



Facultad de Humanidades

Magister en Literatura

**AN ANALYSIS OF THE EXPERIENCES OF AUTHORITY AND RESISTANCE
FOR CHARACTERS AND READERS IN THE HANDMAID'S TALE (1985) AND
THE TESTAMENTS (2019) BY MARGARET ATWOOD**

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this research is to analyze the extent to which Atwood provides the experience of totalitarianism to both her characters and readers as well as the possibility of a permeable structure as a counterbalance to the aforementioned system that would allow an escape for both. To facilitate this goal, four objectives have been decided upon. First, to describe the totalitarian characteristics present in both of Atwood's novels that would enable a totalitarian experience for her characters problematization of the dystopian discourse within Atwood's narrative space. Second, to examine how readers might be subjected to a similar type of control as the characters in the novels. Third, to describe the acts of resistance demonstrated by the characters. Fourth, to examine how readers may counteract authorial control. To this end, we work with the concept of dystopia and its different theoretical approaches; the concept of totalitarianism with a focus on the different mechanisms used in state domination and control; and Wolfgang Iser's aesthetics of reception and its connection to authority. As a result of the research, strategies and techniques of totalitarian control as well as acts of resistance are evidenced in both texts. In addition, Atwood's narrative provides textual cues that, while not as extreme as the regime presented in her novels, influence the reader's imagination. That is, the way a reader reacts to a text and arrives at a potential meaning from her experience with it is not arbitrary. However, this influence is limited and ultimately readers are encouraged to recognize and embrace their own interpretive agency.

KEY WORDS: dystopia, totalitarianism, reception theory.

INTRODUCTION

One of the literary genres that has enjoyed great popularity in the 21st century is the dystopian novel, particularly those labeled "young adult," i.e., for young readers. Countless examples such as the sagas *The Hunger Games* (2008-2010) by Suzanne Collins, *Divergent* (2014-2016) by Veronica Roth, and *The Maze Runner* (2009-2011) by James Dashner serve as evidence. Added to this is the continued notoriety of dystopian novels such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), George Orwell's *1984* (1949), and Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), all from the 20th century. Speculation then arises behind this popularity. According to Gregory Claeys, "[D]ystopian fiction often has a higher purpose [...] [It] is often about rational autonomous individuals lost in the [...] crowd [...] Dystopian novels are imaginary futures where much has gone wrong, though sometimes ways out are indicated" (269). These future possibilities allow us to see dangers in today's society taken to the extreme. Thus, there is often a connection between the fictional dystopian future and the real present. These novels invite reflection on the socio-political issues to which a population is subjected. Furthermore, the impact of the future presented in dystopian novels is enhanced by the link formed between narrator and reader. Margaret Atwood took advantage of these characteristics of dystopian novels in her works.

However, unlike the more traditional dystopias where societies are ruled by a powerful and often violent overlord, Atwood's dystopian universe of *The Handmaid's Tale* subverts some conventional elements of dystopian fiction by displaying a form of control that is exercised through the social fabric, ideology and even the individuals' daily activities. This is not a form of domination where the authority is direct and obvious, but one that is achieved through a complex mechanism of control which includes surveillance, language, and psychology. It exemplifies, therefore, the postmodern distrust of grand narratives and also the rejection of simple binaries of oppressor versus oppressed. Power is not directed by a single antagonistic figure but is dispersed across society and subjective experiences: through cultural norms, language, and institutions. In addition,

Atwood strays from traditional storytelling, employing unreliable narrators and jumps in time to display a fragmented text that reflects postmodern characteristics such as the critique of an all-encompassing truth and the challenge of hegemonic ideologies and structures. Her novels offer a nuanced and multifaceted perspective on power, exhibiting both a critique of the dystopian genre as well as an expansion of it.

Although at times left aside or barely touched upon, the socio-political historical context around the development and publication of a novel may provide information worth considering before delving into any possible interpretations as “[...] literary texts constitute a reaction to contemporary situations, bringing attention to problems that are conditioned though not resolved by contemporary norms” (Iser 3). Thus, when reviewing the contexts of the corpus to be analyzed, two periods stand out. The first is around the 1980s with the creation and publication of *The Handmaid's Tale*. According to Coral Ann Howells, Atwood maintained a collection of clippings from mass media publications with information on current events that influenced her writing. In this collection,

[P]amphlets from Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace sit beside reports of atrocities in Latin America, Iran and the Philippines, together with items of information on new reproductive technologies, surrogate motherhood, and forms of institutionalised birth control from Nazi Germany to Ceausescu's Romania [...].

[Additionally,] [t]he clippings file contains a lot of material on the New Right with its warnings about the 'Birth Dearth', its antifeminism, its anti-homosexuality, its racism and its strong religious underpinnings in the Bible Belt. (Howells, 129)

These are topics that relate strongly to the context of Atwood's novels due to Gilead's own construct as an authoritarian, male-dominated, religiously governed state. Women must comply with specific female roles within Gileadean society; women are submissive to men; procreation is heavily controlled; all levels of society are intensely monitored; fear and violence permeate society through

public executions, hangings, deportations to concentration camps, etc.; and there is an extremely religious influence reminiscent of seventeenth century Puritans.

The second period is around the year 2017. It is in this year that social movements such as the Mee-too Movement and the Women's March in the United States emerge, being replicated globally and in subsequent years. The year 2017 is also when Donald Trump assumes the presidency of the United States. During his term as president (2017-2021), NBC News stipulates that Trump "signed an executive order that LGBTQ advocates say rolls back lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights and breaks a promise to that community not to make such changes to existing policy" (O'Hara). Meanwhile, The Guardian highlighted Donald Trump's favorable opinion towards interrogation techniques such as simulated waterboarding (Mccarthy). In addition, BBC News wrote the following regarding Trump and abortion:

Roe v Wade is the landmark Supreme Court ruling from 1973 which safeguarded the right to an abortion on the national level. It protects a woman's right to an abortion only until viability - the point at which a foetus is able to live outside the womb, generally by the start of the third trimester, 28 weeks into a pregnancy. Mr. Trump had promised in 2016 to pick judges who would "automatically" overturn Roe. While that hasn't happened yet, he has installed hundreds of federal judges plus two conservative justices on the top court - and if the president wins re-election he could reshape the judiciary even further. ("Abortion")

This background, in conjunction with the fact that everything Atwood includes in her novels *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and *The Testaments* (2019) are based in reality, lends credibility to her dystopian world. In other words, although these novels are fictional, the types of events and actions that occur in her narratives were (and in several cases still are) real, e.g., surveillance methods, information control, physical and psychological violence, threats, limited interaction, identity elimination; these are just some of the totalitarian techniques

that humans have historically employed to control people and that appear during the course of Atwood's narratives.

It is relevant to highlight at this point that the majority of previous research in connection to the topic at hand address only *The Handmaid's Tale* while a small number of studies address *The Testaments* or both novels together due to the relatively recent publication year of the second novel. What critics have said about the corpus of study revolve in their majority around two overarching themes: women and dystopias. First, regarding the theme of women, these previous works deal with women's roles, the objectification of women, femininity, feminism, female identity, and solidarity among women. Second, with regard to dystopias, there is a focus on women's roles in this type of scenario, women's complicity and resistance to authoritarian control strategies, morality, and the implications of the protagonists' testimonies. These topics hold a connection to the research problem to be tackled in this thesis mainly through their discussions of dystopia and totalitarianism which shed a light on the presence of these concepts throughout the different events of both novels, providing a base for further analysis, which in turn assists in the evaluation of an authoritarian experience for not only characters but also readers themselves.

A relatively recent comparative study between both novels by Daný van Dam & Sara Polak (2021) called "Owning Gilead: franchising feminism through Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*" examines Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and its sequel *The Testaments* as a transmedia franchise, and discusses its economic and sociopolitical dimensions. What the authors are calling the "Gilead universe," consisting of the novels and their adaptations, functions as a sort of elaborate franchise, ripe for commercial exploitation but also easily appropriated by the culture of feminist protest. Although the authors' focus and approach rely substantially on feminism and franchising there are some key points relevant to the present thesis through their alignment with Wolfgang Iser's Reception Theory, one of the main theories guiding the thesis.

The paper demonstrates that readers and viewers are capable of participating in the *Handmaid's Tale* universe, where they become the “prosumers” (176) that not only receive but also create the meaning. In this way, they interpret and use the text’s imagery in real-life protests, which complete the gaps in the narrative and provide the personal and collective interpretation of the text beyond the author’s intent. Along with this, there is negotiation of the authorship and ownership of the *Handmaid's Tale* universe as this phenomenon develops in the form of adaptations and is appropriated by the readers/viewers, signaling a possible form of escape for consumers from the narrative imposed by the author. In sum, this paper shows how the reader or viewer plays a very significant part in determining the significance and effect of a literary work beyond the author’s intent, thus demonstrating key concepts of Iser’s Reception Theory which will be further explained and analyzed later on. *The Handmaid's Tale* franchise shows this dynamic at work, as it explores the different ways in which the text has been understood and developed across platforms.

Another comparative study, Anna Beránková's text *The role of women in the world of Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale & The Testaments* (2020) focuses on the fictional world in which Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and its sequel *The Testaments* are set, highlighting real historical aspects and how these relate to the treatment of women in the context of totalitarian, theocratic and fictional regimes such as Gilead. The hypothesis that this thesis proposes is that the power of the oppressed (women) carries within itself the announcement of the fall of Gilead, achieved through the subversion of the established order. The proposal is built upon colonial studies of Puritan America, theocracy, some anthropological studies, totalitarianism, and the Ceausescu dictatorship in Romania. The text concludes that the Sons of Jacob (religious group in the novels) took advantage of contemporary social and world problems to gain support for their theocratic-totalitarian project. However, some women took control of their existence and used their position within the system against the regime. What is rescued from this analysis is the call for the use of a theoretical heterogeneity to be able to approach and analyze the different subjects belonging

to Gilead's society. This would include both women and men. This is pertinent to the present thesis as its research covers the narratives as a whole rather than focusing on a specific gender. According to Beránková, "Atwood's written output does not focus exclusively on female oppression. Rather, she explores oppression, victimization and abuse of power in general. In Gilead, both men and women are being oppressed, and both men and women play their part in supporting or subverting the system. Therefore, approaching this topic solely from a gender studies perspective would be limiting" (10). Beránková's text, by focusing on the oppression of white women, is self-limiting. In addition, there is the contribution of the concept of liminality:

Within the moment of transition from one state to another, the liminal stage occurs after an individual separates from the previous social category, the liminal person is stripped of all attributes associated with the previous phase, but does not yet receive the attributes of the destination stage. At this point, the transitional person is perceived as dangerous by the community, as he or she defies any traditional classification, having no attributes of any of the socially acceptable stages. (Beránková 23)

It is an interesting idea to explain the hidden power behind the two most extreme female roles in Gilead society, which are Aunts and Handmaids. Both roles are in a linear state due to their complicated categorization. The study demonstrates with this concept the feminine/masculine nature of Aunts (women with men's rights). As for the Handmaids, their linearity lies in the fact that they are revered for their fertility and condemned for their sinfulness. The discussion of linearity invites in general a broader study into the topic as well as provide a possible tactic against authority specific to the research of the present thesis.

Finally, the study highlights the importance of reading and writing. "The suspension of the right to read prevents the Wives and Handmaids from developing the ability of creative and critical thinking and the denial of the right to write takes away one of the primary means of self-expression, as well as of the

corroboration of one's existence" (Beránková 52). Without it, women remain silenced, enclosed and empty. This argumentative contribution seems somewhat obvious, considering that both abilities are often addressed in dystopian novels in some way or another because of their connections to knowledge and expression. Thus, one possibility for analysis could be precisely why reading and writing represent a danger (for the dominant) and a salvation or form of rebellion (for the oppressed); and how this is configured in Margaret Atwood's narratives. Based on this idea, it would be necessary to consider for the development of the hypothesis that one of the indoctrination techniques of totalitarian regimes is to proscribe the right to free expression of people.

In connection with the right to freedom, Aisyah Amilatul Quran, and Desvalini Anwar in "Women Objectification in *The Testaments* by Margaret Atwood (2019)" (2020) address the issue of objectification of women in the novel *The Testaments* by Margaret Atwood, stipulating that the novel reveals male actions for the subordination of women. To this end, the study uses textual and contextual interpretation as well as Martha Nussbaum's concept of objectification for its analysis. It is concluded that the reification of women is visualized through the restriction of decisions and the distortion of religion exemplified in the novel, proving in turn the significant role of a patriarchal system in the lives of women, forced to accept what the system delivers to them. The study contributes two major axes associated with the methods of control of a totalitarian and/or theocratic government such as Gilead. Of these, what the authors denominate as the restriction of choices is of interest. According to the authors: "Restriction of choices can be defined as any internally or externally imposed boundary that limits or confines choices. Almost every choice a person makes is restricted in some way along with the pressure exerted by others" (Quran, and Desvalini 374). How these boundaries are imposed on both the narrators of Atwood's narratives and possibly the readers themselves pertains to the study of the present thesis.

Similarly, Shirin Kalantarian and Bahman Zarrinjooee's study "Women's Oppressed and Disfigured Life in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*" (2017)

is limited to only one of the novels, exploring why and in what ways women are oppressed in a patriarchal society. To this end, it is proposed that Atwood speculates on feminist themes such as gender inequality and the pitfalls of the patriarchal system for the oppression of women in her novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. In order to understand how Atwood addresses these issues, the article uses Simone de Beauvoir's ideology in its analysis.

The Handmaid's Tale describes a society in which women are not considered as autonomous beings, but rather as Others. They are sexual objects for men's pleasure and needs [...] Actually, *The Handmaid's Tale* exposes two major forms of women's oppression under the patriarchal rules that Simone de Beauvoir mentions in *The Second Sex*, biology and sexuality. (Kalantarian and Zarrinjooee 68).

The text concludes that the intention behind the novel is the understanding, on the part of its readers, of the social conditions of women. For example, marginalization due to their reproductive capacity and sexuality as the main cause of women's oppression, victimization and positioning in society.

From this research, elements are brought into focus and questions arise: Why is *The Handmaid's Tale* centered solely on white women? Could there be a reason behind the exclusion of viewpoints centered on other genders, sexual orientations, races, etc.? If so, could this be due to a form of dehumanization typical of totalitarianism and thus a fundamental element to the fictional Gilead, or could it form part of an even greater authoritarian experience? The answers to these questions are hoped to be touched upon, at least partially, throughout the present thesis' examination of Atwood's narratives.

Another relatively recent study of Atwood's works include Victor Vinoth and Vijayakumar M.'s article "The Dystopian Scourge of Women in Gilead Society as Portrayed in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*" (2022) which examines elements of feminism present in the novel and the relationship of these with the concept of dystopia. The study yields an apparent reproach by part of the novel

of the contemporary world. The article's authors further highlight the ongoing struggle of women. As they have stated:

The portrayal of such a dystopian society by the author has revealed a pointed criticism against the nature of patriarchy and even distorted matriarchy residing in the dominant society. The criticism against the established Gilead society is marked further by its fall at the end of the novel. However, the lack of address regarding the position of women [...] indicates the inability of the society, at any point in time, to truly understand the precarious position of women. (V and M 2707-2708)

Although seemingly loosely connected to the topic at hand in the present thesis as well as its limited analysis due to extension constraints which impeded the incorporation of any further knowledge existing on the topic, in addition to a more in-depth reflection, the study points out not only the male authority prevalent in the novel but also the authority given to select women (Aunts), demonstrating a growing distrust among and between all women because of these power plays. "The women characters that are in-charge of advocating for Gilead traditions are shown in the light of extreme cruelty and strictness against the freedom and individuality of women. The exclusion of women is therefore furthered by the matriarchal authority, indicating the separatism politics employed by Gilead" (V and M 2708). This separatism, functioning as a strategy by part of Gilead provide not only a more realistic authoritarian experience for Atwood's characters but could also have a role in the reader's own authoritarian experience.

Continuing with the feminist approach, Mitra Mirzayee's "Female Identity in the Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood" (2019) analyzes the representation of feminist dystopia among other analogous matters. The paper highlights key points and strategies in Gilead's regime that work towards the dehumanization and complete control of women through language and actions. Women are reduced to resources used to carry out the regime's objectives. They are eliminated from history and they are taught obedience, securing their complicity towards Gilead

even if betrayal of their own gender is necessary. The paper concludes by stating that “gender stereotypification strengthens social status of both sexes and gender hierarchies” (Mirzayee 122), casting a negative view on those who differ from the norm.

Some insights kept in mind for the present thesis include two main devices to control women highlighted by the study: an oppressive language and a more direct and harsh type of oppression. In addition, the Aunts are included as a means for total control due to the training they impart to women and the distrust they bring about among these women, similarly to how Victor Vinoth and Vijayakumar M. discuss separatism politics. As Mirzayee states: “The Aunts have very clear goals that they want to accomplish with their training of the Handmaids. The first is to delete the women from history [...] The second goal is to teach women how to betray other women. The Aunts are women charged to teach the Handmaids how to be obedient and submissive” (120). This power play exercised throughout both of Atwood’s novels can be linked to Pilar Somacarrera’s study “Power politics: power and identity” in *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, edited by Coral Ann Howells (2006).

Somacarrera applies Foucault’s model of Power/Knowledge to Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* given the depictions of the fictional totalitarian society Gilead. “For Atwood and Foucault power is unstable because it is diffused throughout all social relations rather than being imposed from above [...]” (45). As mentioned in studies previously addressed, some of this diffusion of power is evidenced in the interactions between women of different classifications in Gilead such as the power Aunts exert over other women in Gilead, not only through violence but also through access to information unavailable to the rest of their own gender. “Atwood’s definition of politics emphasizes the aspect of the ascription of power, and implies “who gets to do what to whom,” which [...] can be rendered as “who inflicts violence on whom,” both in the political and sexual domains” (44). Diffusion of power is deeply set into Atwood’s narratives, as will be evidenced throughout the analysis of the present thesis. However, what could possibly yield

greater insights into the workings of both *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* is the analysis of this diffusion of power between the narrative work and the reader. In other words, between author and reader, “who gets to do what to whom” (Somacarrera 44).

A final notable study helpful towards to development of the present thesis, providing insightful thoughts that could be further advanced in addition to a scholarly overview of *The Handmaid's Tale* is *Bloom's Guides: The Handmaid's Tale* by Harold Bloom (2004). Aside from a background and a comprehensive analysis of Atwood's novel, the book features many contributors who cover a range of different topics and critical views in regard to the novel. What are particularly interesting for the present thesis are the comments about Offred's narrative and its possible implications. The guide states that “Offred reminds readers throughout the narrative that her subjective lens is altering and guiding the tale as she tells it—making her somewhat unreliable as a narrator—but also, readers learn at the end, male historians edited, ordered, and transcribed her story” (Bloom 16). This is reiterated later on by Bloom in his summary and analysis of the novel. On the one hand, regarding Offred's narration, “[r]eaders are reminded [...] that Offred's textual constructions, of herself and others, may be misleading, since she sometimes sees and imagines what she merely desires to be true” (Bloom 61). On the other hand, regarding the historical notes provided at the end of Atwood's novel, “[...] it appears that Atwood wants to alert her readers to how scholars have the power to re-shape and warp the historical record; just as Offred's narrative was questionable regarding reliability, so is Pieixoto's (and any academic's, for that matter), since all information is being processed through a subjective lens” (Bloom 74). These ideas overlap with the matter of the present thesis as the notion of a subjective lens can be analyzed through multiple narrative levels. The subjective lens in Offred's testimony, the subjective lens utilized by future historians and imposed on Offred's testimony, the subjective lens practiced and imposed by Gilead itself, as well as the subjective lens provided by the author through the narrative and imposed on readers.

The interest in understanding the mechanisms behind a totalitarian state, whether it be real or a work of fiction, allows us to identify and understand behaviors, tools, mechanisms, etc., that lead to a dystopian speculative future as well as actions of insurrection that serve as opposition to severely totalitarian states. However, rather than focusing solely on the totalitarianism present in the plot of Atwood's novels, the main research problem that seeks to be solved plays with the concept of totalitarianism in relation to the narrative as a whole, i.e., the extent to which the author provides the experience of a totalitarian system for both her characters and readers as well as the possibility of a permeable structure as a counterbalance to the aforementioned system that would allow an escape for both characters and readers. Consequently, the texts to be analyzed in relation to the problem just posed are *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* by Margaret Atwood.

The selection criteria of the corpus corresponds to the information necessary to fully understand the republic of Gilead; the access to testimonies of four women that conform the four narrators of the series; the reality of a totalitarian and theocratic system; and any escapes offered by Atwood for her characters living this totalitarian reality as well as for readers subjected to the narratives. The relevance of the present work for the field of literary studies lies in the deepening of knowledge about literary dystopias, being these a reflection of the social problems prevalent at the time of their elaboration and publication, as well as the interaction between text and reader in this particular genre. That is why the contribution sought through the demonstration of the hypothesis is to offer a method of analysis for works of similar theme, promoting the understanding of strategies of indoctrination and dehumanization exemplified in the novels, and their relationship with readers. Some areas linked to the study problem that will not be addressed in the course of this research include additional information provided by the audiovisual adaptations of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* and possible connections between the novels and the sociopolitical history of the world. Conjointly, a potential drawback associated with the project's execution could include little or no information surrounding the

subaltern and racialized groups in the republic of Gilead. This would imply a much more thorough analysis than planned in order to reach a more nuanced interpretation.

To formulate the problem as a question, with the intention of facilitating comprehension, what this investigation examines is: to what extent does the author provide the experience of a totalitarian system for both her characters and readers as well as the possibility of a permeable structure as a counterbalance to the aforementioned system that would allow an escape for both her characters and readers? In other words, What are the totalitarian characteristics present in both novels that allow for an authentic totalitarian experience for its characters? Are readers subjected to a similar authority and totality as that of the novels' characters, if so, how? and, Which are the strategies or means used to allow both characters and readers to break out from under their respective authority?

In both texts, the totalitarian control strategies and techniques employed as tools for indoctrination and dehumanization are physical and psychological in nature. These are subdivided into themes of surveillance, information control, education, violent punishment, threats, limited interaction, identity elimination, among others. In line with the strategies and techniques of totalitarian control, both texts work with religious and biological ideological foundations that justify the indoctrination and dehumanization of subaltern and minority groups in a white patriarchal imaginary. Taking into account Wolfgang Iser's *The act of reading: a theory of aesthetic response*, it could be ascertained, at least initially, that readers are similarly subjected to a totalitarian structure as are Atwood's characters due to the notion of text as a structured guide. Atwood's narrative provides textual signals that, although not as extreme as the regime presented in her novels, influence the reader's imagination, i.e., how a reader reacts to a text and arrives at a potential meaning of their experience with it is not arbitrary. Nonetheless, strategies are implemented to allow both characters and readers a degree of freedom from the authoritarian state. For the novels characters, the tactics of resistance in both texts are manifested in a variety of ways. These include

information management, building oppositional networks, smuggling, solidarity, micro-insurrectionary actions, and more. As for the reader, a degree of vagueness substantially present in *The Handmaid's Tale*, coupled with questionable narrators, and supplemented with 'historical notes' at the end of each novel give way to an experience, and thus an interpretation, that escapes the confines of Atwood's narrative.

The theoretical foundations that will guide the development of the research are summarized in the following two main concepts: dystopia and totalitarianism. The choice of these concepts was decided in part by the literary genre to which Margaret Atwood's novels *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* belong but mainly due to the mechanisms of domination of a totalitarian state present in the republic of Gilead and the inquiry into the extent these mechanisms provide a totalitarian experience for characters and readers.

According to Gregory Claeys in *Dystopia a Natural History* (2017), the concept of dystopia is commonly understood as the opposite of the concept of utopia. "The word is derived from two Greek words, *dus* and *topos*, meaning a diseased, bad, faulty, or unfavourable place [...] In common parlance, the word functions as the opposite of 'utopia', the bad place versus' what we imagine to be the good place, the secular version of paradise" (Claeys 4). However, Claeys stresses that the concept dystopia encompasses more than just a literary genre, affirming the possibility of the empirical use of the concept. In his words:

Dystopias are not necessarily fictional in form [...] The adjective dystopian implies fearful futures where chaos and ruin prevail. So there are non-literary, empirical usages of the term [...] Most commonly, from both literary and historical viewpoints, dystopia is identified with the 'failed utopia' of twentieth-century totalitarianism [...] Here it typically means a regime defined by extreme coercion, inequality, imprisonment, and slavery. Often this is described as some concept of collectivism run wild, though some include conformist tendencies in liberal societies. Which encourage

egalitarian repression and intolerance [...] Many authors, however, simply equate totalitarianism with dystopia. (5)

In addition, Claeys presents three forms of the concept of dystopia. For the development of the research, it will focus on the notion of "political dystopia" because of its socio-political relevance and association with totalitarian political systems. To this notion is added that of "collectivist dystopia". Claeys presents two main forms of this type of dystopia:

[T]he internal where coercion pervades the privileged main group; and the external, where coercion defines the relationship to outsiders as a means of upholding the main group, who are, however, free of most repression inflicted upon outsiders [...] The collectivist dystopia usually exhibits an extreme ethos of sociability centering on a fervent devotion to the common good, which is, in reality,, despotic rather than consensual. In striving constantly to render each sufficiently self-sacrificing, this despotism generates fear which penetrates deep into the individual personality, and which dominates everyday life, sometimes for decades or longer. It is exacerbated by perceived failures to achieve the norms of self-sacrifice. These processes, in turn, are often linked with dystopia's obsession with enemies, and its determination to eliminate them, or at least neutralize their threat, while simultaneously creating them anew as a means of justifying the power of the regime. (8)

Furthermore, Claeys provides the main characteristics of a collectivist dystopia, which are related to the characteristics to be analyzed of the Republic of Gilead and would help in the understanding and classification of this state. "5 models pertinent to the modern collectivist political dystopia. 1) highly militarized or war-centered societies, 2) slavery, 3) political despotisms, 4) prisons (torture, forced labor, death camps), 5) ostracism of diseased populations" (Claeys 11-13). With the information presented by Claeys, we begin to visualize the relationship between the concepts of dystopia and totalitarianism. Indeed, these two concepts

often go hand in hand. Therefore, it is important to highlight the concept of totalitarianism referred to in this research.

In *Totalitarianism, Terrorism and Supreme Values* (2017) by Peter Bernholz, the author defines a totalitarian regime based on the following: "they have to use their spiritual power and the secular power of the state to convert people, to drive out nonbelievers or in-convertibles, to eliminate them if necessary and to pursue their aims outside the borders of the nation ruled by them" (25). Bernholz also elaborates a categorization around the supreme values or ideologies of a totalitarian regime.

Concerning the contents of the supreme values, the following differentiation offers itself:

- Universal ideologies: These are ideologies demanding that all human beings are converted to the true creed.
- Ideologies demanding universal domination of the globe: The supreme values of these ideologies are not aiming at the conversion of all people on earth, but postulate their rule by a minority elite determined by the ideology. The world dominance of the Aryan race would be an example.
- Expansionist ideologies: These ideologies are striving for a limited expansion of their territory or of the number of their believers, or of the resources they need to reach the aims of their supreme values. A nationalist movement striving to comprise all people speaking the same language in one state would be an example.
- Restrictive ideologies: These ideologies do not ask for any further expansion of their territory or do not aim at winning more converts with the help of power. These categories allow us to clarify somewhat the differences between totalitarian regimes and mature ideocracies. For as mentioned,

totalitarian regimes have not yet reached their aims, whereas this is the case for mature ideocracies. (Bernholz 26)

Added to this are the categorizations and/or differentiations provided by Steven Saxonberg in *Pre-Modernity, Totalitarianism and the Non-Banality of Evil* (2019) and Phillip W. Gray in *Totalitarianism: The Basics* (2023). On the one hand, Saxonberg offers a number of criteria by which a state can be classified as totalitarian. These are “[...] a totalizing ideology with which it seeks to legitimize its rule, [...] organizations capable of helping it enforce its rule, [...] a political religion or a politicized religion, [...] an atmosphere of fear in order to deter would-be dissenters” (16). In turn, Gray comments “We should attempt something similar here, dividing our examination of totalitarianism along three different lines: how totalitarianism “thinks,” how totalitarianism organizes itself, and how totalitarianism governs” (11-12). These avenues of examination provided by Gray are precisely what is set out to study of the totalitarian state created by Atwood. Among the aforementioned studies, the connection between a political dystopia (or specifically collectivist dystopia) and totalitarianism, associated with the selected corpus, is clear.

As per the proposal and objectives of the present study, two methods or techniques of analysis are proposed for the development of research, accompanied by the theoretical concepts previously mentioned. These include Göran Therborn's mechanisms of ideological domination and Wolfgang Iser's reception theory and strategies, providing an articulation between the contextual aspects the aesthetic framework of the novels. The first aim is to analyze ideologemes of power or oppression cited in Atwood's texts through the mechanisms of ideological domination. To understand and explain the ideological foundations on which totalitarian control is based in both texts, Therborn stipulates that “The ideological rapport that binds the population to a given regime, as the latter's obedient subjects, is essentially very complex and, of course, exhibits wide empirical variation. Nevertheless, it seems possible to identify the main types of the mechanism by the effects of domination and obedience they produce” (93).

Additionally, research looks to determine the tactics of resistance manifested in both texts in relation to the totalitarian control of Gilead. To this end, it seeks to identify fragments of the novels in which resistance actions are described: micro (e.g. the phrase "Nolite te Bastardes Carborundorum" written secretly as an act of silent resistance) and macro (e.g. the creation of a resistance group called "Mayday"), in opposition to Gilead's totalitarian control through contrasts with the mechanisms of ideological domination. In this regard, Therborn states that "[t]hese six types of ideological domination all operate in contemporary bourgeois-democratic societies, although their relative importance varies with the country and the time. A strategy for social transformation and revolution will therefore have to combat all these forms" (95).

The second aim is to connect the first with reception theory in order to evaluate the extent to which the mechanisms of domination transcend the narrative and affects the reader. According to Iser, any literary text is a product of the writer's intentional acts, and it partly controls the reader's response, however, it includes a great deal of "gaps" or "indeterminate elements". In order to understand much better, the reader must take an active participation, and try to fill in these gaps creatively, with the given information in the text before him. By resolving the contradictions between the various viewpoints which emerge from the text or by filling the "gaps" between viewpoints in various ways, the readers take the text into their consciousnesses and make it their own experience. Guiding devices (strategies): organize the internal network of references (e.g. blanks, negations, indeterminacy, etc.)

The present thesis is systematically organized into three comprehensive chapters, each contributing to a holistic understanding of the subject matter at hand. The first chapter is dedicated to an exploration of the theoretical framework and methodology that underpins the entire project. This chapter aims to present a thorough examination of several key concepts, theories, and research methods that will inform the analysis in subsequent chapters. By providing this foundational

knowledge, the chapter seeks to enhance the reader's comprehension of the frameworks and analytical lenses that will be employed throughout the thesis.

The second and third chapters shift the focus toward a detailed analysis of Margaret Atwood's influential novels, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*. Chapter two specifically addresses the theme of authority as depicted in both narratives. This analysis involves a critical examination of the mechanisms of power that govern the dystopian society of Gilead, highlighting the various forms of oppression that characters experience. Additionally, this chapter considers the broader implications of authority, including how the narrative strategies employed by Atwood may impose a certain level of authority over the readers themselves, prompting them to reflect on their own positions within power structures.

In contrast, chapter three shifts its focus to the theme of resistance as portrayed in Atwood's works. This chapter initiates its analysis by investigating the various forms of resistance exhibited by characters within the narratives of both novels. Following this internal examination, the discussion transitions to an exploration of the tactics of resistance that Atwood provides for her readers. This encompasses the ways in which the author encourages her audience to engage in their own acts of defiance against oppressive systems, thereby fostering a sense of agency and empowerment. Through this detailed analysis, the thesis aspires to unearth the complexities of authority and resistance within Atwood's literary constructs, ultimately contributing to a deeper understanding of the socio-political themes presented in her work.

CHAPTER 1: DYSTOPIA, TOTALITARIANISM, AND READER-RESPONSE.

For the objectives of this thesis, essential concepts have been recognized along with a methodology that will direct the advancement of the current research. This section is split into three parts. The initial section addresses the notion of dystopia and its various theoretical perspectives. The second section explores the idea of totalitarianism, emphasizing the various mechanisms employed in the subjugation and regulation of the state. The third and last part emphasizes Iser's reception theory and its relation to authority, specifically the relationship between reader response and the ideas of dystopia and totalitarianism.

1.1 Theoretical approaches to dystopian narratives.

To discuss dystopia one must first mention utopia. This is why when embarking on the history of dystopia, Gregory Claeys states that “utopia comes into its own as a popular literary genre in the late nineteenth century. Dystopia emerges from the same set of problems: how to control industrialization, widespread poverty, the concentration of wealth, and an increasing tendency towards collectivist solutions to these issues” (274). The connection between utopia and dystopia is profound, one always beside the other, evidenced through the works of prominent academics from this particular field of study. In his book *Character and Dystopia: The Last Men* Aaron Rosenfeld also touches upon the link between utopia and dystopia. “Utopia—often used interchangeably with eutopia, or ‘good place,’[...]—is a collective ideal, a world for everyone. Dystopia, in contrast, is a persecutory ideal of suffering that, even when collective, is experienced in the singular” (4).

Tom Moylan in *Scrapes of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia* goes beyond the apparent differences between utopia and dystopia and instead focuses on their interconnectedness. He recognizes the possibility of utopian elements or a utopian impulse inside of a dystopia:

Although all dystopian texts offer a detailed and pessimistic presentation of the very worst of social alternatives, some affiliate with a utopian tendency as they maintain a horizon of hope (or at least invite readings that do), while others only appear to be dystopian allies of Utopia as they retain an anti-utopian disposition that forecloses all transformative possibility, and yet others negotiate a more strategically ambiguous position somewhere along the antinomic continuum (147).

Likewise, Fátima Vieira in *Dystopia(n) Matters: On the Page, on Screen, on Stage* discusses the relationship between utopia and dystopia. She states that “a book could be both a eutopia and a dystopia depending on the reader” (11). In addition, she refers to a specific type of dystopia, the “critical dystopia” which “suggests that the possibility of eutopia exists within some dystopias, but the problem is how to actualise the eutopia and get rid of the dystopia” (11). In other words, not only may the categorization of utopia or dystopia rely on readers themselves, but even if a book is categorized one way or another does not negate the presence of utopian elements inside a dystopia or dystopian elements inside a utopia. As Fátima comments, “Dystopia is not so much the opposite of utopia as its shadow [...] So close are the genres that it is not always clear what is a utopia and what a dystopia” (19).

When asked what comes to mind at the mention of dystopia as a literary genre, classic dystopian tales such as George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, and Antony Burgess’s *A Clockwork Orange*; modern tales like Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*, Naomi Alderman’s *The Power*, and Lois Lowry’s *The Giver*, may surface as examples and thus help to pinpoint some of the typical characteristics of dystopian narratives, an exercise various academics have endeavored to achieve and whose fruits of labor shall be generally discussed here. A characteristic often associated with the genre is that “dystopian fiction often has a higher purpose” (Claeys 269). Of course, the novels’ predominant function as a form of entertainment is not forgotten, however, it

seems that dystopian literature carries with it a sociopolitical purpose, or at least an impulse to question and examine the world through the lens of dystopian fictional worlds, to serve as warning and promote learning . If these features seem fairly broad, it is because the genre itself is incredibly wide. Claeys states that:

“Determining what is distinctive about the literary genre of dystopia has proven very problematic. Immense variation exists within the genre. Some dystopias are only minimally literary, and are primarily tracts in social and political thought where conversation and monologue only frame the argument. Others offer complex plots and well-drawn characters, and display considerable emotional power, prioritizing the elaboration of subjective experience over the methodical presentation of ideas” (273).

However, academics, particularly through recent studies, have been able to trace repeated structures and characteristics of dystopian literature, thus providing at the least an approximation of certain distinct features of the genre. Tom Moylan in particular delivers a broad yet comprehensive description of dystopian literature:

Crucial to dystopia’s vision in all its manifestations is this ability to register the impact of an unseen and unexamined social system on the everyday lives of everyday people. Again and again, the dystopian text opens in the midst of a social “elsewhere” that appears to be far worse than any in the “real” world. As the *mise-en-scène* is established in an exponential presentation of the society’s structure and operation, the narrative zooms in on one of the subjects of the terrible place. The story line then develops around that alienated protagonist as she or he begins to recognize the situation for what it really is and thus to trace the relationship between individual experience and the operation of the entire system. In some dystopias this narrative runs aground when the power structure crushes the resistant dissenter -ending the text on

a note of resignation that nevertheless offers the compensation of an apotheosis of the defeated individual. In others, however, the singular misfit finds allies and not only learns the “truth” of the system but also enters collectively into outright opposition. The conflict may end in another defeat, but it is one that can be remembered by others. Or the outcome may lead to the organization of a resistant enclave, a liberated zone, that sticks in the craw of the hegemonic system; or it may even result in a political movement that threatens to transform the entire order. In some form, a utopian horizon, or at the very last a scrape of hope, appears within the militant dystopia. (xiii)

Similar to Moylan, Rosenfeld also identifies an “elsewhere” typical of these narratives. “One of the hallmarks of dystopia is that it is located in a setting removed in time and space from our own” (**Rosenfeld** 37). Likewise, Viera comments that “it was never the function of dystopia to give a complete picture of the world. What dystopias – like utopias – aimed to do was to pick out the most distinctive and novel features of the time and to present them in the form of an imaginatively realised society” (22). Dystopian narratives provide a setting that could very well be reality but are ultimately only representations of certain parts of reality transported into an “elsewhere” that supply readers with opportunities for inspection of their surroundings and everyday way of life without the actual dangers of extremism presented in these novels. In addition, Viera recognizes a specific type of dystopia, the critical dystopia which the description of resonates very well with the storyline of *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Testaments*. The academic states:

Critical dystopia becomes the narrative space that, not only thematically but even structurally, foregrounds the most urgent issues of our times. Critical dystopias reflect on the functions of literature, on its imaginative possibilities and on its risks of mystification. They prefigure a horizon of hope, expressing a tension

towards change that classic anti-utopias refused, because beyond the black horizon they configured no hope, only a regressive desire of returning to the past. (Vieira 35)

Another characteristic of dystopian literature is the focus on the individual rather than the collective. Usually, readers are privy to a singular perspective, that of the narrator who is typically a character (the protagonist) who suffers under the influence of the mechanisms of domination employed by the governing power in the narrative (commonly with totalitarian tendencies), e.g. the Republic of Gilead in Atwood's novels. On the topic, Rosenfeld comments that "the reduced, singular perspective is pushed to an extreme. The world is viewed through a singular lens—there is only one thinking, feeling character, and only one set of forces and outcomes for everyone in the novel. The absence of heterogeneity closes down the text" (10). Although *The Handmaid's Tale* complies with this characteristic through the testimony of Offred, the novel's sole narrator, its sequel, *The Testaments*, expands perspective through the use of four narrators instead of one. This implies an opening of the text in the sense that readers are aware of multiple testimonies which not only grants them access to more information, but has the potential effect of prompting critical thinking skills such as comparing and contrasting testimonies, making connections and inferences within the expanded perspective. This could lead to a defiance of the imposed testimony from the first novel in the series.

Along with the experimentation of single perspective and the place of "elsewhere", dystopian literature has a tendency to play with time. Rosenfeld states that "[d]ystopia's universalizing gestures express a world state that is uniform, a single place that stands in for all places. By reducing possible places to only one, and by representing history as complete, dystopia denies time-space entirely" (69). He goes on to comment that "[d]espite its engagement with fears and fantasies of a society's development in time, dystopia is surprisingly a-temporal in the relationship it poses between character and time-space" (69). Therefore, Rosenfeld puts forward the following: "I propose three distinct time-

sites of dystopia. The first belongs to the character, the second to a reader who looks ahead to the dystopian world, and the third, the implied future perspective, looks back on the dystopian world (e.g., Orwell's Newspeak appendix in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*) as occurring outside of time" (71).

A final characteristic crucial to dystopian literature is its use of language. Inside dystopian narratives, language tends to be controlled, words considered "dangerous" become obsolete or outright prohibited as is the access to language itself by society. "The dystopian protagonist [...] is generally prohibited from using language [...] language is a weapon for the reigning dystopic power structure" (Moylan 149). This is reinforced by Vieira who distinguished four conditions that have a tendency to recur in dystopian literature:

Firstly, the past – which this obsolete language represents – must be erased or rendered mutable [...] Secondly, the population of the dystopian future must be denied access to books. All reading matter – in some texts, even the very act of reading itself – is considered reactionary. A literate society, it is assumed, with unrestricted access to language (and, by extension, access to prohibited words and their associated concepts) is potentially incendiary and less amenable to autocratic control [...] Thirdly, the controlling powers of the dystopian society must recognise the inherent power of language to communicate even incite revolutionary potential and take action to prevent this [...] Finally and crucially the fourth necessary condition is the presence of at least one character who is "bilingual" or who knows enough of the language of the past to act in an interpretive capacity for the reader and often for other characters. (**Vieira** 98-99)

So far, characteristics typical to dystopian literature would include: a higher purpose, an "elsewhere" similar to reality yet fictional, an individual perspective, an intricate use of time (usually atemporal or a narrative that plays with past, present and future), and the use, or lack of, of language, both in the society presented in the narrative as in the narrative itself as presented to readers.

Understanding the concept of dystopia and its main features serve as a basis for understanding how the dystopian narrative in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* provide a totalitarian experience for its characters and how the author could potentially provide a totalitarian experience for readers themselves through these dystopian narratives. However, to better comprehend these totalitarian experiences a review of the concept and its key features is necessary.

1.2 Mechanisms of domination of a totalitarian state.

On the search for an overall comprehension of totalitarianism, the political theorist Hannah Arendt provides an insightful and extensive approximation to the concept in her work *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Arendt affirms that:

Totalitarianism differs essentially from other forms of political oppression known to us [...] Wherever it rose to power, it developed entirely new political institutions and destroyed all social, legal and political traditions of the country. No matter what the specifically national tradition or the particular spiritual source of its ideology, totalitarian government always transformed classes into masses, supplanted the party system, not by one-party dictatorships, but by a mass movement, shifted the center of power from the army to the police, and established a foreign policy openly directed toward world domination (460).

This is perhaps what comes to mind for most when thinking about totalitarianism or totalitarian governments, a thought shared by Phillip Gray in *Totalitarianism: The Basics*: “when most people think about totalitarianism, the first things that come to their minds are totalitarian governments, be they historical regimes or fictional representations of totalitarianism as dystopian futures” (81). As evidenced in his usage of the word “dystopian”, there is a clear and profound link between both totalitarianism and dystopia that has hopefully been able to come across through this theoretical approach.

Similar to what readers encounter in dystopian novels, “totalitarianism attempts to control, or at least influence, every element of human interaction. As the ideology is totalistic, so too must the society be totalistic” (Gray 90). In addition to this all-encompassing ideology Steven Saxonberg in *Pre-Modernity, Totalitarianism and the Non-Banality of Evil* declares that “totalitarian states tend to pressure parts of the population to commit ‘evil’ acts as part of their legitimization process. That is, the new state, lacking legitimacy, tries to unite the population around an ideology, as well as against an outgroup that it claims poses an existential threat to the country” (22-23). To commit these types of acts would be to demonstrate your allegiance to the state which is fundamental to a person’s survival in such a system and exactly what the totalitarian state is after. “Totalitarian movements are mass organizations of atomized, isolated individuals. Compared with all other parties and movements, their most conspicuous external characteristic is their demand for total, unrestricted, unconditional, and unalterable loyalty of the individual member” (Arendt 323).

In order to better understand totalitarianism it is imperative that an overview of the key features of the concept be explored. For this purpose, Phillip Gray’s identification of some common traits will be utilized as he provides both a concise yet complete description of these:

First is how totalitarianism “thinks,” or ideology. A central commonality in this style of thought is totalism: in other words, that the ideology can explain, at least theoretically, everything regarding human interactions [...] This leads to a second characteristic of totalitarian thinking: deriving from this notion that certain dynamics are “really” the cause for social relations, there are also certain populations that are especially important [...] these populations are “world-historic”: the future direction of human society is dependent upon this population, and the dynamics of society depend substantially upon the fate of this population [...] totalitarian ideologies are inherently revolutionary: they are not interested in

reforms of the current form of society, but wish to radically and irrevocably change it, usually through a social revolution [...] This leads to one final commonality to mention here, the negative assessment of the present. Totalitarian ideologies view the present as being inherently wrong in some sense: “oppressive,” “irrational,” “degenerate,” “corrupt,” and “impious” would be some of the terms used to describe contemporary society [...] Additionally, those that benefit from this current oppressive system are, by necessity, implacable enemies to the “world-historic” population and the future world itself. As such, the contemporary world must be utterly overturned, the current dominant populations removed (at least from power, and perhaps even from existence), and the “world-historic” population must take control. (13)

As has been discussed, totalitarianism looks to not only overpower and control the masses but also incite the masses to carry out the actions the system dictates, either explicitly or implicitly. Saxonberg comments that “a totalitarian regime is not satisfied if the population merely accepts its rule passively; it demands that the population support it actively. Totalitarian regimes want your heart and ‘soul’” (1). Therefore, totalitarianism involves complete control over society and complete support from society. Returning to Arendt’s work on the topic at hand, she states that “[t]otal domination does not allow for free initiative in any field of life, for any activity that is not entirely predictable. Totalitarianism in power invariably replaces all first-rate talents, regardless of their sympathies, with those crackpots and fools whose lack of intelligence and creativity is still the best guarantee of their loyalty” (339). This coincides with the class of people executed during the takeover and reign of the Republic of Gilead in Atwood’s novels. People of great talent, such as doctors, scholars, politicians, educators, religious leaders, etc. were in their majority eliminated so as to ensure the stability of Gilead. In addition, “[t]he struggle for total domination of the total population of the earth, the elimination of every competing nontotalitarian reality, is inherent in the totalitarian regimes themselves; if they do not pursue global rule as their ultimate goal, they

are only too likely to lose whatever power they have already seized” (Arendt 392). This is exhibited particularly in *The Testaments* with the introduction of missionaries (Aunts in training) called Pearl Girls.

Due to the objectives of the present thesis, it is necessary to move on from a description of totalitarianism and its characteristics to instead focus on the mechanisms of domination utilized by such a system. Arendt asserts that “[t]otal domination, which strives to organize the infinite plurality and differentiation of human beings as if all of humanity were just one individual, is possible only if each and every person can be reduced to a never changing identity of reactions, so that each of these bundles of reactions can be exchanged at random for any other” (438) and that “[t]he first essential step on the road to total domination is to kill the juridical person in man” (447). Arendt further explains that:

The destruction of a man's rights, the killing of the juridical person in him, is a prerequisite for dominating him entirely. And this applies not only to special categories [...] but to every inhabitant of a totalitarian state. Free consent is as much an obstacle to total domination as free opposition. The arbitrary arrest which chooses among innocent people destroys the validity of free consent, just as torture-as distinguished from death-destroys the possibility of opposition. (451)

Alongside the murder of the judicial person lies the murder of the moral person. Both are necessary for the totalitarian system to achieve its goal of complete and utter domination. In regard to this second murder, Arendt states:

Totalitarian terror achieved its most terrible triumph when it succeeded in cutting the moral person off from the individualist escape and in making the decisions of conscience absolutely questionable and equivocal. When a man is faced with the alternative of betraying and thus murdering his friends or of sending his wife and children, for whom he is in every sense responsible, to their death; when even suicide would mean the immediate murder

of his own family-how is he to decide? The alternative is no longer between good and evil, but between murder and murder. (452)

Accordingly, one of the mechanisms of domination used by a totalitarian system is the murder of the judicial person and the moral person. "Once the moral person has been killed, the one thing that still prevents men from being made into living corpses is the differentiation of the individual, his unique identity" (Arendt 453). However, after both murders (judicial and moral) "the destruction of the individuality is almost always successful" (455).

Nonetheless, the murder of the parts that conform a person is only a part of a larger system. To be able to analyze other elements utilized to ensure control and authority, Göran Therborn in *The Ideology of Power and the Power of Ideology* provides a typology he denominates "Mechanisms of Subjection" that identifies six types of ideological domination. Therborn states that the "mechanisms of subjection [...] ensure that the rule of the ruling class is obeyed by the ruled" (93) and that "it seems possible to identify the main types of the mechanism by the effects of domination and obedience they produce" (93). He goes on to explain that this typology "is proposed as an analytical tool that is both theoretically systematic [...] and sufficiently complex: it offers a way out of the constrictive dichotomy of force and consent, and the rationalist-idealist traditions of 'legitimacy' or 'false consciousness'" (94). The six types of ideological domination include: accommodation, sense of inevitability, sense of representation, deference, fear, and resignation.

First, "[a]ccommodation refers to a kind of acquiescence in which the rulers are obeyed because the ruled are constituted to regard other features in the world as more salient to them than both their present subordination and the possibility of an alternative regime" (Therborn 95). Second, "[t]he sense of inevitability refers, of course, to obedience through ignorance of any alternative." (Therborn 95). Third:

When the rulers are obeyed because they are seen as ruling on behalf of the ruled, and because this situation is seen as good, then

we may talk of obedience based on a sense of representation [...] The representativity of the rulers may be based on a perception of likeness or belonging, such that the rulers and the ruled are seen as belonging to the same universe, however defined. But it may also be based on its opposite, if the rulers are seen as possessing extraordinary qualities of understanding and as really defending the needs of the ruled. This is charismatic representation, by anyone from 'the man with a mission' to the flashy TV personality. (Therborn 96-97)

Fourth, "[d]eference is also an effect of enunciations of what is good about the present rulers. The latter are conceived as being a caste apart, possessing superior qualities, qualities which are necessary qualifications for ruling, and which the present rulers alone possess" (Therborn 97). Fifth, "[f]ear is the effect of ideological domination that brings about acceptance of [obedience and life instead of resistance and death]" (Therborn 97). Therborn further clarifies that "[f]ear means that beyond the frontiers of obedience there is, in the current situation, only nothingness, the non-existence of chaos, darkness, suffering and death. Fear plays a great role in maintenance of bourgeois-democratic rule" (98).

Finally, the sixth ideological domination Therborn identified is resignation:

Resignation, like fear, derives from considerations of what is possible in the given situation. But whereas obedience out of fear is contingent upon the presently prevailing constellations of force and is quite compatible with maintaining a belief in the possibility of a better alternative in the future, resignation has more deep-seated connotations. It connotes a more profoundly pessimistic view of the possibilities of change. In this context the term is used for designating a form of obedience that derives from conceptions of the practical impossibility of a better alternative, rather than of the repressive strength of the powers in existence. This resignation may stem from received and accepted statements that all power corrupts,

also alternative power, that the forces for a change are too few, divided, incompetent, or unreliable, that an alternative society would be unable to maintain itself, democratically, economically or militarily. (98)

This overview of totalitarianism, its features, and the mechanisms of subjection will help in distinguishing and describing the totalitarian characteristics present in both novels as well as the strategies or means used to allow both characters and readers to break out from under their respective totalitarian authority. However, because this thesis focuses not only the totalitarian system experienced by the characters of Atwood's novels, but also the reader's own totalitarian experience of both narratives, an additional theory is required to assist in the present thesis' examination of *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*.

1.3 Reader Response theory and strategies linked to authority.

Reader-Response Theory or Reader-Response Criticism focuses on readers and how they engage with the text. The intentions of the writer are irrelevant since a text can have multiple meanings that shift over time. In this theory, reading is a transaction or exchange, in which readers construct meaning as they progress through a text. Because readers bring their own experiences and ideologies to the text, their responses will differ. The text itself does not hold meaning but rather helps guide readers in the ongoing creation of meaning. What a text is cannot be separated from what it does. Readers actively make the meaning they find in literature through their own experiences, beliefs, and attitudes to a text which affects how they understand and interpret the text. For this reason, proponents of reader response theory argue that there is no single objective meaning of a text, and that meaning is created through the interaction between the reader and the text.

There are numerous approaches to Reader-Response Theory. Although typification is difficult, some specific variations have been broadly identified, and

even then, these variations tend to overlap. Nonetheless, in order to provide a clear understanding of the theory partly guiding the present thesis, it is necessary to point out that it follows Transactional Reader-Response Theory, specifically Wolfgang Iser's work as presented in *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* and *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology*. In the former, Iser states "[a]esthetic response is [...] to be analyzed in terms of a dialectic relationship between text, reader, and their interaction. It is called aesthetic response because, although it is brought about by the text, it brings into play the imaginative and perceptive faculties of the reader, in order to make him adjust and even differentiate his own focus" (*The Act of Reading* x). In the latter, Iser declares "reader-response criticism provides a framework for understanding text processing, revealing the way in which the reader's faculties are both acted upon and activated. By putting the response-inviting structures of a literary text under scrutiny, a theory of aesthetic response provides guidelines for elucidating the interaction between text and reader" (*Prospecting* vii).

It is precisely the response-inviting structures utilized by Atwood in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* what this thesis partly intends to analyze. On the matter of these response-inviting structures, Iser asserts that:

[T]exts already contain certain conditions of actualization that will allow their meaning to be assembled in the responsive mind of the recipient. The concept of the implied reader is therefore a textual structure anticipating the presence of a recipient without necessarily defining him [...] the concept of the implied reader designates a network of response-inviting structures , which impel the reader to grasp the text. (*The Act of Reading* 34)

Iser's identification of response-inviting structures in literature is directly related to his connection between reader-text communication and speech acts. A crucial characteristic of the latter is that they "must not only organize the signs but also condition the way in which these signs are received" (Iser, *The Act of Reading* 55). Readers must question "why certain conventions should have been selected

for his attention” (61). In search of an answer, “the reader is guided by a variety of narrative techniques, which might be called the strategies of the text” (61). These strategies organize both the information in the text and how this information is transmitted which trigger the “acts of comprehension” (86) in readers.

Iser mentions a number of strategies that include among others: (1) the relationship between background and foreground. This dialectic relationship provides readers with unfamiliarity set against familiarity, the unfamiliar then restructuring the familiar ultimately affecting comprehension, thus leading towards the development of meaning (the aesthetic object). (2) the theme and horizon structure: “organizes the attitudes of the reader and at the same time builds up the perspective system of the text” (Iser, *The Act of Reading* 97). (3) the wandering viewpoint that involves “different consecutive phases of reading” (109), each phase providing part of the aesthetic object yet none are capable of solely representing it. “[T]he wandering viewpoint is also situated in a particular perspective during every moment of reading, but [...] it is not confined to that perspective [...] it constantly switches between the textual perspectives, each of the switches representing an articulate reading moment, it simultaneously offsets and relates the perspectives” (114). (4) the schemata of the text involved in image-building: “aspects of a totality that the reader himself must assemble; in assembling it, he will occupy the position set out for him, and so create a sequence of images that eventually results in his constituting the meaning of the text” (141). (5) Indeterminacy: “[W]e can say that the indeterminate elements of literary prose –perhaps even of all literature— represent a vital link between text and reader. They are the switch that activates the reader into using his own ideas in order to fulfill the intention of the text. This means that they are the basis for a textual structure in which the reader's part is already incorporated” (Iser, *Prospecting* 28).

The objectives of this thesis focus on exploring the dynamics of reader engagement with literature, particularly examining how readers may experience a form of control analogous to that which characters encounter within the

narratives of the novels. This control is pertinent to understanding the psychological and interpretative processes that govern the reader's interaction with texts. In this context, Reader-Response Theory serves as a critical framework for analyzing the intricate transaction that unfolds between the reader and the text, specifically in the works of Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*. This theoretical approach allows for a nuanced exploration of the extent to which the narratives themselves direct readers toward specific interpretations, thereby shaping their responses, while simultaneously assessing the degree of autonomy that these readers possess in interpreting the material.

Within this analytical framework, it is essential to consider the strategies articulated by Wolfgang Iser in his foundational works on Reader-Response Theory. These strategies encompass a range of concepts that contribute to our understanding of the reading experience, including the role of the reader's imagination, the gaps within the text that invite interpretation, and the various cognitive processes involved in meaning-making. A brief overview of these strategies lays the groundwork for a more in-depth discussion of their implications for reader engagement with Atwood's novels. The analysis will subsequently expand on these concepts, examining how they illuminate the complex interplay between narrative structure and reader agency, thus providing a comprehensive examination of how readers navigate and potentially transcend the control exerted by the narrative. Such an exploration not only enhances our understanding of Atwood's literary techniques but also raises broader questions about the nature of autonomy and interpretation in the reading experience as a whole.

It is important to remember that “[t]he more texts lose their determinacy, the more the reader is shifted into the full operation of their possible intentions” (Iser, *Prospecting* 6). Blanks or gaps, negation, negativity, among others, form part of the elements of indeterminacy vital to the relationship between text and reader. “The indeterminate sections, or gaps, of literary texts are in no way to be regarded as a defect; on the contrary, they are a basic element for the aesthetic response” (9). Therefore, “it can be said that indeterminacy is the fundamental

precondition for reader participation” (10). As has been stated, one way to create indeterminacy thus promoting reader participation is through blanks or gaps. Iser states:

Communication in literature [...] is a process set in motion and regulated [...] by a mutually restrictive and magnifying interaction between the explicit and the implicit, between revelation and concealment. What is concealed spurs the reader into action, but this action is also controlled by what is revealed; the explicit in its turn is transformed when the implicit has been brought to light. Whenever the reader bridges the gaps, communication begins. The gaps function as a kind of pivot on which the whole text-reader relationship revolves. Hence, the structured blanks of the text stimulate the process of ideation to be performed by the reader on terms set by the text. (*Prospecting* 34)

Blanks are the empty spaces between textual segments that motivate readers to find connections, ultimately developing determinate meaning through indeterminate regulations. According to Iser:

Blanks and negations both control the process of communication in their own different ways: The blanks leave open the connection between textual perspectives, and so spur the reader into coordinating these perspectives and patterns-in other words, they induce the reader to perform basic operations within the text. The various types of negation invoke familiar and determinate elements or knowledge only to cancel them out. What is canceled, however, remains in view, and thus brings about modifications in the reader's attitude toward what is familiar or determinate-that is, he is guided to adopt a position in relation to the text. (*Prospecting* 34)

Therefore, blanks incentivize readers to coordinate exposed connections while negations invalidate the familiar which incentivizes readers to interact with text by picking a stance. In addition to blanks and negations, Iser discusses in his

works the concept of negativity. He explains that “negativity is not formulated by the text, but forms the unwritten base; it does not negate formulations of the text, but [...] conditions them. It enables the written words to transcend their literal meaning, to assume a multiple referentiality [...] to undergo the expansion necessary to transplant them as a new experience into the [...] reader” (*The Act of Reading* 226).

The exploration of the relationship between dystopia, totalitarianism, and Wolfgang Iser's reader-response theory reveals complex interconnections and significant implications that arise at the intersection of these concepts. Dystopia, as a literary genre, often serves as a lens through which societies characterized by oppression, suffering, and injustice are vividly portrayed. Dystopian narratives frequently depict a bleak future where the ideals of society have devolved into frameworks that suppress individuality and autonomy. These narratives provide stark critiques of contemporary social and political structures, emphasizing the potential consequences of unchecked authority and systemic injustice.

Totalitarianism, as a political concept, embodies a form of governance in which the ruling authority wields absolute power over nearly all facets of both public and private life. This form of government is characterized by the centralization of authority, the suppression of dissent, and the pervasive intrusion into the personal and social realms of citizens. Totalitarian regimes often employ propaganda, surveillance, and state-sponsored violence to maintain their grip on power, fostering an environment in which fear and control stifle free thought and expression.

Wolfgang Iser's reader-response theory posits that the meaning of a literary text is not solely embedded within the text itself but is constructed through the interaction between the reader and the text. This theory highlights the active role of the reader in interpreting, negotiating, and ultimately shaping the significance of a narrative. Readers bring their own experiences, emotions, and perspectives to the text, which influences their understanding and engagement with the themes presented.

By examining the interplay between dystopian narratives, totalitarianism, and reader-response theory, a more nuanced understanding emerges of how these elements intersect to address issues of power, control, and the interpretive agency of the reader. Dystopian works often serve as cautionary tales that invite readers to reflect on the implications of oppressive governance and societal decay. The active engagement of the reader becomes crucial in navigating these complex themes, as individual interpretations can illuminate the varied reactions to authoritarianism and the human experience within such contexts.

Through this combined analysis, a deeper appreciation of the dynamics at play in dystopian literature is achieved. The relationships among these themes underscore the importance of critical thought and the significance of individual agency in the face of societal constraints. As readers confront the oppressive realities portrayed in dystopian texts, they are compelled to not only question the status quo but also to consider their role in the larger narrative of resistance against totalitarianism and the pursuit of justice and freedom.

It is essential to consider the ways in which dystopian literature reflects and critiques totalitarianism. Dystopian narratives often serve as cautionary tales, warning readers about the dangers of unchecked authority and the erosion of individual freedoms. Totalitarian regimes, with their emphasis on conformity, surveillance, and the suppression of dissent, provide fertile ground for dystopian authors to explore the consequences of oppressive governance.

In these dystopian worlds, the relationship between the ruling regime and the populace is characterized by a pervasive sense of fear, manipulation, and dehumanization. The totalitarian state seeks to exert control not only over external behavior but also over the thoughts and emotions of its citizens. This theme of psychological domination is central to the dystopian genre, as it highlights the insidious ways in which totalitarianism penetrates and shapes the inner lives of individuals. Through the depiction of oppressive surveillance, propaganda, and the suppression of free expression, dystopian literature underscores the intrinsic link between totalitarianism and the erosion of personal autonomy.

Furthermore, the role of Wolfgang Iser's reader-response theory in the context of dystopian literature and totalitarianism merits careful examination. Iser's theory posits that the meaning of a literary text is not fixed or predetermined but is actively constructed by the reader through a process of engagement and interpretation. According to Iser, readers fill in the gaps and ambiguities within a text, bringing their own experiences, beliefs, and emotions to bear on the act of reading. Using Iser's reader-response theory, the reader's engagement with these dystopian narratives becomes crucial in unraveling the intended meanings and messages conveyed by the author. Through the reader's active participation and interpretation, Iser's theory highlights how dystopian narratives can serve as thought experiments, inviting readers to critically examine societal issues.

When readers encounter dystopian literature through the lens of Iser's theory, they are prompted to consider their own responses to the themes of oppression, resistance, and moral compromise. The open-ended nature of reader-response theory allows for a multiplicity of interpretations, reflecting the diverse ways in which individuals engage with the complex moral and philosophical questions raised by dystopian narratives. By foregrounding the reader's active role in shaping meaning, Iser's theory underscores the deeply personal and affective dimensions of reading dystopian literature, particularly in relation to the portrayal of totalitarianism.

Moreover, the dynamic interplay between dystopian narratives, totalitarianism, and reader-response theory invites us to consider the ways in which these texts prompt readers to reflect on the nature of power, authority, and the ethical responsibilities of individuals within oppressive social structures. Dystopian literature often presents protagonists who grapple with the moral quandaries of resistance, complicity, and survival in the face of totalitarian rule. Through the experiences of these characters, readers are compelled to confront their own ethical positions and consider the implications of living under authoritarian regimes.

In this sense, the intersection of dystopia, totalitarianism, and reader-response theory serves as a catalyst for critical reflection and moral inquiry. Readers are prompted to interrogate their own beliefs and values in light of the ethical challenges posed by dystopian narratives, thereby deepening their engagement with the text and its implications for real-world power dynamics. Iser's emphasis on the active, creative role of the reader aligns with the ethical imperative inherent in dystopian literature, as both underscore the significance of individual agency and moral discernment in the face of oppressive systems of control.

The relationship between dystopia, totalitarianism, and Wolfgang Iser's reader-response theory is a rich and multifaceted terrain that invites nuanced exploration. Dystopian literature offers a lens through which to examine the perils of totalitarianism, while Iser's theory foregrounds the active, interpretive agency of the reader in engaging with these narratives. Reader-response theory becomes a powerful tool for understanding the impact of dystopia and totalitarianism on individuals. By emphasizing the active role of the reader in interpreting a text, Iser's theory highlights the ways in which individuals can resist and subvert the dominant ideologies of a totalitarian regime. Readers are not passive recipients of information, but active participants in the construction of meaning, able to challenge and question the narratives imposed on them by those in power.

CHAPTER 2: AUTHORITY IN THE HANDMAID'S TALE AND THE TESTAMENTS.

Comprehending the inner workings of totalitarianism enables the recognition of the behaviors, tools, and mechanisms that pave the way towards a dystopian future. This chapter examines how totalitarian control is carried out in Atwood's novels *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*. The analysis is divided into two sections. The first section focuses on the mechanisms of domination in Gilead. In other words, the strategies and ideological domination implemented by the totalitarian state on society, highlighting key events from the novels where these are clearly evidenced. The analysis of the strategies utilized in both novels are based on the discussion developed in section 1.1 and 1.2 in Chapter 1, particularly Goran Therborn's types of ideological domination as well as characteristics of totalitarianism addressed by Hannah Arendt, Phillip Gray, and Steven Saxonberg alongside academics from the dystopian discipline. The second section focuses on imposed authority over readers. The analysis present in this section is heavily guided by Wolfgang Iser's Reader-Response Theory discussed in section 1.3 in Chapter 1 due to the premise that just as strategies are implemented by a totalitarian state to exert dominion and control over society (e.g. Gilead) so do the narratives of both novels utilize strategies to strive to regulate readers' comprehension of the texts and the development of meaning.

2.1 Mechanisms of domination in Gilead.

Both novels depict dystopian societies where women are oppressed and controlled by a totalitarian regime. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, readers are introduced to Offred, a handmaid who is stripped of her identity and forced into sexual servitude. The novel is written in first-person narrative, immersing readers into Offred's world and making them experience her fear, frustration, and helplessness. Similarly, in *The Testaments*, Atwood introduces three different

female narrators who provide firsthand accounts of life under Gilead's rule. These additional three narrators include Aunt Lydia (former judge and a founder of the order of Aunts that presides over the women of Gilead), Agnes Jemima (a young woman who provides a testimony on growing up in Gilead), and Daisy (another young woman who delivers an account of the world outside of Gilead). By presenting multiple perspectives, Atwood allows readers to witness the extent of Gilead's control over women, specifically white women as any insight into the lives of men, sexual minorities, cultural and/or ethnical minorities, and so on are left in obscurity.

A preliminary explanation as to the reasoning of this very specific focus group could be due to the author's place of enunciation. Margaret Atwood is a white female, specifically a Canadian white female. Therefore, if she is to write from familiarity it doesn't come as a surprise that her narrators would also be white and female. In addition, on the level of story, Gilead is presented in the novel as not only sexist but racist. There is a passing moment in *The Handmaid's Tale* where the relocation of the "Children of Ham" is mentioned. "The Children of Ham" are associated to individuals of color. Consequently, the absence of cultural and/or ethnical minorities in *The Handmaid's Tale* seems logical based on Gilead's values which would also apply to sexual minorities. What is interesting to point out is that the exclusion of the different groups briefly discussed is continued in *The Testaments* even though a narrator from outside of Gilead is introduced. It would seem that the novels are trying to present the world both inside and outside of Gilead as white. This decision by the author could be interpreted as some form of critique of real present society, particularly that of the northern hemisphere. This preliminary explanation could serve as an interesting avenue for future research.

Through Offred's direct and personal engagement with the events unfolding around her, readers are gradually introduced to the various components of life within the Gileadean community. This portrayal encompasses not only the rigid social structures and expectations imposed upon individuals but also the daily routines and interactions that characterize existence under a totalitarian

regime. Offred's observations and experiences offer a window into the oppressive nature of this society, illustrating how the individuals within it navigate the complex and often perilous landscape dictated by totalitarian rule.

However, it is particularly through Offred's memories of her life before Gilead that the true depth of the regime's control becomes apparent. These recollections provide critical insights into the initial measures employed by the state to consolidate its power and influence. They unveil a systematic approach to manipulation and domination, where the erosion of personal freedoms was gradual yet relentless. As Offred reflects on her past, readers gain an understanding of the foundational strategies of fear, surveillance, and indoctrination that the totalitarian state harnessed to dismantle individual autonomy and uphold its authority.

The juxtaposition of Offred's current existence in Gilead with her earlier life serves to highlight the stark transformation imposed by the regime. Through her thoughts and actions in the present, the echoes of past experiences resonate deeply, revealing the psychological impact of living in a society that prioritizes conformity and obedience over personal identity and freedom. This interplay between memory and present reality underscores the pervasive influence of the state's initial strategies, emphasizing the profound and lasting effects on the individuals caught within its grasp. At this point in time, it is noteworthy to mention that "strategies" here follows Michel de Certeau's approach¹:

[...] the calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships that become possible as soon as a subject with will and power [...] can be isolated. It postulates a place that can be delimited as its own

¹ The decision to utilize Michel de Certeau's categories stems from his studies into the dynamics of power but, more importantly, his analysis of everyday practices and resistance within consumer culture (e.g. reading), particularly in his work *The Practice of Everyday Life*. His categories of "strategy" and "tactics" serve as analytical tools to deconstruct how power operates in various contexts and highlight how individuals or groups who lack direct power navigate and subvert dominate systems.

and serve as the base from which relations with an exteriority composed of targets or threats [...] can be managed. (35-36)

The dynamics of power relationships undergo significant transformation when a subject endowed with both will and power is given the opportunity to be isolated. This situation creates a framework where a distinct space can be established, effectively delineating its boundaries to serve as a strategic base. From this base, the subject can then initiate and manage interactions with external entities, which may consist of potential targets or perceived threats. This structured approach enables the subject to calculate and manipulate their position within the broader socio-political landscape, allowing for a more nuanced and strategic engagement with the world beyond their immediate environment.

Against this backdrop, Offred reflects on her own experiences within the confines of a controlled environment designed to suppress communication and maintain order. As she recalls her attempts to find solace and rest in the army cots, which had been arranged in regimented rows with deliberate gaps to prevent any form of conversation, she underscores the oppressive nature of her surroundings. The lighting, dimmed but not extinguished, serves as a constant reminder of the surveillance that looms over her and her companions. The presence of Aunt Sara and Aunt Elizabeth, figures of authority tasked with enforcing compliance, reinforces the atmosphere of fear and control. Equipped with electric cattle prods, they embody the threat of punishment while simultaneously highlighting the limits of their power; guns are not in their possession, reflecting a distrust even among those appointed to administer oversight.

The guards, designated as the Angels, hold a different status, being specially chosen to fulfill their roles with authority and weaponry, yet they are restricted from entering the interior spaces of the facility unless summoned for a specific purpose. Conversely, the women imprisoned within these walls are confined, permitted only limited movement during scheduled walks, two by two, around a football field that has been secured by a chain-link fence and topped

with barbed wire. This physical barrier encapsulates the feeling of entrapment and the broader implications of power dynamics, where the seemingly simple act of walking becomes a regulated experience, exemplifying the lengths to which systems of control will go to maintain their authority and suppress any semblance of autonomy.

In the narrative provided by Offred, the insidious nature of violence is portrayed through her observations of weaponry, constant vigilance, and systematic oppression. This undercurrent of brutality finds explicit expression in Aunt Lydia's recollection of the regime's initial seizure of power. During this harrowing account, Aunt Lydia describes a chilling and orchestrated display that unfolded at the designated hour of four o'clock.

She recounts an event that can best be characterized as a grotesque spectacle. A group of twenty women, differing in size and age but uniformly clad in the oppressive attire dictated by the regime, was brought into the central area of the field. The choice of the term "led" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 117) is telling, as it implies a lack of agency; these women were not participants in any voluntary act but rather were driven into this scene, blindfolded, their vision obscured and their fate unknown. Handcuffed, their hands were restrained in front of them, further emphasizing their helplessness and the total domination exerted over them.

The women were arranged with a chilling precision in two orderly rows, ten in each line. The front row, in a display reminiscent of a macabre group photograph, was forced to kneel, an act that stripped them of dignity and autonomy. The tableau was set for what was to come next, a stark demonstration of the regime's ruthlessness. The men, who had escorted these blindfolded figures to the center of the field, wielded their firearms with calculated intent.

Aunt Lydia notes that the men raised their guns and executed the women with precision, a grim testament to the regime's cold efficiency. The act was swift and ruthless; the women fell to the ground, their bodies collapsing in an instant, marking a brutal punctuation to the power dynamics at play. This vivid recollection

starkly illustrates not only the physical violence employed by the regime but also the psychological terror inflicted upon the populace, thereby encapsulating the essence of oppression that defines the new order. Through this testimony, the pervasive atmosphere of fear and control permeates the narrative, reflecting the broader themes of subjugation and the chilling normalization of violence within the regime's framework.

Both accounts reflect one of Goran Therborn's types of ideological domination, fear. "Force and violence operate as a form of rule only through the ideological mechanism of fear [...] Fear means that beyond the frontiers of obedience there is, in the current situation, only nothingness, the non-existence of chaos, darkness, suffering and death" (97-98). This rings especially true for Offred and Aunt Lydia who are thrust into the beginnings of the regime from one moment to the next, unaware of what has happened, what is happening, and what is to come. Fear arises from the unknown. Offred's outings, whether it be a shopping trip or a gathering such as a "Salvaging" event (public executions), hold an air of trepidation. This is understandable if attending a "Salvaging" but an overreaction to a mere shopping trip. But that is the trick. Nothing is merely something. There is always more. Of what? It is that exact unknown that generates fear in Gilead's subjects and thus commands obedience. When reaching the supposed centre of Gilead, Offred narrates:

Doubled, I walk the street [...] There is the absence of people, the same air of being asleep. The street is almost like a museum, or a street in a model town constructed to show the way people used to live [...].

This is the heart of Gilead, where the war cannot intrude except on television. Where the edges are we aren't sure, they vary, according to the attacks and counterattacks; but this is the centre, where nothing moves. The Republic of Gilead, said Aunt Lydia, knows no bounds. Gilead is within you. (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 33).

In this passage, Offred illustrates the inherent impossibility of taking singular, personal action within the oppressive environment of Gilead. The term "doubled" signifies that any movement or decision she contemplates is not made in isolation; rather, it occurs in conjunction with another individual who may share her perspectives or, conversely, who may have already yielded to Gilead's repressive structures. This duality underscores the profound danger that such companionship may pose. The reality of Gilead feels abstract and intangible; the streets, devoid of life, do not reveal any clear boundaries or restrictions, suggesting that the true essence of Gilead exists internally within the societal psyche.

This raises unsettling questions about the consequences of defiance against such a regime. If an individual were to resist or challenge the tenets of Gilead, what would be the ramifications? Would that person face swift punishment in the form of torture? Would they be sentenced to a detention camp, stripped of their freedom and dignity? Or, in the most extreme scenario, would they face execution, silenced forever in an effort to quash dissent? It is the uncertainty inherent in what lies beyond the familiar boundaries of everyday existence that breeds profound fear. This pervasive fear acts as a powerful mechanism of control, ensuring that individuals conform to the demands of society. The specter of punishment looms large, reinforcing obedience and compliance among the populace, thus maintaining the societal structure that Gilead has imposed upon them.

Another type of ideological domination is that of the sense of inevitability. This "refers [...] to obedience through the ignorance of any alternative [...] It is a component in the political marginalization of large sectors of the population in contemporary advanced capitalist societies [...] Marginalization seems often to be accompanied by a cynically critical view of the rulers" (Therborn 95-96).

In Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, a palpable sense of inevitability is introduced through the character of Aunt Lydia as she addresses the handmaids, emphasizing the unique struggles of their generation. "You are a

transitional generation” (127) Aunt Lydia asserts, highlighting the weight of the burden they carry in a society that has drastically altered their roles and identities. This generation is confronted with the harsh reality of sacrifices demanded of them, sacrifices that may not have been fully understood by those who came before them, and that will undoubtedly shape their current and future experiences.

Aunt Lydia acknowledges the emotional and psychological toll of living in a world where they are met with disdain and revulsion from men, an experience that serves to further isolate and diminish their sense of self-worth. The hardships they endure are profound, marking their existence with a lingering sense of resistance against the roles imposed upon them. In contrast, Aunt Lydia looks toward the future, offering a glimpse of what lies ahead for the next generation of women. “For the ones who come after you, it will be easier” (Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* 127) she states, suggesting a resignation to their fate. However, her explanation remains chillingly incomplete. She does not articulate the crucial point that the next generation’s acceptance of their roles will stem from a complete lack of memory of a different way of life, a life that once afforded them autonomy, choice, and individuality.

Instead, she emphasizes that these future women “won’t want things they can’t have” (127) implying a tragic adaptation to their environment. This statement reflects a profound sense of loss not just of freedom, but of the very desire for autonomy. The implication is clear: this new generation will not grapple with the same internal conflicts as their predecessors because they will have been conditioned from the very beginning to accept their prescribed roles. This foreshadowing encapsulates the brutal mechanisms of control and social engineering at play within the narrative, revealing a chilling path toward normalization of oppression. Through Aunt Lydia’s words, Atwood underscores the psychological manipulation involved in such a transition, where the erosion of memory and desire becomes a tool for maintaining the status quo.

The concept of foreshadowing is poignantly articulated in Margaret Atwood’s *The Testaments*, particularly through the perspective of Agnes Jemima

in the segments designated as “Transcript of Witness Testimony 369A.” Agnes enters the oppressive society of Gilead at an impressionably young age, one that renders her devoid of any memories of her life prior to her arrival in this authoritarian regime. This lack of recollection contributes significantly to the pervasive sense of inevitability that envelops her and her peers as they confront the grim prospect of their impending marriages. For Agnes and her friend Becka, these marriages are not only undesirable but also inescapable, as they are emblematic of the limited choices afforded to women in their society.

Agnes articulates this predestined path with striking clarity in her narration, highlighting her internal conflict and the absence of a viable escape. She reflects, “I considered running away from home, but how would I do that and where could I go? I had no notion of geography: we did not study it in school, since our own neighbourhood should be enough for us, and what Wife needed more?” (Atwood 224). This passage encapsulates the profound limitations imposed on her education and worldview, underscoring the systematic indoctrination that defines their existence in Gilead. The suggestion that the confines of their immediate surroundings should suffice illustrates the regime’s efforts to curtail any aspirations of freedom or broader understanding.

The notion of inevitable matrimony is thus reinforced through Agnes’s reflections, as she grapples with the stark realities of her future. The lack of knowledge about alternative life paths amplifies the sense of futility and resignation that permeates her thoughts. The inexorable push towards becoming one of the Wives in a society that strips individuals of autonomy becomes not just a fate but a well-defined role into which Agnes and her friends are thrust. This powerful imagery serves to illuminate the broader themes of agency and the constraining social structures that characterize life in Gilead, painting a vivid picture of the emotional landscape navigated by those trapped within its confines.

In addition to the different types of ideological domination carried out by the Republic of Gilead, the totalitarian state implements strategies that echo across other systems of its kind (fictional and nonfictional). These include language

control (e.g. the banning of reading and writing and the control of information), the implementation of surveillance units (e.g. known as “Eyes” in Gilead), the formation of a clear and definitive hierarchy (e.g. Gileadean women classified as “Handmaids”, “Wives”, “Marthas”, “Unwomen”, “Econowives”, “Pearl Girls”, etc.), and so on. Some of the strongest scenes in both novels reflect the realization of these totalitarian strategies. One such scene can be observed in *The Handmaid’s Tale* in which a “Particicution” is carried out. This neologism is created through the combination of “participation” and “execution”. It involves the execution of a subject, usually male and supposedly guilty of sex crimes, carried out by a group of Handmaids. The scene represents the totalitarian state’s call and pressure to perform evil acts. “[A] totalitarian state is able to induce people to commit acts of evil if it chooses an outgroup and portrays it as an existential threat in a period of crisis. It must also succeed in dehumanizing that group” (Saxonberg 291).

The strategies employed in contemporary narratives exhibit a striking similarity to those found in the classic works of dystopian literature, notably the writings of authors such as Yevgeny Zamyatin, George Orwell, and Aldous Huxley. This similarity is not unexpected, given that these foundational texts are integral to the dystopian genre, thus sharing fundamental traits and thematic concerns that define the category. Dystopian fiction traditionally engages with the tension between individual agency and oppressive societal structures, presenting cautionary tales regarding the potential consequences of totalitarianism, surveillance, and the loss of personal freedoms.

However, as elaborated in Chapter 1, the landscape of dystopian literature has evolved significantly, resulting in a genre characterized by a remarkable degree of variation and complexity. This transformation raises critical questions about the distinguishing features of Margaret Atwood's novels in comparison to earlier works within the dystopian tradition. Atwood's approach often integrates a nuanced exploration of gender dynamics, ecological concerns, and socio-political commentary, which differentiate her narratives from those of her predecessors.

While Zamyatin, Orwell, and Huxley provide foundational examinations of dystopian societies that alert readers to the dangers of authoritarianism and technological overreach, Atwood's narratives often place a stronger emphasis on the lived experiences of individuals, particularly women, within these oppressive frameworks. Furthermore, her works frequently challenge the binary distinctions between dystopia and utopia, thereby complicating the reader's understanding of societal constructs. This study of Atwood's novels inspires a thorough evaluation of how her distinct thematic concentration and stylistic decisions add to the ongoing conversation about dystopian literature, encouraging readers to contemplate current issues through a perspective that both conforms to and deviates from the conventions set by previous dystopian writers.

The Handmaid's Tale opens into an "elsewhere" which seems to be a distorted and negative version of a possible future reality. The novel also plays with time, moving through present and past through fragmented scenes, the use of flashbacks, and the final historical notes that function as "the implied future perspective" (Rosenfeld 71). In addition, an important characteristic of the novel is its use of language, the control of which is typical of dystopian novels. These briefly touched upon features of *The Handmaid's Tale* serve to display the similarities between the novel and earlier dystopian literature. Nonetheless, clear contrasts exist as well. Usually, the politics, values, and mechanisms of control of a dystopian fictional state are grasped throughout the narrative of the novel through the knowledge and interactions of the protagonist, whether it be first-person or third-person perspective. However, Offred, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, is relegated to the political margins of Gilead. Of course, she is aware of the main functions of the system, she is obligated to if she wants to survive. But details are irrelevant for her. Her priority is survival and knowledge, in Gilead, is dangerous. Therefore, she lives in ignorance of aspects only touched upon at the end of the novel in the "Historical Notes" provided by a future male academic.

In addition, it is due to this lack of information in Offred's perspective that Gilead comes across as ephemeral in comparison to previous fictional dystopias

that tend to seem eternal and all encompassing. The highest-ranking members that Offred encounters are the Commanders. There is an absence of any higher-ranking power whether it be a close-knit group of specific Commanders or one sole totalizing being. It begs to question if there is anything else above the hierarchy of Commanders but because these men must follow strict regulations suggests that there must be. Especially when considering how Offred's Commander displays both explicitly and implicitly a tiresome and bored attitude towards some of Gilead's regulations and values. If he finds them undesirable, why follow them? In addition, Atwood places the Commanders in contexts that highlight their ridiculousness, such as Commander Fred playing scrabble with Offred, something unimaginable in narratives such as *Nineteen Eighty-Four* where "Big Brother" is always watching.

A notable distinction that sets Margaret Atwood's novels apart from other works within the dystopian genre can be observed in the evolution of narrative perspective, particularly highlighted through the creation of *The Testaments*. In her earlier work, *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood employs a singular narrative voice through the character of Offred. This character serves as a lens through which readers experience the oppressive reality of Gilead, a totalitarian society characterized by severe repression and subjugation of women. Offred's thoughts, feelings, and personal history encapsulate her struggles within this harsh environment, allowing readers to connect deeply with her plight. However, this singular perspective also creates limitations; it confines the reader's understanding to Offred's individual experiences, which, while emotionally resonant, offers a narrow view of the broader societal landscape.

In contrast, with *The Testaments*, Atwood significantly broadens this narrative scope by introducing three additional narrators, each offering their unique viewpoints and experiences within the same oppressive society of Gilead. This strategic shift from a singular to a multifaceted narrative enriches the storytelling, as it allows for a more comprehensive and layered exploration of the complexities inherent in Gilead. The three narrators, whose diverse backgrounds

and personal histories intersect in various ways, contribute to a more diverse range of human experiences and resistance against the totalitarian regime. Their distinct voices not only enhance the depth of the narrative but also illuminate new dimensions of survival and defiance that were previously uncharted in Offred's isolated and limited narration.

Furthermore, the inclusion of multiple perspectives in *The Testaments* underscores the varied nature of oppression and resistance within Gilead. Each narrator reveals different facets of the experience, presenting nuanced insights that highlight the complexities of loyalty, betrayal, and hope amidst an oppressive regime. This broader narrative perspective introduces new possibilities and avenues for agency, which contrast sharply with the sense of helplessness that permeated Offred's story. By weaving together these divergent narratives, Atwood crafts a more intricate and hopeful vision of resistance, suggesting that even in the darkest of circumstances, the collective strength and resilience of women can forge pathways toward liberation and change. This evolution in narrative strategy not only enhances the reader's understanding of Gilead but also redefines the potential for hope within the dystopian genre itself, marking a significant development in Atwood's literary exploration of societal structures and human resilience.

This transformation in narrative perspective results in a more optimistic tone, which stands in stark contrast to the often bleak outlook typical of earlier dystopian literature. The interplay among the various narrators introduces a "horizon of hope" (147), as noted by Moylan, suggesting that even in the darkest circumstances, resilience and collective action can emerge. *The Testaments* thus challenges the conventional boundaries of dystopian storytelling, inviting readers to envision alternate futures that diverge from the despair and fatalism often found in the genre. Atwood's innovative approach enriches the narrative, transforming it into a compelling exploration of agency, resistance, and the potential for change within a repressive system.

2.2 Imposed authority over readers.

The Handmaid's Tale and *The Testaments* constitute significant contributions to the dystopian genre, their narratives extending beyond the act of storytelling, creating a profound and lasting impact on readers that engages them on multiple levels. At the heart of this distinction lies the sophisticated use of language, which operates as a crucial medium for conveying vital signals and information. This language plays an essential role in facilitating readers' development of a meaningful understanding of the complex narratives presented in both works.

Each meticulously chosen word and phrase does more than merely advance the plot; it encapsulates the lived experiences, struggles, and emotions of the characters, effectively inviting readers to immerse themselves in the intricacies of the dystopian worlds crafted by Atwood. The author's ability to evoke vivid imagery and profound emotional resonance ensures that readers are not just passive observers but active participants in engaging with the moral and ethical dilemmas portrayed. Furthermore, the narratives elevate language to a level where it becomes a vehicle for exploring themes of power, identity, and resistance, thus enhancing the reader's connection to the broader societal critiques embedded within the stories. Thus, the integration of language as both a narrative device and a means of emotional engagement solidifies the works' unique positions within the dystopian genre, demanding consideration well beyond their surface-level plots and inviting a comprehensive examination of their reflective, thought-provoking themes.

Drawing upon the theoretical framework provided by Wolfgang Iser, this dynamic highlights the interactive relationship between the text and its audience. The textual strategies employed in these novels challenge readers to actively participate in the interpretation process, blurring the lines between reader and narrative. As readers navigate the intricate layers of meaning embedded within the portrayal of power structures, gender dynamics, and societal norms, they are

compelled to confront their own perceptions and beliefs. The potency of language in these works amplifies this effect, as it shapes not only the story's atmosphere but also the emotional and intellectual responses elicited from those who engage with the texts.

Moreover, the stylistic choices and thematic depth found in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* resonate with contemporary societal issues, making the narratives particularly relevant for modern audiences. This relevance reinforces the totalizing effect of the texts, as readers are drawn to reflect upon the parallels between the fictional worlds and their own realities. Ultimately, the interplay of language, narrative structure, and reader engagement culminates in a rich tapestry of meaning that leaves a lasting impact, challenging individuals to reconsider their understanding of freedom, identity, and moral responsibility in an increasingly complex world.

As observed through the different mechanisms of oppression identified in the novels, through her narrative Atwood constructs a totalitarian society that engulfs readers, providing them with the harrowing experience of living under an authoritarian regime. The novels explore themes of oppression, control, and the desire for freedom, presenting a dystopian world where individuality is stripped away and replaced with a strict system of hierarchy. There are several strategies (i.e., ways to organize actualization) in which *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* impose authority on readers, similarly to their characters, that the present study connects to Iser's work. As he explains, "the strategies organize both the material of the text and the conditions under which that material is to be communicated" (*The Act of Reading*, 86). The difference in meaning when compared to Certeau's definition of the concept is identifiable when considering its functions. While Certeau links strategies to actions, carried out by an imposed system, that elaborate totalizing discourses (i.e. strategy presumes control); Iser's understanding of strategies is linked to the reading process, specifically how readers are guided by narrative techniques and/or elements implemented by the author. However, there is common ground to be found between both types of

strategies. Just as “strategies” in Certeau’s framework are deliberate attempts by dominant forces to regulate and organize social life, Iser’s strategies refer to the intentional choices made by authors to guide readers in their interpretations and evoke particular responses from them. Both understandings of “strategies” involve a certain level of control by part of a dominant force, Certeau focusing on larger and more empowered forces such as institutions while Iser’s focus is on the author as a dominant force. What differentiates them boils down to their application in distinct theoretical frameworks and their different purposes. Certeau employs the concept to analyze power dynamics and resistance in everyday life, whereas Iser employs it to examine the dynamics of textual interpretation and reader engagement in literature.

One prominent strategy employed in the narrative is the intricate world-building that characterizes the novel. The author offers vivid and detailed descriptions of Gilead, illustrating its oppressive structures and the rigid rituals that govern daily life within this dystopian society. The portrayal of Gilead immerses the reader in a setting that evokes a strong resemblance to historical totalitarian regimes, yet transcends mere imitation by reflecting the complexities of contemporary societal issues. As readers navigate through the text, they encounter a series of experiences that are not only harrowing but also hauntingly familiar, echoing the pervasive nature of oppression and control.

These oppressive experiences manifest repeatedly throughout the narrative, creating an atmosphere that remains unsettling regardless of how many times the text is revisited. Each reading invites the reader to further engage with the text, unveiling additional layers of meaning and resonance related to the ongoing struggles present in modern society. This characteristic of the world-building establishes a continuous yet non-uniform experience, presenting a succession of unique events and scenarios that serve as mirrors to prevailing social conditions.

The meticulous construction of Gilead's world acts as a powerful reminder that the lessons of the past are not confined to history; rather, they remain relevant

and tangible in the current landscape. By highlighting the parallels between historical oppression and potential future realities, the narrative provokes critical reflection on contemporary issues and the societal structures that enable them. The descriptive world-building thus emphasizes that the past is intricately intertwined with the present, suggesting that the trajectory of the current social climate could indeed shape a future that mirrors these darker facets of history, urging readers to remain vigilant and aware of the potential ramifications of societal complacency.

In the intricate narrative of Gilead, as depicted through Offred's personal account, a particularly harrowing ritual comes to the forefront, deeply entrenched in the society's fabric. This ritual, known as a "particution", serves as a visceral manifestation of the regime's brutal enforcement of its laws and moral codes. During this event, Offred finds herself a witness to a public execution, an act that is not executed in isolation but rather emerges from a collective frenzy. The individuals responsible for this execution are the Handmaids, women who have been stripped of their autonomy and are bound by their roles within the oppressive system.

In this specific instance, a man stands accused of committing rape, a heinous act that, according to the claims made against him, also resulted in the tragic death of an unborn child. The gravity of the accusation sends ripples of outrage through the assembled group, embodying the community's deep-seated desire for retribution. The ritualistic nature of the "particution" is underscored by the sudden command of the Aunts, whose authoritative whistle pierces the air, signaling the initiation of violence.

As the whistle echoes, the atmosphere shifts dramatically; the Handmaids, who are usually subjugated and silent, are galvanized into action. In a frenzy fueled by a mixture of pent-up rage, indoctrination, and the desire for communal justice, they unleash their collective fury upon the condemned man. This ritual not only exemplifies the breakdown of individual morality in favor of sanctioned mob violence, but it also serves as a grim reminder of the consequences of a society

stripped of compassion and humanity. The “participation” stands as a chilling representation of how the Gileadean regime manipulates the emotions of women, turning them into instruments of violence as they participate in the very injustice that oppresses them. Violence ensues among the congregated Handmaids,

There’s a surge forward, like a crowd at a rock concert in the former time, when the doors opened, that urgency coming like a wave through us. The air is bright with adrenalin, we are permitted anything and this is freedom, in my body also. I’m reeling, red spreads everywhere, but before the tide of cloth and bodies hits him Ofglen is shoving through the women in front of us, propelling herself with her elbows, left, right, and running towards him. She pushes him down, sideways, then kicks his head viciously, one, two, three times, sharp painful jabs with the foot, well-aimed. Now there are sounds, gasps, a low noise like growling, yells, and the red bodies tumble forward and I can no longer see, he’s obscured by arms, fists, feet. A high scream comes from somewhere, like a horse in terror [...]

He has become an it. (Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* 291-292)

The Handmaids form a striking and overwhelming sea of red, a visual manifestation that envelops not only the individual man positioned to be engulfed by this wave of crimson but also the Handmaids themselves, who are united in their representation. This powerful imagery poignantly illustrates the erosion of their individuality, as each Handmaid is subsumed into a collective madness, driven by an overwhelming force of violence and vengeance. In this chaotic moment, Offred’s inability to see the actual events unfurling, what is being done to the man, serves to shield readers from experiencing a graphic account of his torment.

Nevertheless, the impact of this scene is not diminished; rather, it is amplified through evocative auditory cues, such as gasps, growls, and shouts,

which stir the readers' imagination, providing enough sensory detail to allow them to infer the depths of the horror that remains unspoken. This use of sound as a narrative device creates an atmosphere that can evoke even deeper fears than explicit descriptions might achieve, suggesting that the reality of the situation could indeed be far more horrifying than anything described in straightforward terms.

Margaret Atwood skillfully urges readers to grapple with the frightening repercussions of unfettered authority by employing vivid imagery that resonates more strongly through sensory experiences, like sound and physical sensation, rather than through exhaustive recounting of events. For instance, Offred's account of Ofglen's purposeful kicks conveys a visceral impact that is far more profound than merely stating that Ofglen kicked the man three times. The deliberate choice of figurative language, coupled with selective omissions, enriches the narrative, crafting a more intense and nuanced portrayal of a society dominated by fear and control. This approach not only heightens the emotional resonance of the scene but also compels readers to more profoundly engage with the grim realities of the world Atwood depicts, reinforcing the chilling consequences that arise when power is left unchecked.

Margaret Atwood employs a first-person narrative perspective in her novel to assert a compelling authority over her readers, thereby shaping their understanding of the dystopian world she has created. Through the eyes of the protagonist, Offred, readers are invited to experience the profound restrictions, demeaning humiliations, and the omnipresent surveillance that characterize daily life in the totalitarian regime of Gilead. This narrative choice is particularly powerful, as it places readers directly into the experiences of an individual who is subjected to systemic oppression. By encouraging readers to inhabit the persona of a marginalized character, Atwood compels them to confront the pervasive nature of the authoritarian control that saturates the novel's setting.

The first-person perspective serves a dual function within the text. On one side, this approach acts to humanize Offred, allowing for a rich exploration of her

inner landscape. Readers gain access to her thoughts, emotions, and struggles, creating a deeply personal connection that encompasses her moments of joy, sorrow, hope, and fear. This intimate view not only enhances the narrative, enriching the storytelling experience, but also cultivates empathy and understanding toward individuals who endure the harsh realities of oppressive governance. Readers are not merely observing Offred's plight; they are engaging with her vulnerabilities, which fosters a sense of shared humanity.

Conversely, Atwood's use of the first-person perspective implicates readers in the broader themes of subjugation and complicity. By positioning them as passive observers to Offred's suffering, she challenges them to acknowledge their own potential roles within existing systems of power and control. This immersive narrative technique not only highlights the injustices that Offred faces but also encourages introspection regarding the moral implications of inaction in the face of tyranny. Readers are urged to consider their own positions within society and the ethical responsibilities that accompany awareness of oppression. Thus, Atwood's narrative strategy not only deepens the reader's emotional engagement but also prompts a critical examination of societal structures and individual agency in times of crisis.

In a pivotal moment within Margaret Atwood's narrative of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred vividly recounts one of the most critical rituals that defines her existence as a Handmaid, a ritual whose primary intention centers on procreation. Her narration is strikingly detailed and, in its explicitness, serves to draw readers into the harrowing circumstances she endures. This immersive storytelling invites readers to not only observe but to engage deeply with Offred's emotional and psychological state, effectively tethering them to her experience. As Offred undergoes this dehumanizing ceremony, readers are compelled to experience her profound anguish and the loss of agency alongside her.

In the ritualistic scene, Offred's perspective is framed in a chillingly intimate manner. She describes Serena Joy, arranged above her, in a position that underscores the unnatural nature of their roles. Serena is fully dressed, her body

positioned in a manner intended to reflect a twisted sense of communion. Offred lies between Serena's legs, her head resting against the other woman's stomach, with Serena's pubic bone pressing uncomfortably against the base of her skull. This physical arrangement symbolizes a grotesque confluence of bodies, yet it ultimately reveals the imbalanced dynamics of power; Serena's grip on Offred's hands signifies unity, but in reality, it underscores her dominance over the proceedings. The rings on Serena's left hand dig into Offred's fingers, an action laden with potential malice, perhaps serving as a reminder of the control Serena wields in this oppressive environment.

As Offred's red skirt is pulled up to her waist, exposing her to the Commander, a stark reality becomes evident. The Commander's actions are not framed as an expression of love or mutual connection; Offred refrains from using terms that might romanticize this encounter. With deliberate clarity, she refuses to label the experience as "making love," acknowledging that such terminology is wholly inappropriate for what transpires. Similarly, she dismisses the notion of "copulating," a term that implies mutual participation, as merely one-sided in this context. The word "rape" also fails to capture the full essence of her experience, as Offred recognizes that she has consented, albeit with limited options, to the ritual imposed upon her.

Through this lens, readers are pulled deeper into a narrative where Offred's personal struggle becomes emblematic of the larger societal constraints faced by all Handmaids. By navigating her conflicted feelings and the realities of her situation, readers cannot escape the oppressive atmosphere of Gilead. They become involuntarily implicated in Offred's plight, sharing in her suffering and grappling with the chilling authority that governs her existence. This experience of shared discomfort not only highlights the brutality of the ritual but serves as a profound commentary on the complexities of choice, consent, and the structures of power that dictate the lives of women in this dystopian world. Offred's body and that of the other Handmaids become a political battleground for ideological control as they are reduced to mere vessels of reproduction in a patriarchal society.

Through both of Atwood's novels, the female body is reduced to a means of political reproduction and subjugation, exploring how political control can be enforced through gendered narratives.

Additionally, the narrative structure of *The Handmaid's Tale* serves as a means of imposing authority on readers. Atwood employs a nonlinear storytelling technique, weaving together past and present events: "We wait, the clock in the hall ticks, Serena lights another cigarette, I get into the car. It's a Saturday morning, it's a September, we still have a car. Other people have had to sell theirs. My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 94). The narrative begins with a sense of anticipation as the house collectively awaits the arrival of their Commander, a moment laden with significance and tension. This expectation, however, is abruptly disrupted as the story shifts from the present into the protagonist's past. As memories unfold, they offer glimpses into Offred's previous life, rich with detail and emotional resonance. The reflections provide context to her current existence within the oppressive regime of Gilead, revealing the stark contrasts between past freedoms and present constraints.

This movement through time is not merely a linear progression; it is characterized by interruptions that mirror the disjointed and unsettling reality that Offred navigates daily. The transitions between chapters act as punctuation marks in her life, underscoring the fragmented nature of her experiences and thoughts. This narrative structure serves to immerse the readers deeply into the protagonist's psyche, allowing them to feel the disorientation and uncertainty prevalent in her life. The author's deliberate choice of such a scattered storytelling technique enhances the gravity of Offred's situation, compelling readers to engage intimately with her struggle and fostering a profound understanding of the societal constraints imposed on her.

The varying shifts in time and perspective throughout the narrative compel readers to engage actively with the text, thus ensuring that they remain vigilant and fully aware not only of the progression of the story but also of the underlying

power dynamics that influence it. Wolfgang Iser highlights the fundamental nature of these textual segments when he observes that, at their most basic level, they manifest within the context of the narrative structure. He notes that the plot often experiences abrupt interruptions or takes unexpected turns, which serve to disrupt the reader's linear comprehension of events. This disruption is not merely a technique of separation; rather, it presents a silent yet compelling invitation for readers to seek out the elusive connections that exist within the narrative framework, as articulated in his work *The Act of Reading* (196).

Atwood employs this method of narrative fragmentation as a means to reinforce the oppressive authority that governs the unfolding story. By presenting readers with a disjointed narrative, she creates specific moments of reading that necessitate an active search for the “missing links” Iser describes. This approach transforms readers into participants in the narrative process, as they must piece together the disjointed elements to form a cohesive understanding. Each reader's interpretation of the narrative's gaps and the connections they establish to fill those voids will differ, shaped by their subjective experiences and perspectives. Nevertheless, it is evident that an element of authority is consistently at work, whether overtly or subtly, guiding readers toward these narrative gaps. This dynamic invites them to engage with the text on a deeper level, fostering a sense of collaboration between the author and the audience in the construction of meaning within the story. The interaction not only enhances the reader's immersion in the text but also highlights the complexities of the power structures that the narrative seeks to convey.

Another manner with which Atwood imposes authority on readers is through her use of language. In this dystopian society, words and their meanings have been distorted, stripped of their original significance. The new vocabulary, such as “particicution”, “unwomen” (female enemies of state), and “salvaging” (public execution) serves as a constant reminder of the regime's power over language, effectively erasing individuality and critical thought. The theme of new vocabulary seems to repeat itself in dystopia literature, one prime example being

the “Newspeak” language created by Orwell in his novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. While both systems manipulate language for control, Gilead’s vocabulary enforces a rigid social order, and Newspeak aims to obliterate individual thought. On the one hand, “Newspeak” is designed to eliminate rebellious thoughts by simplifying language, suppressing complexity and critical thinking, thus limiting range of thought. On the other hand, Gilead’s vocabulary reinforces social roles. It is also much richer and diverse than “Newspeak”, endeavoring to include religious and historical allusions reflective of Gilead’s theocratic ideology. “Gilead” itself is borrowed from biblical passages, a mountainous region known as “Hill of testimony” (“Reference list – Gilead”), reflecting once again the theocratic ideology of The Republic of Gilead, but also alluding to the nature of Atwood’s novels. Both *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Testaments* are novels which narratives are delivered through testimonies. By immersing readers in this semantic-perversion, Atwood forces them to confront the manipulative nature of authoritarian rule.

As readers delve into the story, they become familiar with these terms, unknowingly adopting the language of the oppressor. These words carry the weight of Gilead’s ideology and social structure, and their repeated use within the context of the novels can make them seem ubiquitous and is ultimately embraced by readers either consciously or unconsciously. As the act of reading is carried out and readers are exposed to Gileadean language, domineering vocabulary becomes normalized. What was once an unfamiliar term, or an alternate meaning to a familiar term, is integrated into one’s own working lexicon. This adoption of the language can subtly influence how readers perceive and understand the dynamics of oppression and control depicted in the story. Atwood’s linguistic manipulation mirrors the insidious nature of Gilead itself, where language is used as a tool to suppress dissent and maintain control. This is a painful truth Agnes confronts in *The Testaments*. She states,

The day came when the locked wooden Bible box reserved for me would be brought out to the Reading Room and I would finally open

this most forbidden of books. I was very excited about it, but that morning Becka said, "I need to warn you."

"Warn me?" I said. "But it's holy."

"It doesn't say what they say it says."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I don't want you to be too disappointed." She paused. "I'm sure Aunt Estée meant well." Then she said, "Judges 19 to 21."

That was all she would tell me. (Atwood, *The Testaments* 302)

Furthermore, Atwood's playfulness with words in both novels serves as yet another means of manipulating her readers in the trade-off game of fictive transaction. She introduces wordplay throughout the novel, creating a sense of ambiguity and uncertainty. Iser argues that the reading pact involves a complex interplay where the text offers gaps and ambiguities that the reader actively engages with, using their own expectations and experiences to construct meaning. This interaction between text and reader is dynamic and results in the creation of meaning that is co-produced through the reading process.

Communication in literature, then, is a process set in motion and regulated not by a given code but by a mutually restrictive and magnifying interaction between the explicit and the implicit, between revelation and concealment. What is concealed spurs the reader into action, but this action is also controlled by what is revealed; the explicit in its turn is transformed when the implicit has been brought to light. (*The Act of Reading* 168-169)

In Margaret Atwood's work, particularly in *The Testaments*, Aunt Lydia exemplifies the author's distinctive wordplay, as seen in her statement: "Only dead people are allowed to have statues, but I have been given one while still alive. Already I am petrified" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 3). This intriguing statement opens a window into the layers of meaning embedded in her words. The initial

identification of pun is evident in the use of the term “petrified”, which can refer to both the literal notion of being turned into stone, akin to a statue, and the metaphorical sense of being frozen in fear or trepidation. The connection between the concepts of petrification and statues highlights a duality that is significant in understanding Aunt Lydia's predicament.

The word “petrified” suggests not only a physical transformation but also hints at a deeper emotional state characterized by anxiety regarding the implications of her existence and the future that awaits her. This notion is further complicated by the inclusion of the word “still” before “alive”. This choice of wording implies a certain resignation or awareness on Aunt Lydia's part; she acknowledges that her life is precarious and that the traditional association of statues with the deceased casts a long shadow over her current state. Statues, as artifacts honoring the dead, underscore a profound tension in her existence.

Aunt Lydia's assertion that she has received a statue while alive raises unsettling questions about her fate. The narrative context suggests that she is acutely aware of the impending end that looms over her. This awareness aligns with her role as a double agent, navigating the dangerous waters of a repressive society where her survival hinges on a delicate balance of compliance and subversion. Ultimately, her actions and the convoluted path she traverses will culminate in her conforming to the official requirements necessary to secure a statue, an ironic twist that encapsulates her struggle for identity and legacy.

Moreover, the phrasing of “still” alongside “alive” paints a vivid picture of her current existence. While she may be a living, breathing individual, her freedom is severely curtailed, reflecting the oppressive conditions she faces. The juxtaposition of these words encapsulates the paradox of her situation: she is alive, yet constrained within the rigid parameters imposed by her environment. Thus, she embodies a state that resonates with the concept of being both “still” and “alive”, a living monument trapped in a society that seeks to minimize her agency and render her existence a mere shadow of what it could be. In this way,

Aunt Lydia becomes an actual living statue, symbolizing the complex interplay between life, fear, and the societal constructs that dictate her reality.

Additionally, Aunt Lydia's statement, "Not for nothing do we at Ardua Hall say 'Pen Is Envy'" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 140), serves as a significant commentary on the socio-political dynamics within the narrative. This phrase encapsulates the underlying tensions experienced by women who are systematically denied the fundamental rights to read and write. Within this restrictive environment, the act of writing or possessing the ability to express oneself through written language becomes a symbol of power that is fiercely coveted yet perpetually out of reach for these women. The clever wordplay inherent in the phrase extends beyond a mere observation of literary deprivation; it subtly transforms "Pen" and "Is" into "Penis", thus invoking the concept of "Penis Envy". This transformation highlights the pervasive impact of patriarchal structures, elevating the discussion to a critique of gender inequality. It illustrates how the denial of intellectual freedom to women is intertwined with their status within a male-dominated hierarchy. The phrase thus not only reflects the aspirations and frustrations of women within the narrative but also serves to critique the broader societal norms that perpetuate such inequalities. By intertwining the notions of envy and the symbolic representation of male dominance, Aunt Lydia's response poignantly exposes the complexities of female identity and the profound impact of a patriarchal system that seeks to suppress women's voices and agency.

The intentional and strategic use of language in Margaret Atwood's works, particularly in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*, serves to engage readers in a complex dance of interpretation, compelling them to scrutinize the implications of the words they encounter. Atwood's linguistic precision and nuanced vocabulary are not simply artistic choices; they are deliberate tools designed to provoke critical thinking and foster a deeper understanding of the underlying themes. By carefully crafting her narratives, she embarks on a formidable interrogation of the concept of truth itself.

In a societal landscape characterized by the rampant spread of propaganda and the widespread influence of misinformation, the writings of Margaret Atwood serve as a critical lens through which the assumed reliability of commonly accepted narratives is systematically called into question. Atwood's literary works do not merely present stories but engage in a sophisticated examination of how language functions within those narratives. Her prose compels readers to scrutinize the very foundation of the words they encounter.

Through her intricate storytelling, Atwood unveils the ways in which language serves as a double-edged sword, capable of both illuminating truths and obscuring realities. Readers find themselves confronted with essential inquiries regarding the nature of words and their meanings. Is a term truly reflective of its standard definition? What happens when the language we encounter in everyday life is manipulated or distorted? Atwood's narratives encourage an exploration of these vital considerations, prompting individuals to contemplate the implications of linguistic choices and the potential for misrepresentation.

As readers engage with her work, they become increasingly aware of the nuanced relationship between language and perception. The stories Atwood weaves invite a deeper reflection on whether the words that populate both public discourse and personal interactions can be trusted to convey an authentic representation of the truth. In a world where the boundaries between fact and fiction are often blurred, her writings challenge individuals to remain vigilant and critical of the information they consume, advocating for a more discerning approach to understanding the complexities of the modern experience. Through this engagement, Atwood not only entertains but also educates, pushing readers to navigate the fragile landscape of communication with greater awareness and critical insight.

The inquiries posed within the literary works resonate profoundly, leaving a lasting impression on the minds of readers that persists long after they have completed the final chapter. Margaret Atwood demonstrates a remarkable ability

to instill a pervasive sense of doubt concerning the narratives that are constructed and disseminated by those occupying positions of power. She challenges the prevailing assumption that language can serve as a neutral and reliable vehicle for truth, suggesting instead that it often becomes a tool for manipulation and distortion.

In this exploration, Atwood does not merely highlight the inherent fragility of truth in contexts where it is subject to reinterpretation and deceit. She emphasizes the critical need for readers to actively engage with the texts and the ideas they encounter, which are pivotal in shaping their understanding of the world. This active engagement becomes essential in a landscape where information is frequently filtered through various biases and agendas.

Moreover, the lingering sense of uncertainty that Atwood cultivates serves as a compelling reminder of the multifaceted nature of communication and its inherent complexities. In an era characterized by an abundance of competing narratives and perspectives, this realization underscores the necessity for careful discernment. Readers are encouraged to question the validity of the information presented to them, fostering a more informed and cautious approach to the narratives that permeate contemporary society.

CHAPTER 3: TACTICS OF RESISTANCE.

In Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*, resistance against the oppressive regime of Gilead is a central theme. Both novels explore various tactics² of resistance through their characters and plotlines. Recognizing and understanding actions of insurrection in these novels is important for gaining insight into human resilience, critically reflecting on power structures, fostering empathy and engagement, exploring ethical questions, and deepening literary analysis. These elements together help readers appreciate the complexity of resistance and its significance both within the novels and in the real world. This chapter explores the tactics of resistance present in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*.

The analysis is divided into two sections. The first section centers on resistance inside of Gilead. That is, the resistance present inside the narratives, highlighting key events from the novels where these are clearly evidenced. Much like the methodology utilized in Chapter 2, the analysis of the tactics of resistance present in both novels are based on the discussion developed in section 1.1 and 1.2 in Chapter 1. However, as opposed to the analysis carried out in Chapter 2, the purpose is to determine the tactics of resistance manifested in the novels by examining fragments that combat Therborn's mechanisms of ideological domination or are in conflict with the characteristics of totalitarianism. The second section focuses on reader resistance. In other words, the tactics supplied by the author in order for readers to carry out their own acts of resistance. Once more, this section is heavily guided by Wolfgang Iser's Reader-Response Theory discussed in section 1.3 in Chapter 1 due to the active role of the reader in interpreting a text. Strategies are implemented in the novels in an effort to guide and regulate readers' comprehension. Nonetheless, Iser's theory recognizes a

² As employed by Michel de Certeau in his work *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Certeau, through his concept of "tactics," underscores how individuals creatively navigate and manipulate cultural products to suit their own needs and desires.

myriad of interpretations that readers may develop, thus signaling a degree of reader agency.

3.1 The Rebellion Within

In his, *Totalitarianism: The Basics*, Phillip W. Gray articulates a profound concern that reverberates throughout the genre of dystopian literature. This concern centers on the unsettling possibility that a totalitarian regime, once it consolidates sufficient power and control over its citizens, could achieve a state of permanence. The implications of such a scenario are dire; a population subjected to the oppressive mechanisms of totalitarian rule may find itself trapped in a structure that not only limits its freedom but also stifles any desire for liberation. It raises a crucial dilemma: the extent to which individuals, under extreme repression, may become conditioned to accept their plight, potentially leading to apathy or acceptance of their subjugation (107-108).

Gray further observes an important historical trend that counters this bleak outlook. While the fear of enduring totalitarian control is a common theme in literature and political discourse, it is noteworthy that, with a few significant exceptions, the vast majority of totalitarian regimes that have emerged throughout history have ultimately failed. This observation invites a deeper analysis of the dynamics of power and resistance, suggesting that, despite the formidable nature of such regimes, the human spirit often finds a way to challenge authoritarian governance. The historical record demonstrates that even the most repressive systems are not immune to dissent, revolution, or transformative social movements that can lead to their eventual downfall. Thus, the fear of an unbreakable totalitarian grip, while valid within fictional narratives, is tempered by the reality of historical change and the enduring quest for freedom among oppressed populations (107-108).

The novels *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* by Margaret Atwood depict dystopian societies where women are oppressed and controlled by

totalitarian regimes. In these narratives, resistance plays a crucial role in challenging the status quo and fighting for freedom and equality. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, women are reduced to their reproductive abilities and forced to bear children for the ruling class. The main character, Offred, is a Handmaid who secretly rebels against the regime and forms connections with other women who are also resisting in their own ways. In *The Testaments*, the sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale*, the story continues with a focus on the next generation of women who are fighting against the oppressive regime.

Through their complex characters and intricate plots, Atwood reveals that resistance is not solely a grand act of defiance but often manifests in subtle, everyday actions that challenge the status quo. The protagonists engage in nuanced forms of rebellion that underscore their resilience and agency amidst systemic oppression. These forms include acts of defiance, subversion, and solidarity. Women in these dystopian societies find ways to communicate with each other, share knowledge, and organize resistance movements. They use code words, symbols, and secret meetings to challenge the regime's authority and support each other in their struggle for freedom.

Organized resistance manifests as one of the most overt and structured forms of opposition against oppressive regimes, as depicted in *The Handmaid's Tale*. A significant element within this narrative is the underground resistance group known as Mayday. This group is portrayed as a vital force striving to undermine the authoritarian grip of Gilead, facilitating the smuggling of both information and individuals out of the regime's clutches. The escape plans that involve multiple characters not only serve as pivotal plot points but also symbolize the broader human instinct to challenge tyranny. Through these actions, the narrative vividly illustrates the various avenues through which individuals can assert their autonomy in the face of overwhelming oppression.

Despite the presence of this organized resistance, the novel maintains a level of ambiguity regarding the actual existence of Mayday. This uncertainty largely stems from the limitations inherent in Offred's perspective as the protagonist.

Offred is not an active member of the resistance group, which confines her understanding and knowledge to what she can observe and deduce through her interactions with others. Her testimony, therefore, becomes a double-edged sword: while it offers insights into the oppressive reality of Gilead, it simultaneously constrains the revelation of any concrete proof of Mayday's operations.

However, the narrative provides tantalizing hints that suggest the group's reality. Offred's interactions with various characters, some of whom may have connections to Mayday, weave a complex tapestry of subterfuge and hope. Furthermore, the mention of Offred's eventual escape from Gilead in the Historical Notes at the conclusion of the novel serves as a compelling reference point. This moment not only implies the existence of a functioning resistance but also confirms that such efforts can lead to tangible outcomes despite the oppressive environment.

The existence of Mayday is further substantiated in the sequel, *The Testaments*, where the themes of resistance and rebellion are explored in greater depth. Through these narratives, the notion of organized resistance transcends mere speculation, becoming a powerful testament to the resilience of the human spirit against systemic control. The interplay between personal experiences and collective rebellion underscores the enduring struggle for freedom, emphasizing that even in the darkest of circumstances, the seeds of dissent can take root and flourish.

The novels present a more structured form of resistance epitomized by the character of Aunt Lydia. At first glance, Aunt Lydia embodies the archetype of compliance within the oppressive regime of Gilead; however, her actions reveal a complex duality. Despite her role as a figure who appears to support the system, she operates covertly to destabilize it from within. Her position allows her to manipulate Gilead's rigid structures for her own benefit, reflecting her deep understanding of the regime's dynamics. Aunt Lydia employs sophisticated psychological strategies to exert control over the Handmaids, embodying a blend

of intimidation and cultivation of loyalty. This sophisticated manipulation enables her to wield authority while subtly nurturing the seeds of dissent among the Handmaids.

For instance, Aunt Lydia utilizes grotesque accounts of punishment to instill an atmosphere of fear. These narratives serve a dual purpose: they are designed to terrify the Handmaids into compliance while simultaneously engendering a sense of loyalty that arises from the instinct for survival. Offred recalls the brutal punishment meted out to her friend Moira after Moira attempts to escape from the confines of their training facility. The punishment takes place in a room that is an emblem of dread, well-known to the Handmaids, where they would never voluntarily tread. The details Offred provides illustrate the harsh reality of their world. Moira is subjected to a horrific ordeal that leaves her unable to walk for a week, her feet rendered too swollen to fit into her shoes, a consequence of her first offense. The brutality inflicted, “using steel cables, frayed at the ends” (Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* 102), reveals the regime’s complete disregard for the Handmaids’ well-being. Aunt Lydia’s chilling reminder that for the purposes of Gilead, someone’s “feet and hands are not essential” (Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* 102) underscores the dehumanization prevalent within the society.

In the aftermath of Moira’s punishment, her condition serves as a stark reminder of the regime’s cruelty. Offred observes the camaraderie that blossoms in response to Moira’s suffering. The Handmaids rally around her, showcasing a form of solidarity that arises from their shared experience and mutual vulnerability. The necessity of physically carrying Moira to classes speaks volumes about their bond. The act of pilfering extra packets of sugar from the cafeteria and covertly delivering them to Moira exemplifies a small but significant act of defiance against their oppressors. While these acts may seem trivial in the grand scheme of their oppression, they reflect a critical moment of unity among the Handmaids. The collective “We” used by Offred to narrate these acts of kindness conveys a sense of shared agency that transcends individualism. This choice of language emphasizes that it is not merely Offred’s compassion for Moira that is at play, but

a broader communal effort among the Handmaids to support one another in the face of systematic oppression.

The shared decision to assist Moira in such a clandestine manner becomes a quiet rebellion against the regime's attempts to instill fear. While fear functions as an effective means of control, it thrives in the unknown. By banding together, the Handmaids gain the capacity to confront fear through their shared understanding of the consequences within their world. Therborn articulates the concept of fear as an ideological form of domination, yet the Handmaids' actions illuminate their ability to resist this domination, albeit subtly. Ultimately, the solidarity displayed in their small acts of rebellion, as represented through their cooperation to support Moira, serves as a reminder that even within the constraints of a repressive regime, the spirit of rebellion can manifest in forms both profound and quiet.

Another manner in which Aunt Lydia exhibits a nuanced form of resistance is by skillfully navigating the intricacies of Gilead's political framework. Through her strategic maneuvering, she establishes alliances with influential high-ranking officials within the regime. This calculated approach not only serves to fortify her own position but also enables her to safeguard her interests and those of the women under her charge. By cultivating relationships with key figures in the ruling hierarchy, she deftly ensures that her voice is heard and her authority remains intact in a system that is designed to suppress individuality and dissent.

Her ability to curry favor with powerful individuals exemplifies a level of strategic thinking that is essential for survival in such a repressive environment. Aunt Lydia's actions reveal a deep understanding of the political dynamics at play, allowing her to operate effectively within a structure that rewards compliance and punishes opposition. While outwardly appearing to conform to the expectations of Gilead, she subtly asserts her influence and fosters a protective layer around herself and those she seeks to support. This blend of outward compliance and behind-the-scenes manipulation illustrates the complexity of her character and highlights the lengths to which she is willing to go to maintain her position in a

society that continually seeks to undermine it. This is evident in her following testimony:

The Pearl girls were originally my idea [...] but, being no fool or at least not that kind of fool, I'd let Commander Judd take credit for the plan. Officially, the Pearl Girls report only to me, as it would be unseemly for the Commander to involve himself in the details of what is essentially women's work; though of course I must pass along to him anything I deem either necessary or unavoidable. Too much and I'd lose control, too little and I'd fall under suspicion. (Atwood, *The Testaments* 64)

Aunt Lydia's relationship with power and resistance is deeply multifaceted, illustrating a character who navigates the confines of an oppressive regime while simultaneously seeking ways to subvert it. Her actions align with Therborn's concept of ideological domination, specifically the notion of accommodation. This process describes a form of acquiescence in which those in power are obeyed because the subjugated are conditioned to prioritize other aspects of their lives over their own oppression or the potential for an alternative governing system (Therborn 95). Despite being enmeshed in Gilead's patriarchal framework, Aunt Lydia remains acutely aware of her own ambition for authority. Her relentless pursuit of power is not merely for personal gain; it serves a larger purpose, the accumulation of critical information that could ultimately facilitate Gilead's undoing. While she outwardly projects an image of contentment and compliance with her prescribed role, her internal landscape is rife with aspirations and possibilities. These latent ambitions, driven by an acute awareness of the systemic injustices around her, simmer beneath the surface, poised for the opportune moment to manifest into action. Thus, Aunt Lydia epitomizes the tension between compliance and rebellion within a repressive society, highlighting the complexity of her character in a world defined by rigid hierarchies and gendered roles.

In *The Testaments*, Aunt Lydia meticulously catalogs her experiences and observations, utilizing the written word as a means of resistance against the oppressive regime of Gilead. This act of keeping a record is not merely an outlet for her thoughts; it is a powerful method of preserving the truth of her lived experiences. By documenting her life, she actively undermines the dominant narrative propagated by Gilead, challenging its falsehoods and moral pretensions. The specific tools of her trade, a bottle of blue drawing ink, a fountain pen, and carefully trimmed notebook pages, symbolize both her creativity and the constraints within which she operates. These items are not just instruments of writing; they represent her determination to communicate hidden truths in a society that seeks to silence dissent. Her choice of a concealed location for this writing underscores the gravity of her actions. It reflects the inherent danger associated with her need to express herself in a world where such expressions are strictly forbidden.

Aunt Lydia grapples with the nature of her narrative and the implications of her role in recording the events around her. On certain days, she perceives herself as a "Recording Angel", a figure gathering the sins and transgressions of Gilead, including her own complicity in its machinations. This introspective view highlights her moral struggle and the weight of her conscience. However, she also experiences moments of doubt regarding the significance of her writings, questioning whether she is, in essence, engaging in trivial gossip rather than imparting substantive truths. This duality reveals the complexity of her character and her predicament within Gilead's stringent societal structure.

As one of the central figures in *The Testaments*, Aunt Lydia serves as a conduit for recounting the narrative of her life before and during the establishment of Gilead. Through her writings, she conveys not only the personal toll that the regime has taken on her but also the broader implications of the society in which she lives. Her reflections and observations provide invaluable insights into the inner workings of Gilead, portraying a landscape marred by hypocrisy and moral degradation. In doing so, she invites readers to engage with the harsh realities of

her world, emphasizing the importance of memory and truth as forms of resistance against oppression.

Through her perspective, readers are offered a detailed account that bridges the past and the present, drawing attention to the societal transformations that have taken place. This narrative approach mirrors the structure found in *The Handmaid's Tale*, where Offred's own recollections serve as windows into life before the rise of Gilead, illustrating not only the origins of this oppressive regime but also its gradual development into a totalitarian state. Such narrative techniques are characteristic of protagonists within dystopian literature, as their testimonies often encapsulate a complex relationship with memory. The act of recalling and articulating what once existed acts as a subtle form of defiance against authoritative forces that strive to control the narrative and shape reality according to their own ideologies.

Tom Moylan provides a critical examination of this phenomenon in his work from 2000, highlighting how the hegemonic systems manipulate and limit collective memory. According to Moylan, these systems tend to confine memory to a longing for an imagined golden age, one that reflects the idealized values and principles of the prevailing power structure. In contrast, the dystopian protagonist engages in a reclamation of memory, accessing narratives that have been suppressed or obscured. This engagement is not merely nostalgic; it has a forward-looking aspect that empowers individuals by challenging oppressive narratives. As these protagonists reconstruct their pasts, they begin to deconstruct the official stories propagated by those in power, thereby reaffirming alternative perspectives and modes of existence. This process of remembering becomes an act of liberation, enabling characters to envision possibilities beyond the constraints imposed by their current realities (149-150). Through Aunt Lydia's reflections, readers witness the potential of memory as a tool for resistance, underscoring its vital role in crafting a broader understanding of agency and identity within a repressive framework.

In turn, Offred employs various subtle forms of resistance that manifest primarily through her cultivation of inner thoughts and vivid memories from her past. These recollections serve as a vital means of rebellion against the oppressive regime that seeks to dictate her identity and dominate her consciousness. In a society where external control is paramount, the preservation of her inner world becomes an act of defiance. By reflecting on her experiences and engaging in internal dialogues, Offred asserts her individuality and reclaims a semblance of autonomy that the regime systematically tries to eradicate.

Offred's use of memory and imagination becomes a tool of resistance. Her body, which has become a machine for procreation, is also a site of poetic defiance. Offred's internal monologue during the Ceremony, described previously, reclaims the experience as something personal and resistance instead of a state-sanctioned sexual assault. Thus, through language, memory, and collective action, the body starts to become more than the site of control but indeed a symbol of subversion, agency, and, possibly, defiance. While this fact may be physically repressive toward the women in Atwood's world, the places where they can reclaim bodies, poetically reframe experiences, and act autonomously become points of tremendous resistance against the ideological elements in positioning subordinating oppression onto these women. Through this poetization, Atwood imagines how bodies, once controlled, can be transformed into powerful tools of personal and collective rebellion.

One particularly illuminating moment in her internal monologue illustrates her complex relationship with authority figures, specifically the Commander. Offred admits, "Occasionally I try to put myself in his position. I do this as a tactic, to guess in advance how he may be moved to behave towards me" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 221). This insight reveals her strategic thinking in navigating the power dynamics inherent in her situation. In this context, she recognizes the necessity of understanding the motivations and emotions of those in positions of power. It underscores her awareness of the precarious nature of her existence

and the importance of adapting her behavior accordingly to influence her circumstances.

Moreover, Offred grapples with the paradox of power as she contemplates the Commander's role in her life. She expresses a sense of disbelief regarding her own potential to exert influence over him, stating, "It's difficult for me to believe I have power over him, of any sort, but I do" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 221). This acknowledgment highlights the nuanced layers of power within their interactions. Even in a relationship defined by stark inequalities, Offred's cognitive resistance allows her to assert her agency, albeit in a limited and covert manner. Through these reflections, she engages in a form of resistance that is deeply psychological, effectively undermining the regime's attempts to strip her of her identity and reduce her to mere functionality. In doing so, Offred reaffirms her humanity and the importance of her inner life as a battleground against the despotism that seeks to define her existence.

Offred's secret relationship with Nick, coupled with her participation in the underground resistance group known as Mayday, underscores her personal rebellion against the stringent and dehumanizing norms imposed by Gilead. These clandestine interactions reveal her struggle to maintain a sense of identity and autonomy in a society that seeks to strip her of both. By engaging in these forbidden relationships and covert activities, Offred asserts her individuality in opposition to the totalitarian regime that confines her existence to rigid roles and expectations.

The affair with Nick serves not only as an emotional refuge but also as a critical assertion of her humanity. In a world where female agency is systematically dismantled, this intimate connection becomes a vital form of resistance. It is a reclaiming of her body and desires, which the regime aims to control and suppress. The connection with Nick stands as a testament to her refusal to remain passive in the face of oppression, allowing her to experience moments of genuine affection and connection that Gilead forbids.

Additionally, Offred's involvement with Mayday represents another layer of her defiance. This underground movement symbolizes hope and collective action against the oppressive structures of Gilead. By participating in this resistance, Offred aligns herself with a broader struggle for freedom and justice, transcending her individual plight to become part of a larger narrative of insurrection. These secretive relationships and activities serve as essential mechanisms for reclaiming her autonomy and resisting the pervasive dehumanization characteristic of Gilead's regime. Through these acts of rebellion, Offred not only defies the constraints imposed upon her but also embodies the enduring human spirit that yearns for liberation and self-determination.

The Handmaid's Tale and *The Testaments* present a multifaceted examination of resistance against oppressive systems, highlighting a spectrum of strategies employed by individuals and collectives in their struggle for autonomy and justice. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the focus is primarily on the nuanced, personal acts of defiance carried out by the protagonist, Offred. Her subtle forms of rebellion ranging from the mere act of recalling her past to moments of clandestine communication underscore the psychological resilience of individuals in the face of dehumanizing circumstances. These narratives emphasize how personal acts of resistance can be both a means of survival and a form of protest against an authoritarian regime that seeks to erase individuality and agency.

In contrast, *The Testaments* shifts its emphasis toward more organized and strategic forms of rebellion. It explores how collective actions and alliances can amplify the struggle against oppression. The narrative introduces a broader array of characters and perspectives, illustrating the complexities and challenges inherent in mobilizing resistance efforts against a deeply entrenched system of control. This sequel emphasizes the importance of solidarity and collaboration among women in overcoming the pervasive threats posed by Gilead's autocracy, suggesting that greater strength is often found in unity.

Together, these two works offer a comprehensive exploration of resistance, illustrating that while individual acts of defiance are crucial, they are often part of

a larger tapestry of rebellion that involves collective action and strategic planning. By examining both personal and organized resistance, the texts provide a deep understanding of the ways in which individuals and groups navigate oppressive environments, revealing the intricate dynamics of power, agency, and the human spirit's relentless pursuit of freedom. The contrast between the intimate, personal struggles depicted in *The Handmaid's Tale* and the broader, more coordinated efforts showcased in *The Testaments* enriches the discourse on resistance, showing that the fight against tyranny can take various forms, each vital in its context.

3.2 Reader Resistance.

Wolfgang Iser's work, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, published in 1980, provides a comprehensive examination of the complex dynamics between readers and texts. Iser's theory focuses on the concept of active engagement between the reader and the text, emphasizing the role of the reader in constructing meaning and interpreting the text. By employing these tactics, readers are encouraged to question, interpret, and challenge the author's intentions, thereby liberating themselves from the constraints of the author's authority.

One of the key tactics used to facilitate this process is the concept of "gaps" or "absences" within the text. Iser argues that these gaps or ambiguities serve as points of entry for the reader to actively engage with the text, filling in the missing pieces and creating their own interpretations. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood strategically incorporates gaps in the narrative, leaving certain details ambiguous or open to interpretation. This allows readers to engage in a process of active reading, questioning and interpreting the text for themselves, rather than passively accepting the author's authority.

Central to this exploration is the character of Offred, the protagonist, whose internal monologue is marked by significant gaps that elicit a multitude of

questions regarding her lived experiences and the overarching societal framework in which she navigates her existence. These deliberate omissions serve a dual purpose: they engender a palpable sense of uncertainty while simultaneously stimulating a more profound investigation into the motivations, personal histories, and conflicts faced by both Offred and the individuals who populate her world.

For instance, during a visit to the Wall, Offred encounters a disturbing display that encapsulates the harsh realities of her society. She describes the sight of three new bodies hanging on the Wall (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 53), marking them as victims of a regime that enforces brutal codes of conduct. One of these individuals is a priest, who is still clothed in the traditional black cassock. This detail is emblematic of a past that has been forcibly altered; it suggests a ritualistic adherence to historical norms even as society has evolved, perhaps deteriorated, over time. Offred notes that this attire was imposed for the trial, despite the fact that such garments had been abandoned years ago, coinciding with the onset of the secret wars that reshaped their world. The very mention of these wars, however, is shrouded in ambiguity, as Atwood provides no further context or explanation. This omission is striking, as it leaves readers with an incomplete understanding of the events that led to the current state of affairs, thereby inviting speculation.

Furthermore, the two other bodies are presented with purple placards identifying their supposed crime as "Gender Treachery." This classification raises critical questions about the nature of gender in this dystopian reality, the implications of such transgressions, and the societal mechanisms that govern punishment. Offred's reference to the war, which remains unexplained, compels readers to engage in a cognitive process of filling in these disturbing gaps with their interpretations, as they contemplate the significance of Gender Treachery and the social dynamics at play.

Through these deliberate gaps in the narrative, Atwood effectively encourages readers to reflect on the complexities of Offred's reality, prompting them to consider the socio-political structures that inform her daily existence. The

omissions not only highlight the protagonist's isolation and the oppressive forces surrounding her but also serve as a mirror reflecting the reader's understanding of the broader historical and cultural contexts that shape the unfolding story. Thus, the narrative functions as a powerful tool for critical engagement, drawing attention to the importance of understanding the underlying factors that contribute to individual experiences within a repressive society.

As readers immerse themselves in Offred's narrative, they are drawn into a complex web of her subjective experiences, prompting them to confront essential questions regarding the trustworthiness of her account. This theme of reliability comes sharply into focus following Offred's recounting of her friend Moira's second escape attempt. In a moment of reflection, Offred articulates, "This is a reconstruction. All of it is a reconstruction. It's a reconstruction now, in my head, as I lie flat on my single bed rehearsing what I should or shouldn't have said, what I should or shouldn't have done, how I should have played it" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 144). This declaration underscores the fluid nature of memory and the subjective interpretation of past events, revealing that her narrative is not merely a straightforward recounting but rather a reimagining influenced by her current mindset and circumstances.

The statement signifies a profound uncertainty that compels readers to engage in a more thorough analysis of Offred's identity formation and her perception of the oppressive world surrounding her. Moreover, this uncertainty in Offred's storytelling invites readers to step back from the primary narrative thread and critically interrogate the authorial choices embedded within her account. The act of reconstruction that Offred describes raises significant questions about the nature of truth in storytelling, the impact of oppression on personal narratives, and the broader implications of such a narrative within the context of societal control. By actively interpreting her inner life and the nuanced ways she resists the totalitarian ideology imposed upon her, readers engage in an act that transcends mere observation. This engagement becomes a powerful statement against the

oppressive forces within the text, transforming the act of reading into a collective act of rebellion.

Additionally, the use of multiple perspectives and voices within the narrative is a significant strategy that effectively empowers readers to transcend the confines of the author's authority. In Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments*, this approach is vividly illustrated through a carefully constructed multi-narrative framework that incorporates the distinct voices of three central characters: Aunt Lydia, Agnes, and Daisy. Each character brings forth a unique lens through which the reader can explore the complexities of life in the oppressive regime of Gilead, offering insights shaped by their individual experiences and values.

Through the adoption of this multi-voiced technique, Atwood not only enriches the narrative but also invites readers to engage in a critical examination of the reliability of the narrators. The existence of diverse viewpoints serves to challenge the notion of a singular truth, compelling readers to question the validity of each character's account. The presence of many different elements enhances the complexity of the story, indicating that reality is relative and influenced by individual viewpoints. Atwood's deliberate choice to include these varying voices encourages readers to consider alternative interpretations of the events and themes presented in the novel. Rather than passively accepting the author's viewpoint, audiences are prompted to actively engage with the text. They are urged to analyze, compare, and contrast the distinct experiences of Aunt Lydia, Agnes, and Daisy, which fosters a deeper understanding of the intricate dynamics at play within the story.

By empowering readers through this multi-faceted narrative, *The Testaments* becomes not only a commentary on the disturbing realities of Gilead but also an invitation for readers to challenge the authoritative voice of the text. This engagement nurtures independent thought, allowing readers to draw their own conclusions and construct personal meanings from the narrative's complexities. Ultimately, Atwood's innovative storytelling approach enhances the

reader's experience, transforming them from passive recipients of a story into active participants in the exploration of its themes and implications.

One of the significant tactics employed to enable readers to transcend the confines of the author's authority is the integration of metafictional elements within the narrative. Metafiction can be defined as a literary technique characterized by a self-awareness that prompts the text to draw attention to its own constructed nature. This approach invites readers to engage in a meta-cognitive exercise, prompting them to contemplate not only the story being told but also the very process of reading and the nature of fiction itself. In the works of Margaret Atwood, particularly in *The Handmaid's Tale* and its sequel *The Testaments*, metafictional devices are skillfully interwoven into the fabric of the narrative, effectively destabilizing the traditional boundaries demarcating fiction from reality.

In both novels, Atwood employs epilogues that serve a dual purpose, concluding the narrative arc while simultaneously presenting a framework that positions the reader as an active participant in discerning the truth behind the fiction. Specifically, these epilogues are crafted as partial transcripts from the proceedings of academic symposiums focused on Gileadean Studies, designated as the twelfth and thirteenth meetings. By framing the testimonies and experiences recounted in both novels as potentially reliable historical documentation, Atwood invites readers to engage critically with the text. The testimonies presented within this scholarly context suggest layers of authenticity and reliability that compel readers to scrutinize the narratives they have just consumed.

In the twelfth symposium, the keynote address is delivered by Professor Pieixoto, who presents a lecture titled "Problems of Authentication in Reference to *The Handmaid's Tale*." This title itself foreshadows the complexities surrounding the reliability of Offred's narrative, which readers have likely just immersed themselves in. Pieixoto opens his talk with a joke, a rhetorical choice that stands in stark contrast to the grave and often unsettling themes explored within the novel. This juxtaposition serves to both disarm the audience and

establish an ironic undertone as he proceeds to announce his intentions regarding the manuscript under discussion.

Pieixoto articulates his focus on the manuscript with the phrase “soi-disant” (a French term that translates to “self-styled” or “so-called” in English. It’s used to describe someone who claims a particular title or identity, often implying that the claim may not be entirely legitimate or widely accepted), implying a level of skepticism regarding its authenticity. He underscores that the document the audience is considering is not the original version, adding a layer of complexity to the conversation about authenticity and truth. He articulates, “The item in its pristine state consisted of [...] approximately thirty tape cassettes” (Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* 313). This disclosure not only highlights the medium of the original narrative but also points to the challenges involved in preserving and interpreting the material. The mention of reconstructing a machine capable of playing the tapes reinforces the notion that the process of archiving and transcribing these testimonies is fraught with difficulties, both technical and interpretative.

The meticulous nature of the transcription work that Pieixoto references further emphasizes the tension between the act of storytelling and the preservation of truth. Through this scholarly lens, Atwood compels readers to reconsider the narratives they have just engaged with, prompting them to scrutinize the authenticity of the experiences relayed within the text. The epilogues serve not merely as a conclusion but as a critical interrogation of the narratives, thus fostering a deeper intellectual engagement with the themes of power, truth, and representation woven throughout both novels. This layered approach ultimately transforms the reader’s role from passive consumer to an active participant in the discourse surrounding the complexity of historical and textual authenticity.

This metafictional strategy ultimately serves to challenge readers’ perceptions of the text’s legitimacy, urging them to consider the broader implications of the author’s authority over the narrative. The interplay between

fiction and historical reality raises important questions regarding the nature of truth in representation. Readers are thus encouraged to reflect on the power dynamics inherent in storytelling, particularly in the context of Atwood's portrayal of a dystopian society. The act of questioning the authenticity of the narratives presented not only fosters a deeper engagement with the themes explored in both novels but also underscores the complex relationship between the reader and the text, enhancing the overall reading experience by inviting ongoing dialogue about the nature of fiction and its reflections on reality.

In addition, Atwood utilizes a diverse range of literary, historical, and religious references in her writing, prompting readers to closely interact with the story and contemplate the complex connections between these sources and the narratives. This intertextuality serves to establish a dynamic dialogue among the texts, enriching the reader's experience and empowering them to uncover their own interpretations and meanings. Notably, Atwood's narrative is infused with allusions to the Bible, which play a crucial role in shaping the themes and societal structures within her fictional world, particularly in Gilead. The biblical story of Rachel and Leah, which recounts how handmaids bear children for their mistresses, serves as a foundational myth that underpins the entire societal framework of Gilead. This narrative not only emphasizes the themes of fertility and subjugation but also invites readers to consider the implications of such practices on women's autonomy and identity.

Moreover, Atwood's literary exploration in *The Testaments* introduces a particularly harrowing biblical narrative drawn from the book of Judges, specifically chapters 19 to 21, which recounts the appalling fate of a concubine who is brutally dismembered into twelve pieces. This chilling story serves as a powerful commentary on the extreme violence and systemic oppression that women endure in patriarchal societies. For characters such as Agnes and Becka, the confrontation with this narrative acts as a significant catalyst for deep personal introspection. They find themselves grappling with the stark dissonance between the sanitized, perhaps romanticized version of the story that they were taught

throughout their upbringing and the brutal, unvarnished reality conveyed in the original biblical text.

Agnes' testimony poignantly encapsulates this sense of disillusionment. She recalls her memories with clarity, reflecting on the explanation provided by Aunt Estée during her youth. Aunt Estée had framed the concubine's fate as an act of self-sacrifice; she claimed that the concubine was punished for her disobedience, suggesting that she willingly faced death to protect her owner from the vile intentions of the Benjaminites. In this narrative, Aunt Estée depicted the concubine as a figure of bravery and nobility, asserting that she had made a conscious choice that was both heroic and honorable. However, upon revisiting the original story, Agnes is struck by a profound sense of betrayal. She searches in vain for elements of bravery or choice within the text: "But now I was reading the whole story. I looked for the brave and noble part, I looked for the choice, but none of that was there" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 303), only to encounter a grim reality where the young woman was forcefully cast out, subjected to a horrific assault that ultimately led to her death, and then callously dismembered by a man who had viewed her as little more than property throughout her life.

Agnes's realization is stark and sobering; it emphasizes the trauma underlying the original account and provides insight into the reasons behind the concubine's desperate escape. This deeply unsettling contrast not only accentuates the themes of distorted narratives prevalent in Atwood's body of work but also compels readers to engage with the complex ways in which history and religion are interpreted, manipulated, and weaponized to uphold existing societal structures. Through her intricate weaving of such references, Atwood invites a critical examination of themes related to power, identity, and the often painful legacies of cultural myths. This narrative choice serves to enrich the reader's understanding of the enduring impact of these stories, revealing how historical and religious narratives shape perceptions of women's roles in society and the broader implications of these interpretations. Such exploration encourages an awareness of the need for a reevaluation of the narratives that have long

influenced cultural consciousness and highlights the importance of amplifying the voices of those whose stories have been marginalized or misrepresented throughout history.

A prominent illustration of allusion that draws upon the reader's extensive reservoir of both literary and cultural knowledge is evident in the descriptive passage provided by Offred in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. The text describes a mirror, an ordinary object that transcends its commonplace nature through rich imagery and thematic significance. Offred reflects on this mirror, positioned on the hall wall, and remarks on the act of turning her head in such a way that the white wings framing her face channel her gaze toward the glass. This act of looking into the mirror as she descends the stairs reveals its distinctive characteristics; it is round and convex, resembling a pier-glass, which serves to distort and amplify her image. The comparison to "the eye of a fish" (19) introduces a vivid, somewhat unsettling visual, suggesting an otherworldly observation of her presence.

In this reflection, Offred perceives herself not as a clear and defined figure but rather as a "distorted shadow" (19), hinting at themes of identity and self-awareness within the oppressive context of her existence. The phrase "a parody of something" (19) suggests that Offred's image is not merely a representation of herself but rather a twisted mimicry of a familiar archetype, specifically evoking the image of a fairytale figure traditionally associated with innocence and vulnerability, notably one dressed in a red cloak. This allusion serves to juxtapose the innocent connotations typically associated with such characters against the darker implications of her current reality, where descent symbolizes a movement toward risk and potential peril.

The concluding bold statement, "A sister, dripped in blood" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 19), further intensifies the gravity of this scene. The use of the term "sister" may invoke notions of solidarity and shared experience among women, yet the accompanying imagery of blood introduces connotations of

violence and danger. This interplay between camaraderie and threat encapsulates the essence of Offred's circumstances, revealing the complexity of her situation in a world that can transform the seemingly benign into a source of fear. Through this rich tapestry of imagery and allusion, Atwood invites readers to engage deeply with the text, allowing their own literary and cultural knowledge to enhance their understanding of the layered meanings within Offred's experiences. Atwood's poetization of the female body serves as a narrative tool to comment on the way power narratives are constructed and how they can be both oppressive and empowering. Atwood critiques the ways in which the female body is politicized and commodified in societies (both fictional and real) by portraying how the female body is both controlled and potentially subversive. Women in Gilead are not merely victims but also agents of resistance, perhaps symbolized most powerfully by the young women in *The Testaments*, who actively work against the regime from within its own structures.

In conclusion, when considering the insights presented in Wolfgang Iser's work, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, it becomes imperative to acknowledge the various tactics employed by Margaret Atwood in her novels *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*. These tactics serve to liberate readers from the confines of the author's authority, thus enhancing their engagement with the texts. Atwood skillfully integrates narrative techniques such as gaps, which are intentional omissions that invite readers to fill in the blanks with their interpretations. This approach not only fosters a sense of participation but also elevates the reader's role from that of a passive consumer to an active constructor of meaning.

Furthermore, incorporating various viewpoints in the narrative structure creates a more diverse range of voices and perspectives, prompting readers to explore different interpretations and to challenge the credibility of a singular narrative thread. Atwood's presentation of the story through different perspectives encourages readers to analyze the events and characters, challenging the idea of one absolute truth.

Moreover, the incorporation of metafictional elements serves to remind readers of the constructed nature of the narrative itself, further distancing them from any perceived absolute authority of the author. This self-reflective quality invites readers to scrutinize the storytelling process and their own responses to it, ultimately positioning them not just as observers but as key participants in the literary experience.

As readers navigate these complex texts, it becomes increasingly important to reflect on the effects of Atwood's narrative strategies and tactics on their overall reading experience. This engagement not only deepens their understanding of the novels but also has significant implications for the ongoing discourse in literary theory and criticism. The methods employed by Atwood can potentially influence future explorations of reader-response theory, as they highlight the dynamic interaction between text and reader, opening up new avenues for critical examination and interpretation within the field.

CONCLUSION

Both *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* employ a variety of strategies and techniques indicative of totalitarian control, placing a significant emphasis on methodologies of indoctrination and dehumanization. These strategies manifest through both physical and psychological means, which can be systematically categorized into several critical themes. These themes include, but are not limited to, surveillance mechanisms, stringent control of information, the imposition of a specific educational framework, the application of violent punishments, the instillation of threats, the restriction of interpersonal interactions, and the systematic removal of individual identity.

In this context, it can be argued that readers are subjected to an experience of an authoritarian system similar to the one encountered by Atwood's characters. This notion aligns with Wolfgang Iser's concept articulated in *The Act of Reading*, which posits that the text functions as a vehicle for controlled direction, guiding responses and interpretations in a manner akin to the oppressive environments depicted within the narratives. Atwood intricately weaves subtleties throughout her writing that, while not as extreme as the governing structures portrayed in her fictional worlds, nonetheless influence the reader's capacity to engage in imaginative thought and interpretation.

The interpretative process that readers undergo is not haphazard; rather, it is shaped by deliberate narrative choices and structural elements that demand attentive engagement. Furthermore, research indicates that there exist particular strategies that grant both the characters within the narratives and the readers themselves a modicum of autonomy from the pervasive grasp of authoritarian control. At the character level, we can observe a range of tactics employed in resistance against their oppressors, including but not limited to information control, the formation of clandestine opposition groups, the expression of solidarity with fellow individuals, and the initiation of small-scale revolts.

Similarly, the reader's engagement with Atwood's work is enhanced through the intentional incorporation of elements such as ambiguity, the presence of unreliable narrators, and the inclusion of "historical notes" at the conclusion of both books. These components create a complex interaction that propels the understanding of the text beyond the immediate confines of Atwood's narrative world. Such an experience compels readers to navigate the intricate layers of meaning and interpretation, fostering an engagement with the themes of power, control, and resistance that resonate with their own context. In this way, both characters and readers are presented with pathways that enable them to challenge and critique the authoritarian ideologies at play, ultimately cultivating a deeper comprehension of the broader implications of totalitarian control as portrayed in these seminal works.

The intricate interplay between dystopian narratives, the mechanisms of totalitarianism, and Wolfgang Iser's reader-response theory significantly enhances the comprehension of literary works while simultaneously encouraging readers to contemplate the broader implications of their own interpretations. This relationship becomes particularly evident when analyzing the works of Margaret Atwood, specifically through her strategic use of language and narrative structure, which poignantly reflects overarching themes of oppression and agency. Atwood's craftsmanship serves as a lens through which one can examine the consequences of totalitarian regimes, as well as the pivotal role that readers occupy in resisting the ideologies they present.

In texts such as *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*, Atwood employs narrative techniques and linguistic choices that empower readers to confront and critique the oppressive systems depicted in her stories. The layered narrative structures and the deliberate use of language allow readers to engage with the material on a deeper level, facilitating a reflection of their own societal contexts and the prevailing power dynamics within them. Such engagement becomes a pathway for individuals to consider not only the narrative at hand but also the implications of similar oppressive frameworks in the real world.

Atwood's calculated inclusion of narrative gaps and multiple perspectives cultivates a critical engagement that actively challenges the viewpoints disseminated by authoritative figures. By providing readers with fragmented truths and diverse voices, she encourages them to interrogate the legitimacy of both the characters' experiences and the overarching narratives that seek to impose uniformity. This act of questioning is fundamental, as it illustrates the malleability of truth and the importance of subjective interpretation in the face of authoritative control.

Ultimately, Atwood's work underscores the necessity of interpreting literature actively as a form of resistance against totalitarian ideals. By inviting readers to critically analyze the texts and the ideologies they embody, she empowers them to recognize the significance of their interpretations as not merely passive consumption but as a vital counteraction against oppression. Through this process, Atwood not only enriches the literary landscape but also sparks a broader discourse on the power of literature as a tool for understanding and resisting the complex realities of totalitarian existence.

Through the critical framework provided by Wolfgang Iser, it becomes evident that reading transcends the simplistic notion of merely absorbing text. Instead, it emerges as a vigorous exercise of consciousness that empowers individuals with the tools necessary to recognize, interrogate, and navigate the complexities of the realities surrounding them. This perspective suggests that the act of reading engages cognitive processes that not only facilitate comprehension of the written word but also encourage a reflective stance toward the societal structures and norms that govern everyday life.

The implications of Iser's theoretical approach extend far beyond the scope of literary analysis; they encroach upon the broader arena of societal engagement. By viewing reading as an active endeavor, it becomes clear that critical reading fosters an environment conducive to democratic deliberation. This active engagement with text nurtures the capacity for dissent, equipping readers with the analytical skills needed to question and resist oppressive societal frameworks.

In this sense, literature serves as a crucible for the development of critical thought and civic responsibility.

Margaret Atwood's texts embody this notion, functioning as invitations for readers to not only challenge their own preconceived notions but also to cultivate a heightened awareness of the intricate power dynamics that shape lived experiences. Atwood's narrative structures and thematic concerns prompt readers to scrutinize the implications of totalitarianism and dystopian realities, urging them to reflect upon the societal implications of control and oppression.

In the end, exploring dystopian concepts, authoritarian rule, and reader reactions in Atwood's writing helps readers realize their important role in understanding and challenging imposed narratives. This process involves them in a critical conversation that connects literature with the complex realities of the world they live in. By doing this, it emphasizes the idea that reading is not a passive behavior, but a necessary trigger for understanding, taking action, and asserting oneself when facing the intricate challenges of modern society.

The Handmaid's Tale and *The Testaments* challenge the reader to destabilize those cultural and political presuppositions through which readers generally navigate the world. Atwood utilizes dystopian fiction as a tool whereby the reader is made to critically confront the dangers of political and cultural complacency, most specifically in its relationship with gender oppression, authoritarianism, and religious extremism. By presenting the readers with narratives that oblige them to question the nature of power, the role of women, and the complicity of society, Atwood challenges the assumptions that many readers bring to the text and invites them to rethink their relationship to the established political and cultural order.

Atwood's novels call for a critical reevaluation of politics and social values in the contemporary context, not in a passive reading of the narrative but by actively considering what it might imply in reality. Through subversion, Atwood breaks the reading pact when she involves the reader by making him part of the resistance to urge them into deep thought about how near our existing world is to dystopian

realities she writes, and what they are able to resist in the course of trying to hold off the controlling ideologies.

In conclusion, the intricate relationship between dystopia, totalitarianism, and reader-response theory offers a multifaceted framework that significantly enhances our comprehension of both literary works and the sociopolitical environments from which they emerge. By examining Margaret Atwood's skilled narrative techniques alongside Wolfgang Iser's theoretical contributions, readers are encouraged to recognize and embrace their own interpretive agency. This invitation to engage actively with the text fosters a deeper critical engagement with literature, particularly in relation to pressing contemporary issues such as the dynamics of power, the construction of truth, and the modes of resistance that individuals and societies employ against authoritarian forces.

This synthesis of literary analysis and sociopolitical commentary illuminates the critical importance of active interpretation within the reading experience. It underscores how readers do not merely consume narratives passively but instead construct meaning through their interactions with the text. Each reader, bringing their unique perspectives and experiences, contributes to a broader discourse that challenges dominant ideologies and oppressive systems. Literature thus serves not only as a reflection of societal values and conflicts but also as a catalyst for nurturing resilience and fostering awareness.

Furthermore, literary works functioning within dystopian frameworks often mirror the alarming realities of totalitarian regimes, compelling readers to confront uncomfortable truths about the nature of authority and conformity. By engaging with these narratives, individuals can better understand the mechanisms of control and subjugation prevalent in various contexts, allowing for the cultivation of a more discerning and critical worldview. The interplay between literature and sociopolitical analysis thus emphasizes the transformative power of storytelling, reinforcing literature's vital role in shaping our perceptions and encouraging collective resistance against oppressive ideologies. Through this framework,

readers are not only positioned as mere observers but also as active participants in the ongoing dialogue about freedom, justice, and the human condition.

Ultimately, it becomes evident that Atwood's works serve not solely as cautionary tales but rather as potent calls to action. By encouraging readers to grapple with the themes of their narratives while critically examining their own societal realities, Atwood instills in them a sense of awareness and responsibility. As they dissect the complex themes of power, control, and human agency portrayed in her novels, readers are empowered to forge pathways toward understanding and actively resisting the insidious forces of oppression that manifest both in fiction and in their everyday lives. Thus, Atwood's literature remains a crucial touchstone for exploring the multifaceted relationships between narrative, authority, and the profound potential for resistance that resides within each individual.

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