DENYING AUTHORITY:
MONOLOGIC AND DIALOGIC PERSPECTIVES IN
MARGARET ATWOOD'S
THE HANDMAID'S TALE

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* as an account of a struggle between monologic and dialogic forces. Using Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia as a guide, the meaning of language is shown to be socially determined. Therefore gender, class and political ideology influence one's interpretation of language. These social factors, however, influence a person's interpretation of the world as well.

In *The Handmaid's Tale* the totalitarian, male-centered government attempts to control people by limiting meaning, knowledge and experiences. The government's ideology therefore allows only one way to view the world -- its own. Since there is just one method of thinking acknowledged by the government, the perspective is considered monologic. Yet the monologism of the government is constantly challenged by the main character, Offred, who refuses to be constrained by her society's ideology. She repeatedly introduces alternative meanings and opinions that contradict the status quo, thereby maintaining a dialogic perspective that accepts the multifarious construct of the world and of language.

Offred's dialogism undercuts the monologism of her government. By questioning the validity of possessing a single interpretation of the world, Offred exposes monologism as stifling in a world that generates innumerable meanings and perspectives.
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Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* opens with a thematic juxtapositioning of relative freedom and rigid imprisonment, self-autonomy and imposed authority. Offred, the autobiographical narrator of the tale, attempts to explain the seemingly abrupt transformation of herself and her society. Once a working wife and mother, Offred has been literally captured and forced into the role of a handmaid in the new Republic of Gilead. Her main duty as a handmaid is to reproduce, since the national birthrate has dropped to an alarmingly low level. Offred's former life and identity have been eradicated, leaving only memories; she is now circumscribed, a slave to a monolithic, patriarchal government. However, Offred refuses to be a puppet of the Gileadean government. Remembering her past, Offred maintains her sense of self and desperately waits for an opportunity to escape her present situation and thus reclaim control over her life and identity.

In her position as a Gileadean handmaid, Offred is marginalized on two levels. First, in a totalitarian society her words, actions, opinions and worldview must appear--convincingly--to conform to the tenets of the governing political party. Since Offred's real views and attitudes differ from the government's, she is categorically an Other, and therefore a potential threat to the status quo. To preserve herself, Offred must cloak her true opinions and her true self. Secondly, as a woman in a staunch patriarchal society, Offred is dismissed automatically as inferior, though necessary in
order to propagate the race. Offred is marginalized due to her biological Otherness. As an Other in both totalitarian and patriarchal terms, Offred is deprived of social authority in the dual hierarchical scale; she has no political power and no true social significance.

From its initial publication in 1985, The Handmaid's Tale has been studied primarily as a feminist text and a political critique within a dystopian framework. Yet underlying Atwood's political and feminist arguments is a pervasive and overwhelming concern with signs and interpretations. It is, in short, a text about our attempts to determine the meaning of a word, event, or thing. As Atwood makes clear, one source for interpreting signs is ideology. As evidenced in Gilead's approach to language, ideology constructs systems of interpreting signs; these systems are presented as singular, authoritative, and absolute means of deriving significance. Language, as it shapes a society's (and a person's) perception of the world, is used as a tool of the government to erase unwanted concepts. For example, by defining Offred as a handmaid, the government limits her potential role in society. She is no longer a wife and a mother and a worker. Instead, she is a handmaid. "And/but" is replaced by "either/or"; plurality of being is replaced with singularity of existence.

However, in The Handmaid's Tale, ideological systems of interpretation are exposed as inadequate and false in assigning meaning; they are merely deliberate misreadings, intended to retain power in the hands of government rulers. Offred's perspective of language is at odds with the ideological forces of Gilead. For Offred, words are a means of creating, not erasing, multiple significations. Even as Gilead negated her multi-
faceted identity through language, Offred continually re-creates herself (and thereby her significance) through language. By presenting two views of language, Atwood illustrates the idea of language as a site of struggle, a site of power.

It is the purpose of this study to trace Atwood's critique of interpretative acts, and also to determine how (mis)interpretations within the novel relate to the issues of ideology and power that shape the tale. Using Bakhtin's theories concerning monologic and dialogic forces as a framework, patriarchal and political hierarchies can be examined as institutions of totalitarian power that implement language as a primary mechanism of control. In turn, Offred possesses (and utilizes) a certain amount of power that weakens Gilead's manipulative monologism. Offred's position as storyteller operates as an overriding element of carnivalesque that emphasizes her demarginalization within the text. Bakhtin's concept of carnival is based on the medieval carnivals, "a privileged time when what oft was thought could for once be expressed with relative impunity," either verbally or physically (Burke 182). Carnivals were large social events during which the world was "turned upside down," for the social hierarchy was temporarily reversed, with peasants dressing and acting like nobility (Burke 188). In Atwood's novel, Offred reverses the social rules and structure, for although Offred stands outside the established authoritative structure of her society, it is she who becomes the figure demanding attention. By utilizing the power of the word, Offred suspends the hierarchical structure; she who is forbidden to communicate enters into familiar verbal contact with others.
Through her story, Offred identifies language as a source of power; those who use and control language wield the ability to persuade or manipulate others. Offred intends only to persuade her audience to believe her; Gilead, conversely, intends to exercise its authority by manipulating its captive audience through language. Since Offred refuses to yield to the verbal strictures of Gilead, language becomes a site of struggle: should language be implemented as a medium of communication or as a means of manipulation? Bakhtin identifies language as a “site of struggle” between the authoritative and the subjective, or the monologic and the dialogic. Monologic forces restrict meaning in language. Through authoritative decree, meanings associated with a given sign are reduced, usually to one “correct” definition. It is a process of assigning one finite definition per word. Monologism’s censorship is applicable to an approach to life as well. Not only is there just one meaning per sign, but there is just one way of reading, one way of thinking, and one way of viewing the world. Because of the wide applicability of monologic philosophy, Bakhtin alternatively calls the monologic forces the centripetal forces as a means of concretely illustrating the monologic tendency to impel things inward, toward a center. Monologic forces, like centripetal forces, seek “to unify and centralize” language and ideological views (i.e. the “verbal-ideological world”) (Bakhtin 270).

Conversely, dialogic forces leave room for a multitude of voices, thoughts, and perspectives, similar to a Tower of Babel. In dialogism language is subject to infinite meanings and variations, thereby shattering monologism and equalizing authority to “just” another perspective.
Bakhtin compares dialogic forces to centrifugal forces, which decentralize and disunify the verbal-ideological world. Therefore, there is constant tension between the monologic/centripetal forces and the dialogic/centrifugal forces in the world:

Alongside the centripetal forces, the centrifugal forces of language carry on their uninterrupted work; alongside verbal-ideological centralization and unification, the uninterrupted processes of decentralization and disunification go forward. (Bakhtin 270-271)

The struggle between the centripetal and centrifugal forces of language is presented in The Handmaid's Tale as the conflict between the monologic insistence of the Gileadean government and the dialogic perspective of Offred, an unwilling participant of Gileadean society. Through Offred, the ideological system of interpretation is exposed as inadequate because it assigns singular meanings; such an approach to interpretation is in all respects a misreading of the world. Offred contests the monologic structure of thought presented by the government as she fragments meaning into regressive plurality. According to Offred, there is no absolute meaning associated with a particular sign; meaning proliferates into a nebulous collection of words and sounds.

As a totalitarian regime, Gilead is by necessity monologic. George Orwell, in the Nineteen Eighty-Four appendix "The Principles of Newspeak," as well as in his essay "Politics and the English Language," indicates his belief that a "totalitarian system, in seeking to curtail dissent and stifle the upward impulse of humanity toward liberty, would need to abolish independent thought" (Young 3). Regimes such as Gilead and Ingsoc, like Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia, are based on the realization
that power is maintained through the manipulation of language. In other words, by controlling language, totalitarian rulers can control their subjects. In totalitarian societies such as Atwood's Gilead or Orwell's Oceania, the government attempts to reduce people to lonely, isolated atoms, forbidden to think for themselves or to communicate their private thoughts and feelings (Young 45). By preventing dialogue, a totalitarian society is better able to convince its members that anyone who differs in opinion is wrong, a deviant—and completely alone in holding such an opinion. The absence of collective, unified dissent that would evolve from dialogue allows for the propagation of the totalitarian, monologic view.

Because of its monologic nature, Gilead is a society obsessed with words. Created and enforced by the commands of a few men, Gilead is, in a sense, a verbal construction: it exists because it was ordered to exist. Gilead's "materiality" is based upon command: word made flesh; language-made reality. The society of Gilead itself is based not only on the word of the commanders, but also on the Word. The "act" of creating a world through words strongly parallels the book of Genesis—quite intentionally. Chapter one of the Book of Genesis is considered the story of creation, outlining the order in which the world was ordered into existence, beginning with the creation of light:

In the beginning, when God created the universe, the earth was formless and desolate . . . . Then God commanded, "Let there be light"--and light appeared. God was pleased with what he saw. Then he separated the light from the darkness, and he named the light "Day" and the darkness "Night." (Genesis 1: 1-5)

According to Genesis, it is through the authoritative command of God that
the world was made and categorized; he made light and distinguished it from darkness. The Commanders emulate the “way of the Lord” and, as their name indicates, they commanded the social order to exist. They separated men from women, handmaids from wives and Marthas. In short, through their (military) power and through their lawful orders, the Commanders created Gilead and created its internal hierarchy, claiming the Bible as their basis of authority. Since the Bible is essentially the Word of God, it provides the ultimate authoritative word. The Bible’s authority springs from its a priori discourse, a discourse from an unfathomable past of preexistence. The Bible is the Word of God, the Father of all men; he existed before the world, and it was through his word that the world was created:

Before the world was created, the Word already existed; he was with God, and he was the same as God. From the very beginning the Word was with God. Through him God made all things; not one thing was made without him. (John 1: 1-3)

Existing before time with no previous author, the Word of God, the Word that created the world, is the generative source of life and of language. Basically, the Word is the foundation and source of a verbal-ideological world.

The Commanders of Gilead acknowledge the link between language, knowledge, and power; for them, knowledge of and access to the written word becomes the basis of their contrived power. Adopting the Bible as a primary guide, the Commanders implement a literal interpretation of certain passages to provide the foundation for reinstating an archaic patriarchal society. However, they omit conflicting passages and create “new” passages of their own in order to construct their new Old Wor(l)d
more to their ideals. Since the written word is permanent it can be checked or consulted at will, allowing time for thought and understanding; therefore, any changes made to the primary text of the Bible would be noticeable immediately. Also, the passages that are actually contained in the text of the Bible are always open to a multitude of interpretations. Yet as Orwell points out in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the permanence of the written word poses a problem for the totalitarian government. Because a written word is accessible at all times, a reader can meditate upon it, producing various meanings. The dialogism that written words initiate threatens the survival of the totalitarian regime. Since a totalitarian regime's objective is to centripetally "diminish the range of thought" to ideas that support only the government's ideological purposes, it is essential to limit access to written word (Orwell, 1984 247).

In Gileadean society, the written word is contained; therefore, the possible interpretations are limited to those provided by the Commanders, who are technically the "keepers of the word." As Offred notes after hearing the Beatitudes recited, "Blessed are the silent. I knew they made that up, I knew it was wrong, and they left things out, too, but there was no way of checking" (Atwood 115). Hence, the verbal-ideological world is presented in Gilead as monologic and unified; there is only one way to view the Word and only one way to view the World. Offred tells her audience that "The Bible [the Word] is kept locked up. It is an incendiary device: who knows what we'd make of it, if we ever got our hands on it?" (Atwood 112). The word becomes a source of secret knowledge and power that divides the society into a hierarchy of gender; generally, men have the word and,
consequently, the power, whereas women simply do not. Even the Aunts, who appear to possess some amount of power, are not allowed to read. Their power is portioned out to them by the men, leaving the Aunts relatively low in the social hierarchy.

However, the men's basis of power is fundamentally flawed, due to their refusal to allow for any other interpretations of the verbal-ideological world. In Gilead the concept of dialogism is categorically denied; ambiguity is dismissed as myth. For example, the Commanders read the Bible literally and apply it directly to the world; they hide the possibility of any other reading. Their amendments to the Biblical text are intended to extend the Commanders' control; yet as Offred realizes, there were—and ostensibly are—other ways of reading the Bible, including the false passages added by the Commanders. Since Gilead is founded on an intentional misreading of words, the society itself becomes a model for misreading. Thus, the ambiguity of the society itself demonstrates that centripetal forces are unable to eradicate dialogism.

The concept of concealing or erasing readings is paralleled by the nature of Offred's tale itself: her tale is a palimpsest in both form and content. According to Piexoto in the "Historical Notes on The Handmaid's Tale," Offred erased most of the original contents of thirty cassette tapes and recorded her own material: "In general, each tape begins with two or three songs, as camouflage no doubt, then the music is broken off and the speaking voice takes over" (382). Clearly, Offred's tale itself parallels the material form in which it is found, for Offred constantly revises her story, negating and then retelling certain segments. Essentially, Offred "rewrites"
her tale without physically erasing its previous contents, thereby allowing her audience to consider both the original and the revised texts.

For example, in relating her encounters with Nick, Offred breaks off and confesses: "I made that [story] up. It didn't happen that way. Here is what happened" (338). She then retells her story, only to admit that "It didn't happen that way either" (340). Offred does not retell her scenario with Nick again after "erasing" her other stories; as a result her audience is left with only an impression, or a faint image, of what may have occurred. Yet the layering that occurs in a palimpsest adds to the dialogue of the story. The possible range of events gives rise to a concurrent spectrum of possible readings for each option presented. Each scenario Offred relates is open to several different readings by her audience. The fact that Offred does not provide a conclusive account of her encounter with Nick allows for infinite readings, since the text is itself infinite in possible occurrences.

As Offred often admits, an outline of the past is the only thing she can truly present, since the past is a reconstruction or an approximation of what once was, based on fallible memory and inadequate language:

This is a reconstruction. All of it is a reconstruction. It's a reconstruction now, in my head, as I lie flat on my single bed rehearsing what I should or shouldn't have said, what I should or shouldn't have done, how I should have played it.

When I get out of here, if I'm ever able to set this down in any form, even in the form of one voice to another, it will be a reconstruction then too, at yet another remove. It's impossible to say a thing exactly the way it was because what you say can never be exact, you always have to leave something out, there are too many flavors, in the air or the tongue, half colors, too many. (173-174)

What Offred finally produces, then, is a dialogic reconstruction based on
approximations of recall and imagination, which fill in the gaps remaining in her memory. Her story is an imagined conversation, in which the events of her past and present are related to an undefined audience. However, through her communications, the evocation of her memory becomes an essential force within Offred’s life. She is able to remember fragments of how life used to be; she is able to remember freedom and self-determination. Because of her ability to compare the present with the past, Offred is capable of resisting the verbal-ideological world Gilead attempts to force upon her. As she was told by Aunt Lydia in the Red Center, Offred is part of a “transitional generation:”

It is the hardest for you. We know the sacrifices you must make. It is hard when men revile you. For the [handmaids] who come after you, it will be easier. They will accept their duties with willing hearts. (Atwood 151)

Offred understands that the generation of handmaids that will succeed her will readily accept their responsibilities “Because they will have no memories of any other way” (151). It is the memory of what she has lost that impels Offred to survive and to escape. It is only memory that allows her to maintain a sense of self in a society that seeks conformity and renunciation.

There are four applications of the word reconstruction that are relevant to Offred’s situation: the process of constructing something anew; the process of constructing something anew in the mind; the process of mentally restoring the past; and the process of rebuilding an area devastated by war (OED). Wade and Piexoto have constructed Offred’s tale anew. They have arranged Offred’s tapes “in the order in which they appeared to go; but all such arrangements are based on guesswork and are to be regarded as
approximations“ (Atwood 383). The transcript created by Wade and Piexoto, then, overwrites and reconstructs the structure of Offred’s text. Offred, in turn, is constructing the events of the past anew—in her mind and in the minds of her audience. The fourth application of the word reconstruction applies directly to Offred herself. Her former self has been despoiled and “buried” by an ideological war of politics and gender (274). Gilead’s objective was to create and perpetuate a population that was quickly dwindling. Yet its underlying purpose was to provide men with “something to do”:

The problem wasn’t only with the women, [the Commander] says. The main problem was with the men. There was nothing for them anymore . . . .
There was nothing for them to do. (272)

Men had lost their control over women; therefore, their function in society had disappeared. The male thinkers behind the formation of the Republic of Gilead sought to regain what they had lost through women’s liberation—basically, men’s power over the “second sex.” In order to accomplish their task, the Commanders had to reduce the freedom and the power women possessed and then redefine the role of women in society. By forcibly redefining women’s responsibilities, men decisively eliminated women’s ability to define themselves. The Commanders provided five categories for women in Gilead: Wives, Handmaids, Marthas, Econowives, and Unwomen. The Wives primarily control the functions of the household, without actively participating in household maintenance; they are figureheads of the house. The Handmaids are Gilead’s “natural resource,” since their main function is to produce offspring. The Marthas are the household servants, performing the necessary duties of cleaning and
cooking. Econowives are the wives of non-ranking men; as such, they perform the tasks of Wives, Handmaids, and Marthas. Lastly, the Unwomen are rejects of society; they are left to die among the toxic waste dumps and refuse piles they are ordered to maintain. With such rigid classifications of functions, women in Gilead are offered no choice. Econowives cannot be just Marthas; Handmaids cannot be Wives, or vice versa. The ability to determine who they want to be in life is denied to women in Gileadean society. As a result, women are imprisoned by their social roles. Gilead’s ideology refuses to allow for any distinctions. In Gilead, “1+1+1+1=4;” each woman is exactly like another, despite social categories (240). “1+1+1+1=4” merely emphasizes Gilead’s centripetal verbal-ideological perspective, in that the formula presented assumes a lack of uniqueness among people. Offred counters Gilead’s premise with her own: “1+1+1+1=1+1+1+1.” Offred’s theorem allows for individuality, surmising that one person is never exactly like another.

Within her story, Offred struggles against Gilead’s rigid definition of her as a handmaid, which is paralleled metaphorically by her presentation of herself as a text that she is struggling to rewrite. The Gileadean society has erased her former identity (her name) and her former lifestyle (her context), leaving her nothing but her female body, which is all that matters in Gilead. Gilead has removed Offred’s multiple signification as a person and replaced it with a single, literal interpretation: she is a female capable of bearing children. Offred’s sexual status is her only means of signifying in the Republic. Since she is still able to conceive children, Offred is allowed to signify; she is not erased from society and completely dismissed as an
Unwoman. Instead, Offred is woven into the fabric of Gileadean society. Rather than being regulated to the margins of the social text, Offred is constructed into the text itself—silent, but present: "I am a blank, here, between parentheses. Between other people" (295). Since her former context has been eliminated, Offred's identity also has been altered and redefined by others. The most obvious indicator of Gilead's attempt to change Offred is her name. The name by which she calls herself throughout the story is "Offred," a moniker that has been assigned to her. It is designed to restrict her by identifying her as the property of Fred—Fred being the first name of her Commander at the time of the story. As property, Offred is reduced to a thing; she is no longer regarded as having an identity of her own. She is merely an extension of Fred's estate. Yet despite her "erasure," Offred's blankness continues to present itself as a social commentary: "Whatever is silenced will clamor to be heard, though silently" (196). As Piexoto fails to notice in his study of Offred's tale, "the gaps . . . have been filled by our anonymous author" (393). In fact, the gaps between the parentheses are synonymous with Offred herself, as she indicates herself.

Offred's verbal-ideological perspective motivates her selection of linguistic signification as the creative mode of constructing herself. She presents her self as a product of words and is therefore as arbitrary and multivalent as the medium she has chosen. Offred is a writable text, with no determinate meaning, no settled significations, plural and diffuse. Offred reveals the fact that the closed interpretations the government presents still do not prevent the proliferation of meaning. Throughout her story, Offred
is conscious of being read; she acknowledges that she herself is a sign to be willfully interpreted by others. She is read in light of her outward signs, particularly her red dress. Her red is read as defining her identity and character, as Offred realizes: “Everything except the wings around my face is red: the color of blood, which defines us” (11). However, the people Offred encounters read her red garb differently, yet it seems she is “off-read” by each of her readers. The official definition of handmaids presents them as the glorified backbone of society: without the handmaids, there would be no procreation, and no future for Gilead. Handmaids are machines “designed” or at least designated to make babies. Moira views handmaids as puppets of the regime, lacking the strength to defy authority. Rita, on the other hand, sees handmaids as legalized prostitutes, bereft of morals and good sense. Similarly, Serena Joy considers handmaids to be sluts, as well as a threat to her marriage and her happiness. Only Cora seems to think that handmaids are vessels of hope and of life.

Offred presents these various interpretations of her red dress in order to illustrate the plurality of meaning associated with a given sign. Even though the Gileadean government declares that there is only one way to view handmaids, the fact that Moira, Rita, Serena Joy, and Cora have all assigned different definitions to the concept of handmaid is a concrete example of dialogic forces actively decentralizing the verbal-ideological world, even as monologic forces persistently attempt to constrain and centralize verbal-ideological perspective. Offred realizes that she cannot control meaning in light of dialogic forces. Although she attempts to write over the others’ interpretations of her self, Offred is cognizant that her own
reading of self will not be the final or even the definitive interpretation. Offred is highly aware that her audience will read her character by her words, and that they will interpret her as they choose. No matter how she tells her tale, she cannot even attempt to control the readings of others; she can merely persuade them to believe in the validity and correctness of her reading.

Throughout the novel, Offred struggles against Gilead’s definition of her as a handmaid. None of the readings offered separate the red dress from the person; there is no allowance for individuality among the group of handmaids. Offred only represents a group of people. Yet even as the red dress overwrites her identity, and as others’ “off-readings” of her overwrite previous readings of the red dress, Offred layers her own interpretation over the already multivalent text of her self, hoping to offer a perspective that takes the individual into account. Essentially, Offred views her dress as a symbol of physical survival. To have chosen either immediate execution or a lingering death as an Unwoman were not feasible options for her. The red dress, then, is a sign of her own life—and of hope of eventual escape. Offred has off(e)red herself in order that she may be saved. Hence, Offred’s interpretation of herself is essentially different from the other readings. Whereas the others see Offred’s dress (and therefore Offred) as a sign of Offred’s renunciation or prostitution of self, Offred considers herself a sacrifice. Offred basically inverts the whore image into one of a sacrosanct offering: she is a “Sister dipped in blood” (11). The red light of lust and sex is revealed as “off-red;” the light has been extinguished in the face of Offred’s explanation of her actions as self-preservation. Furthermore, Offred
attempts to reconstruct herself as being *handmade*: "My self is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech. What I must present is a made thing, not something born" (86). Offred rejects Gilead’s use of gender as a definitive agent and adopts the use of creative effort as the mean of constructing her identity. She distinguishes between the impersonal apparatus of the Republic of Gilead, which views women as machines, and the individual act of creating a unique self. Even as she resists the identity Gilead gives to her, Offred metaphorically (and literally) composes herself through words. The story itself is a testimony of her existence; her words create an image of her in the minds of the audience, as well as in her own mind:

I sit in the chair and think of the word *chair*. It can mean the leader of a meeting. It can also mean a mode of execution. It is the first syllable of the word *charity*. It is the French word for flesh. None of these facts has any connection with the others.

These are the kinds of litanies I use, to compose myself. (140)

Offred uses her testimony as a way to construct herself and make herself "real" not only to her audience, but to herself as well. She demarginalizes then recontextualizes herself by becoming the narrator and focal character within her own text, deliberately transporting herself from the position of "Other" to that of "I." By constructing bridge of oral testimony from herself to her audience, Offred believes that she will cease to be a symbol (i.e. a handmaid) and will instead become an individual.

In a carnivalesque manner, Offred attempts to move from the background of Gilead’s hierarchy into the foreground of the audience’s attention through the narration of her own story; in other words, she
inverts the pyramidal social stratification that typically places her among the bottom of the social scale. Instead of remaining silent (and thereby blank), Offred persistently voices her dissatisfaction with the ideological realizations of Gilead. Offred’s transmission of her testimony is a rebellious act, a defiant gesture under a political edict against women’s speech (Kauffman 226). Offred’s rebellion, however, has deeper implications than a deliberate nose-thumbing at the government and its rules. Offred’s communicative act is an act of resistance to the government’s attempts to gain absolute power over people, a power that designates who can do what and who can signify within the social hierarchy: a power that designates who can be. By taking command of her own voice, Offred announces her “being” and leaves her mark, so to speak, upon the world. She does not leave herself as a blank space, waiting to be inscribed with the words of other people. Instead, she fills in her own space, determining what words and ideas will be presented to the rest of the world. In making her voice heard, Offred forcibly undercuts the monologism of Gilead. Since Offred, as a woman, is categorically silenced, the mere presence of her voice disrupts the myth of monologism and opens Gileadean society’s discourse by introducing dialogism. Furthermore, the fact that any person holds a verbal-ideological perspective different from the authoritative bias fragments the supposed unification of thought Gilead presents.

Offred’s tenacity in opening up a dialogue springs from her adamant refusal to partake in a language that would erase her difference. Her strong belief in “1+1+1+1=1+1+1+1” impels her to maintain a sense of separateness from her role as handmaid and from Gilead’s ideology as a whole. Offred’s
philosophy of distinctiveness applies to everything, as is observed in her reaction to the dead men hanging on the Wall after a Salvaging. The men have white bags covering their heads, but one of the bags has absorbed the blood, resulting in a "smile of blood" (Atwood 43). Offred’s reaction is not one of horror, but of contemplation:

I look at the one red smile. The red of the smile is the same as the red of the tulips in Serena Joy’s garden, towards the base of the flowers where they are beginning to heal. The red is the same but there is no connection. The tulips are not tulips of blood, the red smiles are not flowers, neither thing makes a comment on the other . . . . I put a lot of effort into making such distinctions. (Atwood 44-45)

By retaining such distinctions, Offred remains intact mentally and prevents her vulnerability to the brainwashing efforts of Gilead. If Offred allows her sense of individuality to be erased, she will be erased as well; she will become a true handmaid, a servant of Gilead devoid of any autonomy of thought. As Offred considers the totalitarian efforts of Gilead to control society, she ponders the nature of power:

Maybe it isn’t really about who can own whom, who can do what to whom and get away with it, eve as far as death. Maybe it isn’t about who can sit and who has to kneel or stand or lie down, legs spread open. Maybe it’s about who can do what to whom and be forgiven for it. Never tell me it amounts to the same thing. (Atwood 174)

The difference Offred indicates is the disparity between becoming a thing that is manipulated and a person who is manipulated. Offred acknowledges that her body is controlled by Gilead; even so, she realizes that she is still human, she still possesses an inner being that is her own, a being that is still
free to choose whether or not to forgive. Offred has retained a sense of identity, an interiority of feelings and opinions which Gilead has tried to efface through its artificial constructs of womanhood and society. Offred’s story stands as a testimony of her humanity and her individuality; her communication is a declaration of her control over herself and her forgiveness of herself for what she has had to do. Conversely, by tenaciously asserting her writerly mark (and her only truly re(a)d mark), Offred remains vital and intact; she creates, not renounces, herself.

Offred, in all consideration, is indeed a writer, for “all literature, like music, is oral by nature” (Atwood, Second Nature 335). Offred as storyteller is therefore synonymous with Offred as writer. The question which remains, then, is why Offred tells her story. Obviously, storytelling is an important expression of self for Offred, or else she would not persist in relating her tale, especially within a society that adamantly refuses to allow her to communicate on a personal level. According to Atwood, “It has always been one function of the artist to speak the forbidden, to speak out, especially in times of political repression . . . . Because there was a story [she] felt impelled to tell, that [she] felt the rest of us had to know” (350). Offred, repressed by the totalitarian regime of Gilead, undercuts her oppressors through her words; she exposes them as tyrants, misguided and morally wrong. Offred’s voice is comparable to revolutionary artists who have defied the silencing strictures of tyrannical political machines. Her red garb, then, does not indicate her allegiance to the ideology of Gileadean society. Instead, Offred is again “off-red”; her red is the red of a covert revolutionary, an insurgent seeking to overthrow the existing government.
Offred’s participation in the “May Day” organization identifies her as an “off-red” rebel; it also introduces another level of carnivalesque to the Republic of Gilead. The May Day operation, however, is unlike the Salvagings and Particicutions, which are government-controlled events that allow the lower-ranking social groups to physically vent their frustrations. The Salvagings are more typical of the traditional European Carnival, which was a time of “institutionalized disorder” (Burke 190). A form of public execution, Gilead periodically performed Salvagings as a method of social control. By allowing the public to participate in the execution of individuals who breached custom, the government devised a ritualized procedure by which the public could vent their anger. When Offred describes a Particicution of a Guardian who had supposedly raped a handmaid, she is horrified at the reaction of the other handmaids:

There’s a surge forward, like a crowd at a rock concert in the former time, when the doors opened, that urgency coming like a wave through us . . . . Now there are sounds, gasps, a low noise like growling, yells, and the red bodies tumble forward and I can no longer see, he’s obscured by arms, fists, feet.

(Atwood 359)

The handmaids vent the anger of their oppression onto a chosen victim--a victim not of their choosing, but of the government’s. The Guardian pays for the wrongs of Gilead.

May Day, on the other hand, is not a government-controlled organization; it is an anti-government covert operation to save the people of Gilead that want to be saved. The name “May Day” does carry carnivalesque connotations from the European festival of spring. However, the concept of the festival is replaced with the idea of “mayday” or “m’aidez,” meaning
“Help me” (Atwood 58). The only slight connection with May Day would be the concept of spring as a source of hope and new beginnings. Since the May Day operation is designed to undercut the power of the government, Offred’s discovery of the underground organization confirms that she is not alone in her sentiments and in her struggles, as the totalitarian government would have her believe.

At the conclusion of her story, Offred suspects that the May Day members are helping her to escape from Gilead. However, she is uncertain of what is really happening to her at that point, and she notes that there is no definite closure to her tale; the possible endings are infinite, paralleling the proliferation of readings Offred anticipates from her audience. In considering the range of options that are possible upon her entrance into the black van, Offred muses:

> Whether this is my end or a new beginning I have no way of knowing: I have given myself over into the hands of strangers, because it can’t be helped. (378)

Just as Offred must entreat herself into the care of others in hope of surviving, so must she offer herself to the judgment of her audience in hope of being heard, of surviving in the minds of her future audience. Offred will exist because she is heard and thereby acknowledged; that is all she can hope for, since without an audience to hear her, she remains silent, dead to the memory of the world. It would be as if she never existed. Offred, therefore, wills herself to tell her “sad and hungry and sordid, . . . limping and mutilated story” because she needs someone to hear it (344). Offred’s will to speak delineates a tension between speaker and audience: “I tell, therefore you (as listeners) are.” Offred realizes that her tale cannot actually
exist unless it is communicated to someone else, even if that person is unseen. Furthermore, since Offred’s text is an extension of her self, if the text is nullified by the absence of a receiver, Offred’s existence is also effaced. “I tell, therefore you are” necessitates the correlative belief “You hear, therefore I am.”

Through the work of Professors Piexoto and Wade, Offred’s text is brought to light and presented to the audience she needs. Although Piexoto dismisses Offred’s text as incomprehensible and not yielding any “useful” information, it is through his efforts that Offred will now be heard. Piexoto fails in his attempt to use Offred’s story as an oral history intended to corroborate or correct the traditional historical record. Therefore, his study of Offred’s story, like the story itself, lacks closure. His report is merely an entangled series of possible explanations as to the veracity of Offred’s account and the identities of the people she describes. Piexoto’s findings are at best inconclusive hypotheses, not nearly the proven facts for which he had hoped. Therefore, since the story and the study have no finality, the story must be repeated, and “to repeat is to be ungovernably open to revision” (Johnson, “Melville’s Fist” 1038). Piexoto’s concluding “Are there any questions?” intentionally leaves both his study and Offred’s tale as open texts to be re-read, re-evaluated, and reconstructed, adding to the dialogism already surrounding Offred and her story.

Throughout her story, Offred denies the validity of Gilead’s centripetal verbal-ideological perspective; to her, authoritative voice is a fabrication. Therefore, Offred does not attempt to become the authoritative
Offred maintains a dialogic perspective of words and of the world, she is categorically unable to assume a central position of authority. Offred clearly indicates that her presentation and interpretation of signs is far from comprehensive. In considering the Commander’s actions, Moira’s evaluation differs from Offred’s, prompting Offred to admit that another “interpretation hadn’t occurred” to her (Atwood 316). Even as Offred attempts to collect her tale into one text, other stories and interpretations are deliberately included to demonstrate that there is always another way of viewing a sign, another meaning. Offred does not presume to offer a hegemonic verbal-ideological world that would replace that of Gilead. Instead, she attempts to illustrate that meaning is subjective and contextual. In her presentation of text as story and as self, Offred continually establishes that a monologic perspective of signs is always surrounded by dialogic forces.
NOTES

1 In his study of The Handmaid’s Tale, J. Brooks Bouson draws from Bakhtin to inform at least a brief segment of his study; his findings are interesting enough to warrant further examination. Bouson combines Bakhtin with a feminist literary approach, noting Offred’s “dialogic resistance to the official, monologic discourse” of the male-controlled Republic of Gilead (Bouson 148-149). Bouson’s comment opens up the discussion of how “feminist interventions disrupt monolithic discourse,” or how Offred’s strategies of reading constitute a form of cultural resistance (Bouson xiii). However, Bouson’s interpretation can be extended to declare Offred’s strategy of reading as a “will to dialogism,” which empowers her by undermining the authoritative discourse of Gilead (Bauer 5). In the carnivalistic act of narrating her story, Offred speaks from “a ‘silenced’ zone,” thereby contesting the monologic Gileadean ideology and competing to validate her reading of the world (Bauer 9). Offred emphasizes her difference, refusing to participate in an ideology or language that seeks to dismiss her validity and significance in the world.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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