRD OF THE AIR SHALL CARRY THE VOICE, AND THAT WHICH HATH WINGS SHALL TELL THE MATTER. / LOVE IS AS STRONG AS DEATH" (*TT* 415). This inscription calls the reader to use their voice and "tell the matter" about the problems of the world. The main section provides the examples of three female characters whose voices rose to tell their stories and favors identification with them to empower the reader.

2.2. Dystopia: A Discussion with the Present

The type of connection with the readers, implied and real, also depends on the genre; some, like thrillers, tend to immerse the readers whereas other favors a reflexive stance, for instance epic theater. Dystopias warn the readers about the dark trends present in society (Vieira 17) and they:

> teach their reader not only about the world around them but also about the open-ended ways in which text such as the ones in front of their eyes can both elucidate that world and help to develop the critical capacity of people to know, challenge, and change those aspects of it that deny or inhibit the further emancipation of humanity. (Moylan 199)

Instructive on societal problems and the power of literature, dystopias are inclined to strengthen their readership's critical thinking. Atwood experiments with those conventions in her two novels and adapts them to the context in which she writes. Genre blurring has political implications in itself, as she resists the “hegemonic ideology” (Baccolini 520) that shapes the literary field.

The Handmaid’s Tale is undoubtedly a dystopia, but scholars discuss whether it belongs to the classical or critical subgenre, which influences how the novel engages its readers. Dystopian writers present “the very worst of social alternatives” (Moylan 147) “to make [the readers] realize that things may go either right or wrong, depending on the moral, social and civic responsibility of the citizens” (Vieira 17), thus telling the readers they are accountable for the state of their society. Yet, authors should preserve a sense of hope inside their dark universe, as readers, to be active, need to see “that there is still a chance for humanity to escape” (Vieira 17). Critical dystopias accentuate this trait and

> maintain the utopian impulse *within* the work. In fact, by rejecting the traditional subjugation of the individual at the end of the novel, the critical dystopia opens a space of contestation and opposition for those groups . . . for whom subject status has yet to be attained. (emphasis in original, Baccolini 520)

The empowerment of marginalized figures gives a sense of hope to the readers, contrary to classical dystopias where the hope is “only *outside* the story” (emphasis in original, Baccolini 520). For Baccolini and Tolan, *The Handmaid’s Tale* classifies as a critical dystopia because Offred reappropriates her discursive power, thus resists Gilead’s indoctrination, and the end leaves the possibility for a happy resolution (Tolan 21, Baccolini 520). Atwood calls her work an “Ustopia,” a word she “made up by combining utopia and dystopia—the imagined perfect society and its opposite—because, in [her] view, each contains a latent version of the other” (“Ustopia”), a definition closer to the critical dystopia. However, Moylan contests this categorization, for him, the “Historical Notes” undermine Offred’s emancipation, as Professor Pieixoto has the last word and Offred is “patronizingly reduced to the reified status of an object of study” (Moylan 165). For the critic, *The Handmaid’s Tale* pushes “the classical form to its limits” (Moylan 164) but remains in this subcategory. The classification thus depends on the interpretation one has of the "Historical Notes": if it provides a sense of hope, Gilead collapsed, or despair because the future repeats the same gendered hierarchy.

In *The Testaments*, hope is clearly contained within the work and the dystopic characteristics are lessened due to the readers' familiarity with Gilead and the lighter tone of the novel. Indeed, the sequel finishes on a positive note: the two sisters are reunited with their mother—which grants Offred a happy ending as well—and Aunt Lydia who, if she is going to die, accomplished her mission and accepts her fate. Moreover, the future presented in the "Symposium" is more encouraging than in the "Historical Notes." This closure answers most of the readers' questions and depicts better days to come. The tone of the novel is lighter for two main reasons. Firstly, the readers already know this dystopian world and expect the horrors done to women in Gilead. The description of those actions is therefore less shocking compared to the first book. Secondly, the characters no longer live in a transitional period and the Gileadean society is now "ordinary" (*HT* 43), just like Aunt Lydia predicted. Offred, who knows what the regime can do, lives in constant dread which is conveyed in her storytelling. Agnes, for whom life under Gilead is normal, adopts a neutral tone when she details her everyday activities. Daisy, even if she is surrounded by dangers at Ardua Hall, does not realize how precarious her situation is. Her narration is consequently not colored by fear. Aunt Lydia, now in control of the women's sphere, introduces dystopian themes when she writes about the violence used to establish Gilead. Yet those deeds, told in the past tense, took place years ago and do not create an immediate feeling of danger like in Offred's story. In her present of narration, Aunt Lydia is fighting to remain at the head of Ardua Hall against the aging Founding Aunts who scheme plans to usurp her position. For instance, Aunt Vidala plants offerings at the feet of Aunt Lydia's statue and accuses her of encouraging "excess attention . . . dangerously close to cult worship" which constitutes a "grave sin" (*TT* 179). This subplot is less fear-inducing than Offred's chances of being killed if she fails to provide her pass quickly enough (*HT* 30). Altogether, *The Testaments*'s tone is not dystopic. The narrators are not crushed by the weight of this society, even if Gilead's structure remains "the very worst of social alternatives" (Moylan 147).

The two novels blur the limits of the dystopian genre, which has political implications according to Baccolini. As we saw, *The Handmaid's Tale* is between a critical and classical dystopia and Atwood borrows "the convention of the diary and the epistolary novel" (Baccolini 520) for Offred's and Aunt Lydia's narrations. The sequel disrupts the genre even further and includes characteristics of the thriller genre. Indeed, the interwoven narratives create a fast-paced story that evolves on three planes. Towards the end, when Agnes and Daisy flee Gilead, the speed increases climactically. The rapid tempo coupled with Daisy's training, her infiltration in Gilead and escape with a chip full of damning documents hidden in her arm resonate more with a thriller or a spy novel than a dystopia. Through the blurring of genres, Atwood experiments with different formulas to reach the readers with immersive or distancing strategies, adapting the genre to her needs rather than following the norm. For Baccolini, mixing genres is a "resistance to a hegemonic ideology" (520) and she noticed that "dystopian fiction by women resists genre purity in favor of a hybrid text . . . by making it politically and formally oppositional" (520). Atwood thus contests hegemonic conventions, often set by male writers and critics, an opposition which resonates with her exploration of gender in the content of her novels.

A "product of our dark times" (Baccolini 521), dystopias respond to their context, and Atwood, who wrote the sequel thirty-five years later, had to adapt her narrative strategy to the period. Published in 1985, *The Handmaid's Tale* emerges from a specific literary context. Indeed, the eighties and nineties "have produced what a series of scholars have addressed as a ‘dystopian turn’ in Anglo-American science-fiction” (Baccolini 520), created by the discrepancy between politicians’ utopist discourse and the social degradation. Elected in 1980, Ronald Reagan used “the utopian figure of the ‘city on the hill’ from colonial history, to signify the society of harmony and enterprise that his new administration promised to establish” (Moylan 183). Yet his “ ‘utopian’ tropes [did] clearly not [celebrate] the betterment of humanity and the earth but rather the triumph of transnational capital and right-wing ideology” (Moylan 184). Writers developed “dystopian strategies as a way to come to terms with the changing, and enclosing, social reality” (Moylan 186), including Margaret Atwood. *The Handmaid’s Tale* originates from this movement and dialogues with its time, as we will analyze in more detail below. Published in 2019, *The Testaments* does not belong to this “dystopian turn,” and Atwood adapts the themes and narrative strategies to the current society.

2.3. One Fictional Universe, Two Historical Contexts

The Handmaid’s Tale, written in 1985, responds to the North American society and explores its problematic trends by adding a “slight twist” (Atwood quoted in Cooke 277) to the present. During the eighties, conservatism rises in reaction to the recent social transformations—opposition to the Vietnam War, Civil Rights movement, student revolts, and sexual freedom with the availability of oral contraceptives and the legalization of abortion in 1973—which entirely disrupted the American society in twenty years. “For many conservatives the sixties became a decade from which the US had to rescue itself” and “served as a spectre of damaging moral, social and cultural promiscuity” (Thompson G. 9), a discourse Atwood reuses in the Commanders’ speeches condemning the former USA[22]. In 1980, the election of Ronald Reagan, and his association with the New Right and New Christian Right, reinforces religious and conservative discourses. To counter the seventies' inflation, the president institutes "la baisse des impôts, la déréglementation de l'économie et la libéralisation des échanges" (Artaud 78), or the "Reaganomics." Those policies are not only economic and include a moral vision "with its roots in myths about family values, individuality, national strength and the importance of technological progress" (Thompson G. 8). The Christian Right largely influences this rhetoric by stressing "the role of women as mothers and child-carers" (Thompson G. 32), a preeminent discourse in Gilead, and opposing abortion rights. The return to conservative values is felt as a "backlash," a term coined by Susan Faludi

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[22] See page 43.

> to describe a cultural climate in which women were the subject of two conflicting narratives: one which told them they had won the equal rights battle and were now successful; another which told them that the consequences of this success were unhappiness in the form of "burn-out," and "infertility epidemic" and a "man shortage." (Thompson G. 32)

Atwood envisions a world where the "infertility epidemic" occurs, and imagines a response based on the religious right's rhetoric, which results in Gilead. Offred, who disregards her mother's feminist fight, incarnates the second narrative of the backlash which tells women they acquired all necessary rights and do not need to defend them anymore[23]. A dangerous position because her "willed ignorance" (Neuman 862) led to the revocation of these newly acquired liberties. Atwood exploits the eighties' anxieties and pushes discourses to their extreme consequences, warning the readers against inaction.

To create a continuity between Gilead and the readers' reality, Atwood set *The Handmaid's Tale* in a transitional period and represents the American society of the eighties. Esquenazi explains "pour que la possibilité d'un jugement de véridicité soit possible, il semble essentiel que l'univers fictionnel soit ressenti comme 'proche,' d'une façon ou d'une autre, de l'univers réel du destinataire" (118). Readers are therefore more likely to accept Gilead as verisimilar if it originates from a familiar context and it prevents their rejection of this warning as "only fiction." Atwood cared not to compose a binary opposition between a "good" America and "bad" Gilead. She underlines the continuity of the patriarchal system present in both societies, differing in intensity rather than nature. In the fictional America, Offred explains how women's bodies are found by the side of the roads "bludgeoned to death or mutilated" (*HT* 66), and despite her independence, she follows certain rules to protect herself:

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[23] For a developed analysis on Offred's lack of reaction, see Shirley Neuman's article, and to understand the representation of the second-wave feminism in *The Handmaid's Tale* consult Fiona Tolan's work.

> rules that were never spelled out but that every woman knew: don't open your door to a stranger. . . Don't stop on the road to help a motorist pretending to be in trouble. Keep the locks on and keep going. If anyone whistles, don't turn to look. Don't go into a laundromat, by yourself, at night. (*HT* 34)

Outside of their homes, danger looms and awaits women in the imagined American society, in Gilead[24] and in the real readers' lives—for who has never heard that women should not walk alone at night. The same narrative about women needing to protect themselves against men can be found everywhere. The figuration of a discourse existing in reality produces a double effect: the fictional world seems more realistic because of its closeness to the readers' lives, and the transfer of a familiar rhetoric in an unfamiliar setting makes it more visible and easier to question. Like a magnifying glass, Gilead accentuates the mechanisms of gender and patriarchy, enabling the readers to understand what shapes their reality.

The Testaments has to continue the fictional world of *The Handmaid's Tale*, first imagined in 1985, while responding to the specific issues of 2019. In the fiction, sixteen years elapsed between the two narratives and the outside-Gilead narration is now situated in Canada. The society evolved as well, Daisy has classes on Gilead (*TT* 46), sex trafficking (*TT* 124), victim blaming (*TT* 327), consent (*TT* 56). Offred never mentions studying such subjects at school or with her feminist mother. However, "one has to avoid representing Canada as an ideal place in and of itself," warns Atwood (quoted in Bethune).

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[24] See the analysis of the Aunt's discourses on page 26.

Canada is therefore not spared by the violence present in the first novel. For example, Daisy evokes "news about children who'd been found battered to death" and women discovered "in a shallow grave with their necks broken" (*TT* 122). This returning theme shows how gendered violence is not contained in Gilead but exists everywhere. While respecting her original work, Atwood includes contemporary issues in *The Testaments.* For instance, immigration, a recurrent question in the USA, recently came back to light with Trump's anti-immigration rhetoric, crystallized by his slogan "Build the Wall," and the public's discovery of the horrific conditions in detention centers. In *The Testaments*, the immigration crisis is evoked through the "SanctuCare" (*TT* 123) that welcomes women fleeing Gilead. Daisy explains she "hadn't really seen" these refugees, until she herself experiences what it means "to leave a place you knew, and lose everything, and travel into the unknown" (*TT* 271). Another issue mentioned is climate change; in the fiction, nuclear accidents and chemical leakages are responsible for the infertility epidemic and the environmental degradation (*HT* 317). The sequel accentuates this aspect by portraying a Canadian society that invested in sustainable solutions, for example solar energy powers the boat rescuing the sisters (*TT* 377). Youth activism, in the media spotlights since the last couple of years, is represented in the novel as well. Daisy participates with her class in a protest against women's mistreatment in Gilead and the denial of climate change. They carry banners proclaiming, "GILEAD, CLIMATE SCIENCE DE-LIAR! GILEAD WANTS US TO FRY!" (*TT* 48), which also alludes to climate-skeptic tendencies in the USA. If Atwood only scratches the surface of those problems, it nevertheless inscribes *The Testaments* in the 21st century.

Atwood's writing was prompted by a feeling of the world's degradation, both in 1985 and 2019. She explains that "for a long time we were going away from Gilead and then we turned around and started going back towards Gilead" (Atwood quoted in

Allardice). Indeed, “developing countries have witnessed their fair share of political crises: the Arab Spring, ISIS, and the Rohingya crisis in Burma. These events share stories of women who were sexually harassed, raped, and slaughtered” (AlTaher 346). These facts echo the eighties’ crisis such as the Iranian revolution where “Ayatollah Khomeini had forced women out of Iranian universities, out of their jobs, and back into their burqas and their homes” (Neuman 859), Afghan women who were not allowed to read or write (Neuman 859) or “the enforced childbearing of Romania” (Bethune). One can see the clear lineage between this historical reality and the Gileadean society. In 1985, Atwood responds to the world’s problematic trends with *The Handmaid’s Tale* and their resurgence in the 21st century with *The Testaments*.

In American society, the eighties’ conservative rhetoric and backlash against women are revived today, in part because of Donald Trump’s sexist discourse and policies. Trump’s politics follows the historical lineage of Ronald Reagan’s, even if its expression sometimes lacks coherence (Greenberg). Katzenstein analyzes that

> some parts of the Reaganist script endure: tax cuts, small government, strong military, ready acceptance of growing inequality, inaction on or outright opposition to environmental issues, and bulging deficits. New items have been added: misogyny, racial prejudice, and xenophobia.

This heritage resonates especially with the white working class which has “borne the brunt of the economic changes that have revolutionized the U.S. economy in recent decades” (Thompson J. 3) and hoped Trump would improve their situation. Susan Faludi also noticed the “new items” Trump introduced in the rightwing rhetoric and analyzes how he uses sexism to divert attention from complex issues and redirect people’s frustrations onto women:

> There’s immense fear and bitterness out there over the lightning-speed changes brought on by deindustrialization, the technological revolution, globalization, all these forces that lack a face and seem too abstract and complex to confront directly. And there’s an immense desire to find culprits to punish, a desire that Trump has skillfully manipulated. His scapegoats are multiple—immigrants, minorities, LGBT

> people, etc.—but women, and especially women who represent feminist achievement and aspiration—are prime targets. (343)

According to her, today's backlash is "loud and clear" because of Trump's systematic "need to humiliate and attack any strong woman who challenges him" (Faludi 337). For instance, "throughout the presidential campaign, Trump deployed sexist stereotypes to undermine the presumptive Democratic Party nominee, Hillary Clinton" (Boatright and Sperling 56). Once, he retweeted, "If Hillary Clinton can't satisfy her husband what makes her think she can satisfy America?" **(**Boatright and Sperling 57), one example among many sexist remarks[25]. Moreover, he does not stop at words and was "accused by at least 24 women of inappropriate sexual conduct" (Drobac 396). As the president of the United States, his acts and words have profound consequences on women, notably because "his administration is working to strip systematically every bit of legal and legislative scaffolding that supports women's equality and freedom" (Faludi 338). Trump's time in office will have long-lasting effects and contributes to legitimizing sexist discourse.

In this climate of blatant misogyny, identification with strong female characters might be beneficial for the readers, whereas a more reflexive approach suited the Reagan era better. The backlash of the eighties was "subtle" and "undercover" (Faludi 338), *The Handmaid's Tale* thus favors an approach where the readers' critical thinking is triggered. It enables them to recognize discourses shaping their lives, such as the double narratives of the eighties' backlash; and draw parallels between the elements used to control gender in Gilead—clothes, repetitive actions, and so on—and how similar structures influence their own gender. If the 2019's readership still benefits of these teachings, the context has changed and a more empowering approach might be more effective to counter today's open sexism. Indeed, in parallel with this recent backlash, women actively defended their rights on social media or in the streets. *The Testaments* interacts with this activism in two manners. Firstly, Atwood responds to the #MeToo movement by focusing on banalized sexual harassment through Agnes's abuse at her dentist appointment. Secondly, the readers reappropriated symbols of the fictional universe to protest against abortion. Both products of their times, Atwood adapts the two novels to their context to maximize their effect.

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[25] For more examples, see Arwa Mahdawi's enlightening article "This is What Rape Culture Looks Like—In the Words of Donald Trump," where she collected Trump misogynistic comments.

Through the representation of sexual assault on Agnes in *The Testaments*, Atwood participates to the discussion the #MeToo movement started. We analyzed this scene before and showed how Agnes becomes a sexed body through this encounter and how men assert their power through sexuality[26]. Dr. Grove's casual tone and his matter-of-fact manners set the event as an everyday occurrence, which is precisely what the #MeToo movement exposes. In October 2017, the revelation about the movie producer Harvey Weinstein's sexual assaults sparked the movement which grew exponentially on Twitter. Women shared on social media their own experiences of sexual harassment in detail or simply by posting "me too" (Drobac 395). These stories "created a new understanding concerning the scope and breadth of sex-based discrimination in the US" (Drobac 395), and around the world. The #MeToo movement illustrates how "sexual predation…is used to keep women in their place, to intimidate, threaten, silence, and control" (Faludi 339), the same mechanisms we detailed while studying Gilead. With her fiction, Atwood offers the readers the possibility to understand how discourses and sexuality can be used to reduce women to their bodies. This example shows how "literature tells us something about reality by ordering its conventions so that they become objects of our reflection" (Shi 984). In her fiction, Atwood reframes what the #MeToo movement denounces, proposing an overview of the oppressive mechanisms involved in sexual harassment.

The interaction between fiction and reality goes in both directions. Indeed, readers reappropriated Gileadean symbols to protest against the recent restriction imposed on abortion rights. The Trump administration favored these modifications because the Christian Right supports the President, notable due to his appointment of religious high-level officials, such as his Vice President Mike Pence. Trump also elected three conservative Supreme Court Judges—Neil Gorsuch, Brett Kavanaugh and Amy Coney Barrett—which grants republicans a strong majority of six against three democrats. The nomination of Barrett, a "devote catholic" (Pengelly and Smith), was controversial because many feared she would "help overturn the landmark 1973 Roe v Wade decision that legalised abortion" (Pengelly and Smith). Finally, Trump himself participated to a *March for Life* in January 2020 and is the first president to do so—one can wonder about his real motives, as he probably sought to divert attention from his impeachment (Smith). His appearance nevertheless gave weight to the movement. In parallel, "nearly a dozen conservative states have passed laws in 2019 restricting access to abortion" (Hutzler). Yet these changes did not go unnoticed. Women protested against the limitations and often wore the Handmaid's dress, designed by Ane Crabtree for the television series, as a symbol of resistance. Atwood analyzes that "what the costume is really asking viewers is: do we want to live in a slave state?" (quoted in Beaumont and Holpuch). The bright red dress provides a strong visual and "allow[s] people who are very shy but want to do something to speak up," explains Jocelyn Foye who demonstrated in one (quoted in Cohen). Disempowering in the fictional world, the Handmaid's costume is reinterpreted in real life and becomes a tool of resistance. The readers, or viewers of the show, understood *The Handmaid's Tale*'s warning and, empowered by *The Testaments*, fight for their right to reproductive health.

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[26] See page 33.

2.4. Conclusion

The Handmaid's Tale creates a compassionate but active audience through Offred who oscillates between an engaging and distancing narrator's stance. The readers identify with her as she shares her perspective, her little joys and great sufferings with them. However, Offred, with her direct addresses and avowed "reconstruction," reminds the readers of their position. This critical distance is necessary to study the Gileadean society and its domination on women. These mechanisms are not estranged from the readers' reality but an extension of it. To mark the continuity between the two, Atwood situates her first novel in a transitional time and represents familiar discourses, told by politicians or religious ministers, into an unfamiliar setting to question their normality and legitimacy. The "Historical Notes" accentuate the readers' alienation and tilt the balance toward critical distance, corresponding to the dystopian genre and its aim to warn readers.

For *The Testaments*, Atwood had to respect her original universe, while adapting it to 2019. She consequently blurs the limits of the dystopian genre as Gilead's society is still "the very worst of social alternatives" (Moylan 147), but the tone and structure resemble a thriller. *The Testaments* provides a sense of closure, in the main part and in the appendix, to the readers who finally received the answers they waited for thirty-five years. More hopeful, the narration favors immersion and identification with Daisy and Agnes who are strong female characters, while maintaining the critical distance through Aunt Lydia's complexity.

Today's readers have the advantage of knowing the two texts. In this part, we generally distinguished the two readerships to facilitate the comparison of the novels. However, both contain immersive and distancing characteristics and complement each other. Indeed, *The Handmaid's Tale*'s teachings about gender constructivism, also present in the sequel, resonate with readers in 2019, even if they are unaware the eighties' backlash inspired Gilead. The strength of this novel, and maybe of all classics, is the permanence of its theme and its simultaneous ability to echo a specific time. *The Testaments* possesses this quality too, as it addresses fundamental gender issues and punctual one, like the #MeToo movement. Atwood's novels illustrate the power of fiction which "nous fai[t] mieux comprendre le monde et nous aid[e] à vivre" (Todorov 72).

Conclusion: A World of Nuances

Our essay opened on Donald Trump's words to stress that gender equality has not yet been reached. Now, with the tools we developed, we can compare his comments with the Commanders' discourses, demonstrating how fiction teaches us about reality. Power, according to Foucault, produces sexuality through discourses and actions—for instance, the Aunts construct the girls as sexual beings by constantly evoking the "dangers" of their bodies. Foucault's model details how power deploys essentialist discourses to hide its origin and the constructiveness of gender, thus maintaining the patriarchal structure. The Gileadean ideology justifies the Commanders' sexual behavior by projecting their responsibility onto Nature or God. Donald Trump uses a similar discourse to justify his acts; his sexuality also seems independent from his will, as he is "automatically attracted to beautiful" (quoted in Bullock), a magnetic force he cannot resist. Putting the blame on so-called natural instincts, Trump or the Commanders are not, according to their views, responsible for their actions; they illustrate the mechanisms of power that hides its origin behind essentialist discourses.

This system is also maintained through symbolic violence: those who dominate impose their definition onto the powerless and, with their discursive power, can exclude them from the human realm. The Gileadean society is skilled at dehumanizing women and reducing them to their bodies, through discourses comparing them to fragile flowers when young, to animals, objects or incubators when adults, and devoid of brains at any age. The same logic underlies Trump's words when he objectifies women or comments on their looks for political gain. He ascertains his dominance by imposing his definition on others. This enforcement of gendered categories does not stop with words, but also includes actions, especially sexual violence. Butler explains, "the act of harassment may be one in which a person is 'made' into a certain gender" (Butler, *Trouble* XIII) as the sexual violence reduces a person to “a one-dimensional sexual entity” (Wilson, Freidman, and Hengen 110). Therefore, when Trump uses his power to sexually assault a woman—like Dr. Grove who attacks Agnes—, he violently enforces the category of women upon her, then avoids responsibility by hiding behind an essentialist discourse.

Trump is only the tip of the iceberg, visible because of his status, but his behavior is sadly common, as the #MeToo movement revealed. Mechanisms maintaining gender imbalance are all-pervasive, in families or at work, from sexist jokes to rape. Therefore, we need to understand them, recognize their prevalence and raise awareness about them. This can be achieved through different means: women’s testimonies on social media, the study of theoretical models or literary texts. The parallel we drew between Trump and the Commanders illustrates how the three interact and are complementary. The real testimonies of sexual assault offer striking examples but no explanations. The theories created by Judith Butler and Michel Foucault, or analytical tools developed by critics such as Wolfgang Iser, Tzvetan Todorov and Jean-Pierre Esquenazi, provide useful frames of reference and technical terms to understand gender or study literature. However, these texts can be dry and not everyone has the time or willingness to read Butler’s complex prose. Without having the impact of reality nor the precision of theories, literature is nevertheless powerful, and its strength resides in its capacity to represent the former and teach about the latter, while entertaining the readers.

Literary texts suggest possibilities to the readers and leave them free to interpret them, as Todorov explains, “en figurant un objet, un événement, un caractère, l’écrivain n’assène pas une thèse, mais incite le lecteur à la formuler: il propose plutôt qu’il n’impose, il laisse donc son lecteur libre et en même temps l’incite à devenir plus actif” (74). *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Testaments* do not explain but show that gender is a social construction. Indeed, the implied author opposes Gilead’s essentialist vision to various gender models. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the readers can compare the American eighties with Gilead, linked by Offred's associations between her present and past life, and, in *The Testaments*, the juxtaposition of Agnes's and Daisy's points of view underlines the weight of socialization. The novels condense the mechanisms of normalization—the influence of clothes, the internalization of bodily attitudes, the performative effect of repeated actions—on a scale observable by the readers, but never explain them with so many words, leaving the readers free to draw their own conclusions.

Critical thinking or identification, distance or immersion, both novels contain these two sides but in different proportions. We focused on the figure of the implied reader to guide our interpretation and, therefore, on the formal elements, because the actual readers may have very different responses based on their experiences. The immersion in *The Handmaid's Tale* is prompted by Offred, who shares her perspective with the implied reader and thus mediates her access into the fictional world, creating a strong connection. Aunt Lydia, despite her many problematic aspects, also invites the implied reader to identify with her. Agnes's and Daisy's narrations do not contain distancing elements as they rarely mention their narratees and focus on actions, thus favoring identification. This last narrative structure echoes with the thriller novels that tend to immerse their readers in a fictional world. In *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*, critical distance is induced on different narrative levels. When Offred and Aunt Lydia address the implied reader, it reminds her of her position and pulls her away from the fictional world. Similarly, when Agnes learns to read and develops a critical mind, it creates a *mise en abyme* which reflects the implied reader's position. Then, the implied author plays with intertextuality—for instance, Agnes's remarks about acting referring to Judith Butler's theory, or Aunt Lydia's different personality in Offred's narrative or her holograph—which reminds the implied reader of the real world. The immersive or distancing strategies are therefore both present in the main narratives and the real readers will respond in function of their experiences.

However, the appendices shift the two novels' interpretation differently, even though their format is similar. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the "Historical Notes" alienate the implied reader because of the different tone, genre, and Professor Pieixoto's contemptuous attitude. She is presented with an example of misreading which should question her own reading practice and the weight of her interpretations. This ending corresponds with the dystopian aim of creating an active audience by triggering their critical thinking. To encourage the real readers to act, dystopias leave a glimmer of hope, within or just outside the fictional world—the difference between a critical or classical dystopia. Indeed, if gender can be changed for the worst, it could also be modified for the best, and it is up to the readers to orient these evolutions in the right direction.

The shimmering hope at the end of *The Handmaid's Tale* is strongly reinforced in *The Testaments*. Indeed, the alienation effect of "The Thirteenth Symposium" is lessened, as the implied reader expects the explanatory appendix, foreshadowed in the main text and by the knowledge of *The Handmaid's Tale*'s structure. Moreover, the tone and the content provide the implied reader with a sense of closure. All the unresolved questions concerning Gilead's fall and Offred's fate are finally answered. This closure does not induce the dissatisfaction and desire to seek answers felt after reading the first novel, and thus reinforces the immersive aspects of the novel, a strategy adapted to today.

Indeed, readers in 2019 benefit from both narrative strategies. Their critical thinking is stimulated in *The Handmaid's Tale*, which originally favored distance to teach readers to recognize the covert backlash of the eighties; they are empowered by identifying with strong female characters through *The Testaments*. The effectiveness of Atwood's novels and their messages are illustrated by the readers' reappropriation of the Handmaid's dress to protest against the limitation on abortion rights.

We hope that, through our dissertation, we contributed to further the discussion on gender, illustrate the power of fiction, and show how one can learn about the constructiveness of gender in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*. In a world where "right" and "wrong," or "good" and "bad," seem to be the only options, literary texts offer a haven of nuances; a place where the readers have the time and space to explore, imagine, notice, dream, reflect, and so much more. As Samuel Becket wrote (quoted in Katzenstein):

> It is grey we need—
> Made of bright and black,
> Able to shed the former
> Or the latter,
> And be the latter
> Or the former—
> Alone.

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