Ca' Foscari
University
of Venice

Master's Degree in European,
American and Postcolonial Languages
and Literatures

Final Thesis

The Handmaid's Tale and The Testaments: a Rethorical Character Analysis

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Academic Year
2021 / 2022

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People are always coming up with new theories of the novel,

but the main rule is: hold my attention.

- Margaret Atwood

Introduction

This thesis examines once again the figure of the handmaid in Atwood's famous novel *The Handmaid's Tale* and it explores how the identification with this character is so vivid and relevant in present days. Margaret Atwood wrote this bestseller in the eighties and recently, in 2019, published the sequel *The Testaments*. Most people know her for her short stories and her feminist point of view. Exchange of roles and new beginnings are common themes in her books, which are all about women trying to find their place in the world. Atwood is interested in power and duality and in her stories we see often repressed women who cannot cope with their feelings. Only if they free themselves from the burden of society they will find peace. Atwood explores power dynamics inside relationships, society and government. While she digs into the evolution and distribution of power, she creates around her female characters the feeling of being suffocated and helpless. She fully understands how terrifying it is when someone in power does not care if you suffer, and she does not hold back from exploring every aspect of that fear. She represents the perfect voice for this era in which citizens of the world are more and more scared of their politicians because they see their rights undermined and underrated.

My interest in Atwood's work arose from my detecting in her works an uncanny ability to represent what it means to navigate difficulties, to witness and articulate trauma. Starting from the reading of many of her texts in which the concept of trauma and victimhood is widely treated, I have shifted my attention to the dystopian novel at the center of this dissertation. My first-person involvement as a reader was the step that led me to focus on this book in relation with the experience of reading. The story of the handmaid has touched me as

a young woman looking for a place in a world that does not seem to be designed to facilitate my choices, but rather poses constant obstacles and seems to aim to trap me in a role that I did not choose. On the other hand, as a student of foreign languages and literature, I wanted to undertake a path of analysis that could make the most of what I have studied so far.

My intention therefore is to analyze both *The Handmaid's Tale* and its sequel, *The Testaments* according to James Phelan's rhetorical theory and more specifically, his take on characterization as comprising the mimetic, thematic and synthetic component. To better understand Phelan's approach, in the first chapter I will present a survey of the evolving theories on characters up to the moment in which character is considered as a possible real person with whom the reader can empathize.

Through the origin of the term character and the presentation of Phelan's theory, I will then shift my attention on the novels first providing a necessary overview of the terms dystopia and the term feminism. In the second chapter I begin addressing the related issues of immersion and identification listing the narrative techniques that trigger empathic responses in readers. Moreover, a special attention on the thematic features of victimhood and trauma will be added before jumping into the text.

In chapter three my argument is that even if Phelan asserts that the mimetic component is the key feature for identification, what happens in *The Handmaid's Tale* is somewhat different: I will argue that the thematic component is what makes Offred an example of abused woman in a patriarchal society and thus the foundation of the identification with her. Her image has been already used in many protests and the identification was made possible by the ordinariness of the victim. On the other hand, the protagonists of the sequel have a stronger mimetic and a weak thematic component. They are

described as incredible women who would be recognized as the heroins that defeat the regime of Gilead. Although they represent an important example of bravery and cleverness, their actions are too perfect for the imperfect reality readers live in. Our real world is nearer to the situation Offred experienced, especially after the recent developments concerning abortion.

In the final and fourth chapter I will list the important events such as dissent on social media and protests during which the image of the handmaid was used as a bastion of women's rights. The political relevance of these thematics make us reflect with powerful urgency on Gilead's world, especially on how religious beliefs combined with white supremacy are still today a valid alternative for many. Offred's reality is, in fact, mainly composed by white people and a lot of black women have criticized Atwood's choice: their thoughts on the lack of black historical references in the novel and their feelings of misrepresentation close my excursus.

Chapter 1

Theories of Character

Narratology, in literary theory, represents the branch of knowledge or criticism that studies narrative structures. The purpose of this discipline is to examine in what ways a narration is constructed and to analyze it considering the cultural aspects and knowledge we have of the world. Since the 1960s narratology has progressed revealing a notable feature: a pervasive lack of attention for characters. While other important aspects of narration have been obsessively studied, most academics saw character as undeserving of serious scholarly debate. The primary source of their attention has been the anatomy of the text and the structure of action has received significantly greater attention in narrative theory, together with the various kinds of narrators, the implied author, focalization and the way narrative content is communicated. It is over the last twenty-five years that the international narrative studies community has become extremely diverse and interdisciplinary. The most relevant admissions were: the recognition that storytelling is a phenomenon central not just to literary studies but also to multiple other disciplines, especially law, medicine, and business; the recognition that the affordances of different media enable storytellers to do significantly different things with the elements of narrative; the recognition of the efficacy of narrative, that is the multiple ways in which storytelling, fictional or nonfictional, has real world consequences (Phelan, “A Brief Story” 4). As a result, the new curiosity around the question of characters and a lot of new perspectives have been introduced by narrative theorists who wanted to escape from the limited precincts dictated by structuralism. David Herman, a

professor of English who researched on linguistic and cognitive approaches to narratives of all sorts, in his book *Narratologies*. *New Perspectives on Narrative Analysis* wrote that the new era of scholars is drawing "on fields such as Artificial Intelligence, hypertext, psychoanalysis, film studies, and linguistics (including possible-world semantics and discourse analysis) to broaden and diversify our conception of stories and to provide new ways of analyzing their structures and effects" (2).

With the rise of the middlebrow reader in the 20th century, the reading experience centered once again both on pleasure and education as the Horatian motto "docere delectando" went. This is having a deep influence in the market of fiction nowadays as well. Because high modernist literary fiction was so hard to read and write, reading and writing novels became more acceptable and various publishing houses such as Penguin Books were established with the purpose of satisfying this new type of audience (Keen 60). The engagement established between fiction and reader is often strongly connected with the ease of a text to endorse the identification with a character. The power of reading intended as a persuasion tool is used by literary critic Robert Scholes to help his students to make connection with their real lives and actions. He believes that reading is complete only when the story is absorbed by the thoughts and deeds of the reader: "reading, though it may be a kind of action, is not the whole action but a part of it, remaining incomplete unless and until it is absorbed and transformed in the thoughts and deeds of readers" (qtd. in Keen 63).

Because of this interest in the relationship between fiction and reader, the relevance of character identification and readers' response to fiction acquired a new impulse and opened up further investigation.

It is then under these circumstances and the gradual detachment from structuralism that critics put readers center stage and began considering readers' empathic responses to novels.

1.1 Definition of Character

According to the definition of *The Cambridge Dictionary*, a character is "a person represented in a film, a play or a story." Despite that, when we speak about "character" the usual meaning refers to the qualities belonging to a living being and such expressions as "having a good (or bad) character," "being out of character" or "having a shady character" reverberate in our every-day world. The etymological origin of this term might involve the uncertain pre-greek word "kharax", pointed stake, but beyond any doubt it developed into "kharacter" in Hellenistic times with the meaning of "engraved mark" and also "symbol or imprint on the soul". In metaphorical context it stood for "a defying quality or individual feature" and it resembles the successive Latin "character" and the Old French "caratere". It is just in the middle of 17th century that in England people begun to expand the meaning of the word from the "sum of qualities that define a person or thing and distinguish it from another" to the sense of "person in a play or novel." This term is usually used in contrast to "person" as an individual in the real world, but in narrative the two terms are both to be considered as humans or human-like individuals sharing the same recognizably mimetic traits. The etymological origin of "person" is Latin: "persona" meant a "human being, person, personage" and also "a part in a drama, assumed character," originally "a mask, a false face," such as those of wood or clay, covering the whole head, worn by the actors in later Roman theatre. The connection with the idea of having a role, of having specific traits that shape, or

better characterise, an individual is extremely evident. The evolution of this word gave it a more general meaning, arriving in the middle of 14th century to "one's physical being, the living body" and striving in most recent years to achieve gender neutrality or to avoid allegations of sexism in the '70s.

In literature "character" is still in use today to represent a person within a narrative text with distinct qualities. This fact has given rise to an additional sense of the term "character" that is commonly used in literary critical discourse. Some scholars tried to distinguish them not only according to their names or to physical qualities but also according to their way of behaving because it is what makes them different one from another. The term "character" now has a distinct meaning: a hypothetical "personality" or "nature" conveyed through certain individual activities. This notion of "character" has been reintroduced into everyday life. The trend today appears to be to speak about people's "personality," yet "character traits" are still commonly used. Both of the above-mentioned daily meanings are subsets of the idea of a person's "character" as a more or less stable complex of features (dispositions, attitudes, views and values). However, in literary arguments, this is likely the most essential sense of the term "character."

Therefore this individual can be either completely fictional (novels), be a literary interpretation of a person (biofictions) or either a real man/woman (biographies). In literature there are multiple varieties of characters, each of them captures the attention of different kinds of readers and helps selling of books. Their relevance within the narration is due to the forming of the plot, in which themes are constructed around characters' experiences, feelings, situations. There are even cases in which the thematic representations involve, more than anything else, the personality of the character because it may personify qualities such as

courage, mercy, love, justice that help to convey the message of the story. Characters help us understand how individuals could respond in different situations. Through the identification with the character, a story becomes more significant. When identification happens, we may internalize what characters are experiencing, how they react to it, and how they solve their difficulties. There is really no story without characters and their relevance on the pages brought many scholars to ask themselves what they are and how they work in narratives.

1.2 Character in Different Theories

"Character" is given a number of different meanings in contemporary literary criticism, each of which is derived from a distinct theoretical framework. Quite a few of these definitions can be illustrated along a continuum that goes from textuality to representation, from signifier to signified.

In grammar, for example, its definition points to a grammatical person that has proper names, pronouns and (in)definite noun phrases. The main focus here is linguistic and the narration reveals a complex web of referencing terms that are indexically connected. Whereas, in narratology, "character" is examined according to speech positions and constitutive roles that allow to distinguish narrator, narratee, focalizer and themes. Fictional characters are artifices stemming from the intellectual activity of their authors: the reader is invited to observe and reflect on the process of creation of the characters and how they develop in a given context.

The semiotician A. J. Greimas developed the "actantian model" whose purpose is to examine and describe the different roles, functions and actions of characters in storytelling.

According to him, character is defined in two ways: this definition develops from the notion of an actant, that is someone who performs or suffers an act (doing) prior to any semantic investment. In other words, the character is considered as the action shorn of its purpose and meaning in the text. In the second phase it becomes an actor, the point where the thematic and actant roles converge, that is the theme or thematic trajectory of the story (qtd. in Margolin "Introducing" 107). In thematological studies, "character" assumes the form of a semantic complex composed of smaller units and its attributes are considered as vehicles to express ideas. In semantics studies it is viewed as a person who is a part of or belongs to a non-actual state of affairs or possible world and is identified by a proper name, pronoun, or (in)definite noun phrase (Margolin 107).

The term "literary character" evokes the idea of a fictional character formed up of words and textually recognised by a referencing expression and created by a writer to achieve a particular effect or to convey a particular idea. Edward Morgan Foster, an important British literary critic in the twentieth century and brilliant figure in this literary field, put forward the definition of "character" making a first big distinction: flat character and round character became the starting point of the classic analysis of fiction in the 20th century. In his critic book *Aspects of the Novel* he explained that a flat character is basically made of a single quality or idea, without changing throughout the book and it is therefore very easy to identify for the reader. According to Foster, the fact that it maintains the same trajectory and style is a nice property for a fictional character, while many scholars have broadly criticised its superficiality. He believes that flat characters are more remarkable and represent an anchor in the narration. Round characters, on the other hand, are those with complex and contradictory personalities and they tend to evolve and change in the plot. Foster writes:

> The perfect novelist touches all his material directly, seems to pass the creative finger down every sentence and into every word. The test of a round character is whether it is capable of surprising in a convincing way. If it never surprises, it is flat. If it does not convince, it is a flat pretending to be round. It has the incalculability of life about it—life within the pages of a book. (Foster, n.p.)

Although a character starts to exist in a specific text, it can be independent, possibly even going under a process of culturization and it can also be similar to a group of individuals: this phenomenon reveals a fundamental dichotomy. In this theory, promoted especially by Uri Margolin, philosophy influences the discussion about character being an entity within fictional words. Dolezel, Pavel and Ryan's studies are the base of Margolin's thoughts, giving a theoretical foundation to his ontological approach: literary narrative is a semiotic device that originates multiple universes and the characters that live in different worlds from the real one can't be judged under the same law and social rules. That is to say that the reader must remember that those words he/she is reading are just fictional, like when parents remind children that movies are "just movies." However, there are no limits to the similarities that these ethereal worlds can have with human reality.

Ralf Schneider brings to the table another possible slant through cognitive science: he debates that characters are mental models created by the reader. During the process of character construction the interaction between reader and text reveals a dynamic process: understanding literary individuals, according to this view, requires forming a mental representation of them in which the reader provides motives, actions, expectations, emotions mixing what the text provides with his/her personal knowledge. Schneider's thesis involves social psychology as well and he thinks that readers can apply personality theories when they

recognise characters' traits in their social knowledge structures: this schematic structure of knowledge allows readers to understand situations, but it may also create social stereotypes that can have negative effects on social life (Schenider 611). Even though trained readers in literary analysis focus on the content and on the techniques of a text, common readers use emotions in text understanding and in character reception.

The importance of the hybridity that lies in the concept of character gave to John Frow the ambitious aim in *Character and Person* to present a theory in which the ontological quest branches into "person-like entities" and "pieces of writing and imaging." He acknowledges that readers instinctively react to characters with emotions, involvement, judgements and they need a constant reminder that characters are just textual entities. However they are made by words: when a person is reading them, they start to become alive in his/her mind. The success of *Character and Person* is achieved thanks to Frow's ability to see the importance of emotions and identification, motivations and intentions in narratology; nevertheless the formalism that stands at the root of this theory, forbade him to understand that there is no explanation in why readers have feelings towards characters and that the theory must be grounded in another perspective. Frow's intention was in any case to broaden the discussion on "character" to the phenomenon of identification and emotional response. He distinguishes "ethical" critics, who treat characters as they were real persons, and "structuralist" critics, who think that they are mere textual constructs. The father of this latter category of critics can be considered Jonathan Culler: his idea of a character is that it is a convention, a sort of variation of a stereotype. He is firmly convinced that "the most intense and satisfying reading experiences may depend upon what we call involvement with characters, but successful critical investigation of the structure and effects of a novel, as a

literary construct, may require thinking of characters as sets of predicates grouped under proper names" (5). Culler explains in his discussion on Todorov and Barthe's "Structuralist Poetics" that characters are predicates, or qualities, of a given name. Therefore they are not heroes, princesses, helpers, etc. but a collection of predicates that does not go beyond interpretations. The reader is the one that comes up with a portrait of a character by adding all the qualities and actions that s/he has encountered while reading a text.

This type of approach surely echos the New Criticism: L. C. Knights's work was very influential during the 20th century and he strongly believed that literary criticism is a professional competence belonging to highbrow readers exclusively. His essay "How many children had Lady Macbeth?" hid a specific aesthetic and professional agenda, that is to say the privilege of form over meaning, themes or content and the idea that it is impossible to discuss characters as if they were real. It is crucial to understand that not taking into account that the majority of readers were common people and mostly of them women was clearly a mistake. He considered all writers that gained success among middlebrow critical amateurs. Good criticism for Knights required impersonality in addition to academic knowledge of literature and he blamed famous writers like Charlotte Brontë to encourage emotional identification of the reader with characters. Sentimentalize with the hero/heroine was, for him, the corruption of professional criticism.

In most recent times the structuralist model is considered to be antiquate because it takes for granted that characters are just fictional and it doesn't take into consideration narrations like nonfictions or other forms of contemporary writing such as true-crime writing, literary biographies or memoirs. Nowadays the intellectual and aesthetic atmosphere has changed and this brought a detachment from the traditional modernist conventions. The New

Criticism school was against realism and its aim was to generate a critical text without even mentioning plot or characters: the focus was on language and on the quality of words, while characters were interpreted as abstract because they are formed as a result of the text. In fact, Knights wrote that the critic's duty is "to examine first the words of which the play is composed, then the total effect which this combination of words produces in our mind" (Knights HMC 7).

Alongside modernist formalist theories, it is worth mentioning Vladimir Propp: he was a folklorist scholar who, through the analysis of 100 folktales from the corpus of Alexander Fyodorovich Afanasyev, recognized the basic structural elements within Russian fairy tales. Reclaiming Aristotle's character-study, Propp argued that characters have to be analyzed according to their action because plots develop from their decisions and from their function within a story. He claimed characters could be classified into specific roles that contribute to the development of a story and he found seven archetypes: the hero, the villain, the helper, the donor, the princess, the false hero and the dispatcher. Propp's categorization became the most popular attempt to establish the fundamental elements of narration. It revealed the importance of causality to the success of the narratives because one scene always seemed to lead to the next with a clear sense of progression.

The majority of commonly used descriptions of characters focus on their function in an action. The term "protagonist", which has been in use since Greek antiquity, designates the protagonist or antagonist of a story or drama. The term "hero" refers to a positive individual, typically in some sort of representative story, as opposed to more neutral designations for other characters. Modern high-culture stories frequently feature an anti-hero or a cast of characters rather than a single protagonist.

The popularity of novels increased during the 18th and 19th centuries and resulted in a previously unheard-of variety of characters that were steadily getting more distinct and one-of-a-kind. Their singularity was founded on increasingly detailed descriptions of their nature, which completely rejected the functional perception of the Middle Ages and began to create characters that were as complex as their readers' inner thoughts and emotions.

Suzanne Keen explains in her *Empathy and the Novel* that in the 18th century the romantic idea of the sympathetic imagination developed into a device for personal and social renovation. Novels of sensibility became the idyllic mirror for a positive behaving society, whereas other feelings belonging to the same pages like delusional hopes, corrupted desires, and damaging unawareness of the real world were negative consequences of reading fiction according to novel's critics. Sentimentality was decried by 18th century critics who saw readers' desire for emotions as morally dubious, especially if exposure to the literature of sensibility did not result in changes in readers' behaviour. Later on in the 19th century, literature and especially poetry took the lead as the most important venues for sympathy. However, literary depictions of sympathetic encounters had such a big cultural impact that it was difficult to distinguish between the evidence of textual and actual sympathy. According to the romantic theory, writers encourage their audience to blend with both themselves and the subjects of their portrayal. It is at the end of Victorian period that all the social and economical problems, depicted in countless sensation fictions were taken seriously: a lot of reforms were introduced such as the abolition of slavery, the establishment of education, better working conditions in factories, and so on. For Keen, this phenomenon is linked to the popularity of these novels in which justice was always at the centre of attention and to their capacity to create sympathetic characters. This ability, which is justly praised, becomes a

basic litmus test for a novelist's ability. Novelists were supposed to validate their characters' emotional reactions with proper plots of poetic justice, thus the evolution of psychological realism was a double-edged sword: realist writers were aware of their power and that a novel could be a tool for mass manipulation (55).

This new attitude which gave more and more importance to the experience of character identification within the reading of a fiction unlocked a new kind of interpretive slant: the "mimetic" or "psychological" literary movement. Its main tendency is to compare characters to real-life individuals and the immediate consequence is an estrangement from the typical tenets of structuralism. The reading experience and the analysis proposed by the mimetic movement are thought to be the most natural way to read a story for the average reader.

1.3 Phelan's Rhetorical Theory

James Phelan is a theorist, author of many books on narrative theories and editor of *Narrative*. His studies are driven by the certainty that "we do not yet have a satisfactory theory of literary character" (Phelan "Character, Progression" 282). Critics, as broadly discussed in the previous paragraphs, could not distance themselves from the belief that characters could not be interpreted as real individuals and that they are just linguistic entities or embody thematic issues. The progress made in this literary field, the theory of character, has led many scholars in a different direction, closer to consider narration as a whole: words and emotions, text and style and empathy and identification. Phelan linked the problem of developing a solid theory to the problem of the mimetic-didactic distinction. He traces this

separation back to the neo-Aristotelian critical tradition which believes that fictions can be divided in two distinct categories. The first one is constituted by the works that "represent characters in action for the sake of the emotions generated by that representation", which means that characters are mimetically organized. The second category is based on the thematic representation of characters "that is, to represent characters in action for the sake of some ideational purpose, such as convincing the audience of the truth of some preposition (…)" (Phelan "Character, Progression" 282). He adopts the principle that a character is not mimetic or didactic, but potentially both of them. In order to have a broader and good understanding of characters in a novel, James Phelan stands in opposition to Culler providing a rhetorical theory of character that "foregrounds the text as communication between author and reader." He believes that narration is "a multidimensional (cognitive, affective, ethical), purposeful communication of nontrivially-related event from a teller to an audience. More specifically … narrative is somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose(s) that something happened" (Phelan "Toward a Rhetorical Perspective" 319). His rhetorical theory focuses on the ethical dimension of the character-character relationships and on the ethical dimension of the author-narrator-audience relationship. As a result, rhetorical theory in Phelan's model is concerned both with the content of narrative but also with tellers, audiences, effects, and purposes. Affective effects are emotional reactions (from empathy to antipathy) to characters, narrators, authors and plots as well.

Phelan wants to explain the narrative's purposes by connecting them to the reason why the author decided to use specific textual feature in order to activate in the reader's mind a certain set of emotions, judgements and ethical responses. His starting point for the analysis is constituted by two complementary principles of rhetorical narrative: the first presents

narration as an action of a teller because of the need of satisfying his motives in regard to the audience; the second principle offers the idea that the audience does not reply only to the language of the text but also to how the tale is constructed. This theory thinks in a posteriori way: this means that the critics have to reason back from the effects generated by the narrative's techniques to the causes of those effects which are rooted in the authorial shaping of them. This process cannot be reduced to a formula since text communication is a complicated, multifaceted phenomenon, and its outcomes generate hypotheses rather than dogmatic conclusions.

1.3.1 Characters in Rhetorical Theory

Even if Phelan agrees that a literary character is formed out of language and that it has functions in a text, he suggests that it also has more than a linguistic construct with some functions. His idea is that characters can be considered as possible persons and also as artificial constructs. The novelty in his discussion is then the consideration of character as "multi-chromatic" and he defines three main components: the mimetic, or rather the possibility of characters to be recognised as "images of possible people;" the thematic, that is how characters generate "statements of significance;" and the synthetic, the way characters are artificial and a "construct." The mimetic dimension is very interesting because it is the result of the traits that together with actions and thoughts create the illusion of a real person and it must be distinguished from the thematic dimension in which characters are representative entities. The degree to which the three dimensions are developed is determined by the type of fiction. The mimetic feature predominates in realistic literature, while the

synthetic aspect is most essential in postmodern fiction, and thematic characters are more prevalent in fiction with a thesis. To differing degrees, characters can be humans, artificial entities, or themes. Phelan's theory evolves "through an examination of the range of relations among the mimetic, thematic, and synthetic components of character" (qtd. in Weststeijn 60). A particular attribute of his/her personality can produce in the text a realistic person, a distinct entity, but it can also have a thematic role. This function stretches out the character, making him or her the embodiment of a concept or the representation of a group. The particularity of this theory is also that Phelan studies literary characters as dynamic characters. They stand in opposition to the definition of static characters and they represent in the plot the individual who suffers major internal transformation as a reaction to his/her most important conflict. Dynamic characters have a wide range of attributes that may be both good and bad, making them complex and realistic. They eventually depict the intricacies seen in actual humans. When the character has dealt with the conflict, the change experienced produces a shift in personality or attitude rather than a change in their surroundings. The tendency of authors in creating dynamic characters has the purpose of establishing an empathic relationship between them and readers. Moreover, with a clearer knowledge of the character's motivation, readers may detect the impact of their change, which contributes to their process of identification. This is the reason why they become more invested in the plot: when a reader becomes emotionally engaged with the characters, he/she cares about them, which increases the impact of the book on the reader.

There are two important consequences for the development of a theory of character, according to Phelan: firstly, that a further distinction between dimensions and functions of the character is mandatory; secondly, that the relationships among a character's components

cannot be established in the abstract and any findings regarding the nature of a character in a specific story cannot be divorced from an investigation of that narrative's evolving structure, which he calls “narrative progression”.

1.3.2 Narrative Progression

As I have just mentioned, his theory takes also into consideration narrative progression, considering it “as a dynamic event, one that must move, in both its telling and its reception, through time”. “Progression” is a nonliteral term and it moves the analysis into the rhetoric realm, where the interest shifts to how the author generates, develops and resolves reader’s responses (Phelan “Character, Progression” 285). In order to understand what a progression of events is, it is necessary to put together the combination of setting, characters, events, points of view, content and style. This concept is built both on temporality and spatiality. The temporal component is evidently recognisable in the narration’s movement from a beginning to and ending; the spatial component is hidden in the fact that any step versus a movement is affected by the whole configuration of the narrative elements up to that point. Phelan’s conception of narrative progression puts forward the notion of plot because it includes the narrated events and their interrelations, and the trajectory that the audience follows in response to all this. To put it in other words, it is the combination of the textual dynamics and the readerly dynamics.

Textual dynamics is constituted by the internal processes that propel tales from beginning to middle to conclusion, whereas readerly dynamics is constituted by the audience’s cognitive, emotive, ethical, and aesthetic responses to those textual changes.

Interpretive, ethical, and aesthetic judgements serve as the link between textual dynamics and readerly dynamics. Because they are inscribed in the story yet executed by the audience, these judgements serve as a bridge. Textual dynamics has to do with the plot, which usually develops through a series of instabilities, complications and finally a resolution. The author, by introducing one or more characters with unstable conditions, entangles the story enriching it with plot twists; by reaching the end he can resolve one or more of the instabilities or he can thematize the impossibility of resolution. On the other hand, readerly dynamics consists in local and global interpretive, ethical, affective and aesthetic responses to the evolution of the textual dynamics. They also encompass bigger actions like configurations and reconfigurations of the development of these textual dynamics. Because understanding the development entails unraveling the narrative's underlying logic, this analysis is very useful for catching the purpose of the narrative taken into consideration.

1.3.3 Rhetorical Narrative Audiences

Rhetorical narrative theory identifies a feedback loop in the process of reading a story that involves authorial action, textual phenomena (including intertextual relations), and reader response. This loop connects the author to the reader. To put it another way, the approach is predicated on the assumptions that

> (a) texts are designed by authors to affect readers in particular ways; (b) those authorial designs are conveyed through the words, techniques, elements, structures, forms, and dialogic relations of texts as well as the genres and conventions readers use to understand them; and (c) those authorial designs are also deeply influenced by

> the nature of their audiences and their activity in responding to the unfolding communication. (Phelan "Reliable, Unreliable, and Deficient Narration" 91)

This means that it is always possible to trace back the origin of a critical judgement searching for the purpose in the author's decisions inside the text.

Phelan's rhetorical approach of having "somebody telling somebody else" allows to distinguish three audiences in non-fictional works and four audience in fictional narratives. The first audience is represented by flesh and blood readers, with all their unique differences and affinities. The authorial audience, the group of readers who share the author's own knowledge, ideas, values, and experiences is the second audience: this audience is the ideal one the author has in mind in constructing a text. The authorial audience is neither entirely imaginary nor entirely real. Instead, it is a mix of readers an author knows (or at least interprets). The third kind of audience is constituted by the "narratee," namely the person the narrator addresses directly, either in character or not. Because of this, it is common for authors to describe their narrator more than they characterize their audience, but this entails that authorial audiences are likely to be indistinguishable from narratees in non-fiction. In addition to these three types of audiences, fiction has an additional kind: the narrative audience. Rather than seeing the people and events as made up, the narrative audience sees them as true to life, and embrace the whole story-world as genuine, regardless of how closely it matches the real world. The connections among all audiences might differ from one tale to the next, and some narratives make such interactions an essential part of their effects, whilst other narratives do not.

1.3.4 Reliable and Unreliable Narration

Another important aspect regarding the analysis of a narration when rhetoric theory is used is to consider reliable and unreliable narration not as opposite poles or single phenomena, but as a wider concept in which the author-narrator-audience relationships are multiple. Phelan presents the concept of reliable narration in *Living to Tell about It* linking his view to another concept, which was developed by literary criticism in the 20th century, that is to say the implied author. It stands between the real author in flesh-and-blood and the narrator and it is the imaginary construct that the reader pulls out from the text. Therefore Phelan writes

> the essence of reliable narration is the implied author's communicating matters that she endorses through the filter of an ontologically distinct character. Authors adopt such filters because anchoring the reporting, interpreting, and evaluating in the perspective and experiences of an actor and teller in the storyworld can increase the thematic, affective, and ethical force and significance of the whole narrative. But not all reliable narration establishes the same relationship between the character narrator's telling functions and her character functions. (Phelan, "Reliable, Unreliable" 95)

As a result, the nature and effects of every instance of reliable narration will be heavily influenced by the specific interaction of the thickness of the filter with the specific narrating functions.

Going further, Phelan identifies among reliable narration three subcategories: restricted narration, convergent narration, and mask narration. Restricted narration is the kind that takes some features from reliable and unreliable narration, meaning that it is reliable at

the core because the implied author limits the character narrator's function to reliable reporting and the character narrator remains unaware of interpretations and evaluations he/she makes. In this particular case, the narrating-filter of the character's mimetic function is most likely thin, especially when the implied author gives more space to other characters or highlights the activity of the experiencing-I.

Convergent narration occurs when the implied author's, the character narrator's, and the authorial audience's are aligned even if the narrating-filter of the character function is pointed to the experience of one or more characters. Convergent narration has more effect on the reader and it is easier to find it when in the text the character narrator is growing in maturity, wisdom or other qualities.

The last one is called by Phelan mask narration: as the implied author leans on the character narrator to thematize one or more parts of the tale for the audience, the reporting role of the narrator takes a backseat to the interpreting and judging functions. Here the narrating-filter stays put, but it is in any case thinner than in the convergent narration. In order to make the thematizing more powerful, the author makes use of the audience's prior knowledge of the character narrator's challenges and victories.

In the case of unreliable narration, the narrating-filter of the character's mimetic function is always thick, because the unreliability is grounded on specific attributes of the character. Phelan spots six types of unreliability: misinterpreting and underinterpreting; misevaluating and underevaluating; and misreporting and underreporting.

1.4 Identifying with Characters

Phelan comments the ethical position of readers as follows: “our emotions and desires about both fictional and non-fictional characters are intimately tied to our judgments of them” (*Living to Tell About it* 160). It is evident that during the act of reading a link between characters and readers develops and that scholars cannot anymore pretend to consider the surfacing of emotions simply nonsense.

According to him, “the mimetic component of narrative is responsible for our emotional responses to it” (8); “responses to the mimetic component include our evolving judgements and emotions, our desires, hopes, expectations, satisfactions, and disappointments” (Phelan et al. *Narrative Theory: Core Concepts* 8). We can only feel empathy for characters if we think they are genuine, and only if we are immersed in the story. The reader’s involvement in the narrative audience is interrupted when the reader’s attention is drawn to a story’s aesthetic features. Thus, according to Rabinowitz, the reader’s awareness of “the novel as art […] tends to diminish our direct emotional engagement in it” (Rabinowitz 132). To understand the relationship between emotions and narrative one must keep in mind that emotions are strictly connected with the personal interpretation of a story. The personal explanation of the events by the reader establishes whether empathic feelings will show up, which will be intensified or blocked. Some scholars suggested that literary narrative may be helpful for readers to understand a situation or an emotion he/she has never experienced before. The degree of immersion is intimately related to readers’ emotions and sentiments of empathy for the characters. The degree of empathy is also a prominent characteristic of role taking, which is critical for developing affective capacities since it allows readers to not

only learn about but also share the feelings of others. Empathy, compassion, and pity are examples of reader's reactions to the characters and the plot. These emotions are inextricably linked to narrative aspects such as plot, conflict, the characters' attitudes and their experiences. Readers' emotions are stirred not just by the ideas, feelings and acts of characters or narrators the narrative and discourse levels, but also by the contrasting and corresponding connections between distinct characters. Furthermore, linguistic and narrative techniques on the surface structure of literary works, as well as formal aspects and word choice, can provoke readers' emphatic responses. In addition to that, unconventional metaphors and variations on generic conventions might elicit aesthetic responses.

Narratological research on strategies likely to elicit empathy often focus on this aspect: the first mode of arousing reader's empathy includes narrative strategies that prompt him/her to consider the characters' thoughts, impressions, beliefs, feelings, and opinions, for example, through techniques such as free indirect discourse, interior monologue or psycho-narration, or the use of homodiegetic narrators. Suzanne Keen explains that it is incorrect to deem character identification as a narrative technique since it is an effect that occurs in the reader and not in text. However, the use of particular techniques of characterization can activate the identification: "Aspects of plot structure and narration that might have a role in invoking reader's empathy include the control of timing (pace), order (anachronies), the use of nested levels of narrative (stories within stories), serial narrative, strong or weak closure, the use of subsidiary (supplementary, satellite) plot events, repetition, and gaps" (Keen 94).
The meaning of "identifying" is complex, often confusing and this is why sometimes it is preferred to talk about "engaging", even if this expression covers a wider range of reactions. Rita Felski in her essay "Identifying with characters" maintains that "identification is often

equated with empathy, or co-feeling-through empathy is just one of the ways in which readers and viewers identify. And it is also conflated with the question of identity, with a fixing or circumscribing of the parameters of selfhood" (Felski et al. *Character* 77). This brings the discussion deeper in the world of a character because to identify with one of them does not mean that the reader actually likes him/her. The shared qualities and affinities experienced while reading a book can navigate through gender, race, sexuality, class and people have evolved developing a genuine curiosity for others' motivations, thoughts and feelings. Thus, identification is a natural consequence of being human beings. Alter egos, ideal types, negative exempla, moral mentors, romantic partners, and imaginary buddies are all possibilities that can occur in readers' mind. It is not uncommon for fictional characters to appear in real life, and it is not uncommon for such characters to stay with you long after you've done reading a book about them. Thus, Felski pinpoints four different strands of identification which try to expand its meaning: alignment, allegiance, recognition and empathy. Alignment is quite comparable to the concept of focalization that is found in narrative theory. This first strand takes place in the mind of the reader when texts influence his or her access to character. It draws attention to the power of narrative, description, and point of view: the author encourages the reader to choose a perspective, yet identification may or may not be pushed throughout the text. It is contingent on the reliability or unreliability of the narrative, and there are several reasons why audiences may not feel like they are identifying with a character: a text may give a suggestion, but it cannot force further readers to connect with a character. In terms of structural analysis, alignment therefore resonates with major and minor characters, as well as round and flat characters. The process of judging anything via its ethical and political ideals is known as allegiance, and its potential

to bring viewers closer to certain personalities rather than others lies in its capacity to do so. The detachment of modern literature from novels written in the 18th century resulted in the texts of contemporary literature being free from moral prescriptions. However, there are countless points of intersection between various modes of aesthetics, ethics, and politics, and it is impossible to isolate our beliefs from what we read. Therefore, allegiance is in motion whenever we find ourselves partnering with a character and with his/her values; this allegiance may be qualified, ambivalent, or partial depending on the circumstances. An attachment may have a transitory impact on our vision of the world around us, or it may have a more long-lasting one. This kind of ethical engagement does not preclude the possibility of critical alienation, but it is frequently associated with the sensation of being completely immersed in a fictitious universe. Fictional depictions of women and members of marginalized communities, for instance, are being studied as a revealing gauge of these groups' general standing in society as a result of the growth of new social movements and the phenomenon that came to be known as "cultural politics." In the 1970s, what Felski refers to as a "feminist counter-public sphere" came into being. This was a space of public debate on newly interesting and difficult themes, such as women's roles in the workplace, sexuality, maternity, harassment, and sexist imagery. The need to identify with certain personalities was intricately intertwined with issues pertaining to value. The audience's emotive reactions, the texture of their response, and what people cared about were all shaped by the political ideas and beliefs that functioned as essential mediators. Murray Smith conceived the term "recognition" to describe the act of apprehending a gestalt; consequently, it is the most fundamental level of engagement with a film or fiction, and it is a prerequisite for the audience's capacity to follow and create meaning of the narrative as well as react emotionally

to characters. Felski, on the other hand, is of the opinion that such a response is too biased due to the fact that certain characters are more easily recognizable than others. She likes to refer to this experience as a "coming to know", since she believes that recognition connotes both what was already known and what is in the process of being known in a fluid interaction between interiority and exteriority. The reader is therefore in a position to perceive anything that is external to him or her and that stimulates a reevaluation or modification of their perception of who they are. During the process of recognizing something or someone in another person, it is possible for that him/her to learn something new about themselves, which may be shocking or unsettling. Self-recognition is inextricably tied to the quest for public acknowledgement; for instance, women have long fought for the right to be regarded as equal participants in the global community. The last strand is empathy, which means experiencing someone else's feelings. It comes from the German *Einfühlung*, or "feeling into." It requires an emotional component of really feeling what the other person is feeling. According to Felski, empathy may be split into two distinct components: feeling with someone and feeling for someone. Because a reader can care about or feel for a character even without experiencing the character's emotions or mirroring their affective state, there is no inherent connection between the two of them. When we speak of someone as having empathetic qualities, we are not only implying that they are sensitive to the emotions of others, but also that they react to those emotions with compassion when they are experienced. It is impossible to have empathy without first acknowledging the suffering of others and being able to experience and respond to their anguish. A lot more consideration has been paid to empathy than it has been to other components of identification in literary studies.

According to Richard Rorty and Martha Nussbaum, having empathy for fictional characters may broaden the scope of one's experience, foster a feeling of unity with people different from ourselves, and contribute significantly to the improvement of civic and political life. Keen discovered that some studies indicate that a reader's potential to comprehend the relationship between causes and effects comes before their ability to take roles and empathize with characters. This shows that very fundamental components of narrative, such as logical plot units and/or the link between characterization and the actions of characters, need to be satisfied in order for empathy to take place. Readers are freed from the duties of self-protection via skepticism and mistrust when they have the notion that the material they are reading is fictitious, which plays a part in the following sympathetic reaction readers have. David Miall has found a similar effect: when the reader finds the strength to drop his disbeliefs he is able to defend the fictionality of the text and to elicit "the decentering response of empathic projection" (qtd. in Keen 88). He gives the impression that empathy on the part of readers might lead to observable effects in the beliefs and actions of groups of actual readers. The assertion that engaging in literary pursuits may foster empathy, which in turn helps to strengthen social cohesion, rests precariously on a foundation of unproven assumptions. Empathy is more relevant to certain genres, and certain readers are more empathic than others. In the meanwhile, the topic of whether or not empathizing with fictional characters has any long-term consequences on behavior remains unanswered.

Chapter 2

The Handmaid's Tale and *The Testaments*

The book I am about to present has been broadly discussed also for its appealing feature to readers and for the empathic response it triggers. As I will argue in chapter four, the consequences it had in the real world and on more recent events as well demonstrate how its appeal remains strong and vivid, even now, many decades after its first publication.

In 1985 Margaret Atwood decided to take a leap into the world of dystopian novels and to write a book that had a lot in common with the reality she was surrounded by at that time. Nowadays readers have found that that reality is still very relevant. The book in question is titled *The Handmaid's Tale* and its popularity went through a huge revamping in 2017 when Atwood signed for the production of a tv series with the streaming service Hulu. Currently the book is considered a bestseller and probably it is the most famous and successful novel written by a Canadian author. My intention is to provide a general overview of the book in the following paragraphs. The novel has spawned a host of critical assessments mainly concerned with the dystopian setting and the feminist voice that shouts throughout the novel: these two aspects will be my main focus. *The Handmaid's Tale* is considered to be the milestone of the feminist dystopian genre and it triggered enough curiosity to be followed by numerous other feminist dystopian novels such as the most recent Naomi Alderman's *The Power*. However there are no other novels in this vein that are so well-known and that could be read as a manifesto of female dystopian novels such as Atwood's book and this raises the obvious question of how it happened, how this book is able to shock and move the reader even today and every time you read it. During these last decades fleets of people have found

themselves deeply involved into the story of Offred, the handmaid protagonist, and have started to knock at Atwood's door for more details: their eagerness for knowing more about this twisted society and its rules, about the interweaving of the characters lives', brought the author to think about a sequel. In 2019 the publication of *The Testaments* arrived on the bookshelves of bookshops all over the world and it answers the questions that have tantalized readers for such a long time. Atwood declared in many interviews that "everything you've ever asked me about Gilead and its inner workings is the inspiration for this book. Well, almost everything! The other inspiration is the world we've been living in." This book is supposed to make room for all the issues that had remained open and nevertheless it does not resonate with its readers like its predecessor.

In the following pages I want to compare these two brilliant novels employing James Phelan's rethorical theory: I have chosen this particular perspective because it focuses more on the nature of the empathic response of readers and on the experience of immersion and identification with characters than other critical theories. Atwood made different stylistic choices: the implications of these choices, especially regarding characterization, reliability and plot progression determine the outcome of the readers' affective and aesthetic positioning.

Given this broad critical slant, the main focus of this thesis will be on the figure of the handmaid; specifically I set out to investigate the textual dynamics structuring the book to see in what way the identification within Offred is so successful in the original novel whereas *The Testaments* fails in activating identification with any of the characters presented. The sequel, set 17 years after the events narrated by Offred, has a hopeful tone which comes from three different voices: they are heroic, unique and brave. They are characters whose heroic

deeds literally make history, as we will discover at the end of the book, while Offred's testimony is just one of the many stories an handmaid could share with the audience. No one could tell the same story of Lydia, Agnes and Daisy/Nicole, but any handmaid could relate Offred's experience. This represents a detachment from Offred's problems and difficulties, which are those relatable to victimhood and survival, typical of Atwood's narration. The central theme of this thesis, which will he argued in chapter three, will center on demonstration that readers' immersion depend on the ordinariness of the handmaid's everyday life. Before jumping into the world of the Republic of Gilead, which is geographically positioned in the land of freedom by antonomasia, the United States, but which has become a totalitarian regime ruled by ultra-conservative men, a general overview of dystopian novels is necessary.

2.1 Dystopian novels and the Republic of Gilead

The concept of dystopian literature develops in response to utopian literature: the term "utopia" was coined by Thomas More to describe a "perfect" world in which people are free from poverty and suffering. The origin of this word comes from the Greek words for "no place" and this enables us to confirm the impossibility of actualization of utopian novels, since the human condition is unable to preserve such idyllic circumstances. On the other hand, dystopian stories are more likely to be considered as possible realities because there is no end to violence and oppression. Human history is already full of examples of regimes of terror, wars, catastrophes caused by human hands and many episodes of extreme marginalization of minorities. In fact, it is no coincidence that dystopian literature gained

momentum after First World War, and the rise of Communism with Stalin and of Nazism with Hitler. Behind their political intentions they cultivated a utopian dream inspired by Darko Suvin's definition of utopia: "The verbal construction of a particular quasi-human community where socio political institutions, norms and individual relationships are organized according to a more perfect principle than in the author's community, this construction being based on estrangement arising out of an alternative historical hypothesis" (qtd. in Sargent 6). The "more perfect principle" of the two dictators led to monstrosities from which the whole humanity is still trying to recover. Therefore the hopeful feelings at the rise of the 20th century were swept away by the barbaric actions of humanity. In this sense dystopian literature arrived as a response to these historical facts stained by the search of perfection and as Lyman Tower Sargent, a critic on utopian studies, says: "The traditional dystopia was an extrapolation from the present that involved a warning. The eutopia says if you behave thus and so, you will be rewarded with this. The dystopia, in the tradition of the jeremiad, says if you behave thus and so, this is how you will be punished" (Sargent 8).

Dystopian literature is a sub-genre of speculative fiction, which describes a world that has the potentiality to be a reality but remains hypothetical at the time of writing. The first writer to adopt this term was Robert Heinlein and in his article titled "On Writing of Speculative Fiction" he explains: "Speculative fiction (I prefer that term to science fiction) is also concerned with sociology, psychology, esoteric aspects of biology, impact of terrestrial culture on the other cultures we may encounter when we conquer space, etc., without end". The features involved in this genre vary from writer to writer and for Atwood "speculative fiction means plots that descend from Jules Verne's books about submarines and balloon

travel and such — things that really could happen but just hadn't completely happened when the authors wrote the books" (Atwood *In Other Worlds* 6).

In general the storyline of a dystopian fiction is set in a future that has dangerous and worrying situations, with a corrupted society and a catastrophic decline under way. The usual results for this kind of situations are: oppression, violence, poverty, ignorance. Authors often like to write about the tragic consequences that our reality might witness if a certain kind of mind, usually the mind of persons with extreme ideologies, takes control of the world. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, for instance, Atwood considers a Puritan society based on literary interpretations of the Bible and that denies basic woman's rights in the name of a patriarchal oppressive government. Margaret Atwood on this topic declared that: "If you're interested in writing speculative fiction, one way to generate a plot is to take an idea from current society and move it a little further down the road. Even if humans are short-term thinkers, fiction can anticipate and extrapolate into multiple versions of the future".

When we think about dystopian novels important book titles come to mind: *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell, *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley, *A Clockwork Orange* by Anthony Burgess, *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins, *Ready Player One* by Ernest Cline, and many more. All of them share similar characteristics that go from an atmosphere of survival, enriched by economical difficulties, unfair social divisions, loss of freedom and individual identity, to the sense of fear for a critical government (both in the case of an absent government and in the case of one that abuses its own power) and fear for technologies that instead of helping humanity are the reason of environmental damages.

Atwood grew up in the flourishing era of sci-fiction and she read almost immediately after its publication *Nineteen Eighty-Four,* and *Brave New World*: her interest for the genre brought

her to develop an outstanding knowledge of it which laid the foundations for a bestseller like *The Handmaid's Tale*. In the novel many of the characteristics listed above are present, starting from a futuristic bad environmental condition of the United States. Even if in the text the situation is never explained in depth, readers are informed that the lands are extremely damaged and women (but also men) are more often than ever sterile because of some chemical substances, pollution and radiation. The environmental issue is not a big theme in the novel, it is, however a necessary context for the story to take place. Gilead was created after a military coup and the founded Republic is in constant war with neighboring countries, a situation which contributes to the lack of raw materials, especially food: cultivation and importation of natural products are rare and they represent the first element of the inhabitants's feeling of living in survival mode.

The political and social situation in the story is the embodiment of patriarchalism, totalitarianism and theocracy: the government is composed only by men, named Commanders, who follow the trail of the Founding Fathers and the divine purpose of building a "city upon the hill". Their project of rediscovering the moral virtue of catholic faith includes a literary interpretation of the Bible, a frugal living and the repopulation of their society, with the objective of establishing a new social order. Men are at the top of this hierarchical society under the role of Commanders or Guardians (a sort of military force). Right one step below, the Wives of Commanders have a few privileges that give the illusion of still having dignity but in fact their only contribution to the community is very nice embroideries and gardening. Aunts could be considered at the same level because even if they play different roles, they have little privileges too. The most relevant feature is the fact that they are the only type of women able to receive and give an education: it is a limited one of

course, but Aunts learn how to read and write and they have access to the library since they have the task of forming new generation of wives and handmaids. Families of the lower class, Economen and Econowives occupy the next rung on the social ladder. Handmaids (along with prostitutes and other social rejects) are at the bottom: they are completely deprived of human rights and they are forced to renounce their body, their life, their future for a greater cause, all in the name of God. The Handmaids are all those women that demonstrated to be fertile and for this reason are treated as a container, however a sacred one, passing from family to family of Commanders and being abused once a month by their "owner" until they prove their worth, becoming pregnant.

The theological component is inspired by the rise of religious fundamentalism in the United States that characterized the '80s and Reagan's presidency. The religious component in political matter was very strong during Atwood's writing of this book: in 1984, a fresh wave of religious fundamentalism began, and fundamentalism has since become a major political problem. Certain groups backed, for example, the campaign for family protection, the ban of homosexuality, the death penalty, the fight against feminism and women's rights, and attacks on hospitals that provide abortion services. Margaret Atwood asserts that she saw Gilead as a society comparable to Puritanical New England, but with the modern-day fanaticism of the Christian right: in Gilead persons who depart from genuinely Christian lifestyles are hung in public ceremonies, while televangelists push women to be obedient and domestic. Many of Gilead's official traditions are exaggerations, parodies, or literal interpretations of Old Testament stories and prayers. For instance, the biblical reference for the design of *The Handmaid's Tale* is the story of Rachel and Leah from the Old Testament (*Genesis* 30:1): the two sisters married the same man, Jacob, who was in love with Rachel

but their father tricked him into marrying the older Leah. Rachel did not stand the idea of not having children of her own and implored her maid Bilhah to get pregnant and to give her the child. This short story is read by the Commander every night before the Ceremony as a sort of legitimation for the rape of the Handmaid with his wife watching. The vocabulary of *The Handmaid's Tale* is very rich of religious terminology: the household staff is named after a New Testament domestic figure, "Martha"; local police are referred to as "Guardians of the Faith", soldiers as "Angels", and Commanders are formally known as "Commanders of the Faithful". All of the shops have biblical names, such as "Loaves and Fishes" and "Milk and Honey". Using religious terms to describe persons, ranks, and shops is a facade to hide political dirt. We are constantly reminder that Gilead's founding fathers act on the authority of the Bible itself. Religion is utilized as a weapon of control and terror in order to shape women and impose sexist ideals.

In a totalitarian regime like Gilead individual freedom is banished and all aspects of individual life are subordinate to the authority of the state, which is largely justified by a rigid interpretation of the Scripture. More specifically, Gilead is a patriarchal society in which only men have access to higher education or the permission to carry guns, and only they may own property, hold jobs, or occupy government positions. Women are considered second-class citizens and they must submit to male authority. Gilead also discriminates against African-Americans in the novel, referring to them as the "Children of Ham" – again an example of religious terminology employed to convey a political idea. Some civil rights, however, have been permanently suspended, such as freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of the press, and freedom of assembly. The government has also instituted a special force, the "Eyes", who are literally the eyes of the state, reporting, denouncing and executing

whomever acts against the law. In fact any rule violation must be reported and severely punished. Criminals are frequently killed and their bodies are put on the Wall as a clear warning: they may be believers of other religions, doctors that were against pro-life, homosexuals, unfaithful men or women and so on.

Similarly to other dystopian novels, propaganda is another crucial topic: the media and news are strictly regulated, and propaganda is frequently used to promote Gilead's goals and values while demonizing its opponents. In *The Handmaid's Tale* women, in particular handmaids, are the most powerful tool for promoting this new kind of state. The way they dress and how they behave, in extreme modesty and purity, are a source of attraction for foreigners who visit Gilead: in chapter two there is a scene in which a group of Japanese tourists are visiting the country and a woman, through the interpreter, asks to Offred and her companion if they are happy. There is curiosity, but also excitement: "I can feel their bright black eyes on us, the way they lean a little forward to catch our answers, the women especially, but the men too: we are secret, forbidden, we excite them" (Atwood 35).

The power of the media is especially detectable in *The Testament*: the temporal gap between the first book and the sequel starts from the escape of Offred from Gilead and because at that time she was pregnant, her baby becomes the biggest offence inflicted to the Divine Republic. The picture of Baby Nicole was used as a sacred reminder of the holiness of life and it suggests an important winning in the fight against infertility, which is at the core of Gileadian ideology. The mission of finding and bringing her back to her birthplace is the refrain that constantly accompanies the political campaign: thanks to this type of propaganda, Commanders give to the people of Gilead a sense of unity in this search, a reminder of their values and morality that has Baby Nicole's face. It is also a wake up call for their duties and

for the respect of roles: Handmaids do not have to dare to escape both physically and mentally (they cannot think about themselves as mothers). The tragic story of the devious Handmaid mother abducting her to Canada has become legendary abroad as well: readers are informed by Daisy, one of the testimonies and one of the narrating voices in the sequel, that in Canadian schools Baby Nicole's story is studied as well as Gilead's culture. The Pearl Girls, Gilead missionaries, distribute fliers requesting Nicole's return: propaganda works both ways, in domestic policy and foreign policy.

Atwood's book has numerous significant dystopian elements, including the stratification of social system, loss of freedom, and elaborate fear's dynamics. In this overview of the genre loss of identity is a major theme in many dystopian literature. Identity is important since it may relate to many aspects of a person: in *The Handmaid's Tale*, women are the victims of this loss and it regards the female sphere, hence I will investigate it under the lens of the other adjective typically used to describe this novel: feminist.

2.2 Feminism in *The Handmaid's Tale*

Many times Atwood had to reply to the question whatever her novel was intended to be feminist: this label was put by others, mostly critics and journalists, rather than by the actual author. In a 2017 op-ed for the *New York Times* she answered like this:

> 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 – with all the variety of character and behavior that implies – and are

> also interesting and important, and what happens to them is crucial to the theme, structure and plot of the book, then yes. In that sense, many books are "feminist."

The meaning hidden in the term "feminism" is complex and it evolved throughout history, making its definition very difficult to determine. Marta Easton, specialized in feminist theory at Saint Joseph University writes in her essay "Feminism" that:

> 'feminism' is perhaps the most politically charged, and also the term whose perceived meaning varies the most depending on the position and outlook of the person using it. Naming some one a feminist can be positive or bitterly negative. (…) Or it can be viewed as an attempt to interject the personal and partisan into a more traditional discourse, with results either richly significant or divisively marginalizing, depending on one's point of view" (99).

R. Claire Snyder, whose researching fields include authoritarianism, militarism, political culture, gender and sexuality, civic engagement, social movements, and ideologies, thinks that "for our generation feminism is like fluoride" and "while every generation by definition confronts a new historical context, that alone does not seem sufficient to declare a new wave of feminism" (178) .

ln Atwood's novel there is a certain kind of attention to women's condition that reflects the principles of second wave feminism. Snyder in fact continues her thoughts as follows:

> In short, classic second-wave feminism argues that in patriarchal society women share common experiences, and through a sharing of their experiences with one another in consciousness-raising (CR) groups, they can generate knowledge about their own oppression. Once they realize that what they thought were personal problems (e.g., uneven division of household labor, male-centered sexual practices, domestic

violence, etc.) are widely shared, they can see the ways in which the patriarchal structure of society produces such problems, and the personal becomes political. (184)

The Patriarchal society of Gilead attacks women and controls women's body, rights and individuality. Inside Gilead all these aspects are in the hands of powerful men who, as mentioned before, organized every detail marginalizing women's personal contribution to the country.

The owing of women's body starts from the way they have to dress: there is a precise code of colours, depending on their rank, that permits to categorize individuals: red, "the colour of blood" (Atwood 14), is for Handmaids, blue for Wives, dull green for Marthas, brown for Aunts, pink for school-age girls and white for future brides. As for the Handmaids their costume is the most special because the kit is formed by a white hat with wings that keep them fror seeing and from being seen: "Modesty is invisibility, said Aunt Lydia. Never forget about it. To be seen - to be *seen* - is to be - her voice trembled - penetrated." (Atwood 35). In general the dresses are very chaste, intendedly nothing too provocative. Women must not be seen as sexual objects and their protection is the controlling device used to keep them in a safety box. In the book there are several passages that refer to the times before Gilead and they are always described as dangerous, chaotic, with "too much choice" (Atwood 31).

The telling of episodes of rape are used to trigger fear in girls: when Aunts give their explanation and interpretation of rape they point to the reason behind this type of violence. They teach handmaids that sexuality is an inborn woman characteristic which turns men into animals. Even if they don't intend to manifest in any way their sexuality the latent component does not ever leave them and this puts them in danger. This moment of sharing is known in the book as "Testifying" and girls that are training to be future handmaids are encouraged to

share violent acts of their previous life, the life before Gilead. The purpose is to heighten their terror and not to free them from the burden of violence. In fact, even if nothing scary has ever happened, it is better to make something up in order to sustain the necessity of building this new reality that "protects" them. Aunt Lydia, one of the first aunts who helped to shape Gilead, constantly suggests the right way to behave, turning around and twisting feminist concepts that were supposed to be solid, but that now are simply erased: "Try to think of it from their point of view, she said, her hands clasped and wrung together, her nervous pleading smile. It isn't easy for them" (Atwood 20), and also "All flesh is weak. All flesh is grass, I corrected her in my head. They can't help it, she said, God made them that way but He did not make you that way. He made you different. It's up to you to set boundaries. Later you will be thanked" (Atwood 51).

For the Handmaids, inside that glass dome, everything that determines them as human beings is actually shut down: from the moment of the military coup, economic power was taken from them, denying the access to bank accounts and all their money went right into the pockets of the closest male relative. Even their name was erased because they inherit the name of the Commander they are assigned to, preceded by "of," the preposition of the genitive case, the case of belonging, of ownership. Their freedom is inversely proportional to their importance: "I am too important, too scarce, for that. I am a national resource" (Atwood 71), says Offred when she looks at her small tattoo on the ankle during bath, a sort of assurance that she would always be a national belonging and of course it conjures up the Nazi's practice on Jews in concentration camps. However, unlike Nazis, Wives and Aunts are very thoughtful of their handmaid's body because they need her to be in shape, a healthy womb: as a matter of fact, physical penalties are also inflicted to them as long as they do not

interfere with the reproductive system since “we are containers, it’s only the insides of our bodies that are important”, says Offred (Atwood 103). The handmaid had to be a “worthy vessel” (Atwood 71) and her only purpose in this world is to have a baby, otherwise it means failure, worthlessness. Women are trained not to think anymore to be the owners of their body, rather as their keeper: “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. […] Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I’m a cloud, congealed 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” (Atwood 80).

These girls, blinded by the fulfilment of their holy role, are unconscious victims of a monthly sex abuse, an event with the name of Ceremony. The perversion of this practice is striking: whereas violence against women is considered the worst insult towards the law of Gilead and the law of God, Commanders found a way to legitimate it using the Scripture. Also the preparation of the girl before the sexual act is an example of the objectification of the female body: a special ritual is required in order to be clean and decent for the man. The Ceremony is a shaming and challenging moment also for the wives because it is the physical demonstration that they are just like biblical Rachel, incapable of having children of their own. That means that even if the wives’ social status is respectable they are lacking in the only request Gilead has to women. Despite the attempt of coaching handmaids to be always very careful not provoking desires in men, it is clear that abusing behaviours are perpetuated, not anymore in dark alleys like in previous times, but within the “safe” walls of the house and by the person who is supposed to take care of them. It is the case of the doctor, who Offred has to visit regularly in order to monitor her physical conditions. His language reveals that he

is not afraid of going against the rules, he calls her "honey" and he pronounces the word "sterile" which is forbidden. It seems he is showing her compassion when he puts forward the proposal of getting her pregnant: he wants to help her to avoid the label of "Unwoman" but in reality he is getting advantages from his position and pushing her to consent.

Also in *The Testaments* there is an episode regarding Agnes, a thirteen year old girl, who is abused during doctor Grove's visit. Only later readers will discover that he raped his daughter Becka many times when she was still a child. Also in this occasion, violence happened just because of the man's perversion and not for any kind of provocation; the gravity of the act is underlined by the young age of the victims. The patriarchal system of the institutions provides a self-confidence in men that allows violence to go unpunished and women are simply compelled to live with it: "Some girls had reported such things. One had claimed their Guardian had run his hands over her legs. Another had said that an Econo trash collector had unzipped his trousers in front of her. The first girl had had the backs of her legs whipped for lying, the second had been told that nice girls did not notice the minor antics of men, they simply looked the other way" (*The Testaments* 97), said Agnes in her testimony.

According to what has been reported so far, there are several themes that denounce female conditions in patriarchal society and the novels, especially *The Handmaid's Tale*, encourage the reader to consider these issues. Even if Offred's mother is a minor character presented just in her memories, she is relevant for this matter: she is described as a feminist activist who participated many times in protests involving vandalistic acts such as burning porn magazines. Her opinion towards men is very low and she thinks of them as oppressors, which gives her the strength to be almost a militant supporter of the women's right movement. For Offred having this parental example and a certain kind of background and

education should represent an important link with her old life and a further reason to fight back in Gilead. Nonetheless her mother is also the stereotypical rebellious woman, who's anger towards men caused her to become lost in her own rhetoric degrading for instance Luke, Offred's partner before Gilead, simply for his gender: "Chauvinist pig" (Atwood 127), the mother said to him in a memory of her daughter. Her attitude can be seen as an author's critique to a certain kind of feminism, which demands power over and oppression of the male gender, rather than equality. This concept is repeated also in the way the mother approaches her daughter: when she says to Offred that she does not understand her ideology, she is putting herself on a pedestal. Her feeling of superiority fails to create an inclusive community and Offred, as many other female characters in the story, remains isolated and lonely. Therefore, the mother is an hypocritical example of feminism and she gives an idea of how Gilead's society developed: people in search of power as the Commanders often turn towards weak and lonely individuals looking for a community and a purpose.

These are some of the reasons why Atwood's work is considered by many as feminist: *The Handmaid's Tale* offers a wide range of interpretations on patriarchy and sexism. J. Brooks Bouson is a literary scholar who investigates the novel under the lens of recent feminist and psychoanalytic theory and she writes: "*The Handmaid's Tale* reveals that what lies behind the benevolent paternalism of the Commander and the culturally conservative ideal of protected womanhood is a rigid belief in male authority and in the hierarchical arrangement of the sexes. In Gilead, women are stripped of their individual identities and transformed into replaceable objects in a phallocentric economy" (125). Atwood clearly draws a parallel between Gilead's supporters and radical feminists. Both parties profess to defend women from sexual violence, and both are ready to suppress free

expression in order to do so. These feminists and the creators of Gilead think with a repressive mentality and using this characters' attitude Atwood welcomes the reader to reflect that even with the best intentions there is always a dark side.

2.3 Narrative Situations, Immersion and Identification

2.3.1 Narrative Situations

Before addressing the correlated issues of immersion and identification is paramount to have a clear sense of how the two books work narratologically speaking. Let us begin with the opening of the narrative of the first novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, worth quoting in its entirety*:*

> We slept in what had once been the gymnasium. The floor was of varnished wood, with stripes and circles painted on it, for the games that were formerly played there; the hoops for the basketball nets were still in place, though the nets were gone. A balcony ran around the room, for the spectators, and I thought I could smell, faintly like an afterimage, the pungent scent of sweat, shot through with the sweet taint of chewing gum and perfume from the watching girls, felt-skirted as I knew from pictures, later in miniskirts, then pants, then in one earring, spiky green-streaked hair. Dances would have been held there; the music lingered, a palimpsest of unheard sound, style upon style, an undercurrent of drums, a forlorn wail, garlands made of tissue-paper flowers, cardboard devils, a revolving ball of mirrors, powdering the dancers with a snow of light. There was old sex in the room and loneliness, and expectation, of something without a shape or name. I remember that yearning, for something that was always about to happen and was never the same as the hands that were on us there and then, in the small of the back, or out back, in the parking lot, or

> in the television room with the sound turned down and only the pictures flickering over lifting flesh. We yearned for the future. How did we learn it, that talent for insatiability? It was in the air; and it was still in the air, an after-thought, as we tried to sleep, in the army cots that had been set up in rows, with spaces between so we could not talk. We had flannelette sheets, like children's, and army-issue blankets, old ones that still said U.S. We folded our clothes neatly and laid them on the stools at the ends of the beds. The lights were turned down but not out. Aunt Sara and Aunt Elizabeth patrolled; they had electric cattle prods slung on thongs from their leather belts. No guns though, even they could not be trusted with guns. Guns were for the guards, specially picked from the Angels. The guards weren't allowed inside the building except when called, and we weren't allowed out, except for our walks, twice daily, two by two around the football field, which was enclosed now by a chain-link fence topped with barbed wire. The Angels stood outside it with their backs to us. They were objects of fear to us, but of something else as well. If only they would look. If only we could talk to them. Something could be exchanged, we thought, some deal made, some tradeoff, we still had our bodies. That was our fantasy. We learned to whisper almost without sound. In the semi-darkness we could stretch out our arms, when the Aunts weren't looking, and touch each other's hands across space. We learned to lip-read, our heads flat on the beds, turned sideways, watching each other's mouths. In this way we exchanged names, from bed to bed: Alma. Janine. Dolores. Moira. June. (9)

The first chapter of the novel opens with a description of a place, a gymnasium which does not have this function anymore. The homodiegetic narrator is speaking in the first-person and

uses the plural pronoun “we” to indicate that she is part of a group and that she[1] is speaking for all of them. The past tense of the verbs gives an atmosphere of loss and longing, of something that is gone, whose echo is still perceptible. The gymnasium is described starting from its floor which is painted according to basketball’s rules and looking gradually up everything seems still in place and ready to host a game, however the nets are gone. It is the first hint that the setting has not the same function any longer: it is not a place where to play a sport or dance and have fun any longer. Despite the fact that this gymnasium is intended to be used for another purpose, which is still hidden to the reader, the narrator is still able to remember the past which means that changes are quite recent. Through the sense of smell, hearing and sight the memory of what usually happens inside the gymnasium is given to the reader: the smell of the players’ sweat, the cheerleader perfume, the music at the high-school balls, the drums of the band, the decorations on the walls. The scene depicted is nostalgic and romantic and it has the texture of a teenager’s hopes and dreams. Furthermore, the gymnasium reminds her of “old sex”: sex is accompanied by the adjective “old” from which we can gather that the juvenile time of first encounters has gone and that the person who is talking is an adult. That place is a well of old memories belonging to a time that shaped the narrator’s identity because youth is the moment of discovery, curiosity and often young adults are associated to impetuosity, lust and eagerness for the future. These thoughts bring back nice feelings and yet the reader cannot absorb any comforting and peaceful impression because these first sentences convey a sense of instability: something has been taken away, these moments of joy and self-discover are gone. These are memories of a past that does not fit anymore the kind of present the narrator is about to unfold for us. The old sensations

[1] The reader is likely to associate the I with the handmaid in the title.

narrated are used by the narrator as a sort of lullaby since she and her group are trying to sleep: the scene takes a more sinister turn once the vocabulary is infiltrated by words belonging to the semantic field of war and a sense of hostility and danger are exposed for the first time. There are army cots set up in rows, to talk is forbidden, the blankets are army-issued and there is the U.S. logo on them: the adverb "still" which accompanies the description of the written letters has the function of highlighting the presumed shift inside the government of the United States. The first instability of the progression of the story is composed by this conjuring up of military and political issues against the backdrop of something that has dramatically changed and has filed pleasure and entertainment away. We do not know yet, whether this situation is dangerous for the narrator and whether that group of people is to be considered imprisoned or if the presence of soldiers is for their protection. The juxtaposition of innocence and violence is conveyed also by the unlikely match of military beds and children' bedsheet as if an innocent sleepover is happening: this overlap of images suggests the dystopian fusion of gentleness with militarism. The reader is left in the dark about the reason for this adult being back in a gymnasium, however the sense of hostility and alienation seeps into the narration with the introduction of two characters that have the qualification of "aunt": we understand right away that their category is not parental because their actions are more similar to those of soldiers and guards. They "patrolled" and "had electric cattle prods": these Aunts have a position of privilege and control which puts them above the social group the narrator belongs to. The illusion of protection is fuelled by a well-organized system of control that leaves no possibility of escape: Aunts control the people on the beds, Angels control everybody.

At this point of the narration the narrator is still unspecified and very little is said about her: the mimetic component is almost absent whereas the thematic of the narration are being displayed piece after piece. The lack of identity revealed by the pronoun “we” is the first brick in the development of a pyramidal society in which individual identities fuse with the class to which they belong, and each remains sufficiently separate from the others to contribute to a feeling of uncontested division. The power of sex is another important thematic issue and the narrator is attempting to transport us to a new future in which sex is still the key to society, but in a confining and demeaning way for women. We have in fact a confirmation of the gender of the narrator when it becomes clear to us that the situation she is experiencing is one of imprisonment and that one of the first thoughts was to bribe the guards. In the realization of having nothing material to exchange, the protagonist becomes aware that she can use her body as the oldest form of exchange. However, this remains only a fantasy because in this society the power of sex does not depend on its ostentation but on its negation. It is therefore clear that women are no longer the holders of their sexual power and are no longer allowed to use their sexuality as they wish. In the despair shared by the protagonist’s group, the desire to touch each other remains alive almost as if this touch could awaken them from the nightmare in which they are immersed. In this imprisonment, which will then be extended from the gymnasium to every dimension of life, women are silent and relegated to the role of procreators. Every living being evolves and adapts to the changing circumstances of the world: the last sentences of the first chapter tells us just that women had to learn to whisper and read their lips if they wanted to survive. The group to which our protagonist had to hand over her individuality is precisely that of women: she shares the same story of girls who like her are imprisoned in this gymnasium, that for them represents good

old memories of youth but at the same time an uncertain and frightening future. The chapter closes with a list of names belonging to those women that accompany the protagonist forming this new social class, the handmaids: some of them will be part of the story as well and they are the only handmaids the narrator will call by name because they were part of her previous life or of the transitioning training time at the Red Center. The last name cited, June, could hint at the real name of the protagonist because it is the only name that never appears again in the novel. The mystery, however, remains unsolved.

At the end of this chapter the narration has the appearance of a diary, a recollection of memories which are expected to be presented in chronological order where the experiencing self alternates with the narrating self with balance and naturalness. For many literary scholars, this kind of narration is the perfect one and for instance Monika Fludernik thinks that "there is a kind of dynamic at work here: ideally, experience and evaluation should be in equilibrium" (Fludernik 90). In the following pages however the narrator uses the present tense which destabilizes the reader. This is due to the instability of present tense because this metalinguistic function violates the mimetic standard, that is to say you cannot live and narrate at the same time. The novel is a succession of flashbacks and present moments, a pattern close to the "'I'-now/'I'-then binary" proposed by Smith and Watson, authors of *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, in which an equilibrium between the experiencing and narrating selves is achieved because it involves the temporal dimension. The type of narrative that we encounter in *The Handmaid's Tale* is the homodiegetic simultaneous present and it puts the reader in a very difficult relationship with the narrator. After all, the reader cannot assume that Offred is following a precise narrating

direction and this leaves the future wide open for inferences. Phelan ponders on Fleischman's concept of "narrative perspective" as it follows:

> For the reader, this double temporal perspective means that she has a tacit *awareness* that the account is retrospective but an overt *experience* of the events as unfolding prospectively. In homodiegetic narration, the double orientation leads to the separation between the experiencing-I whose acts are being retraced and the narrating-I who is doing the retracing. According to the mimetic standard that says "knowledge alters perception," whenever a narrating-I unself-consciously tells the story of his or her change in consciousness or understanding, the new understanding should inform the retrospective narration. (*Understanding Narrative* 227)

In terms of our understanding of mimesis and present tense narration, this means that mimetic rules can be broken without damaging the effectiveness of a story or changing its generic status. In fact, mimesis is not a faithful copy of the real but rather a set of rules for how to show what we temporarily and provisionally agree is the real. This story does not follow the strict rules of mimetic logic and this makes it more powerful. Lastly, the reader's opinions about mimesis and sense of what is possible depend on whether or not s/he is aware that s/he is reading fiction and that the characters and events are synthetic constructions.

Regarding first person narrations, Phelan introduces a new concept called "redundant telling" which is "a narrator's apparently unmotivated report of information to a narratee that the narratee already possesses" (*Living to Tell About It* Introduction n.p). The mimetic model of first person narrative fiction implies that the narrator possesses the same limits, possibilities, and techniques at the disposal of an author of a traditional autobiography. The

redundancy implied by Phelan is the combination of what the character narrator and the implied author are both communicating, only to different audiences. The flashbacks are fundamental for the author to place the information needed for the actual reader in order to make sense of the fictional world Atwood has created. The narration in the present tense has the important aim to generate in the narratee that sense of community through which her traumatic experience can be representative of what it means to survive.

In the sequel *The Testaments*, as already anticipated, Atwood adopts different narratological strategies and this shift of intentions comes from the fact that the reader who approaches this book has already entered in the dystopian world of Gilead. Since it has already been proved that the narration of the events is a recollection of testimonies studied and organized by historians such as Professor Pieixoto, the book is narrated by three different women, which collectively explain a series of events that occurred 15 years after Offred's final scene. One of these stories is that of Baby Nicole, who is now 16 years old and lives in Canada under a new name. One is Agnes' who was kidnapped from her parents, Offred and Luke, and raised by the dictatorship. Aunt Lydia, the iron-fisted enforcer of the new ideology who trains handmaids at the Red Center, provides another testimony. Each narrative is fast-paced and has a distinct voice.

Offred was last seen at the end of *The Handmaid's Tale* and her fate remains unknown. She was getting into a car, and it was unclear if the drivers were Eyes, members of the secret police coming to arrest her, or Mayday resistance on its way to release her. Ambiguous endings stimulate our imagination: our interpretations may on our being pessimists or optimists, even though in difficult circumstances, many of us turn to stories for

reassurance. The novel's main topic is the significance of storytelling itself and I will investigate this more in the section dedicated to *The Testaments*. Storytelling has the power to form and break chains, to define identities and to bring people together. Gilead, like previous authoritarian nations that have burnt or extensively controlled literature, does not want its inhabitants to have free access to stories.

Aunt Lydia covers an important position in the regime which permits her to read and write: it is not a coincidence that her testimony is handwritten in a manuscript and her narration follows the natural evolution of the plot. The hidden chronicle of her life starts from her job as a left-leaning judge before Gilead, her imprisonment, torture, and eventual rise to power as one of the architects of Gilead's society. The features of the manuscripts resemble Offred's: they look like a diary with flashbacks and reflections, but the reference to the time of her – the present tense – is made clear ever since the first pages:

> I write these words in my private sanctum within the library of Ardua Hall —one of the few libraries remaining after the enthusiastic book-burnings that have been going on across our land. The corrupt and blood-smeared fingerprints of the past must be wiped away to create a clean space for the morally pure generation that is surely about to arrive. Such is the theory. But among these bloody fingerprints are those made by ourselves, and these can't be wiped away so easily. Over the years I've buried a lot of bones; now I'm inclined to dig them up again—if only for your edification, my unknown reader. If you are reading, this manuscript at least will have survived. Though perhaps I'm fantasizing: perhaps I will never have a reader. Perhaps I'll only be talking to the wall, in more ways than one. That's enough inscribing for today. My

> hand hurts, my back aches, and my nightly cup of hot milk awaits me. I'll stash this screed in its hiding place, avoiding the surveillance cameras—I know where they are, having placed them myself. Despite such precautions, I'm aware of the risk I'm running: writing can be dangerous. What betrayals, and then what denunciations, might lie in store for me? There are several within Ardua Hall who would love to get their hands on these pages. Wait, I counsel them silently: it will get worse. (4-5)

Moreover Lydia addresses a reader and as with Offred, the reading of her testimony is bound to the defeat of Gilead. There is the chance that she may be betrayed and killed for treason and her words would be gone with her as a direct consequence. The reader that Lydia has in mind is in this case totally fictional because many times she questions herself on his/her real existence and it is more a projection of her hopes, as she asserts here: "Why am I taking your existence for granted? Perhaps you will never materialize: you're only a wish, a possibility, a phantom. Dare I say a hope?" (173). The reader is therefore diegetic and as I will point out in the next chapter of this thesis, the reason is connected to Lydia's fears of being read by a traitor. The relationship between Lydia and the reader gets stronger for the constant questions she asks directly to him/her, making his/her involvement in her decisions, both past and present, vivid. This does not mean that the reader has impact on her actions, rather that she tries to empathize with him/her creating a set of mind of the what-if-you-were-me sort.

The narrations of the two other girls, Daisy/Nicole and Agnes, are titled "Transcript of Witness Testimony 369A" and "Transcript of Witness Testimony 369B" respectively: this is important because their testimonies come in oral form and as it happened for Offred, their

words reach us after the revision of the historians Pieixoto and colleagues. Since their memory recollections are in the past tense, the progression of the narrative comes in retrospective form. Their narration is not presented in diary form and it looks more like an interview or an interrogation. Agnes for example addresses herself to a diegetic "you" who knows about Gilead and the weird conditions of growing up in it:

> 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. I imagine you expect nothing but horrors, but the reality is that many children were loved and cherished, in Gilead as elsewhere, and many adults were kind though fallible, in Gilead as elsewhere. I hope you will remember, too, that we all have some nostalgia for whatever kindness we have known as children, however bizarre the conditions of that childhood may seem to others. I agree with you that Gilead ought to fade away—there is too much of wrong in it, too much that is false, and too much that is surely contrary to what God intended— but you must permit me some space to mourn the good that will be lost. (9)

The implication of her wish, that is to say to be helpful, invokes the importance of storytelling and of testimony. Agnes' duty in doing this is to expose the brutality of Gilead and at the same time she feels the need of preserving her good memories of her childhood. The reader's empathy happens for Agnes in the same way as for Lydia: the request for the reader is to see and feel their stories as if they were the stories of the reader. Also Agnes converses with the reader in a similar way: "What could I say but yes and yes? Yes, I was happy. Yes, I was lucky. Anyway it was true" (13).

Daisy's narration begins similarly to Agnes', with a diegetic "you" that has the function to justify her narration: "They say I will always have the scar, but I'm almost better; so yes, I think I'm strong enough to do this now. You've said that you'd like me to tell you how I got involved in this whole story, so I'll try; though it's hard to know where to begin" (39). Daisy narrates her story retrospectively and in the past tense: there are episodes that will be more difficult to describe and others more vivid for both sisters due to the traumatic events that brought them together. The three women, Lydia, Agnes and Daisy/Nicole are all characters that follows a path of action and discovery of the self which will lead them to a bright future. As readers, we should (ideally) lose our binary vision of good and evil. We discover that there is a massive area of grey space between the two polarized dualities that usually give structure to a story.

2.3.2 Immersion and Identification

In both novels, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*, the positive and negative reactions of characters towards this particular dystopian reality are largely described and this has generated in readers the possibility to bond with characters. Regardless of the genre of the book, whether it is considered dystopian or feminist, certain features help the human brain's to immerse in a story: the act of deep-reading involves the ability to take on the perspective and feeling of others. Perspective-taking not only ties our empathy with what a person has just read, but it also broadens his/her assimilated knowledge of the world. Readers learn to feel what it is to be sad and hopeless, or joyful and driven with unsaid sentiments,

through the consciousness-changing dimension of reading. Each character experiences emotions in the text that help grasping the variety of frequently conflicting sensations that each of us carries; doing so makes us feel less alone with our own complicated mix of emotions, regardless of our life circumstances. Since Atwood's book has reached a huge number of people entering the list of bestsellers, the immersion in the tale is something real. Starting from the assumption that Gilead belongs in a fictional world, it is necessary to investigate in which ways the identification between the flesh-and-blood reader and the characters has happened.

In Phelan's rhetorical theory, narrative is a multileveled communication where the attention of the analysis is equally distributed between the conclusion drawn at the end and the evolving of the story itself. As he explains in *Reading the American Novel 1920-2010* "more generally, this principle underlies my conception of rhetorical form as the particular fashioning of the elements, techniques, and structure of a narrative in the service of a set of readerly engagements that lead to particular thematic, affective, and ethical effects on the audience" (24).

In *The Handmaid's Tale* for instance the initial response could be frustrating because it is very hard to imagine such a fast change in the law that eradicates women's rights turning them into reproductive machines. The common reader, presumably living in a democratic state, would feel even shame for characters that did not understand what was happening straightaway or that did not escape or fight. Atwood's own view of Offred is clear: she has described Offred as "an ordinary, more-or-less cowardly woman (rather than a heroine)" (qtd. in Cooke 276). Nevertheless the more the reader proceeds with the unfolding of events the

more s/he is likely to sympathize, and empathize, with the helpless victim represented by Offred. Another example is the figure of Aunt Lydia, who is described as a ruthless woman in the first book but who completely redeems her image in the sequel, bringing the reader to reconsider his/her feelings once again. The actor Ann Dowd, who plays Aunt Lydia in Hulu's television adaption and gave her voice for *The Testaments* audiobook, went through this change, that we deem textually based. In an interview with *The Hollywood Reporter*, Dowd discussed how the sequel surprised her and helped her to fully understand the character. She explains that:

> "What surprised me — and didn't — is how she got involved in Gilead in the first place. When you play a role such as Lydia in *The Handmaid's Tale*, you search for a human connection that somehow explains why she would make the choices she makes. Now, you read *The Testaments*, and [see that] Lydia, being a family court judge, realized really quickly, "If I want to live and survive this world, this is what you have to do. Not only am I going to do it, I'm going to do it better than anybody so I'm going to be ruling the other Aunts." The lack of sentimentality, which is pure Atwood, is what was the wake-up call for me, like, "OK darling, I get it, you want to humanize her story, but let's look at the facts here, let's jump ahead." I don't know if Atwood would agree with me, but I think the decision to bring Gilead down and all the efforts she makes to do so, is, in a way, about atonement. Because somewhere in a human being, it mounts, the acts of cruelty, the acts of basic human rights being denied that you are fully in charge of."

For Phelan the rhetorical reading has to deal with conscious or unconscious interventions of the author in the text which aim at affecting readers in particular ways. Those responses could

be the instructional manual for critics for navigating inside the text, however they have to be constantly weighed against authorial agency and textual phenomena. As already discussed in the previous chapter of this thesis, identification might occur when certain textual strategies are used, one example is setting the story in a place recognizable by many: the United States represent for sure a significant catching area of potential readers and Atwood probably made this choice because it is a place she knows well and for its political engagement in the global system. Also the timing of the narration is relevant: Gilead's foundation takes place in a not-so-distant future, but what matters the most is the flashbacks that describe our present days, making the atmosphere more vivid. The life taken away from Offred is the same life most of the readers have in the moment of reading and even the narrator suggests us that "Context is all" (150). Moreover, as Susan Keen pointed out many times in her researches, nowadays readers are mostly women: being Atwood's novel centred on the female's sphere in a oppressive patriarchal society it makes readers more inclined to feel empathy with the protagonist.

According to Phelan, actual audiences of the novel develop interests and responses in the three components of the narrative: the mimetic, the thematic and the synthetic. He maintains that the combination of the three may vary in order to trigger identification and immersion. In other words Phelan admits that there are novels in which mimetic, thematic and synthetic work together in creating a satisfying reading experience. For instance in his rhetorical analysis of Pynchon's *Crying of Lot 49* he says that "Pynchon makes all three components of Oedipa's character central to the progression, even as he makes the synthetic and thematic components of his other characters more prominent than their mimetic components" (Reading the American Novel 1920-2010 195). He thinks also that "some

novels (especially those invested in creating the illusion that the storyworld is as real as our own, and that, therefore, the characters are acting autonomously within that world) are dominated by mimetic interests" (*Reading the American Novel* 29). Therefore a strong mimetic component in a character should be the triggering feature allowing readers' identification, that is to say that the more s/he considers a character being similar to himself/ herself, the higher the level of sympathy and appeal will be. The fact that Offred is a woman in her thirties living in the US is already a big common ground for the audience. Offred is also a mother to whom a child was taken away, a pregnant woman, a lover, a wife. In her early life she is a happy human being with an education, a mother with whom sometimes she does not agree, she has a best friend with a vibrant personality which compensates her more reflective one. She had an affair with Luke and eventually she got married with him and they had a child together. Offred is very ordinary: a normal person that goes through typical life's circumstances. When she finds herself imprisoned in her red dress with white wings' hat, her behaviour is not heroic, she does not distinguish herself either for bravery or for cleverness. She passively adapts to her new role and accepts her power because being an handmaid is equivalent to the sexualized image of a woman in her former reality. As it has been said before handmaids are merely containers for men that can have her, the commanders, and for those who cannot have them they are a prohibited desirable fruit: "I enjoy the power; power of a dog bone, passive but there. I hope they get hard at the sight of us and have to rub themselves against the painted barriers, surreptitiously.[…] There are no more magazines, no more films, no more substitutes; only me and my shadow, walking away from the two men, who stand at attention, stiffly, by a roadblock, watching our retreating shapes" (Atwood 28).

Offred does not evolve in terms of power and control: she is unable to preserve her identity, to build a sense of self, connect with others, and act. Under Gilead, even obvious signs of resistance or attempts to create, maintain, or grasp an identity sometimes morph into cooperation with the dictatorship. Gilead's influence penetrates into every possible aspect, every thought and act of Offred's existence, which remains submissive and obedient. She finds finally the courage to be transgressive only when prompted by others: first when the Commander wants her to secretly join him in his studio and after going along with Serena Joy's plan to hook up with their handyman Nick. These transgressions might give to the reader a sense of a turning point in the plot, but Offred keeps participating in her role as the government wishes, highlighting her poor willingness of escaping from this condition. This happens not because she likes to be an handmaid, rather because she feels paralyzed: if we dig in her memories, we find the episode in which after losing her job she reacts closing herself into domesticity, that is the role the society wanted for her. Offred's adaptation of herself and her life to the sexism of contemporary America, her acceptance of such conditions as normal and expected, is paralleled by her eventual submitting to Gilead's conditions. In many aspects she embodies the oppressed human being: she feels weird in her own skin because she does not belong in it anymore, she is melancholic about touching and being touched, she is lonely and abandoned to her destiny, without the people she cared about and without being important to anyone.

The mimetic component of Offred's characterization is a valuable tool for identification because of the similarity of readers' experiences and the use of a first person narrator, which I have already presented at the beginning of the paragraph, gives privileged access to her perceptions, evaluations, and goals. Nevertheless the immobility of her

character is too weak to consider the mimetic component the reason for the amount of fame obtained by the novel. An example of this immobility is a verb that frequently appears in the novel: “to wait”. The first time we encounter it, the story has not even begun: in the list of contents section IV is titled “Waiting Room”. Approaching chapter nine the reader discovers that the room is actually Offred’s bedroom where she spends the majority of her time doing nothing, thinking, remembering, waiting. She narrates a flashback about her affair with Luke: they used to meet in a hotel because he was already married and had to cover their rendezvous and she had the habit to arrive a bit earlier to check in; and she waits for him, she waits even for him to get the divorce. Her waiting is an important feature of Offred’s characterization and since it bespeaks passivity, this mimetic trait may be deem weak as it is not complemented with agency. Donald Maass is the president of the Donald Maass Literary Agency in New York. In his article “Seeking vs. Suffering: The Secret of Passive Protagonists” he points out that “not every protagonist is Odysseus. It is entirely possible that a main character can begin a story in a state of suspension. It’s a human condition to be oppressed, wandering, lost, stuck or even imprisoned. People don’t always make things happen; things happen to them. Naturally, there is no story without a response to an adverse situation.” Even if relative passivity is more realistic in real life, it does not transition well to novels. Audiences expect their protagonists to have a direct effect on the plot. True passive protagonists are uncommon, in part because they are less appealing to audiences. Before Gilead established its dominance, Offred exemplified what not to do. Offred chose to ignore, romanticize, and tolerate. She was concerned about her own status and rights. Her modest resistance has been either damaging or pointless. As the corrupted United States steadily transitioned into Gilead, she committed the ultimate mistake by doing nothing or, more

precisely, by being so preoccupied with her own personal life that she ignored the events outside her personal space.

In the following section I will consider the thematic component as the main ingredient for the mass identification around the figure of the handmaid. Offred in fact has an ideologically precise function in the narrative which arouses interest in readers for its cultural, historical and ethical meaning: she is a victim of abuses that tries to cope with her traumas as a woman in a world ruled by men.

2.4 The Thematic Component of the Handmaid: the Trauma and the Victim

The term "trauma" refers to an experience or situation that is so distressing that it has a lasting effect on a person's mental state as well as his/her physical well-being. In addition to this, there are significant and long-term adverse effects associated with psychological trauma. Michelle Balaev, author of *The Nature of Trauma in American Novels*, wrote an article titled "Trends in Literary Trauma Theory" in which she analyses "trauma" as:

> a person's emotional response to an overwhelming event that disrupts previous ideas of an individual's sense of self and the standards by which one evaluates society. (…). A defining feature of the trauma novel is the transformation of the self ignited by an external, often terrifying experience, which illuminates the process of coming to terms with the dynamics of memory that inform the new perceptions of the self and world". (150)

The minds of traumatized persons are fundamentally influenced by prior traumatic experiences as well as recollections of such experiences. Trauma is caused by a state of

perplexity and insecurity; common causes of psychological trauma include sexual assault, discrimination, police brutality, bullying, and domestic violence. Catastrophic events, war, betrayal, and sexual abuse are all potential triggers for post-traumatic stress disorder. However, the most important thing to keep in mind is that various individuals will respond differently to a given traumatic occurrence. To put it another way, not everyone who goes through the same horrific experience will end up becoming traumatized by it. The literary trauma theories proposed by critics such as Kali Tal and Cathy Caruth believe that reactions to traumatic experience, such as cognitive instability and the eventual split of consciousness, are an intrinsic component of traumatic experience and memory. These literary scholars use the divided identity caused by traumatic experience as a metaphor to depict the level of emotional damages on the individual sense of self and to describe the shift in consciousness induced by the event.

Margaret Atwood's works depict scenarios in which women, burdened by the norms and injustices of their communities, learn that in order to live, they must transform into courageous, independent individuals. Her stories are often concerned with the journey of female characters: they have the tendency to start with a pinch of naivety and they end with transformed and intuitive women. Atwood chooses ordinary people for her tales and novels and usually they have happy memories concerning their childhood: for instance Offred lived a nice childhood, with a loving mother and friends and she did not perceive any danger. In the novel this character is however an adult woman who has to face a society which wants her to be malleable to men's desires, to be pleasant for them. If she refuses or fails to do so, the punishment would be to be considered as the enemy of social community. Every woman learns, the minute Gilead is founded, that trust may be misplaced, that they can be

manipulated, used, and mistreated on a consistent basis. This is a lesson that they carry with them for the rest of their lives. The establishment of the Republic of Gilead is a trauma for women and for Offred it starts when, trying to escape, her child is taken away by Guardians, her husband goes missing, presumably killed, and she is forced to become an handmaid. Because she is unable to adapt to a culture that upholds the concept of a submissive female, she instead uses her body as a defensive mechanism or a stratagem. Everybody has taught her that a woman is a commodity, and the only thing that matters is her image. Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that she evaluates her value in terms of her body. With Offred however the sexist mindset takes root so solidly that she develops a sense of refusal for her body: "My nakedness is strange to me already. My body seems outdated. […] 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" (68-69). For the sake of the potential kid that she will bring to term, every action, every bite of food, and every movement are monitored, recorded, avoided, or given the go-ahead for consumption. Her value solely derives from the contribution she makes to the human race. Her dreams and desires are insignificant. In addition to all that, her new status as handmaid requires that she does not use her real name or be recognized by it anymore. For the whole novel she remains "Offred" meaning that she still has not found her true self after the escape. For the whole time of narrating her only goal is surviving.

The tale of this handmaid allows us to bear witness to situations that cannot be fully understood and opens our ears to sensations that would otherwise go silent and unheard. Her traumatic memory is a recollection of upsetting events which she narrates using a recording device: she hopes these tapes will have a listener, but at the same time she is using them for

herself as a sort of therapeutic device: “It isn’t a story I’m telling. It’s also a story I’m telling, in my head, as I go along” (45). This reshaping of trauma into narrative – conveying the overall texture of trauma and not its temporal details – is what displays in itself the traumatic event and the inherent impossibility to relate it in a reliable way. Cathy Caruth articulates in *Unclaimed Experience* that “trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way its very unassimilated nature - the way it was precisely not known in the first instance - returns to haunt the survivor later on” (4). Traumatic events are hard to describe because the brain, which is considered the place where coherent cognitive structures are stored, cannot properly remember and process them. Trauma is only known through repeated flashbacks that literally re-enact the event, because the mind has difficulties in remembering. Caruth’s theories about trauma and memory, which are based on the abreactive model and mostly come from Freud, have become an important part of literary trauma studies, especially as evidence for the idea of trans historical trauma (Balaev 151). The reader can better comprehend what the narrator felt through the trauma especially when the author employs strategies such as a non-chronological retelling of events and imprecise details.

Some passages of *The Handmaid’s Tale* are about to be presented in the next chapter that show the unreliability of the narrator due to trauma going from the launch, the voyage and the farewell of the protagonist.

Chapter 3

A Rhetorical Reading of the Novels

3.1 *The Handmaid's Tale*: Unreliability in Traumatic Experience

Progression according to Phelan's theory is "the synthesis of a textual dynamics governing the movement of a narrative from beginning through middle to end and a readerly dynamics consisting of the authorial audience's trajectory of responses to that movement" (*Reading the American Novel* 30). What the reader has to read, in the sense of the numerical order of the pages, is the result of the implied author's intent. Textual dynamics is produced by the introduction, complication, and resolution of two types of unstable relationships. The first one is connected to plot dynamics, and the second one is connected to narratorial dynamics.

If we check out the list of contents this is what the evolution of the plot looks like: in total there are fifteen chapters and the final section – "Historical Notes" – stands on its own, appendix-like (differently from the others, it is not numbered). This ending section of the novel, and of Offred's tale, provides the reader with important information regarding the nature of the narration. Seven of the chapters are titled "Night" and the others describe Offred's limited life in Gilead: Shopping, Waiting Room, Nap, Household, Birth Day, Soul Scrolls, Jezebel's, Salvaging. The chapter that has the introductory function is called "Night" and unlikely the other chapters which have unique titles, "Night" occurs in multiple sections of the narration because it represents the part of the day when the protagonist, who is also the

narrator, is alone and reflects, remembers, analyses her thoughts on what is happening and has happened to her. Chapter one is brief, it is an incipit of the themes that will be covered in the story: the reader can grasp a sense of hopelessness, an echo of a place that is gone now, the powerlessness of a woman and the sexism around her body. The thematic component is already displayed as the most relevant element for this story. The synthetic component accompanies it, stressing the pronouns that are the first brick in the development of a pyramidal society. In it the individual identities fuse with the class to which they belong, and each remains sufficiently separate from the others to contribute to a feeling of uncontested division: “we slept”, “we yearned”, “we learn”, “we tried”, “we could not talk”, “we had”, “we folded”, “we weren’t allowed”, “we thought”, “we still had”. Then, there is the juxtaposition with “they”: it refers both to Aunts (“they could not be trusted”) and to Angels (“they were objects of fear”, “If only they would look”) (9-10). It is clear from the very first word “We” that the narrator does not have a strong sense of individuality because she recognizes herself in a group: the only references to her as an individual come when she thinks about the time that precedes what she is trying to narrate. Hence the protagonist has already an enormous difficulty with her self, in fact, she is not presented with a name and the implied author evokes the comfortable awareness of the past with the portrayal of the gymnasium and football field, and the awkward and humiliating feeling of the implied violence of the Aunts with their cattle prods and the Guardians with firearms. This juxtaposition instills in the reader a tense feeling and establishes the tone for the remainder of the plot. The protagonist’s thoughts quickly move to sex and how it was free and voracious. Desire was constantly there, and despite the repetition of the act, fresh aspects were added to the encounter, turning sex every time into something magical. The narrator is attempting to

transport us to a new future in which sex is still the key to society, but in a confining and demeaning way for women. In the transition between these two realities, the protagonist wonders if there is still a strategy to use her body to her benefit. The body is the only thing that belongs to her but is no longer an exchange commodity in her control: “The Angels stood outside [the football field] with their backs to us. They were objects of fear to us, but of something else as well. If only they would look. If only we could talk to them. Something could be exchanged, we thought, some deal made, some trade-off, we still had our bodies. That was our fantasy” (Atwood 10).

In the following pages the Republic of Gilead is presented with its new set of rules which have been already discussed in this thesis, but now it is important to consider the comparison between past and present as Offred’s dominant: a continuous going back and forth from episodes that begin to be blurry, full of sensations that are no longer certain due to the number of traumas suffered. She explains to the reader that the government has aggressively advised women to limit their thinking, and she no longer wants to think independently since it is hazardous, and her sole mantra is to survive:

> A bed. Single, mattress medium-hard, covered with a flocked white spread. Nothing takes place in the bed but sleep; or no sleep. 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. I know why there is no glass, in front of the watercolor picture of blue irises, and why the window opens only partly and why the glass in it is shatterproof. It isn’t running away they’re afraid of. We wouldn’t get far. It’s those other escapes, the ones you can open in yourself, given a cutting edge. So. Apart from these details, this could be a college guest room, for the

> less distinguished visitors; or a room in a rooming house, of former times, for ladies in reduced circumstances. That is what we are now. The circumstances have been reduced; for those of us who still have circumstances. But a chair, sunlight, flowers: these are not to be dismissed. I am alive, I live, I breathe, I put my hand out, unfolded, into the sunlight. Where I am is not a prison but a privilege, as Aunt Lydia said, who was in love with either/or. (14)

The tactical use of crowd manipulation is a characteristic of totalitarian governments: women are taught to choose the only option they have as if it was their only choice, like a privilege. Continuing to discuss the new social roles for women, it is evident that each class despises the others: wives detest handmaids for their virtue, Marthas hate having to serve wives and handmaids, and handmaids resent not being considered respectable human beings. For instance when Offred narrates her relationship with the Marthas working at her house she is aware that the awkward atmosphere is not really because of her, but because of what she represents and she says “But the frown isn’t personal: it’s the red dress she disapproves of, and what it stands for” (16). Offred is compared to a “disease or any form of bad luck” (16). Another episode related to this repulsion at the sight of an handmaid is in chapter eight: Offred and Ofglen during their daily walk pass by a small funeral cortege composed by Econowives. It is clear from the size of the black jar that they are mourning an unborn baby:

> We pause, out of respect, while they go by. I wonder if Ofglen feels what I do, pain like a stab, in the belly. We put our hands over our hearts to show these stranger women that we feel with them in their loss. Beneath her veil the first one scowls at us. One of the others turns aside, spits on the sidewalk. The Econowives do not like us. (50)

The handmaids are despised for being fertile and while this is perceived as a gift for the government, for the rest of the women it is a constant reminder of being deficient. If this society praises birth rate and constrains women to the mother role, not being able to fulfil it produces hostility and rivalry among them. This strategy of placing one woman against the other is stressed by the choice of certain words, exposing how the patriarchal language prevails. Offred often makes reflections on language and in this passage she ponders on the absence of correspondent female words: "*Fraternize* means *to behave like a brother*. Luke told me that. He said there was no corresponding word that meant to *behave like a sister*. *Sororize*, it would have to be, he said" (17). The patriarchal imposition on the language is another ploy to deny women the right of speaking for themselves. The hidden suggestion is that there is no need to provide words for describing the female sphere because it is not worth speaking about it at all; it also implies that women don't fraternize and don't represent a united group. The themes are already successfully displayed, whereas the mimetic component of the protagonist is still vague and the path she will choose in order to fulfil her survival journey is unknown.

The reason why Offred decides to tell her story is explained in the next section entitled "Night" and the addressee of her stories, that is to say the narratee, is also revealed. The principle that follows the narrative surprisingly coincides with Phelan's conception of narration.

> I would like to believe this is a story I'm telling. I need to believe it. I must believe it. Those who can believe that such stories are only stories have a better chance. If it's a story I'm telling, then I have control over the ending. Then there will be an ending, to the story, and real life will come after it. I can pick up where I left off. It isn't a story

> I'm telling. It's also a story I'm telling, in my head; as I go along. Tell, rather than write, because I have nothing to write with and writing is in any case forbidden. 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. Attaching a name attaches you to the world of fact, which is riskier, more hazardous: who knows what the chances are out there, of survival, yours? I will say you, you, like an old love song. You can mean more than one. You can mean thousands. I'm not in any immediate danger, I'll say to you. I'll pretend you can hear me. But it's no good, because I know you can't. (45-46)

Her words are very similar to Phelan's in the way he describes his theory, meaning that a story is "somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose(s) that something happened." Offred's narration makes the reader feel that she is recounting her story inside her mind. The meaning is not necessarily that she is lying to us, rather that she is going through the process of narrativizing the events in her own mind as she goes along. As I have already pointed out before, here again, language opacity and memory instability and gappiness is up front. Since the reader does not know yet the nature of her narration, it looks like she is addressing to a person who is reading her words. This theory is fundamental because it becomes irrelevant only with the discovery of the transcription of the tapes in the final section of the book, moreover it is a reminder of the simultaneous present tense narration: she is aware she is telling a story and nevertheless part of it is recounted as if she was living it contextually, resulting unnatural. The intimacy between the protagonist and the reader is built on this unfolding of feelings as the narration proceed, an intimacy not that

strong if the narration would have been traditionally retrospective. Phelan insists on this, arguing that "both the reader's judgments about mimesis and the sense of what is possible depend upon the reader's tacit awareness that she is reading fiction, that the characters and the events are what I have elsewhere called synthetic constructs" (*Understanding Narrative* 229). The "you" who cannot hear her may or may not be both narratee and actual reader: at that moment, the discourse is blurring the boundaries between them. Acknowledging that the addressee of her story is not present in her physical setting has the double meaning of his/her being somewhere else in the fictional world or in the not-fictional world. This strategy allows the actual reader to better understand the narrative and the rhetorical method is key for understanding how this works:

> In explaining the relation between narrative strategy and readerly activity, the rhetorical critic focuses on how an actual reader can recognize the signs of unreliability and infer the author's different assumptions, knowledge, or values. The key to the rhetorical transaction, then, is the gap between the narrator's assumptions about her audience and the author's assumptions about hers. In explaining the transaction, the rhetorical critic focuses on the way in which an actual reader can recognize that gap and the way in which that recognition is itself a part of the authorial audience's understanding of the narrative. In this way, the activity of the narrative audience gets subsumed by the activity of the authorial, and differentiating between the narrative audience and the ideal narrative audience has seemed less important than attending to this subsumption. (Phelan *Self-Help for Narratee and Narrative Audience* 354)

Phelan continues his thoughts like this: “In other words, continuing to assume that the narratee is a distinct character who is “out there” will mean not just that we prefer the structuralist to the rhetorical framework; it also will mean that the structuralist analysis will neglect a significant aspect of how the text attempts to communicate” (356). The purpose of this passage, thematically speaking, is to address the importance of the storytelling. What the author wants to communicate to the reader is that storytelling helps to mobilize connections. The reason why stories are potentially connective is that they allow you to depict the world in a new light, allow people to imagine themselves inside the story, and provide a reason for change or action. Because everyone enjoys a good narrative, stories are a fantastic tool for communicators. They also enjoy tales because they are how our brain constructs the world in which we live and interact with other people. True stories have enormous power. When you tell a tale about how hard you struggled or how hard you worked to change a difficult circumstance, you give others something to relate to. They can look at their position and recognize that with hard work, they will eventually overcome any problems they confront. Therefore, in the first pages the information about the “somebody telling to somebody else” is revealed and Atwood decides to explain to the reader what has happened right after this, whereas the “occasion” will be relegated to the end of the book; as for the reason behind this tale of the handmaid we may perceive the attempt to cope with what happened to her, hoping it will help her to move on with her life and to be testimony of a horrible parenthesis (as she hopes it will eventually be) of US history.

Going through the protagonist’s voyage, there are several points where it is clear how hard the telling is, as if all of her efforts are focused on being the most authentic to herself

rather than making guesses and to speculate on fantasies: "I am trying not to tell stories, or at any rate not this one" (56), Offred claims to underline her commitment to the truth. When a fact is recounted, it is hard not to slip into the subjectivity of events and the inability to be accurate is also very likely to happen since one's vision of what is going on around oneself is restricted. Furthermore, the fact that Offred has serious difficulties in realizing what has happened to her, creates a mental barrier that keeps her from remembering. She also does not comprehend that she is a victim of abuse because she has never seen it as a possibility for the girl she was. As he asserts in Chapter 13, there were definitely several tv news and articles at her disposal, but when a reality does not immediately affect us, the human mind tries to disconnect and defend itself, exactly by ignoring the allegedly irrelevant signals. She simply exists in the gap between the numerous stories of abuse that surround her. She struggles to recall even the memories of her attempt to escape from a Gilead still under way with Luke and their baby girl, without the ability to empathize with the victims. She wonders if she truly heard certain sounds or if they were only in her brain, and it is frequently the sounds and odours that bring her back to reality. Offred dreams of Christmas pictures, with a joyful family, the Christmas tree, candles, and the ringing of bells, while she holds her daughter in her arms for the last time. This sound is what wakes her up: was it just a dream or a memory? The reader is once again challenged with the possibility that the entire story Offred is narrating is a lie. However her struggling is real: the abuse consumed during Ceremonies is paralyzing in a double way, physically and psychologically. Offred is paralized and forced by Serena Joy, the Wife, to lay still: she cannot move because Serena is holding her wrists and the Commander is penetrating her while gripping her legs. This position, even leaving out the sexual context, is in any case a form of constriction and submission without consent and it is

punitive. The reader must guarantee her narrator the benefit of the doubt whether the story is true or not because the response to a trauma is psychologically personal and delicate. In the moments that follow the act, the woman thinks about the rituals she would like to perform for herself, to heal her body but she cannot for the humble behaviour she must have: a simple body lotion in Gilead is seen as a superficial vanity that does not cure but ruins the soul. The return of tradition imposed by Gilead has in fact deteriorated Offred's soul: it is already full of cracks and she tries to cling to Luke's memories and what it meant to be touched with love. She tries to cling to the memory of her name and what she represented to others: "I want Luke here so badly. I want to be held and told my name. I want to be valued, in ways that I am not; I want to be more than valuable. I repeat my former name, remind myself of what I once could do, how others saw me" (104).

Offred displays here and there some hints that she wants to get out of there and retelling her memories about her friend Moira comforts her because she is the symbol of rebellion and of a woman who refused to succumb to Gilead's rules. Offred lets us know that Moira's story is constituted by details belonging to her memory and details from recollections of other girls using the power of words-of-mouth. Moria is an active character and her actions are the model for the other girls that stayed and became handmaids. Even if Offred cannot tell if her friend survived from escaping the Red Center during their training period, she still has hopes that she is safe and sound and that nobody killed her, so her fantasy can stay alive as well. The Chapter about this moment is followed by these words:

> 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 done, how I should have played it. If I ever get out of here. […] 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 parts, sides, crosscurrents, nuances; too many gestures, which could mean this or that, too many shapes which can never be fully described, too many flavours, in the air or on the tongue, half-colours, too many. But if you happen to be a man, sometime in the future, and you've made this far, please remember: you will never be subjected to the temptation of feeling you must forgive, a man, as a woman. It's difficult to resist, believe me. But remember that forgiveness too is a power. To beg for it is a power, and to withhold or bestow it is a power, perhaps the greatest". (140)

Perhaps the most crucial parts of the tale in this regard are those in which she clearly identifies her narration as a "reconstruction." Offred is a self-conscious narrator who frequently analyzes her own narration technique as well as her narrative choices. Her reflections upon language serve to recognize the problematic relationship it has with memory: reality is too complex and rich in details to be fully described in words. This would be fundamental for the reader when s/he will arrive to the historical notes of Professor Pieixoto because s/he will comprehend the Offred's effort in narrating something that depends on her memory and that memory can be corrupted by the passing of time and traumatic events. In fact, the protagonist herself realizes that the traumatic events of her life problematize her true narration and that she was in a sort of trance but now that she is back she knows she is not prepared. In fact she keeps twisting her narration because she wants to feel better about it, but she is still trying to deny some of the details. She does not try to

misreport: since her whole narration is reconstructed from memory, we as readers must admit the engagement and effort Offred puts in enriching with details her description of what she makes us think is the present time. This is a technique for emotionally involving the reader in her narration, since she is sincere about her limits in remembering the past. In fact, her admission that everything is a reconstruction, gives us no reason to feel cheated. Therefore we should try to empathize with Offred's functional objective in manipulating us, which is to engage us by creating a conflict between our desires and concerns about the fictional future. There are other episodes in which the narrator is aware of making a reconstruction, such as her first secret meeting in the Commander's office and her first secret encounter with Nick. In these cases the involvement of a man is crucial: Offred is able to thematize the complicated relationship between language and power. Her reconstructions are examples of brief moments of control over male figures, who generally are in position of power. Her narrative could be less trustworthy, but she is honest and this keeps the reader's empathic reaction stable.

Victimhood, trauma, abuse, violence: the protagonist holds together all these thematics in what becomes the most important aspects of the book. Atwood is denouncing a specific issue that in *The Handmaid's Tale* is embodied in Offred. The story of a violence suffered within a system that claims to want to defend and protect you makes the confrontation with yourself even more difficult and shameful. There is no escape from the cruelty to which one has been subjected and the first person who judges himself/herself is precisely the victim. In Chapter 49 the protagonist talks to the reader:

> I wish this story were different. I wish it were more civilized. I wish it showed me in a better light, if not happier, then at least more active, less hesitant, less distracted by trivia. I wish it had more shape. I wish it were about love, or about sudden realizations

> important to one's life, or even about sunsets, birds, rainstorms, or snow. […] I'm sorry there is so much pain in this story. I'm sorry it's in fragments, like a body caught in crossfire or pulled apart by force. But there is nothing I can do to change it.I've tried to put some of the good things in as well. Flowers, for instance, because where would we be without them? Nevertheless it hurts me to tell it over, over again. Once was enough: wasn't enough for me at that time? But I keep on going with this sad and hungry and sordid, this limping and mutilated story, because after all I want you to hear it, as I will hear yours too if I ever get the chance, if I meet you or if you escape, in the future or in Heaven or in prison or underground, some other place. What they have in common is that they're not here. By telling you anything at all I'm at least believing in you, I believe you're there, I believe you into being. Because I'm telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are. (275)

She ends this speech echoing Cartesius's "cogito ergo sum" bringing her awareness to a final destination. Her pain now is part of her identity and it defines who she is. After other attempts to tell the truth, about the affair with Nick or about Women's Salvagings (a public punishment done by handmaids to convicted men), things are back to normal and her rescue at the end looks like more a fortuity rather than a credit for the courage demonstrated.

At this point the reader is ready for a resolution of all these instabilities, which belong to the trauma of being an handmaid inside a patriarchal government, however the narrator has not completed the journey as s/he might have expected. In fact Offred's narration ends with no clues about her future: the reader is left in the dark about her future, if she arrived in Canada, if she found Luke, if she was able to cope with everything she went through. The story narrated by Offred concludes with an open-ending: she steps into the darkness hand in

hand with the reader who does not know whatever she made it out of Gilead or if Guardians were able to find her and she got hanged on the Wall for treason. However, the ending chapter of the novel is something revealing.

The closure of the narrative is centred in the section "Historical Notes": it totally differs from the novel's established plot. Professor Pieixoto, a specialist on Gilead, is presenting a seminar at a symposium almost a thousand years after Offred's life. The reader gets now the information that Offred's story is a transcript of audio cassettes she recorded while escaping from Gilead. This is crucial for our temporal understanding of the narration: what we have just read is actually narrated in retrospect and it is distanced in both space and time from what we learnt to be Offred's present. The real present is then the Symposium in which the Professor explains the recent discoveries about Giledian Era, which come from Offred's story. He is able to explain something to us that Offred never could, about the collapse of the US and the reasons Gilead came to be. The Professor properly discusses the Biblical basis for Gilead's rule. However, by presenting this historical contextualization, he tries to remain impartial rather than supporting Offred's story. Professor Pieixoto's society appears to have progressed beyond totalitarianism and white supremacy. He mentions academics with indigenous American names, and the world's greatest colleges are now in Northern Canada and India, implying a new world order in which racial inequity may be erased. According to his opinion, Gilead is viewed as primitive and savage by 2195 standards. Pieixoto, the "expert" on Gilead, on the other hand, is a man who makes sexist jokes and comments, implying that Gilead's legacy isn't that far away after all. In his speech, the professor intends to emphasize the problems surrounding the manuscript known as *The*

Handmaid's Tale: the first clarification concerns precisely the fact that it is not a written document and that it did not have a title at the time of its finding. He is almost reluctant in considering it an authentic historical document and it is only now that the reader becomes aware of the true nature of the story s/he has just read: it is in fact the audio recorded on 30 tape cassettes in which a woman, whose name remains a mystery, tells her own story. However, it is precisely the professor who re-establishes the presumed order of the cassettes and transcribes them, specifying that his is a "guesswork" (310) and that the cassettes could very well be a "forgery" (310). In analyzing the document, the professor assumes an investigative role that allows us to hypothesize that indeed Offred, if we want to believe she is really the voice of the tapes, managed to run away and that at a certain point in her escape she wanted to testify her events. The information the professor finds, however, is not satisfactory for him and he tries to trace the names mentioned to a known identity. However, his deductions remain hypothetical and many doubts remain.

The Historical Notes' section can be seen as Atwood's reflection on history, presumedly an invitation to use this story as an example of something that must not become real because even if this is just a tale it is more similar to reality as we might think. A story will always be subjective and be full of gaps, but it can be a hint for the future: "As all historians know, the past is a great darkness, and filled with echoes. Voices may reach us from it; but what they say to us is imbued with the obscurity of the matrix out of which they come; and, try as we may, we cannot always decipher them precisely in the clearer light of our own day" (320). The unreliability of the narrator perceived by the reader for the entire novel is justified by the academics of the future for all the reasons mentioned above. There

are some details in support of the thesis that the tapes are real, nevertheless a personal story remains a drop in the ocean. This could be an example of the power of finalizing the trauma into something (in this case tapes) that can be used by others for understanding. History is not made by a single voice, but by many recalling the same truth. It could be that Atwood is trying to corroborate women's words in a world where they are often requested to stay in silence and that the power is not in the hands of one individual, rather in the hands of many that cooperate for a greater good.

3.2 The Testaments: Heroines and the Power of Action

The Testaments is Margaret Atwood's follow-up of *The Handmaid's Tale*: 15 years separate the events narrated in the two books. This time the book has three narrators: Agnes is a Gilead girl who does not want to get married, even though her parents want to set her up with a powerful Commander, Daisy is a Canadian girl who despises Gilead and who was raised by strangely overprotective parents and Aunt Lydia who is the only character appearing in both books. She is one of Gilead's founding Aunts and has a status close to that of a god:

> Only dead people are allowed to have statues, but I have been given one while still alive. (…) My statue is larger than life, as statues tend to be, and shows me as younger, slimmer, and in better shape than I've been for some time. I am standing straight, shoulders back, my lips curved into a firm but benevolent smile. My eyes are fixed on some cosmic point of reference understood to represent my idealism, my unflinching commitment to duty, my determination to move forward despite all

> obstacles. Not that anything in the sky would be visible to my statue, placed as it is in a morose cluster of trees and shrubs beside the footpath running in front of Ardua Hall. We Aunts must not be too presumptuous, even in stone. Clutching my left hand is a girl of seven or eight, gazing up at me with trusting eyes. My right hand rests on the head of a woman crouched at my side, her hair veiled, her eyes upturned in an expression that could be read as either craven or grateful—one of our Handmaids—and behind me is one of my Pearl Girls, ready to set out on her missionary work. 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.

From this initial description, it is already clear that her relevance in the book will be as monumental as the statue. She is the personification of Gilead's rule and the connecting dot among the other female figures belonging to their society. She spends her days quietly gathering dirt on Commanders and other Aunts.

Their narrations create the testaments filled with details that readers have been craving for more than 30 years. Aunt Lydia writes her story down in a sort of book called *The Ardua Hall Holograph*. Agnes and Daisy, later known as Nicole, both speak their stories, which are written down as witness testimonies in the book. Each of the three narrators tells about their part in a plot to overthrow the patriarchal and theocratic Republic of Gilead. In this novel there are recurrent themes such as sexism, power, religion because the story takes place in the same setting of *The Handmaid*. Despite that, the thematic component is pretty absent in the making of the characters and another relevant difference is the fact that the three women are heroic members of the resistance, whereas Offred openly presents herself as a non-active

person. The following paragraphs will present the differences between the two novels, highlighting my central argument of this thesis using textual evidence. In this part I want to focus on the fact that Atwood gave more space to the mimetic component this time and she left aside the dark story of the handmaid. The first most relevant difference is that the protagonists in *The Testaments* develop their personality and the young characters of Agnes and Daisy have a of coming-of-age story, a kind of literature dear to her: the two young girls play games with adult roles, dressing up like spies or heroines from a comic book. While Aunt Lydia's plans and the girls' involvement are described in detail, there is no room for romance or sex, there is no trace of loss of identity and traumatic responses either, despite all three protagonists went through sad and/or difficult moments such as the loss of a parent, harassment, coercion.

The title of the book is something worth analysing because it is relevant for the deployment of readerly and textual functions. The English term "testament", which is defined by *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* as "a tangible proof or tribute", has several interpretations, each of which corresponds to a different feature of the novel. Firstly, "testament" might refer to a quality. In the novel, for instance, there are two monuments created as memorials to important traits exhibited by Aunt Lydia and Becka. This definition of testament is very closely related to another word: "testify". To testify is to offer proof, and all the novel's narrators are sharing their stories - testifying- about their roles in the plan that brought Gilead down. The term "testament" appears just once in the novel, on the final page. After warning his audience not to take Aunt Lydia, Agnes, and Nicole's testimony as surely true, Professor Pieixoto provides reasons that explain why he believes the testimonials are genuine. He talks about an inscription on a Pearl Girl monument that he believes Agnes and

Daisy erected in honour of their friend Becka: “I myself regard this inscription to be a strong evidence to the veracity of our two witness transcripts” (*The Testaments* 415) he asserts. The word “testament” has two additional connotations in the text. First, the term can stand for a legal will, which gives instructions on how to dispose of a given person’s possessions after his/her death. Aunt Lydia wishes for her work to be discovered and read after her death, despite the fact that it is not specifically presented as a final will and testament. Furthermore, Aunt Lydia expects her death will result in the disintegration of Gilead itself. The third meaning of the term “testament” refers to the Bible’s two major sections. Whereas the Old Testament tells the account of how a separation between humanity and God came to be\, the New Testament tells how God reconciled that separation by coming to earth as Jesus Christ. God makes a shift from furious to forgiving between the Old and New Testaments. *The Testaments* depict a similar change of Gilead’s culture from repressive and patriarchal to one that offers at least a chance for justice and equality.

3.2.1 Aunt Lydia: a Redefinition of Values

The Handmaid’s Tale and *The Testaments* are deeply connected not just because they share the same setting and a character, Aunt Lydia: they share the concept of testimony because Offred’s story became the evidence of women’s oppression inside Gilead. However, Atwood clearly wanted to put forward a different kind of tale: the very title of the sequel taps into the semantic field of reliability. As it is declared from the start that we have testimonies, presented as dossiers made up of seem like confessions during a detective’s interrogation, the

reader is inclined to believe in every word. He/she is inclined even to reconsider Aunt Lydia's reputation because she is depicted as someone respectable:

> Once, before the advent of the present regime, I gave no thought to a defence of my life. I didn't think it was necessary. I was a family court judge, a position I'd gained through decades of hardscrabble work and arduous professional climbing, and I had been performing that function as equitably as I could. I'd acted for the betterment of the world as I saw that betterment, within the practical limits of my profession. I'd contributed to charities, I'd voted in elections both federal and municipal, I'd held worthy opinions. I'd assumed I was living virtuously; I'd assumed my virtue would be moderately applauded. Though I realized how very wrong I had been about this, and about many other things, on the day I was arrested. (36)

In this book the reader gets to know better this character and s/he may change his/her mind about her: Lydia makes a parallel between *The Handmaid's Tale* and her story when she confesses to be aware of her reputation: "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" (32). The reader approaches her words with the knowledge of Offred's point of view and as soon as she reveals herself, her past, her intentions she triggers the reader's empathy. Her synthetic component is often enriched with law terms evoking her past as a judge and underlining her present involvement in justice's issues, for instance "I'll never know your verdict on that, I fear" (277), or when she says "I will now provide you with a little history" (211) it feels like she is about to present a case at the court. She is already special for many reasons, for instance she opens up each section of the narration and she is the first character we get to know, serving as connecting ring between the novels. Her presentation in chapter

one is accompanied by the description of her statue which gives her an aura of sainthood or of a dead person:“This statue was a small token of appreciation for my many contributions, said the citation which was read out by Aunt Vidala. […] My statue is larger than life, as statues tend to be, and shows me as younger, slimmer, and in better shape than I’ve been for some time” (3). “Already I am petrified” (3), she says meaning that she is not immobile in action but that she is closer to death more than we think.

It is interesting to notice that Lydia tries to minimize her role in Gilead saying the statue is a small token but at the same time she recognizes that statues are usually bigger than reality: we could interpret this as a sign of her shame for what she has done as an Aunt or as related to her way of telling things in a modest to adapt to Gilead’s culture and at the same time to hide her joy in possessing power. In Part III of the novel, she admits her love for power and she confesses this sin to the reader: “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?”(32). Despite her legendary standing in Gilead, Aunt Lydia cannot exercise her influence openly. Unlike Gilead’s elite men, who have complete authority over social and political concerns, Aunt Lydia must exercise power secretly and out of sight. Her tone is often ironic and she is aware of how she makes others feel in her presence; she likes to be important and fear-inspiring and distant from revealing her true self. The reader would eventually agree that these traits are the ones to stick for a woman to maintain a bit of dignity in that regime. “Over the years I’ve buried a lot of bones; now I’m inclined to dig them up again - if only for your edification, my unknown reader. If you are reading, this manuscript at least will have survived. Though

perhaps I'm fantasizing: perhaps I will never have a reader. Perhaps I'll only be talking to the wall, in more ways than one. […] Despite such precautions, I'm aware of the risk I'm running: writing can be dangerous" (5). Aunt Lydia is a woman with a strong personality and her values remained firm under her brown dress because justice is not just something she studied, it is something she learnt to fight for. Therefore in this first chapter the tone of the novel is set and also the purpose of her actions: at the moment of writing the testimony she wants to defeat Gilead once and for all. The decision about what will be her role in the story comes during the coup. After her imprisonment and seven days of lockdown in a sports stadium, she is brought to one of the men who orchestrated the coup: Commander Judd. When Aunt Lydia refuses to cooperate with the new administration, the Commander sends her to more days of solitary detention in the "Thank Tank." Aunt Lydia becomes psychologically confused after being showered in darkness and subjected to noises of brutality against other women. Aunt Lydia admits that her experience in the "Thank Tank" brought her to her knees. Her spirit was seriously damaged by the humiliation she faced in the initial weeks following the coup. Importantly, the violence inflicted by men against her did not entirely shatter her. She confesses: "Did I weep? Yes: tears came out of my two visible eyes, my moist weeping human eyes. But I had a third eye, in the middle of my forehead. I could feel it: it was cold, like a stone. It did not weep: it saw. And behind it someone was thinking: *I will get you back for this. I don't care how long it takes or how much shit I have to eat in the meantime, but I will do it"* (149).

The power of the written word is compared to its dangerousness: it could be a proof of treason and she could be hanged on the Wall. At the same time, the fact that the recipient of this manuscript is a reader and not a listener as for Offred's tapes, ensures Professor

Pieixoto's trusting the testimonies as real historical documents. The narratee is again an individual in the future and his/her possibility to read her manuscript depends on whether Aunt Lydia's plan is successful or not. If she triumphs in taking down the regime, her testimony will be solid proof of her actions done for the best; in the worst scenario of being discovered, by her enemies her testimony will be most likely destroyed. Her connection with the reader will become close to an obsession: "You've become somewhat of an obsession - my sole confidant, my only friend - for to whom can I tell the truth beside you? Who else can I trust? Not that I can trust you either. Who is more likely to betray me in the end?" (172). Lydia demonstrates to be clever and fully aware that the reader could also be a servant of Gilead and at the end of the day she doesn't trust anybody. She continues: "Why am I taking your existence for granted? Perhaps you will never materialized: you're only a wish, a possibility, a phantom. Dare I say a hope?" (173). Unlikely Offred she is able to dream for a better future, possibly because of her position in the hierarchic society that is not totally passive and denigrated. Her moves are always played with a watchful eye and she never misses a beat. Lydia has a privileged relationship with Commander Judd because she proved to be useful: her intelligence and slyness provided her a notable position, conquered through her own share of suffering. Her faith was put to test and she had the nerves to make difficult decisions: she was asked to kill another woman as a sort of ritual of initiation as an Aunt. Even if Commander Judd would eventually tell her her gun was not loaded, she remains with the doubt because as we said before she does not trust anybody, in particular she does not believe a man that covers up the murder of every wife he is tired of.

The reader who expects an intimidating and violent Lydia, perfectly absorbed by patriarchal values, is taken aback, almost seduced by a woman that actually works and

administers, pulling the strings of everything with the only aim to protect other women. As in any great predicament, collateral damage can happen, but we can say with certainty that in the vast majority of cases she is presented as successful. The story of Agnes is an example: as already mentioned, the girl does not want to get married and Aunt Lydia is the one who provides her the tools to get out of this situation. If for Agnes it is above all a question of not being ready (since she is very young) and of having strong doubts towards the family that claims only to want her good, Aunt Lydia knows (and she always knows everything) that her future husband is known for the speed with which wives get "sick." One might think that she plays in her favour and that Agnes is more useful to her where she can be under control, which is in the guise of an aunt, rather than imprisoned and sick in Commander Judd's house. However, the reader, being aware of the woman's final plan, is more inclined to think positively about her intentions since Lydia also puts her life at risk. Whenever she addresses the reader directly, she expresses a strong desire to explain, perhaps even justifying her actions as if this testimony is also a way to atone for her sins. She talks as if she was no longer the one to hold the role of judge in a court: "I'll never know your verdict on that, I fear" (277). Perhaps her fear of not being fully understood is connected to the audience she pictures for her memories: "I picture you as a young woman, bright, ambitious. […] You'll labour over this manuscript of mine, reading and rereading, picking nits as you go, developing the fascinated but also bored hatred biographers so often come to feel for their subject, How can I have behaved so badly, so cruelly, so stupidly? you will ask. You yourself would never have done such things! But you yourself will never have had to" (403). These sentences are representative of the true reader Atwood has in mind, a certain kind of woman who is representative for the genre. Her choice is seen as a mistake: even if her intention is to

bring together all women by narrating a story of abuse, the call to arms seems to concern a small part of them. This helps to support the criticisms that emerged at the time of *The Handmaid's Tale*: the novel's depicting a world of privileged whites, almost forgetting that for centuries black women had lived as slaves for them.

Now that the characters has been set in motion, the focus shifts to the other two narrative voices. However, it must be taken into account that Agnes and Daisy are doing their actions because Aunt Lydia wants them to. Lydia is the girls' guide into Gilead and also for readers: "Think of me as a guide. Think of yourself as a wanderer in a dark wood" (141). Even Daisy, unaware of who she really is and physically outside of Gilead, lives a life filled with decisions made by parents who worked for Mayday, the secret organization that helped women escape and safely enter Canada; Mayday in turn is actually helped from the inside of Gilead by Lydia. As already mentioned, the relationships between the three women are definitely intertwined, but the two sisters play more of a helper role although they operate in a more transparent way than the Aunt.

3.2.2 Agnes Jemima and Daisy/Nicole

The trajectory that the two sisters follow is the hero's typical cycle of: receiving a call, going through multiple tests and finally reaching the goal that is for them the defeat of Gilead and the family reunification. Their narration starts in both cases with the accusation of having always felt something weird in their family. For Agnes her childhood was full of happy moments with her mother Tabitha, whereas she did not have a loving relationship with her father, Commander Kyle. Nonetheless, she grew up in a wealthy environment therefore

all things considered she was a lucky kid. Until the death of Tabitha from an unnamed illness, Agnes considered her as her biological mother: because of some gossips at her school she will eventually discover that her real mother was an handmaid. In that moment she has an epiphany which preserves Tabitha's image as a caring woman and not as a dishonest person, in fact she exclaims: "What a lot of lies she had to tell for my sake!" (16). Agnes remembers a tale Tabitha used to comfort her: "I went for a walk in the forest", she would say, "and then I came home to an enchanted castle, and there were a lot of little girls locked inside, and none of them had any mothers, and they were under the spell of the wicked witches. I had a magic ring that unlocked the castle, but I could only rescue one little girl. So I looked at them all very carefully, and then, out of the whole crowd, I chose you!" (12). This is a metaphor of the real circumstances in which Agnes became her daughter. Because she was the wife of an important Commander, she had the chance to pick up a girl "rescued" from the deviated women of US that then became handmaids. For the reader that means she is the lost daughter of Offred and Luke. This moment of revelation in addition to the disappearance of Tabitha, sets Agnes' narrative into motion.

Her life has been a series of challenges: she had to struggle for a place in her own home after the Commander remarried to Paula, a sort of evil stepmother; she witnessed the loss of their handmaid Ofkyle; she was sexually assaulted by a doctor as mentioned before; she had to avoid the certainly disastrous marriage with the oldest and most powerful Commander of Gilead becoming an Aunt. These events should be enough traumas for a teenager and her narrative is sometimes similar to the tapes of her real mother (her weak sense of individuality, her showing difficulties in telling Tabitha's death, etc.), nevertheless she was raised in that society and so her knowledge was very limited, too ignorant to ponder

her feelings in the right way. Right before Agnes opens up to the reader with the recount of doctor Grove's appointment she says: "Now that I am older and have seen more of the outside world, I can see that it might not seem that significant to some, but I was a young girl from Gilead, and I had not been exposed to these kind of situations, so this event was not trivial to me" (95). This innocence is used by the author to make this character naive enough to believe in Gilead's teachings but also to render her reckless enough to absorb relevant information, like her being the sister of famous Baby Nicole, and to go to a heroic expedition with her.

Agnes gives us new perspectives on the story, she accompanies us into the world of future wives and the discovery is not surprising at all: Atwood keeps her complaint of women's condition up front. Wives were described in *The Handmaid's Tale* as envious, insensitive and sadly lonely women, rich in belongings but poor in souls. As a matter of fact, Aunt Lydia warned us that they were suffering too, however from Offred's point of view they were one of many enemies. With Agnes there is a new attempt of redemption which does not come full circle as she is unable to carry it out successfully.

> "I lay in bed that night with the three photographs of the eligible men floating in the darkness before my eyes. I pictured each one of them on top of me—for that is where they would be—trying to shove his loathsome appendage into my stone-cold body. Why was I thinking of my body as stone cold? I wondered. Then I saw: it would be stone cold because I would be dead. I would be as wan and bloodless as poor Ofkyle had been – cut open to get her baby out. Then lying still, wrapped in a sheet, staring at me with her 94a salso94es. There was a certain power in it, silence and stillness". (223)

This quotation refers to the moment when Agnes has reached puberty and that moment in Gilead means the young girl is ready to be married. Another kind of school provides her the proper education to be a pleasant wife and Aunts arrange the encounters with possible husbands according to their preferences and to their genealogical tree. The three photographs Agnes mentioned belong to her candidates and she feels completely powerless in this decision: one reason is because she finds them revolting and the other is because she fears Paula and Commander Kyle will force her to marry Commander Judd. In this nightmare she pictures herself unable to move while the three are on top of her having sex. This image recalls the act of abuse and more generally her not being ready for marriage: Agnes does not seem to have the knowledge of what a healthy consenting relationship between two people who love each other is. Moreover she considers power in the form of staying silent and still, which was also Offred's power: it looks like the only two options for women are reduced to be dead or to do nothing, which is again the best way for surviving.

Atwood plants some seeds here and there in the text of themes that were so dear to her, never going into deeper clarification. She uses these seeds as Hansel and Gretel's breadcrumbs for readers not to lose track: the mimetic component in *The Testaments* dominates. There is a stream of events that gives the story a frenetic pace, and this unquestionably hooks readers who want to find out what happens to the different protagonists in the story. However, the little space allowed for reflections, the lack of options that the three women think they have implies that the reader is unable to fantasize and make the adventure his/her own. The characters resemble toy soldiers placed by the author so that an unequivocal narrative takes place.

Agnes does not consider herself as a good person however it is hard to understand why given her brief life and poor amount of choices; nevertheless she, like Lydia, feels the necessity to excuses herself for her actions because she reads her life through the lens of her: "If you've never had a faith, you will not understand what that means. You feel as if your best friend is dying; that everything that defined you is being burned away; that you'll be left all alone. You feel exiled, as if you are lost in a dark wood" (303). It is interesting the word-choice "dark wood": Atwood here is probably playing with the fact that Agnes got really lost in the dark wood when Guardians got her and Offred and that faith was something that was never actually there to help her. Agnes would find faith again in her sister, especially when she has to act order to save Nicole's life and hers. Her sister, profet-like, opens her eyes to the possibility Agnes is not weak or delicate or useless but that she is just "victim-blaming" and she pushes her to escape from her comfort-zone as when they were escaping from Gilead with the Nellie J. Banks, by waters. Nevertheless Agnes does not leave entirely her role and her last words in the testimony are "I said in my heart, Dear God. Thank you" (369). Her character evolves throughout the narrative but it can hardly be considered a development along the trajectory of a *bildungsroman*; if she had succeeded in becoming a woman of more modern beliefs maybe she would have generated a more empathetic response. In a novel where religion is described as something dangerous, tricky and manipulative, Agnes cannot be a good fit represetative either for religious girls or for girls who rejected their religious education: she is not ready yet to embrace her new life and her new family, namely, her sister and her true mother. As in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the future of the protagonist is very blurry and we can just guess: if we consider that entering in a completely different world like

Canada was for Agnes a traumatic event in itself, her coping could not be over just taking down Gilead; we only know that it is a happy ending and this should be enough.

For what concerns Daisy she also comes from a lovely background in which Canada serves as setting and Gilead is just something worrying on the news. She has a good relationship with her parents, even though she had always had a weird felling about them. Daisy's world fell apart soon after she went against her parents' wishes and went to a protest against Gilead's violations of human rights. In a short amount of time, she went from being a sad orphan to a reluctant revolutionary to a hero. When her parents were suddenly killed, a group of Mayday operatives working to bring down Gilead told her that her parents were not her biological parents and that she was "Baby Nicole", a child who had become famous after being smuggled out of Gilead. Daisy was taken in by Mayday operatives, who persuaded her to take part in a dangerous plan to infiltrate Gilead and put their hands on top-secret documents from an anonymous high-ranking source. Daisy went to Gilead, even though she was at first hesitant about taking part in the mission. Her key role in getting the documents back out showed how brave and strong she was. Her mimetic component is characterized by courage, straightforwardness and simplicity and in front of every difficulties she shows a quick capacity to adapt and accept her role in the task. Among the three narrators she is the most heroic one: something great is already expected from her since the day she was born, she was famous and an icon in Gilead and even if she is unaware of her true identity until her sixteenth birthday, she cannot be read but as predestined to great things. Even Melanie suggests that when she "used to say that I was born on a Thursday and that meant I had far to go" (259). She is determined and stubborn: for Agnes she switched from being a strange foreign "creature" to a protective sister and an inspirational young woman. She also self-

sacrifices for the cause, letting her body be used as a weapon (Lydia hid in her tattoo a microdot causing her infection and high fever which put her in serious danger). Daisy is the most adventurous and boldest character in the entire novel: since the beginning of her testimony she makes the reader know that she is tough: “They say I will always have the scar, but I’m almost better; so yes, I think I’m strong enough to do this now. You’ve said that you’d like me to tell you how I got involved in this whole story, so I’ll try; though it’s hard to know where to begin” (40). Her confusion is justified by the lies that Melanie and Neil, her parents, told her about her true family and where she came from. This feeling of being a “fraud”, a “fake” brings her to consider everyone connected to her adoptive parents with suspicious eyes: George, a homeless man hanging around The Clothing Hund, is seen as dangerous, a pervert or a stalker; Ada is described as an advertisement of a biker; Elijah as an illegal person. Actually they all are part of the Mayday organization and worked together with Neil and Melanie; they would prove Daisy quite immediately that she can trust them and that they will help and protect her. These encounters are part of the theme of uncertainty that pervades the novel: the hopelessness and confusion all the three protagonists experience are necessary for achieving a bond that will commit themselves to a vision of a better future at personal risk. Also Agnes reflects upon the intention of keeping secrets and the falsity behind it when Aunt Lydia underhandedly passed her information about her family: “Once a story you’ve regarded as true has turned false, you begin suspecting all stories. Was an effort being made to turn me against Gilead? Was the evidence fake?” (307). For the reader this has a double meaning: are these testimonies forged or real? Are these characters worthy of trust or their sneaky behaviour hides something terrible? All the answers will be provided only at the end of the book.

The character of Daisy has multiple versions of herself: the first is indeed Daisy, the person she used to be in Canada, Nicole, Gilead's most important baby, and Jade,the PearlGirl whose identity is prompted to enter in disguise in Gilead. Her ability in shifting from a person to another is something that she learns, but also something she acquired from the circumstances since it was not her decision to grow up undercover. Despite the fact that her narration sounds the most realistic one, both because of her personality, and because her plot is mostly made by actions rather than thoughts, fakeness is at the core of Daisy's character. Nonetheless it is a feature that has positive vibes because it denotes cleverness, presence of mind and dynamism: this pinpoints the contrast between Offred and Agnes, who are still and silent, but at the same time it is an attempt on the author's part to put her narration on the same level of unreliability as that of the others. After her traumatic experiences the narration keeps on going without relevant interferences and Daisy reacts to what happens in the opposite way of her sister: during her telling she reflects on the fact that she did not look shocked, for instance when she discovers about Neil and Melanie's death caused by the explosion of a bomb, she cannot even scream. However this does not lead her to paralysis, but she prefers to act and not become a victim, even if she has the right to feel that way.

The path of victimhood in her case is left on the side: perhaps Atwood did that to give the reader a little hope regarding Daisy's education which is supposed to be similar to our reality. The plan of introduce herself in Gilead had to start from being rescued by PearlGirls and this involved Garth, a guy of MayDay who pretends to be her bad boyfriend. "I should mention here that Garth didn't take advantage, even though he must have realized that I had a puppy-love crush on him. He was there to protect me, and he did, including

protecting me from himself. I like to think he found that hard" (264). Here Daisy has the impulse to underline Garth's golden heart and for the reader he can be the representative of a man who even without religion respects women; at the same time her last sentence denotes a very difficult limit to determine, whether the "animal nature" of men is scary or seductive. It is a thought that is left there for readers, however, because Atwood does not touch the theme of sexuality in this novel.

The chapters that follow her arrival into Gilead are very short, discursive and they recount the sequence of events that bring the two sisters to share a common faith. The author does not leave space for reflections about Gilead and its costumes, and even if they witness a Particicution, a double execution done by handmaids, it is described just with a few words: "It was gruesome; it was terrifying" (322). The girl is already a soldier, not caring about her feelings, she is fighting loneliness and fear and when she reaches Lydia's office she only asks: "What I have to do?"(333). Her victory is the result of her actions and her ability to share her strength with Agnes in their final predicament: when the sister is on the verge of relinquishing all her hopes, Daisy pushes her to react and she gives her the power of being in control of their life. Just like in a fairytale her testimony ends with the reunion with their mother and like a child who is tired but happy she goes back to sleep.

3.2.3 The Thirteen Symposium: Narrative Reliability

The Testaments and *The Handmaid's Tale* conclude in a similar way: with a symposium led by Professor Pieixoto, who along with Aunt Lydia is an "old" character of the book. In the analysis of his previous speech, several jokes were taken into consideration

because of their a sexist undertones and the first thing he does here is to say sorry but his attempt is as goofy as his congratulating for a female colleague's promotion. He then picks up the subject of the previous symposium, revolving around Offred's tape recordings, and he confirms their authenticity: "To those who have questioned this material and its dating, I can now say with assurance that half a dozen independent studies have verified our assumptions, though I must qualify that somewhat" (409). The professor is of course addressing the audience of students, however it seems to be also talking to the narratee of *The Handmaid's Tale* and he wants to reassure that the author did not play with him/her. Offred's unreliability is something that kept hovering in the air until the sequel was released and since *The Testaments* has an happy ending for the characters, it comforts the reader as well. Continuing with his speech he presents the other "spectacular finds, which, if authentic, will add substantially to our understanding of this long-gone period in our collective history" (409): he mentions the manuscript *The Ardua Hall Holograph* which is handwritten by a figure we can identify as Aunt Lydia. Pieixoto is as always very accurate into investigating other options, whether a forgery of an enemy or a true confession, but he inclines "to view that our holograph is authentic" (410). His stance is very unclear, he shifts from being doubtful to being convinced of the truthfulness of the findings. Atwood probably decides to depict Pieixoto so attentive in questioning his sources because of the fake news's phenomenon that concerns the actual audience's present days. Especially during Trump's presidency, which was ongoing during the writing of the book, misinformation was quickly diverted into a propaganda tool and presidential historian Michael Beschloss in an interview said: "I have never seen a president in American history who has lied so continuously and so outrageously

as Donald Trump, period" (Jane C. Timm n.p). Trump used to manipulate unflattering news and defined them as "fake news," even contesting the reliability of the media.

Even when talking about Agnes and Daisy's transcription of their witness he is careful to not display all the doubts: Daisy/Nicole is described as a perhaps too young and too unexperienced girl for the assignment of such a risky mission, nonetheless "Some historians have even argued that persons of that age are especially suitable for such escapades, as the young are idealistic, have and underdeveloped sense of their own mortality, and are afflicted with an exaggerated thirst of justice" (411). Therefore there is a constant jumping between one option and the other, but for he is sure that the reported news at that time talked about a leak of information that led to popular revolt and military investigation. The professor focuses on the witnesses' testimonies retracing their words to their possible movements on the map, reporting even evidence (always doubtful) of their passage on the walls of a house abandoned. The last drop of uncertainty is released in this sentence: "You can take the historian out of the storyteller, but you can't take the storyteller out of the historian!" (414). The purpose hidden in this quotation is a reflection upon these terms, history and story: since Professor Pieixoto is an historian he should stick to the reality of facts, because history is something that really happened, non-fictional and academic. Arguing that he slips on the storytelling he implies that in his seminar there is also a part of fiction, imagination, narrative. The purpose of his academic work as an historian is to establish the authenticity of any kinds of finding. The recognition of these testimonies as trustworthy is the recognition of injustice and oppression during Gilead. They might be forgery, as the Professor hypothesizes few times, and be just an amount of simple stories. Nonetheless, as Jennifer Llewellyn and Steve Thompson in their article for Alpha History "What is history?" remind us: "The word

"history" and the English word "story" both originate from the Latin *historia*, meaning a narrative or account of past events. History is itself a collection of thousands of stories about the past, told by many different people". From this definition of history we gather the importance of testimony and of its validation. Although Pieixoto addresses assumptions and not facts, the reader has to be very careful in considering his studies one hundred percent true. Nonetheless history is full of objects that retell the story for us, like the statue of Becka. Just as the book opened with a statue, so it concludes with one. *The Testaments* ends with a description of a statue depicting a young woman wearing the costume of the PearlGirls and there is an inscription in her memory: she was Agnes' best friend who helped her and Daisy to make their plan successful and she died in accomplishing her role in it:

IN LOVING MEMORY OF
BECKA, AUNT IMMORTELLE
THIS MEMORIAL WAS ERECTED BY HER SISTERS
AGNES AND NICOLE
AND THEIR MOTHER, THEIR TWO FATHERS,
THEIR CHILDREN AND THEIR GRANDCHILDREN.
AND IN RECOGNITION OF THE INVALUABLE
SERVICES PROVIDED BY A.L.
A BIRD OF THE AIR SHALL CARRY THE VOICE, AND THAT WHICH HATH
WINGS SHALL TELL THE MATTER.
LOVE IS AS STRONG AS DEATH. (415)

The note gives extra comfort to the reader because it provides evidence that the two sisters had a family whose legacy continued for generation; there is also a caption dedicated to A.L., giving authenticity also to Aunt Lydia's testimony.

Chapter 4

The Success of the Novel and the Identification with the Handmaid

Margaret Atwood's status as one of the most accomplished and well-liked authors of the modern era was cemented with the success that followed *The Handmaid's Tale* publication (1985). In recent article on the *New York Times* she wrote: "Over the years, *The Handmaid's Tale* has taken many forms. It has been translated into 40 or more languages. It was made into a film in 1990. It has been an opera, and it has also been a ballet. It is being turned into a graphic novel. And in April 2017 it will become an MGM/Hulu television series" (Atwood). Thus, the attention gained in the past few decades raises a simple question, that is what are the features of this dystopian novel that helped to build a new image for feminism, body rights and human rights. In 1985 the book won the "Governor General's Award for English-language fiction" and a year later "The Los Angeles Times Book Prize for Fiction" in addition to the nomination for the "Booker Prize" and the "Nebula Award". In 1987 the book was awarded with the "Arthur C. Clarke Award" and the "Commonwealth Writers' Prize: Best Book" and with the nomination for the "Prometheus Award."

Atwood envisioned the book as a work of "speculative fiction", which is defined by *The Cambridge Dictionary* "a type of story or literature that is set in a world that is different from the one we live in, or that deals with magical or imagined future events". When she began writing the novel in the early 1980s, she was influenced in every way possible by the social and political happenings of the time. When she began her writing it was the spring of 1984, she was living in West Berlin and the Soviet Empire was still very strong. Atwood

recalls that she “experienced the wariness, the feeling of being spied on, the silences, the changes of subject, the oblique ways in which people might convey information, and these had an influence on what I was writing”. The mood she was surrounded by was very inspirational, also because being born during World War II gave her the consciousness of the fragility and uncertainties of politics and society. Atwood researched a lot on the concept of “science fiction”, “dystopia”, “speculative fiction” and she did historic research as well for the reason that she did not want to be accused of having a “troubled mind.” In fact, she explained in many interviews that “one of my rules was that I would not put any events into the book that had not already happened in what James Joyce called the ‘nightmare’ of history, nor any technology not already available. No imaginary gizmos, no imaginary laws, no imaginary atrocities. God is in the details, they say. So is the Devil.” Therefore, the choice of gathering together characteristics that belonged to recognizable places and events heightened the plausibility of the tale. By the time Atwood started the book, the U.S. were seeing by many as a place where everything was possible, a sort of dreamland where democracy was on a pedestal and the freedom of the self was protected at any cost. America was a model for the rest of the world and electing it as the scenario of this dystopian society was a bold but a difficult decision to digest for readers. The detachment experienced by people who observe a tragedy, a catastrophe, a violent act from a distance drive them to the conclusion that they are too far from this to be happening to them and therefore, they are safe. Putting on display a story like the one *The Handmaid* tells in the land of freedom, shortens this distance, especially for the American inhabitants that read the book. Moreover the reader is lead by the author to think “this could be my story” since everything described has a very strong mimetic component.

The starting point for the creation of the Republic of Gilead, as Atwood explained, is the 17th century Puritan roots that have always been a part of today's America. The Biblical references can be traced back in almost every page of the novel and the religious aspects of this new political hierarchy take shape under the light of the U.S.'s embrace of conservatism. During the eighties the author experienced Ronald Regan's presidency as an evidence for the increasing power of the Christian right and its powerful lobbying organisations of the "Moral Majority", "Focus on the Family" and the "Christian Coalition." It is not a coincidence in fact that the character of Serena Joy was a former televangelist who expresses theocratic political ideas that have compelled her, along with all women, to live a life confined to the house. The growing political influence of Christian fundamentalists, along with the pressing worries about the environment, and attacks on the reproductive rights of women are all factors that contributed to the definition of the setting. The criticism against abortion in the United States was fostered by a propaganda video called "The Silent Scream": the clip exhibits an ultrasound of an abortion procedure occurring in the uterus and during it, the fetus seems to be expressing agony and distress. Additionally, there was a cluster of bombings and arson cases involving abortion clinics, and a law was proposed that would give civil rights protections to fetuses. In addition, the Reagan administration reversed a decades-old policy when it announced that the U.S. government would provide funding to international women's health organizations only if they advocated for "natural" family planning, which is another term for abstinence, in less developed countries. In the world imagined by Atwood it seems like the protagonist is living the fictional realization of the Christian policy of Reagan's presidency and all the same it resonates in the more recent turns in American Law. Anyway, the first publication of this book was not universally acclaimed and the critics went from

moderate responses to open criticisms to effusive odes. Unsurprisingly, the notion of a dystopia built on the theocratic persecution of women has always been provocative.

The classic red and white handmaid's cloak seen in the TV adaptation of the novel has become the quintessential icon of women's rights activism. Originally described as a modesty gown, it symbolizes female subservience, with the colour red expressing fertility. However, since 2017, women all around the world have reinterpreted it as a protest symbol for bodily autonomy.

4.1 Protests Around the World

Atwood recognizes that Offred's narrative has had a profound cultural influence: "It's become an international symbol of protest," she said "especially in situations in which women's rights are in question, or are being removed from them." The first time women decided to exploit the image of the handmaid was in March 2017: it has since then become the symbol for protests on abortion rights around the world. The law that women were denouncing wanted to outlaw second-trimester abortions in Texas, or force physicians to perform them using riskier procedures. The legislation involved exceptions if the pregnancy put in danger the woman's health, however these medical considerations were often too unique to be included in a ban. Months later women dressed up in the same outfit to protest an amendment to an abortion bill in Ohio; also members of a pro-choice group in the Isle of Man did the same, silently demonstrating for abortion rights.

In 2018 there was a protest in Buenos Aires and women dressed up like handmaids, with red cloaks and white hats: they marched in silence, heads bowed and gathered outside

The National Congress. President Mauricio Macri was openly against abortion and the Senate had to vote on whether to legalize elective abortions within the first 14 weeks of pregnancy. In the same year, Croatian women's rights activists were inspired by Atwood's novel and protested against their government for failing to ratify the Istanbul Convention: the Parliament listened to them and voted to ratify it, making an important step for eradicating violence against women and domestic violence.

The success of these demonstrations made the dress the flag to contrast political decisions on women's body arrived also in Europe. After Croatia, Ireland had the same kind of protest in Belfast and in Dublin; in London feminist activists marched against Trump who was in visit in the UK. Chiara Capraro from Amnesty International participated there and in an interview for BBC said: "I read the book a long time ago. I think that it feels less and less dystopian. Immediately when I heard there was going to be a protest I knew I would go as a handmaid. The symbolism is so powerful, reducing women to their reproductive functions. Women become just vehicles to produce children. It's a symbol to say we need to be vigilant, to be careful" (Bell).

Trump's presidency was always considered by many a threat for women's right on abortion: even if the business man declared himself to be pro-choice back in 1999, his closeness to social conservatives and Christian evangelicals was made evident when he entered the political arena. He has stated his support for a total ban on abortion, save in circumstances of rape, incest, or threat to the mother's life. His political plan in this matter followed a precise intention in ensuring conservative politicians at the Supreme Court who would support him and overturn legal abortion.

He is considered to have played a central role in paving the way for the reversal of Roe v. Wade (1973), which along side with Planned Parenthood v. Casey (1992) established and maintained federal protections for a pregnant woman's right to an abortion, guaranteeing that states may not prohibit abortion before a fetus is judged a living being. In 2022 the journal *Politico* leaked the first draft, written by Justice Samuel Alito, of a Supreme Court's decision upon abortion, which led to massive protests and concerns about constitutional rights: the repercussion shocked also the rest of the world, which has always pictured the U.S. as the democratic example for everyone else. These protests were especially expressed on social media, starting from the famous tweet of Stephen King "Welcome to the HANDMAID'S TALE". Other tweets from several users followed and they shared a scaremongering for the LGBTQ+ community as well. The image of the handmaid along with the cloth hanger were once again the symbols of this outrageous turning of events. Even Hillary Clinton intervened in an interview prior to the Roe v. Wade overturn referring to Margaret Atwood as a prophet in denouncing a government putting at risk women's rights. The Canadian author wrote for *The Guardian*: "Is it entertainment or dire political prophecy? Can it be both? I did not anticipate any of this when I was writing the book" (Armstrong). She also added:

> The handmaid's costume has been adopted by women in many countries as a symbol of protest about various issues having to do with the requisitioning of women's bodies by the state; it has even been used on posters in the context of the Trump-Putin relationship, with Trump as the handmaid. Because it's a visual symbol, women can

> use it without fear of being arrested for causing a disturbance, as they would be for shouting in places like legislatures. (Armstrong)

She thinks that donning a handmaid's uniform is not only effective but also versatile, as it enables women to demonstrate in places in which they do not have a right of audience. Lots of protests in fact happened in places dominated by men, such as courts, and the aesthetic impact had the same wide appeal of the suffragettes that fought for women's rights almost one hundred years ago.

In countries that declare having a repopulation agenda, a policy of poor reproductive health information and the prohibition of birth control pills are used for controlling women's body; the real message of these red cloaks is: if this is really how we want to live, women would end up becoming slaves of the state. These is also a theory that has popped up after the overturning of Roe v. Wade which is the "great replacement" theory: some Republican politicians promoted the idea that Democrats were supporting immigration to "replace" white American voters. Inside the history of the anti-abortion movement a trace of racism is visible in the fear that white people are going to be outnumbered by black people. A Republican congresswoman, Mary Miller, called the Supreme Court's decision to overturn Roe v. Wade a "historic victory for white life"; her spokesman declared that it was a mix up of words and that she meant "right for life". Whether it was true or not, the change of this law could be seen as an attempt to uphold white supremacy, which rules also Gilead's society. In certain statements by prominent Republicans, these fears about immigration have been explicitly linked to the birth rate. In 2017, Steve King was the U.S. Representative for Iowa's 4th Congressional District and he made the following strong association: "You cannot rebuild your civilization with somebody else's babies. You've got to keep your birth rate up, and that

you need to teach your children your values". The correlation between this thought and the ideology that lies at the basis for the Republic of Gilead is unmistakable and Atwood was seen as a prophet because of that. Some readers for the same reason interpreted the book as anti-American but she replied: "It's a pro-American book in a way, because it's saying, "You're better than this. Don't go there." As other writers of dystopian novels had claimed the world they pictured was something to learn from and something to avoid: the teaching lesson is not to take inspiration from the realization of its rules. The reading of dystopian narratives might be useful as a parallel insight in history, the answer to the question "what if it went the other way" and to prevent such scenario from happening. Perhaps history is really, in some way, fiction.

4.2 Black Women's Responses

Earlier in this thesis I mentioned the discontent of black women community towards *The Handmaid's Tale*. Atwood's work has been attacked as a white feminist dystopia that deletes real enslavement and sexual assault suffered by minorities because there is just a little reference in the book about people of colour. When people cite this work as a reference point for our contemporary era, their words summon all of white feminism's flaws. The most shared belief is that these memes, tweets, posts about the figure of the handmaid convey a message that things will get worse, yet the hard truth is that reproductive freedom has been dystopian for many people for hundreds of years. In the novel prohibitions on reading, writing, and congregating, as well as the spectacles of public lynching and the practice of naming women after their owners (Offred, or "of Fred"), were all used to subjugate Black

people during slavery. Women used the "Underground Femaleroad" to flee Gilead, and the core premise of the book (that women are property, evaluated valued by their capacity to produce children for their Commanders and Wives) is borrowed from the specific persecution that Black women lived through. *The Handmaid's Tale* overlooks the historical facts of an American dystopia predicated on anti-Black violence by taking the historical oppression of enslaved Black women and transferring it naively to white women.

Women of colour are reacting angrily to comparisons to *The Handmaid's Tale* because their ancestors went through the same "story", which has been rejected and ignored for a long time. In many tweets African American women highlighted the fact that there is no need to make references to the novel when Black American history is already full of examples. Alicia Sanchez Gill, who describes herself as a queer and Afrolatinx survivor, has fifteen years of experience in cross movement organizing grounded in Black, queer feminist theory and personal experience. Her tweet in 2020 reported the shared frustration among her community: "When white women reference *The Handmaid's Tale* as warning of an apocalyptic future, instead of a factual historical record, I know they haven't listened to Black and Indigenous women or done the readings. Everything in the book and show has already happened to Black women". In an interview she continued arguing that the book "ignores the presence of race and racism, it really dehumanizes and dismisses our collective experiences of reproductive trauma" (Logan). While the conversation spread on social media, literature critics and Atwood herself stayed silent on the issue and the main focus of the discussion remained white women's oppression. Danita J. Dodson, poet and literary scholar, led the way for considering the novel an actual attempt by Atwood to utilize Black women's enslaved history as the starting point for the creation of Gileadian dystopian society. In her analysis titled *"We*

lived in the blank white spaces": Rewriting the Paradigm of Denial in Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale she explains the similarities between Offred's story with other Black women's testimonies: the oral transcription as raw and original as in slave narrative and the same orality as a woman-centered tool for survival, the legal role of the patriarchal white male in reproduction, the episodes of illicit sexuality, and the worthlessness of a sterile woman. However, Dodson shares her awareness of the fact that "nowhere does she [Atwood] claim that Offred as a white indentured servant has an equivalent or identical subject position to the black slave woman, nor does she argue that all women's oppression is the same" (Dodson 75).

The hypothesis that the regime of Gilead could be the worst scenario to come equals to deny how the U.S. has regulated the reproductive rights of Native Americans, Black and Latinx. Men and women were subjected to forced procreation in the U.S. when black slavery was legal. The birth of slave women supplemented the enslaved work force and from the moment of their conception, the future child belonged to their master. Control of reproduction became a fundamental part of whites' oppression of African Americans as a result of this. Women's reproductive freedom, particularly that of women of colour, has been controlled throughout history.

White supremacy with its aim to control white women's body has a long run. Liberal and conservative women have struggled to understand how mainstream feminism has undermined and erased the voices and experiences of women of colour. Racial division and racial segregation in the U.S. have undermined every form of solidarity between white and black women. The enduring religious belief that the body of a woman is the origin of the carnal sin brought to a racial dichotomy between the sexual images of white and black

women. White women are addresses as “pure” and the patriarchial system controls their sexuality, whereas black women are addressed as “primitive” and the system exploits their body. This opposition is still strong in America and it keeps alive the demotion of black women. One of the main criticisms leveled against first-wave of feminism was that it ignored women of colour. However even with the third-wave and intersectional feminism, the way we talk about and think about novels like *The Handmaid’s Tale* indicates that this mindset persists.

Conclusion

The purpose of this dissertation was to provide a rhetorical analysis of *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*, two novels written by Margaret Atwood. More precisely the aim was to use James Phelan's considerations on characters and examine the figure of the handmaid according to its three component: the mimetic, the thematic and the synthetic. This essay has discussed the reasons for considering the thematic component as the main source for character identification; this reading builds on Phelan's rhetorical foundations.

In the first section of this thesis I examined the evolution of critical studies on characters to comprehend the relevance of rhetorical theory in narrative. Whereas characters have been considered for centuries just as textual features in the plot, the more recent studies in the 20th century changed its perception. The development of a new reading audience composed by middle-class people with a high percentage of women, along with the detachment from the traditional modernist conventions and the importance of the process of identification within a fiction, paved the way for the emergence of the rhetorical approach. The reading experience and the analysis proposed by the mimetic movement are thought to be the most natural way to read a story for the average reader.

In my rhetorical analysis I investigated in particular the effect of the three components on the identification of Offred, and the three narrators of *The Testaments* Aunt Lydia, Agnes and Daisy/Nicole. I also took in consideration other aspects dear to Phelan's theory: the kind of audience intended by the implied author and the narrator and also the level of reliability of

the narration. I examined the most revealing passages of both novels and I followed Phelan's idea of progression to sustain my arguments. The surfacing of the thematic component as the core of character identification led my investigation to the same thematic features of these issues in our present tense. Considering actual events, in the form of protests and through social media, the image of the handmaid has become the a symbol of resistance to the religious right's increasing political power and attempts to bar access to reproductive healthcare, it is possible to draw the following conclusions.

In *The Handmaid's Tale* Atwood takes the reader once again in the realm of female victimhood, but this time she does it inside a dystopian regime which has strong realistic features. She uses typical techniques of characterization that lead to identification: first person narrator, narrated monologue, the order of narration with alternated flashbacks from our present days, a recognizibale setting. However, the protagonist Offred does not contribute much to the evolving of the plot, playing the role of the woman who is waiting for something to happen or for someone to rescue her. Her mimetic function is very limited, however she represents a woman who is victim of men' power in every aspect of her life, from the domesticity of her home, to the social rules she has to live by. The similarity between Gilead's society and our contemporary era makes Offred's simplicity and ordinariness the winning key for mass identification.

As for the protagonists of *The Testaments*, Atwood has foreseen for them a role of heroines, women of a unique kind able to break the chains of oppression and always with the wind in their favour. They are dynamic characters advocating for their own destiny, something which Offred totally lacks. Their story, which concludes with a happy ending,

does not allow the reader to step into their shoes because there is no affinity with the reality of the facts of their daily lives.

Obviously the novels have a strong feminist mold and this allows the identification to manifest itself mainly in women, who are the protagonists of the protests and twitter posts mentioned above: Atwood, furthermore, misses the target of universality, not providing references to the history of African American women exploited during slavery. What emerges from the consequent reading of *The Handmaid's Tale* is the presence of a more united and more marked feminist spirit in the world political arena. We can only hope and pray for generations of future readers that the figures of Aunt Lydia, Agnes and Daisy would be the inspiration for a happy ending not only in fiction but also in the reality of our world.

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