The role of language in constructing consciousness in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale

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The Role of Language in Constructing Consciousness in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale

A Thesis
Presented to the Faculty of California State University, San Bernardino

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By Tamra Elizabeth DiBenedetto September 1992
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To Daniel.

As always, my inspiration.
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INTRODUCTION

Through linguistic knowledge, the world as seen from the diverse viewpoints of other social groups, that we have thought of as alien, becomes intelligible in new terms. Alienness turns into a new and often clarifying way of looking at things.

Benjamin Whorf, "Language, Mind and Reality"

Ever since Benjamin Whorf first proposed what is now known as the theory of linguistic relativity, scholars have debated how much influence, if any, language has on a person's perceptions of "reality." Early in his studies of different dialects and languages, Whorf became convinced that individual consciousness was closely related to, and even determined by, one's language. He linked this assertion to his understanding of the workings of thought processes, and strove throughout his writings to demonstrate the interconnection between thought and language. This is seen most clearly in his essay, "Language, Mind, and Reality":

Actually, thinking is most mysterious, and by far the greatest light shed upon it that we have is thrown by the study of language. This study shows that the forms of a person's thoughts are controlled by inexorable laws of pattern of which he [or she] is unconscious. These patterns are the unperceived intricate systematizations of his [or her] own language . . .

Thinking is itself in a language. (252)
In this passage, Whorf asserts not only the interrelation of thought and language, but further, the dependency of thought on language, and the dependency of both thought and language on "intricate pattern systems" within the human mind. In most of his writings, Whorf asserts that language acts as the catalyst for both the genesis and consequent construction of these patterns within the human mind. In essence, Whorf claims that different languages actually form different patterns in speakers' minds, which, in turn, influence and even "control" the ways in which reality is perceived by individuals within a culture. This notion that an individual's perception of "reality," or in other words, a person's "consciousness," is controlled by the language he or she uses, is referred to as "linguistic determinism." Whorf's strongest assertion regarding linguistic determinism is shown in the following passage from "Language, Mind, and Reality":

Every language is a vast pattern-system, different from others, in which are culturally ordained forms and categories by which the personality not only communicates, but also analyzes nature, notices or neglects types of relationship and phenomena, channels his [or her] reasoning, and builds the house of his [or her] consciousness. (252)

What is especially interesting in this assertion is Whorf's claim that language, as a vast pattern-system,
formulates the ways in which humans communicate, and even more essentially, the ways in which humans analyze the world around them. By forming patterns and establishing relationships from among the multitudinous phenomena encountered at any given moment, the human mind begins the construction of "knowledge." This knowledge, or "what can be known" is not limited to knowledge of the external world, but perhaps even more importantly, it is also the way in which humans begin to "know" themselves: it is the beginning of the construction of consciousness of both the "self" and of "others." Moreover, from Whorf's perspective, language is the shared symbolic system through which humans not only communicate with those who share their language (and possibly their "world view"), but it is also the mechanism for thinking the most personal and private thoughts. Therefore, in Whorfian terms, language is the primary construct for both individual and collective consciousnesses.

Recently, however, the strong version of Whorf's theory of linguistic relativism has been challenged by many contemporary linguists and language theorists (e.g., Slobin, 1974, Friedrich, 1986), because of its inherent determinism. Many of these theorists have now refined Whorf's initial theory of linguistic determinism to a "weaker" version of linguistic relativism. Rather than profess that language determines thought, these theorists maintain that
certain aspects of language can predispose people to think or act in one way rather than another, but there is no rigid determinism: one is not fully a prisoner of one's language; it is just a guide to thought and other sorts of behavior. (Slobin 122)

Although most linguists hold to this "weak" theory of linguistic relativism rather than Whorf's "strong," deterministic version, I do take exception to Slobin's use of the word "just" in reference to language's role of guiding "thought and other sorts of behavior." If language does indeed act as a guide to thought, then it may be quite dangerous to underplay this relationship with a qualifier (e.g., "just") of any sort. This is particularly true when analyzing the role that language plays in constructing social awareness and individual consciousness, as Margaret Atwood demonstrates throughout The Handmaid's Tale.

However, because language both influences and is influenced by both the "self" and others, which in turn influence one another, it is necessary to examine the contexts within which language grows and evolves. By examining the social, psychological, and political contexts of language, we can more clearly see what influence language has on both society and on individuals. These contexts of language are vital to meaning-making in the real world, and as will be shown, are vital to meaning-making in the novel. Twice in The Handmaid's Tale the narrator states, "Context
is all." Playing on Hamlet's line, "Readiness is all," and again on Lear's line, "Ripeness is all," Atwood focuses the reader's attention on the significance not only of the line itself, but on the idea that we cannot understand (or "make sense of") any situation without first comprehending the context within which it occurred. This phrase resonates with meaning, and is essential in understanding the construction of the novel (as Chapter 4 will illustrate), but even more importantly, it is vital to understanding the construction of the narrator's self.

The narrator, known only by the patronymic Offred, has in a sense been de-contextualized with her immersion into the dystopic and highly authoritarian regime of Gilead. The only way she can survive within this unfamiliar and dangerous culture is to strive to forget her past and "reconstruct" or re-encultrate herself. She soon learns, however, that the religious, political, and psychological contexts of this new society impose strict limitations on the ways in which she can construct herself. What ties all of these contexts together, and is at the center of the novel, is language. And it is language that brings us the narrative, acts as the major force in both the deconstruction and the reconstruction of Offred's "self," and solidifies the social structure in Gilead, even though, paradoxically, language is the most highly guarded commodity in this futuristic society.
In this thesis, I will explore the various contexts of language, specifically the socio/political contexts of language, which act as the constructs of both individual "selves" and of whole communities. In most discussions of constructivism, the constant tension between the individual and the group is set up as a polarity, one in which the self and "others" are in constant struggle for supremacy of the individual consciousness. However, as this thesis will demonstrate, this tension between self and others is in fact the chief catalyst which enables Offred to re-construct her own consciousness while at the same time re-encultrate (or re-socialize) herself within this foreign and hostile environment. In both endeavors, Offred's primary tool is language. Because language is the chief means by which humans communicate, and through communication make sense of their world and those around them, she relies on both her past, familiar language (connotative in nature and figurative in meaning) and her present, limited language (denotative in nature and literal in meaning) to re-organize, talk about, and finally "know" both the new regime in Gilead and most importantly, her new self in relation to that community.

Chapter 1, "Deconstruction: The Loss of the Self" will examine the ways in which language is used to both deconstruct the old society and also to reconstruct a new society. The focus will be primarily on the politics of
language, and the ways in which those in power shape people's perceptions through limiting access to both written and oral speech and also through the linguistic acts of naming and labeling.

Chapter 2, "Reconstruction and Renewal," focuses primarily on Offred's attempts to reconstruct herself within this new society. It further explores the implications of linguistic relativity and the interconnections between language, thought, and the construction of the self. Also, it will describe and analyze the process whereby Offred comes to understand her new society, how she uses inner language as a mediator between the self imposed on her by the new regime and the self that she once was, and the ways in which language acts to construct her consciousness anew.

Chapter 3, "Ambiguity, Uncertainty, and the Quest for Freedom," explores the possibilities available with multiple interpretations. Furthermore, it explores the relationship between writer and reader and and how the two might interact in an effort to make meaning.

Chapter 4, "Contextual Constructs and Constraints," explores the last section of The Handmaid's Tale, an "epilogue" entitled "Historical Notes on THE HANDMAID'S TALE," with specific emphasis on the ways in which context affects meaning in communication. This chapter represents an effort to demonstrate (in Atwood's words) that context, indeed, is all.
CHAPTER 1
DECONSTRUCTION: THE LOSS OF THE SELF

What is commonly referred to as culture... is no more than the official ideology of those in power.
Robert St. Clair, "The Politics of Language"

Definition, the creation of categories—these are useful and necessary, but they are also dangerous... If they become straightjackets, restricting and confining, they are destructive; they have become false naming. True naming is a process of infinite growth, infinite flexibility.
Karen Lindsey, Friends as Family

Imagine being torn from a familiar culture—alienated from family, friends, and community—and being forced into an unfamiliar and hostile environment. Imagine a place where all the rules have changed—the "rules" of which most of us are not even consciously aware: rules governing both verbal and non-verbal communication, rules regarding ways of dressing, ways of acting, ways of knowing, ways of being. How would we act? How would we "learn" the new rules? How would we make sense of our new world? How would we survive?

Margaret Atwood's novel, The Handmaid's Tale, not only formulates these questions, but in doing so, strikes at the very core of what developmental psychologists, language theorists, and philosophers have struggled with for centuries: How is meaning made? To explore this question, Atwood sets her dystopian novel in the futuristic setting of Gilead, within which a fanatical and fundamentalist
Christian regime has violently and quickly overthrown the U.S. government and seized control. Atwood immerses her central character within the hostile, oppressive, and unfamiliar environment of Gilead, and in doing so, explores the ways in which an individual must re-learn the rules governing speech, thought and action in order to make sense of a foreign environment. In this respect, the making of meaning becomes the primary activity of the central character and narrator, Offred, as she strives to survive in and make sense of her new world.

This meaning-making activity is clearly defined by developmental psychologist Robert Kegan in *The Evolving Self*:

> Seen psychologically, this process is about the development of "knowing"; but at the same time, we experience this activity. . .I use the word "meaning" to refer to this simultaneously epistemological and ontological activity; it is about knowing and being, about theory-making and investments and commitments of the self. (Kegan 45)

In this sense, the making of meaning involves ways of "knowing," primarily the types of "knowledge" that are sanctioned by an individual's community (or society or culture) which establishes the nature, criteria and validity of "what can be known." Cognitively, meaning-making involves the growth and development of cognitive schemes,
through which individuals "pattern" information. These cognitive patterns (or schemes) then serve to form connections and establish relations between "old information" and "new information." Moreover, the making of meaning also encompasses "ways of being"—whether or not an individual accepts current paradigms formed by the community or society to which he or she holds membership or whether, instead, the individual formulates new ways of making meaning. The ways in which an individual makes sense of the world, or comes to understand and "know" it, are highly indicative of an individual's ways of being, in the existential, rather than essential, sense of "being."

Therefore, this meaning-making activity involves not only assimilating information, but making choices about what the information "means." Furthermore, meaning-making is an experience (or activity) through which we come to know both ourselves and our world. It is not a static, theoretical construct. Rather, it is an active, on-going process, at the heart of which are the symbols of language. This meaning-making activity is central to thought and consciousness and, as Walker Percy continually reminds us, it is a uniquely human activity (Signposts 123).

Throughout The Handmaid's Tale, Offred shows that creating meaning (or "making" sense) of her new world is an active process which involves the reconceptualization of "reality" and the consequent process of forgetting her past
in order to survive in the present. It is Offred's meaning-making activity which forms the basis of the narrative construction of the novel, and also vividly illustrates the role that language plays in constructing a new society while simultaneously deconstructing the old. It is a story about the deconstruction and subsequent reconstruction of one woman's consciousness in the midst of a hostile, confusing, and inherently "self"-alienating socio-political environment.

The new government in Gilead is able to redefine culture, construct a new society, and impose its worldview on the populace through placing stringent controls on language. Permeated by a fear of individuals thinking for themselves and staging a revolt, those in power ban the use of interpersonal communication and deprive all but the most powerful access to reading and writing. These stringent controls on language represent the government's attempt to turn people into "objects"; through the loss of subjectivity, all become "others." They are aliens in an unfamiliar environment. They must, then, not only learn the "rules" underlying both the culture and the language, they must also re-enculturate (or resocialize) themselves. This chapter will explore the ways in which those in power impose their oppressive ideology on the populace and attempt to limit the proliferation of meaning, to mark boundaries between members of society through labeling, and to strip
language of emotion and feeling by stressing literal rather than non-literal (or metaphorical) meaning.

The Gileadean government is patriarchal in the extreme and because of its radical, right-wing religious ideology, believes that it is constructing a society "sanctioned" by Biblical precedent. Most of its "rules" have what those in power consider to be Scriptural precedent. The most obvious of these "rules" is the conscription of a Handmaiden to a Commander for the purpose of childbearing. This practice finds its roots—and what the Gileadean government purports to be its justification—in Genesis 30: 1-3, the passage which is the source for one of the novel's epigraphs: "And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, Give me children, or else I die. . . . And she said, Behold my maid Bilhal. She shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her." However, consigning and enslaving women as handmaids, for purposes of bearing children for the upper echelon, is not the only practice—or law—which gains its purported authority from Scriptural precedence. Others include the silencing of women (found in Paul's letter to the Corinthians), the sovereignty and supremacy of males (Genesis, particularly, but also throughout Paul's letters), and many other Laws derived from both Old and New Testament texts.
One of the first things the government does to implement its radical ideology is to divide, classify, and label women according to social rank and status. The labeling system that the government implements demarcates boundaries between men and women, and further, between various "classes" of women. There are five distinct "classes" of women in Gilead: the Wives who are married to high ranking and powerful Commanders and other top military officers; the Aunts who have some access to the written word; the Marthas who are the servants of the Wives and are in charge of domestic responsibilities; the Econowives who are married to the working classes and are incapable of reproduction due to genetic mutations stemming from exposure to nuclear and other environmental wastes; and the Handmaids, who have proven their reproductive capabilities in the past, and whose bodies have been consigned to the service of reproducing children for the members of the high-ranking, white officials of the new regime. A last category (actually a "sub-category") of women are labeled "Unwomen." This category consists of Handmaids who have failed to reproduce after three one-year assignments with three different Commanders, some lesbians (referred to in the novel as "gender traitors"), and nuns who will not recant their vows and their allegiance to the Roman Catholic Church. These women are sent to "The Colonies," a type of labor camp where they clean up nuclear waste, with the
consequences of prolonged and unprotected exposure to radiation, leading to severe illness, disease, and ultimately death.

Although the classification system used in the novel may seem extreme because of its blatant tendency to devalue people, it is not as foreign as it appears. Nearly all societies have some system which categorizes, classifies, and separates people into classes or castes. Some examples of social labels are the "Untouchables" of India (similar in social status and duty to the Unwomen of Gilead), or even closer to home, the "savages" and "heathens" of 17th and 18th century America. Although the practice of labeling is generally derogatory and prejudicial, it is also probably the most common method whereby humans denote the similarities or differences between people within society. Labeling is equivalent to the Piagetian concept of classification, a cognitive process whereby a person, when shown a group of different items, focuses on a single characteristic or trait and then groups the items according to that single characteristic or trait (Woolfolk 61).

Although classification is a natural, and important, developmental stage in cognition, when used to "group people" through labeling—especially according to a singular trait or characteristic— it can easily become a means of oppression and devaluation. By their very nature, labels prevent alternatives in the process of classification. In
"Linguistic Factors in Prejudice," Gordon Allport states that "every label applied to a given person refers properly only to one aspect of his [or her] nature" (108). This is particularly true when the label is meant to stand for the person-as-entity; in other words, when the label acts as the primary indication of a person's status, occupation, and identity in his or her society. Allport refers to these labels as "labels of primary potency" because they call attention to what society has deemed the primary trait of an individual, while overlooking all other traits. Gordon states that labels of primary potency "act as shrieking sirens, deafening us to all finer discriminations that we might otherwise perceive" (108). Often, labels of primary potency limit the possible ways that a person can be perceived by society, and may possibly limit self-perception as well. Labels of primary potency are one of the ways in which self-concept is established. Therefore, the labeling system used in Gilead serves a dual purpose: It divides, categorizes, and classifies people according to social rank and duty while it simultaneously places limitations on the ways in which people are perceived by other members of society and also by themselves.

In a society like Gilead, where the covert yet implicit goal is to dehumanize people, devaluation through labeling is an effective means to this end. Through bringing our attention to this blatant (although often overlooked) form
of oppression, Atwood allows us to take a closer look at what we commonly--although possibly unconsciously--do with language, specifically the act of labeling, in our own society. What Atwood also brings to the reader's attention, however, are the ways that society's perceptions of "reality" are transformed through the use of labels. Linguistically speaking, all labels belong to the class of nouns, the element of language which "names" things. Through the use of nouns (names) we classify our surroundings. However, as Allport points out, the human capacity and act of naming brings with it a parallel change in the way reality is perceived:

To state the matter technically, a noun abstracts from a concrete reality some one feature and assembles different concrete realities only with respect to this one feature . . . Thus each label we use, especially those of primary potency, distracts our attention from concrete reality. The living, breathing complex individual--the ultimate unit of human nature--is lost to sight. (108)

In this passage, Allport identifies an essential paradox involved in the act of "naming": although classifying the world through use of nouns (through "naming" things) is essential for humans to begin to make sense of the world, nouns also have the capacity for simplifying complex aspects of the world and individuals within the world. We name what
we know, but does the name allow us to look beyond the single feature amplified by the name (noun) itself? Or does it, instead, simplify our conceptualization of that which is named, allowing us only to perceive a single aspect of the "concrete reality" rather than the alternate, complex "realities" beyond the name? Although naming is necessary for cognitive organization and patterning (which in turn produce cognitive development), naming may also limit the possible alternative ways in which "that which is named" can be perceived or "known."

Through the use of labels, specifically in the act of re-naming and labeling women, the power structure in Gilead imposes a system which is not only discriminatory, but which acts to demote people to the status of an object. People lose their complexity; the labeling system simplifies what was once a "living, breathing, complex human being," and masking all other attributes of humanness, categorizes them according to their obligation to the state. Handmaids are no longer women; instead, their label designates their societal function, and limits all other attributes. Offred recognizes this when she states, "We are for breeding purposes . . . We are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (176). She, like the other Handmaids, has lost her individuality and has, instead, been subsumed under a "category" known by its label. (Also noteworthy in this passage is Offred's use of "Scriptural"
discourse, the words "sacred vessels" and "chalices." Not only has she lost her sense of individuality and identity, she has also acquired the "language" of the regime and uses it to define herself and her social function.

Through language, specifically in the act of renaming and labeling, those in power in Gilead begin solidifying the construction of a new world order. This is not a revolutionary idea; rather, what Atwood has done in the novel (with the emphasis on renaming) is to illustrate the fundamental human capacity to "name what is known," or, from a Whorfian perspective, to "know" only that which is "named." It is, as Whorf states, the way that humans use the "strange gift of language to weave the web of Maya or illusion, to make a provisional analysis of reality and then regard it as final" (Language, Thought, and Reality 263). Naming weaves the web of illusion because through naming things, people have the tendency to believe that the name in fact is the entity; we may forget that words are symbolic tools which help us to converse and communicate about "reality" and the world in which we live. Furthermore, this act of naming is more of a social act than an individual act; it is an agreement between individuals, in the form of language, as to how "reality" or the external world will be perceived. It is the way we make sense of our world.

Because the Gileadean ideology is foreign to those trapped within its walls, the inhabitants must rely on the
new naming system to make sense of it. They are indoctrinated into the new culture, and they begin to learn the rules governing the new culture through their limited exposure to language. They pay attention to names and labels. In Gilead, then, naming becomes a particularly effective way to begin defining the new environment, shaping the political realm, and identifying (labeling) people with their social roles. Offred soon realizes, however, that the rules governing language, primarily the act of "naming," have changed. In every culture, personal names are strongly linked to an individual's identity. Often, names are "commonly associated with the physical and moral characteristics of their bearers . . . [and] they are treated as bonds between an individual and the group" (Bram 41). However, in Gilead, names which denote individuality are banned. Names of people and things no longer convey identity; rather, names denote social status, rank, and duty. Offred, like the other Handmaids, is given a patronymic, made of the possessive "of" attached to the Commander to whom her reproductive capabilities have been designated. Since she is consigned to a high ranking officer named Fred, her new name is Offred. She has been renamed and her name means, literally, "the property of Fred." In this transition, she not only loses a sense of identity, she also loses a sense of herself as "subject";
because she is deemed "property," she becomes objectified in the most extreme and devaluative sense of the word.

With the loss of her proper name and through the subsequent renaming process, the society explicitly proclaims that a woman (particularly a Handmaid) belongs not to herself but to another. Offred tries to accept this transition, for the sake of survival, but she never is able to forget the strong bond between her past name and her identity, as shown in the following passage:

My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden. I tell myself it doesn't matter, your name is like your telephone number, useful only to others; but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter. (108)

Names do matter, not only in her past life, but even more, in the present. But in Gilead, she is no longer named; she is labeled and with that label comes a corresponding loss of self. She reveals this loss of self—not only her identity, but the power and freedom of self-definition—in the lines, "I feel transparent . . . I feel as if there's not much left of me . . . as if I'm made of smoke, as if I'm a mirage" (110). With the loss of her name, a loss of identity, and a loss of personal freedom, she seems to begin to fade into nothingness.

As inhumane as these language abuses are, however, the practice of renaming in Gilead goes far beyond changing
personal names and labeling. Because speech is so closely related to thought, and particularly because knowledge is proliferated through the written word, the Gileadean government is quite threatened by language's accessibility. If people have access to language, it is assumed, they also have access to an unlimited array of ideas—to knowledge and thought—and thinking "subjects" are more likely to stage a revolt than unthinking "objects." Therefore, the world is highly guarded; no one but the most powerful have access to the written word. In this manner, people are truly alienated; they are alienated from others, isolated within the world of their own minds. Language, one of the chief means of bridging the gap between self and others—"communec"-ication in the most literal sense—is no longer accessible to anyone but the most powerful.

The inaccessibility of language in Gilead is especially apparent in the Commander's ritualized reading from the Bible before The Ceremony. In this scene, Offred informs us that, "The Bible is kept locked up. . . It is an incendiary device: who knows what we'd make of it, if we ever got our hands on it?" (112). In Gilead, The Word (not only the Scriptures, but all language) is guarded. Those in power, those who make the rules, know the power of language and fear its allusiveness. They fear the proliferation of meaning. This is best illustrated in Offred's statement, "We can be read to from it, by him, but we cannot read"
The Word has a single interpretation in Gilead, which is professed as the "literal" interpretation, but which is really only the interpretation of those in power. Offred soon realizes that the source of the Commander's power is language, evidenced in her line, "He has something we don't have, he has the word" (114). The Commander not only "has the word," but also has the power of interpretation—of choosing and assigning meaning to words—and because of this he has choice, he has freedom, he has power.

One of the most serious ramifications of being denied access to the word, as Offred soon finds, is that when words are misused, or phrases misquoted or even fabricated, she and the others have no way of "proving" the deception. There is no way to cross reference: those in power can construct a society through fabricated Biblical references, and can incorporate laws which purport to have Scriptural precedents, and no one can argue with them. One example of this type of blatant deception occurs at the Center where the Handmaids were first indoctrinated into the new culture. Offred remembers that a tape recording of the Beatitudes was played every day, tape recorded by a male, Offred tells us, so that "even the Aunts wouldn't be guilty of the sin of reading" (114). One which struck her as particularly odd and didn't "sound right" was "Blessed are the silent." This, of course, is not found in the Scriptures; it is a
command that was to be imposed on the women, but only under the guise of Scriptural authority. Offred knows this, but has no way of proving it. She says, "I knew they made that up, I knew it was wrong, and they left things out, too, but there was no way of checking" (115). The lack of access to the word—both printed and spoken—equals a lack of power in Gilead. It also equates to a lack of thought, and a resultant lack of "self."

Control of language, then, becomes control of the way the individual views the world and the way in which society is constructed. Because Offred's language is limited, her world view is limited, and in a surprisingly short time (as Offred says, "It has taken us so little time to change our minds" [38]) she has begun the process of re-contextualization, or re-socialization. In order to survive within this culture, Offred has learned that she must somehow learn, if not accept, the official ideology of the culture. Where the official ideology and the language of the culture merge is in the imposition of the official ideology on society. In The Social and Psychological Contexts of Language, Robert St. Clair suggests that the ideology of a culture is generally imposed by those in power through linguistic manipulation such as "labeling others as deviant, legitimizing the knowledge of those in power ... and establishing barriers to social mobility through language" (27). As has been shown previously, Gilead
imposes its ideology in all of these ways: through labeling and renaming, through legitimizing the knowledge of those in power by allowing only the powerful access to reading and writing (hence knowledge-making), and through restricting the use of language among the inhabitants which results in their alienation from others and in stifling what they can know about society and about themselves. Their position and rank in society are static and chances for social mobility are nil.

The power structure in Gilead does not stop at labeling, renaming, and limiting communication, however. In their attempt to construct a new society, those in power in Gilead have either renamed or "un"-named locations and events as well as people. This is shown most noticeably when Offred notices that the name of a clothing store has been painted over. She remembers that the store (a shop where the Handmaids order their dresses, or "habits") was once named "Lilies of the Field." Since the name was obliterated, it is now only known by its huge wooden sign in the shape of a lily. Offred responds to this further restriction of language by stating, "[T]hey decided that even the names of shops were too much temptation for us. Now places are known by their signs alone" (33). Places, as well as people, have been demoted to the status of a sign. Words are outlawed because with the written word comes a
growth in thought and in consciousness, both of which are feared by the powerful in Gilead.

Another instance of renaming is seen when Offred and her shopping companion, another Handmaid named Ofglen, walk along the street to do their daily, ritualized shopping. They come to the store called "Loaves and Fishes" which is marked (denoted) by a "wooden sign, a fish with a smile and eyelashes." Offred states that she is lured to the store by "the picture of succulent white fillets in the window" (213). The sign serves more than one purpose, however. It is not only in the window to "lure" customers to the store; it also serves to indicate whether or not the items (in this case, the fillets) are in stock. As Offred explains, "They put the picture in the window when they have something, take it away when they don't. Sign language" (213). Offred's reference to "sign" language here is more than a play on words. Rather, it is a strong indication of Gilead's regression from a mode of communicating through symbols to a more primitive mode of communicating through signs. I use the word "primitive" here in a very literal sense--particularly to define the constrictive effects inherent in communicating through signs as opposed to the liberating effects inherent in communicating through symbols.

In "Sign and Symbols," Susanne Langer offers an extensive definition which distinguishes the differences
between signs and symbols. A sign, Langer points out, is "anything that announces the existence or the immanence of some event . . . it is always a part of the situation to which it refers" (Bloom 529). Signs, therefore, require little interpretation or thought; they are closely bound to their referent. Animals, most notably, communicate through signs (a dog bark "signals" a physical need or "signals" immanent danger), but these patterns of "communication" are no more or less than direct stimulus-response reactions, conditioned through time, whose meaning directly corresponds to stimuli experienced at the present. Therefore, "communication" through signs is a behavior closely related to a Skinnerian stimulus-response reaction. Furthermore, a sign is always situated in the immediate present. Signs are bound by time and by place; as Langer states, they cause a response "in the face of the thing signified" (531). They are primitive, conditioned responses to the environment at present. They never refer to the future because signs are "always embedded in reality, in a present that emerges from the actual past" (531). Because there is a direct correlation between the sign and the signified, signs always refer to something at present, and are the only ways that animals respond to their environment. In this manner, animals are prisoners of an immediate reality; they cannot conceptualize alternative realities.
Although humans also respond to the environment through sign-using behavior (we stop at red lights, we answer bells, we evacuate buildings in response to fire alarms), we also, and primarily—both in a qualitative and quantitative sense—use symbols to communicate. In contrast to sign-using, stimulus-response ways of reacting to the environment, humans have the unique capacity for using and formulating symbols which are not tied to an immediate present, nor necessarily to the thing signified. Instead, as Langer asserts, "they serve to liberate humans from the immediate stimuli of a physically present world . . . [and] allow us to think about the thing symbolized" (531).

Symbols, therefore, allow thought because they allow for conceptualization of possible alternative interpretations as to what the symbol "means." Symbols never "mean" only one thing, as signs do; rather, they "suggest" a range of meanings because they can be "combined and varied in a thousand ways, the result of which is a symbolic structure whose meaning is a complex of all respective meanings" (531). Symbols, therefore, bring to mind a wide range of possible meanings. They do not cause a simple stimulus-response reaction, but allow and even demand thought because of their inherent complexity.

Symbols also mark a fundamental boundary between animal forms of communication and human forms of communication. As Langer states, "Animals think, but they think of and at
things; [people] think primarily about things" (531). This ability to conceptualize, to be liberated from an immediate physical environment, to be able to formulate alternative "meanings" are distinctly human ways of "making sense" of the past and present, but even more importantly, they allow us to think about and plan for the future. Symbols, then, are not bound to time and place as are signs. They allow us to think beyond what has been and what is to what may possibly be. And the chief means for "symbolically transforming" our experiences is through language. As Langer states, "The birth of language is the dawn of humanity. . . . The essence of language is symbolic, not signific; we use it first and most vitally to formulate and hold ideas in our own minds" (533). The ability to manipulate and formulate the symbols of language is what separates humans from animals. Through the use of symbols, humans have the unique capacity for thought, something which allows us to ponder, question, hope, and dream about things not in our immediate physical or temporal environment.

However, with the regression from symbolization to signification in Gilead, a resultant regression in thought, and moreover, in humanness, begins to occur. And the process of deconstruction continues. In Gilead, not only has the government limited access to the written word, it has also deemed it necessary to signify a direct correlation between the sign and the signified. As shown in Offred's reference
to "sign language," a picture of a fish is a fish. If the picture (sign) of a fish is not in the window, the fish does not exist beyond the window. In the same manner, the woman who once existed before the time of Gilead has been deconstructed; her name is no longer there, and as far as the Gileadeans are concerned, she no longer exists.

In Gilead, signs, rather than symbols, have become the means by which "reality" is known. There is no room for interpretation; in Gilead, signs have replaced the symbolic aspects of language. In this society, it appears, things are "what they are." Ambiguity is treason. Proliferation of meaning is prohibited. The powerful have begun reconstructing society and replacing subjects with objects, symbolic meaning with literal meaning, fluidity with rigidity, and consciousness with nonconsciousness.

What appears to be happening with this transition from symbols to signs is a type of breakdown, or regression from, what Walker Percy, in Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self Help Book, has termed "triadic" relationships. Triadic relationships, as the name implies, require three, irreducible elements for any communicative act: a speaker, an object, and a symbol (or word) which refers to the object. This symbol is not the object itself, but only the name of the object which brings to mind (or forms in the consciousness) a concept of the object in a person's mind. However, because language is restricted and words are
replaced by "signs," most meaning-making in Gilead approaches what Percy terms "dyadic" relationships: a direct interaction between a single sign and an organism—a type of relationship which allows for no choices, no other possibilities, but only a direct stimulus-response reaction. Meaning-making through the use of dyadic relationships is indicative of an organism which survives in its environment through the mode of stimulus-response. It is simplistic and it requires no thought. It is the world lacking in thought and consciousness—it is the world of animals wherein each action is only a response to a signal from the environment. In fact, it is not even a world. It is an environment in the most literal sense, one in which there are no alternatives for acting, one in which choices are limited, one in which every action is a direct result of a single stimulus: the sign. It is a world lacking in thought, lacking in emotion, lacking in consciousness. It is the world of Gilead, where people have been demoted to organisms within an environment. It is the beginning of a world of non-consciousness.

In Gilead, where the covert goals are to force people to accept the new regime without question and deconstruct consciousness, the most evident place to begin restricting human thought is language. However, by acting under the illusion that language can only display literal meaning, the government refuses to acknowledge that language is primarily
a symbolic system. By limiting language to a system of signs, those in power deny the fact that "language is a symbolic meaning system—it is a system composed mainly of symbols that are used to communicate meaning from one mind to another" (Casson 13). Therefore, language not only requires symbols, it also requires an interaction between individuals who create and communicate meaning with those symbols.

Ironically, what those in power did not seem to realize when they tried to stifle language is that once people accept the illusion that language is a commodity and can be restricted and stifled, the effects cross all social, political, and economic boundaries. Offred realizes this early on when commenting on the effect these changes have had on one of the most influential people to bring about the current changes in language and in society: Serena Joy, the Wife of her Commander. Offred notes that before Gilead was a reality, Serena had been on the lecture circuit, making speeches about "the sanctity of the home [and] how women should stay at home" (60). But Offred notes the contradiction in Serena's past life and her present life: in her "past life," (her life before Gilead) Serena herself had had a career, of sorts, giving these speeches. However, Offred notices that now the Gileadean concept has become a reality, Serena "stays in her home, but it doesn't seem to agree with her" (61). Seeing the immense gap that lies
between Serena's intent and her effect, Offred states, "How furious she must be, now that she's been taken at her word" (61). In Gilead, the society oppresses the oppressors as well as the oppressed because all is taken literally. When meaning is stifled, when the illusion that each word has a distinct and literal meaning is believed, and when interpretation is outlawed, then language loses the symbolic force which gives it life. When language dies, knowledge dies. And when meaning is stifled, no one can escape the oppression.

It is exactly the type of environment constructed in Gilead, through the limitations placed on language, which stifles the knowledge of the inhabitants and also the society as whole. In The Development of Perception, Cognition, and Language, van Geert describes the result of this type of environment: "In an environment without alternatives for acting, there is nothing to know or to believe, since the conditions for expressing the knowledge or the belief . . . are absent" (237). In Gilead, the conditions for expression which are absent, and whose absence effectively diminishes the cognitive growth of the populace, are the outward manifestations of language: reading, writing, and conversation. By placing such extreme restrictions on language, the society of Gilead remains controlled, dominated by force and oppression, and lacks the flexibility necessary for any society to achieve
growth. This society, which bases its structure on a single interpretation of a single text, quickly and dangerously writes itself into rigidity. Ironically, this society, whose purported goal is to implement a "higher morality" (in the Moral Majority sense of the word) produces rigidity in both cognitive development and, what developmental psychologist Lawrence Kholberg would refer to as, moral development.

Interestingly, Gilead provides a lucid example of the fourth stage in Kohlberg's six stage schema of moral development. Gilead is locked within the stage that Kohlberg defines as "social system and conscience" which appears at the second level of the three hierarchical stages that he believes are necessary in the development of moral meaning-making. Psychologist Robert Kegan states that, "Kohlberg's stage four resolve[s] the historic conflict between the individual and the group by deciding entirely for the group" (63). In this stage, the state takes primacy over all; individuality is subsumed in order to create the state. At this stage of social/moral development, the historic individual-versus-group dichotomy has disappeared and has been replaced by an all-encompassing, oppressive society.

The oppression that occurs in Gilead is illustrative of the type of oppression one would expect to find in any "real world" society based on a strict adherence to a "law-and-
order" ideology. In Kohlberg's hierarchy, it is a point in moral development where people have become social objects, rather than individual subjects, who, as Kegan states, are not guaranteed their distinctness apart from their identification with the social order. Kohlberg's stage four is essentially the psychological birth of ideology, which is a meaning system which is above all factional... This ideology tends to draw lines of membership in the human community according to the particular faction it makes ultimate, creating what Erikson (1972) called the "pseudo-species." (63)

As with many fundamentalists, those who "make the rules" and structure the Gileadean society are "moralists" in the most extreme sense: their ideology is rigid and inflexible because, as Kohlberg's model illustrates, their ideology is factional and does not allow for individual distinctions. There is no individual identity because all is identified with the group and the reigning ideology. This society is exclusionary in the most rigid sense: those who disagree with, or challenge, the dominant ideology in Gilead are exiled or executed. There is no room for dissension.

The power structure of Gilead, locked in Kohlberg's Law and Order stage of moral development, seems to assume that if individuals think individual thoughts, or if they have or construct any identity apart from the group, the society--or "pseudo-species"--will deteriorate. Individuality poses the
most extreme threat to the Gileadean society, which suggests why such stringent controls have been placed on language. Controlling language is the means by which the ideology of the new society is constructed and maintained, while at the same time, individuality, identity, and "self" consciousness are targeted for deconstruction. In Gilead, language control is the chief means by which the group wages war against the self.

Although Offred is subjected to the dehumanizing forces of the Gileadeans, she does, in many ways, resist their efforts to deconstruct her. As Chapter 2 will demonstrate, she resists complete deconstruction by utilizing inner language and the limited access she has to written and spoken language. Chapter 2 will also further explore the dichotomies of self/other, social/individual, and male/female—with a specific emphasis on how all of these dichotomous systems relate to knowing and being—and how language acts as the bridge between these disparate entities. In particular, it will explore the social nature of language, and how society plays a major role in constructing the consciousness of the individual.
CHAPTER 2
RECONSTRUCTION AND RENEWAL

The [person] who writes a serious novel about the end of the world—i.e., the passing of one age and the beginning of another—must reckon not merely like H.G. Wells with changes in the environment, but also with changes in [human] consciousness which may be quite as radical.

Walker Percy
"Notes for a Novel about the End of the World"

Offred's immersion into the foreign and hostile environment of Gilead has subjected her to the process of deconstruction. From society's perspective, she has become nothing. She has lost her past identity; past ways of knowing have been invalidated, and ways of making sense of the world through language have been restricted. She has become an object, useful only as a means to a social end. However, through Offred's narrative, Atwood demonstrates that there are ways to transcend this state of nothingness. She does not allow Offred to become only a victim of a cruel world. Instead, she writes of one woman's determination to transcend and rebel against society's efforts to dehumanize her and deconstruct her consciousness. Although there are times when Offred feels that she will fade into nothingness, she continues to question the regime—although this is often limited to internal questioning—and continues to explore and define "where in reality" she lives. She strives to make sense of her self and the external world through
language, and in this way resists complete deconstruction and begins the process of reconstructing her consciousness and her self.

The chief obstacle that Offred confronts in her reconstructive process is her inability to access language. The "sins" of reading and writing are punishable by death in Gilead, because with reading and writing come an awareness of multiple points of view and a growth of the individual self. The power to write one's self is the power to challenge authority. Because the Gileadean government restricts both the written and spoken word, Offred longs for communication. She misses language, she misses words, and throughout the novel, she "plays" with words, trying to remember the multiplicity of meanings and seemingly endless connotations that derived from words she used in her past life. Many times in the novel, she mulls over meanings and savors the connotative power of words. For instance, when she considers the word "chair," she thinks beyond the literal meaning, beyond the sign, and penetrates the symbol:

I sit in the chair and think about the word chair. It can also mean the leader of a meeting. It can also mean a mode of execution. It is the first syllable in the word charity. It is the French word for flesh.

(140)

In this passage, Atwood vividly illustrates how the human mind "plays" with words, how word-symbols convey seemingly
endless meanings, and how, through a sort of free-association, they allow us to think of many different things at once, things which don't readily appear—at least on a surface level—to be connected in any way. As Offred states (regarding the previous passage), "None of these facts has any connections with the others" (140). In one sense, she's right: the facts have no logical connection with one another, except that they all have been brought to consciousness by the word-symbol chair. On the other hand, they do serve to illustrate an important way that the mind connects things through patterning. All of the "facts" (or associations) that arise in her consciousness are triggered by the word chair, just as in the process of free-association, one word will trigger another, then another. Free-association, then, is the exact opposite of the type of cognitive "patterning" that the Gileadean government strives to implement. Those in power strive for a patterning-system which simplifies thought and restricts alternative ways of viewing the world through limiting connotative and/or symbolic meaning. They seem to be striving for a principle of uniform thinking among people, similar to the principle of Pragnanz in Gestalt psychology which states that "we recognize patterns by reorganizing stimuli to make them simpler, more complete, and more regular than they actually are" (Woolfolk 238). This way of perceiving the world, through recognizing patterns among diverse stimuli and
forming a simpler, more complete, mental construct of them, is a natural cognitive process. It is a process which is essential to making sense of the world since it is difficult, if not impossible, to attend to the multitude of individual stimuli with which we are constantly bombarded. However, when taken to an extreme, this way of thinking can have a reverse effect: rather than helping an individual to form connections, it can limit the possible alternative "constructs" for meaning. Rather than "simplifying" through reordering the world, enforcing a system which "dictates" connections has the effect of making the world "simplistic."

Ironically, however, what Offred appears to be doing while "playing" with the word chair is actually the reverse of Pragnanz: rather than forming patterns from diverse stimuli to simplify and "regulate" her world, she makes her world more complex by conjuring up a variety of mental images with only one symbol, the word chair. This process of making the simplistic more complex--of actually constructing alternatives for a single symbol--is one example of how Offred rebels against the social norms and against society's effort to deconstruct her consciousness. Here, she begins the process of reconstructing her consciousness through the use of language.

Offred reveals the purpose of this word play in another way, stating, "These are the kinds of litanies I use, to compose myself" (140). Thus, through language, Offred
"composes" herself, both in the familiar sense of "calming" or "quieting" herself and in the essential sense of arranging or putting together the separate "parts" or elements of her consciousness (or as she says, my "self") to make complex, yet complete, whole. Through the internal manipulation of language, Offred resists fragmentation, or deconstruction, and strives to remain whole and complete.

Through Offred's narrative, Atwood also confronts and explores the nature of psychological development and cognitive growth. The tension caused by the oppositional, dualistic relationships that Offred continually confronts, particularly the contrast between the past and the present, becomes the catalyst for Offred's reconstructive process. Reconstruction in this sense can be seen as a process of adaptation to a new environment which centers on, in Piagetian terms, the complementary processes of assimilation and accommodation to reach a state of equilibration. In the process of assimilation, Offred strives to "fit" the language, customs, and rules of her new world into her existing cognitive schemes. In order to survive, she must re-encultrate herself; she must make sense of the new world. However, just as in any process of cognitive or psychological development, this foreign information must be accommodated into her existing cognitive schemes. Because these schemes act to organize information and show relationships between and among things, a way of
"patterning" the world and making sense of reality, Offred's existing cognitive structures must be altered in order to assimilate this new information. In this sense, the narrative can be seen as a record of Offred's process of striving for equilibration, a process defined by cognitive psychologists as the search for "a balance between one's cognitive schemes and one's experiences or perceptions of the environment . . . . Equilibriation is the process by which actual changes in thinking take place" (Woolfolk 581). In the process of equilibration, changes in thinking take place because in striving for a balance between old and new information, there are often parallel changes in perception, ways of patterning information, and ways of making sense of the world. This process of equilibration is vividly illustrated in Offred's attempts to re-learn and make sense of both her new world and also her self. Reaching a state of equilibration is essential to adaptation, and for purposes of this paper, will serve to illustrate Offred's process of reconstruction.

Reconstruction, then, must take into account both past ways of knowing and ways of making sense of the world, and new (possibly antithetical) information and new ways of patterning that information in order to make sense of it. Because her present world is in direct opposition to her past world, Offred must alter her ways of processing information, of making sense of the world. Therefore, much
of Offred's reconstructive process revolves around working through the tension caused by striving to forget her past life and, at the same time, trying to remember it. For instance, when she smells the yeast from freshly baked bread, it reminds her of herself in her past life when she was a mother. As she remembers the time before, she states, "This is a treacherous smell, and I know I must shut it out" (62). Offred's past memories are "treacherous" in two distinct senses. First, they are untrustworthy because she can no longer identify herself with those memories; she must learn to shut them out in order to tolerate her new life of oppression. But in another sense, these memories equate with the Gileadean concept of "treachery" because in remembering her past life—and in the process acknowledging that there was any life, particularly a "better" life before Gilead—equates with disloyalty in the regime. But even though the past is too painful to remember, and her memories of it are untrustworthy, Offred knows that she must remember her past life in order to resist society's efforts to deconstruct her. Therefore, when she can no longer clearly remember her husband and daughter, she becomes frustrated and says, "It's my fault. I am forgetting too much" (250). Constantly bombarded by memories of the past, when things were "normal," she strives to shut them out in order to endure the abnormalities of Gilead; yet, at the same time, she knows that she must continue to remember, to recapture
her past life—even in memories—in hopes that she will one day be reunited with her loved ones and her past life. In this way, she continues to hope that she will one day prevail.

Through the process of reconstruction, Offred must live in the space between forgetting and remembering. She must strike a balance and reach a state of equilibration in order to make sense of her self in an alien world. And language—both internal and external—is her chief means for reaching a state of equilibration, which is, in psychologist Robert Kegan's words

[The ongoing conversation between the individuating organism and the world, a process of adaptation shaped by the tension between the assimilation of new experience to the old 'grammar' and the accommodation of the old grammar to new experience. (44)]

Equilibration (or the search for balance), therefore, is "shaped" by the tension between the oppositional and often contradictory forces of past "knowledge" and present understanding. In Offred's case, it is the search for "balance" between the antithetical constructs of her past memories and her present experiences.

Sometimes, as Offred's narration demonstrates, past ways of knowing, or the "old grammar," are no longer valid constructs for making sense of the world at present. Therefore, new schemes must be constructed, new ways of
perceiving and understanding the world must be formed, in order for the "adaptive conversation" to emerge. Throughout the novel, Offred must adapt her past ways of "making sense" of the world to new ways of making sense of what appears to be a senseless world. In the past, her language allowed for metaphorical connections which connected disparate events and/or entities and allowed each to comment on the other. In this way, meaning was allowed to multiply; it resisted clear, concrete descriptiveness. However, in Gilead meaning is limited to the literal. Each sign has a direct correlation to its signified, a situation wherein proliferation of meaning is halted and events, language, and emotions become rigidified.

This enormous tension between her past memories and present experiences forces Offred into a psychological state of disequilibrium. In order to strike a balance, she must learn new ways of comprehending and processing the external world. However, ways of doing this through language are limited in Gilead. This restrictive meaning-making environment is clearly depicted when Offred strives to make sense of the a man who hangs from a hook on the Wall, executed for his past crimes against the state. (The picture of a fetus which hangs around his neck signifies that he was a doctor who performed abortions in his life before Gilead.) She states that she sees what looks like a "smile made of blood" seeping from the dead man's mouth onto
the bag which covers his head. Offred begins to make sense of this image as, it is assumed, she would have done in the pre-Gileadean world. She strives to comprehend the significance of this image, and at first, relies on her old "grammar"—connecting unrelated images through the use of metaphor—to make sense of it. This is shown in her statement, "The red of the smile is the same as the red of the tulips in Serena Joy's garden" (45). However, almost immediately, she stops herself from making the connection and begins to see the images as disconnected and unrelated. She states, "The red is the same but there is no connection. The tulips are not tulips of blood, the red smiles are not flowers, neither thing makes a comment on the other" (45). As shown in these lines, Offred's state of disequilibrium—her inability to adapt the old "grammar" to new experience—forces her to abandon the metaphor. It is as if metaphors are no longer valid constructs for meaning-making; like most everything else in Gilead, they have become untrustworthy. So instead of relying on metaphor, Offred "reads" the scene literally and states,

Each thing is valid and really there. It is through such valid objects that I must pick my way every day and in every way. I put a lot of effort into making such distinctions. I need to make them. I need to be very clear, in my own mind. (45)
This passage illustrates the tension which exists between Offred's past ways of making sense of experience and her present, limited ways of making sense of experience. In Gilead, with the emphasis on denotation and "correctness," metaphors are scandalous because they cannot be "read" literally. As Walker Percy states, from the point of view of scholastics and semioticists, a metaphor is "scandalous" because it appears to be wrong. Logically, a metaphor seems like a "mistake" because "it asserts one thing that is something else—and further, that its [significance] often seems proportionate to its wrongness or outlandishness" ("Metaphor as Mistake" 67).

Metaphorical connections, therefore, because of their poetic nature and their ability to go beyond the literal meaning, are dangerous ways to make sense of the world in Gilead. If Offred had continued to make sense of this scene through a metaphorical construct, it may have suggested, or offered profound insight into, the "meaning" or significance of the man's death. The two otherwise unrelated concepts might then have "commented" upon one another and Offred would have gained a fuller insight not only of the image before her, but in a more general sense, how this image "comments" on other aspects of her world and her existence. If she were to use her past ways of "making sense" of the world in Gilead, she might risk her own sanity because these two things (the dead man and the healthy, living tulips)
when connected, not only comment on life in Gilead, but raise extremely important questions about what is valued and nurtured in Gilead, and what is devalued and easily disposed of within the regime.

However, because of the unconscionable horror of Gilead, Offred stops short of connecting these concepts. Instead, she makes a concerted effort to perceive each thing for what it is in concrete, actual, "valid," and especially literal terms. She has been trained to perceive the world in this manner, focusing on individual concrete aspects rather than on making metaphorical connections. Furthermore, it seems that this way of disconnecting concepts from symbolic meanings enables her to deal with the horrors and atrocities of Gilead, because through distancing the language used to describe and make sense of the scene, she simultaneously distances her self from the scene. Concrete, literal thinking enables her to "process" information in an objective, unfeeling manner, which is necessary for her self-preservation. In fact, Offred states, "What I feel toward them is blankness. What I feel is that I must not feel" (44). She has learned that she must see the dead man as "a valid object," and feel as an object herself, in order to endure the horror of Gilead.

Therefore, through forgetting her past and distancing herself from the Gileadean atrocities, Offred strives to tolerate and endure her oppression. To preserve her self,
she strives not only to forget her past, but also her present: she tries not to feel anything and in this way, alienates herself from the external world. However, in illustrating Offred's tendency toward apathy, Atwood does not suggest that it came about only because of the Gileadean regime. Rather, she shows that Offred learned this tactic for dealing with the world as a child, well before her life in Gilead. In doing this, Atwood shows that even "ordinary" life, we cope by distancing ourselves from "reality" and furthermore, by separating our minds from our bodies. This is evident in Offred's memory of how she learned not to feel:

Steel yourself, my mother used to say, before examinations or swims in cold water. I never thought much at the time about what the phrase meant, but it had to do with metal, with armor, and that's what I would do, I would steel myself. I would pretend not to be present, not in the flesh. (206)

This pretending, this Cartesian mentality of severing body from mind, is one way in which people (both in dystopias and in the "real world") survive. In Gilead, this form of protecting the self, in the form of mental escape, is the way in which most people, from the most powerful to the least, are able to survive. In fact, Offred states that she is not alone in this form of escape, illusionary as it may be. The irony is that the Commander, she notices, embraces
the body/mind duality as well, when they must undergo the ritual of the Ceremony, as evidenced in Offred's line,

This state of absence, of existing apart from the body, had been true of the Commander too...the sexual act, although he performed it in a perfunctory way, must have been largely unconscious for him, like scratching himself. (206, 207)

In Gilead, the way to endure is to abandon the self and simultaneously abandon consciousness. The characters have quite literally objectified themselves, other people, and the most intimate of experiences. Only in this way, of seeing everything as object and nothing as subject, can they disassociate themselves from the world and ultimately from themselves. Only in this way can they endure. As objects, they survive; as conscious, feeling subjects, they risk sanity and hope.

Although Offred is tempted to accept the body/mind, subject/object Cartesian model, she resists defining her self from a dualistic perspective. Instead, she persists in trying to make connections and "fill in the spaces" between the opposites. She resists simplistic either/or patterns of "seeing" or "knowing" the world; she strives for a balance between being and nothing. She persists in becoming more than an object, but in doing so, realizes that she must make choices about her present situation and her future. These choices are frightening however, because they suggest
alternatives to the Gileadean worldview. In Gilead, choices equate with rebelliousness. As Offred says, "It's the choice that terrifies me. A way out, a salvation" (80). Offred cannot trust the "salvation" offered by the Gileadeans, one wherein people are "saved"—particularly through the hideous ceremony of Salvaging—from a world where free agents make free choices. She cannot accept the Gileadean definition of "salvation" wherein people must abandon their individuality and relinquish their selves for the "common good" or a nebulous "later reward." Instead, Offred looks for ways that she can save herself from the salvation offered by the regime.

In this effort, however, Offred must make choices, choices which themselves are terrifying. In the past, the ability to choose was one of the ways she defined her self because with choice comes autonomy and freedom. But in Gilead, this means of self-definition is no longer available. Instead of autonomy, then, Offred relies on language to make sense of her world and to connect with others in an effort to reaffirm herself. She relies on language, because language has the capacity to connect two disparate realities in the process of negotiating a different reality. It is this connective process and social interaction that Offred strives for in an effort to both endure and prevail, and to reconstruct her self in the new world.
Although most of Offred's reconstructive process is isolated within her own mind—a constant process of negotiating between past and present "ways of knowing"—there are instances when others try to connect with her and break through her self-imposed isolation. One of the first of these instances involves her shopping partner Ofglen, who "tries out" the password to the Underground—"mayday"—on her. However, because Offred has learned to distrust both language and "others"—in Gilead, both may betray her—she does not allow herself to enter into a dialogue with Ofglen. Instead, she considers their form of communication as yet another type of "sign" language, nothing more than "clipped whispers, projected through the funnels of [their] white wings" (260). Their exchanges typify those which exist in a system of signs rather than symbols, as shown in Offred's reference to their discourse as being "like a telegram, a verbal semaphore. Amputated speech" (260). Because their chances to engage in language are so highly limited, and also because of Offred's fear and distrust, the context of their exchange does not allow for the emergence of much meaning-making. As in a telegram or a semaphore, the code or "sign" has one meaning and one meaning alone.

Therefore, when Ofglen does try out the "mayday" password, Offred considers, at first, only the literal meaning of the words. Because she has learned to limit meaning-making to the direct response to a sign, she
believes that Ofglen is truly remarking on the beautiful May
day. It is only as an afterthought that she recalls that
the word has another meaning:

Mayday used to be a distress signal, a long time ago.
It was Luke who told me about mayday... .
It's French, he said. From m'aidez.
Help me. (58)

Although Offred is able to go beyond the literal meaning
into the symbolic (or suggested) meaning of the words, her
fear and distrust cause her to reject the "help me"
connotations of the discourse, and instead, she settles for
the literal meaning. It is not until much later, when the
women have formed a bond of trust, that Ofglen is able to
disclose the nature and function of the password. Because
everything in Gilead is untrustworthy, and fear and
alienation separate people and disallow for communication,
Ofglen and Offred must build a bond of trust before either
feel free to disclose their true feelings about the regime.

Therefore, although there are some opportunities for
Offred to engage in a dialogue and affirm both her self and
her true feelings about the regime, she has undergone the
process of re-encultration and has learned that language not
only has the power to construct alternative realities, it
also has the power to confine. She has learned to distrust
metaphors, for they only magnify the horror of Gilead. She
has learned to alienate and isolate herself from others, to
the point that she can no longer trust their discourse.

goals. She has even learned that her own memories are no

longer trustworthy, that everything is really a

reconstruction, and that she must rely on "concrete reality"

and "valid objects" to make sense of her new environment.

She has learned to respond to her environment as an animal

does, through attending to signs—to the literal meaning of

things—rather than symbols, and to avoid danger and

risk-taking at all costs. She has adapted to the

environment in such a way that passivity and acceptance seem
to be the only alternatives to the horror of Gilead.

On a surface level, Offred seems to have accepted the

regime's efforts to deconstruct her to a state of

nothingness; yet at a deeper level, she resists

destruction. She continues in her quest to become more

than nothing; she continues the process of reconstructing

her self and strives for equilibration. Through this

process, she "fills in" the space between the two

dichotomous states (or conditions) of being and nothing. In

direct opposition to the state of nothingness imposed on her

by the regime is Offred's quest to reconstruct her self,

which includes on one level, the need to adapt to the

environment in order to survive, and on another level,

embraces all aspects of being, a state wherein she strives

to redefine herself and empower herself in an effort not

only to endure the horrors of Gilead, but to continue hoping
that some day she will prevail. These oppositional states—nothing and being—continually wage war and struggle for supremacy within Offred. It is her constant struggle to avoid being defined as nothing—which the Gileadean power structure wants so desperately for her to accept—embracing instead all aspects of being, which vividly illustrates the active, and often terrifying and confusing, process of "Becoming," of reconstructing or redefining one's own self. By focusing on this process of psychological and ontological growth, Atwood demonstrates how essential it is to avoid embracing either pole of a dichotomy. She will not accept either/or alternatives; she continues to explore and write the space between.

By immersing her character in the space in between, Atwood explores various alternative ways of "knowing" and ways of "being." By writing the space in between, she illustrates the fundamental ontological process of making sense of the world in relation to the self and the simultaneous process of making sense of the self in relation to the world. In doing so, Atwood demonstrates her capacity for going beyond either/or alternative ways of knowing, defining, and describing the self and the world. Throughout the novel Atwood writes the spaces between dichotomies, not only the being/nothing dichotomy, but also the dichotomies of subject/object, self/other, male/female, and social/individual.
Even though there are times in the novel when Offred tries to connect with others, for a large part of the novel she is limited to making sense of the atrocities in Gilead internally. She does not have access to external "ways of knowing" (e.g., conversation, reading and writing); therefore, her narrative is limited to what might be defined as an internal monologue. However, as shown in her line "You don't tell a story only to yourself. There's always someone else" (52), her narrative includes a strong sense of "other-ness" and of the social nature and function of language. In this way, her story might be more specifically defined as an internal dialogue, composed of her voice from the present, commented upon by internalized "voices" of the past, and directed to an imagined listener who acts to "affirm" the story in Offred's very act of telling it.

With her emphasis on social interaction, in connecting with "others" in the pursuit of negotiating "reality," Atwood demonstrates the dialogic nature of making meaning. She implies that meaning cannot be derived through a monologue; it requires constant negotiation with others in an effort to procure an agreed upon meaning. It is a continuing dialogue which constantly strives to fill in the spaces between disparate realities and between conflicting dualities. It is a dialogue focused on negotiating reality, making meaning, affirming selfhood, and constructing the consciousness through the symbols of language. In "Semiotic
and a Theory of Knowledge," Walker Percy states that this dialogue is essential to meaning-making and is fundamental to the construction of human consciousness:

Without the presence of another, symbolization cannot conceivably occur because there is no one from whom the word can be received as meaningful. The irreducible condition of every act of symbolization is the rendering intelligible; that is to say, the formulation of experience for a real or an implied someone else.

(257)

Although historically, particularly in the Victorian tradition, self-knowledge and knowing-in-general have been thought to originate within monologues, Atwood suggests that even in what appears to be an internal monologue, voices of "others" are present. In a true monologue, there would be only one voice, but because the function of language is to communicate—to co-conceive of experience—and since any symbolic communicative endeavor requires a triadic relationship—one who originates the symbol, the symbol itself, and the receiver who makes the symbol meaningful (even if that receiver is one's own self)—then even thought itself can be considered a dialogue. In the telling of her story, then, Offred's "listener," or imagined other, acts to render intelligible her ordeal in the new world. In this way, her experience becomes meaningful because there is an implied other who can "co-conceive" and affirm her
experience. Through dialogue, even a dialogue constructed in her head, Offred begins to connect with others and begins to formulate and assign meaning to her experiences. She relies on this dialogue because it is a key element in her process of reconstructing her consciousness; as Percy states, "When the dialogue stops, consciousness stops" (Signposts 148). Therefore, in order to continue her process of reconstruction, Offred must continue connecting with others. She must continue the dialogic process of meaning-making.

In her quest for intersubjectivity, her need to connect, Offred "listens" and hopes for the voice of another. In a crucial scene, she "hears" this voice in the form of a "message" left by the Handmaid who preceded her. Like the password "mayday" which was used by Ofglen in a previous effort to communicate, the message is also in a foreign language—in the phrase Nolite te bastardes carborundorum—which she finds shortly after her arrival to the Commander's house, etched in a corner of her closet. This is the first and only written message that Offred receives, and she believes that this message was meant for her. Because she cannot understand the literal meaning of the message, it means many different things to Offred: she regards it at first as a kind of prayer; later, as a command; and most often as "ancient hieroglyph to which the key's been lost" (190). And even though she cannot make
literal sense of it, for the first time since her consignment, she feels that she is "communing" with another. She states, "It pleases me to ponder his message. It pleases me to think I'm communing with her, this unknown woman" (69). It seems as if this sharing of experience through language, even a language that she cannot decipher, gives her hope. It is as if she is now part of a community, distinct and separate from the Gileadean regime. For a moment, she is no longer an object, but a receiver of a symbol, a symbol which allows her hope.

Paradoxically, the message's "meaning" becomes even more ambiguous when it is interpreted for her by the Commander. What is truly ironic in this scene is that the phrase--scrawled in the margin of a textbook by the Commander when he was a "schoolboy"--is written in a crude and bastardized form of Latin, representing the ultimate breach of linguistic propriety and convention. This message, however, has survived from the time before, a time when the Commander also "played" with language and transgressed the rules imposed upon it. It came from the time when he questioned authority and convention, rather than implementing stringent conventions through his authority.

After the Commander shows Offred the "original" message, written beside a defaced picture of the Venus de Milo in the book, he tells her that it was only a
"schoolboy's joke." With the translation—"Don't let the bastards grind you down"—Offred understands the literal meaning of the message, but she also understands that the previous Handmaid must have learned the message in the Commander's study. Offred feels uneasy, jealous even, with her realization, "I have not been the first then. To enter his silence, play children's word games with him" (242). One critic has suggested that after Offred realizes her predecessor learned this phrase in the Commander's study, and is informed that the original message was "only a joke," it would appear that

[T]he piece of text loses its status as a message and therefore its potential to comfort Offred. Not a message of sisterhood at all, it is, at least probably, a male text, in a language as debased as the photo of the Venus de Milo. (Bergmann 849)

Perhaps this is so. But perhaps, in an ironic way, Offred's discovery of the original message forms an even stronger bond of sisterhood between the two women, an affirmation of sorts, between "spirits" of the past: one spirit who haunts Offred's room, the other "spirit" (Offred's past self) which continues to "haunt" Offred's body. I would like to suggest that it still offers her hope, and retains its status as a message, because it is the one thing that she continues to repeat. Whether or not it is in a "male language," she relies on it in her process to become more than an object

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and to reconstruct her self. She may, in fact, continue to see the message as a sign of willful persistence, a message both of hope and of spite. Like Moira's persistent quest for freedom, it offers hope. Even like Serena Joy's insistence on knitting rows and rows of little boys and girls and evergreen trees, it is "evidence of her stubbornness, and not altogether despicable" (263). It is a message whose meaning becomes ambiguous once she discovers the meaning and the source; however, it is an ambiguity that offers enough hope for her to continue to endure. At times, it offers enough hope for her to believe she may prevail.

In the Gileadean world of either/or, Offred's only alternative to hoping is to believe that "If my life is bearable, maybe what they're doing is all right after all" (243). But she knows that it isn't all right; she continues to repeat the message, continues to draw strength from it. Even in her most despairing times, when she contemplates withdrawing so far into herself, "so far down and back that they could never get [her] out" (291), when she sees herself as "a blank, between parentheses. Between other people," she repeats the phrase to herself. Even after seemingly convincing herself that the phrase is not magical, it doesn't offer hope, when she repeats it and her only response is "Fat lot of good it did her . . . Why fight?" (291), she immediately realizes that she cannot give up hope. She sternly tells herself, "That will never do"
(291). Constantly in this battle between being and nothing, between despair and hope, between trust and fear, Offred knows that she must maintain whatever connections she can. She must be valued, validated, affirmed. She latches on to any language which will offer her this hope and continue to commune with others who share her hope. In this way, hoping that someday she'll get out, Offred continues to endure.

However, conflicting with her need to endure in Gilead is her need to survive within herself. She wants to be conscious of the world around her; she wants to think; she wants to regain her status as subject. When asked by the Commander, "What would you like?," she replies, "I would like to know" (243). However, she also realizes how much more powerful the Commander is than she is, as shown in her line, "But watch out, Commander, I tell him in my head. I've got my eye on you. One false move and I'm dead" (113). Because of this enormous difference in power, Offred oscillates between thirsting for knowledge and then trying to convince herself that she really doesn't want to know after all. Her oscillation between giving voice to her desire for knowledge and the subsequent repression of that desire is evident in her statement, "Maybe I don't really want to know what's going on. Maybe I'd rather not know. Maybe I couldn't bear to know" (252). But she does want to know, and because she wants to know, she takes risks which could cost her her life.
The most notable, and also probably the most ironic way that Offred takes risks, and "breaks the rules" imposed by the regime, is by consenting to join the Commander in his study--an "oasis of the forbidden"--within which everywhere, blatantly is the written word, "Books and books and books, right out in plain view, no locks, no boxes" (177). And in this oasis of the forbidden is the opportunity for Offred to experience her first taste of freedom.

Offred enters the forbidden and chooses (in a sense) to break the rules, thinking that the Commander wants to do something indecent, illicit, forbidden, all adjectives suggestive of a sexual encounter in the world before. Yet, even though he has not asked her into his study for a sexual encounter, but rather to play a game of Scrabble with him, Offred realizes--after forcing herself not to laugh at the banality of the request--that even the game of Scrabble--"playing with words"--has taken on new dimensions: "Now it's forbidden, for us. Now it's dangerous. Now it's indecent. Now it's something he can't do with his Wife. Now it's desirable" (179). Before, Scrabble was only a game, and not highly prized by Offred. It was game played by old men and women in retirement homes, and in her mother's day, a game of adolescents. It was out-of-date and old-fashioned and not of interest to her. However, now that Offred has such limited access to language, since language is considered a commodity in Gilead, a highly guarded one at
that, the game takes on new dimensions for her. It is not only the game itself, but what it represents: unlimited possibilities to manipulate language, to think, to choose, to become empowered. Because she has the opportunity to create words, to manipulate language—in both a literal and a figurative sense—she takes on a new dimension of humanness, and sees herself as subject rather than object and the Commander takes on this new dimension of humanness as well. They are no longer objects. Language allows them to think, and it fills in the space between emotion and logic. Language allows her to bridge the disparity between mind and body; language allows her to think and feel as suggested in the following lines, "I hold the glossy corners with their smooth edges, finger the letters. The feeling is voluptuous. This is freedom, an eyeblink of it... What a luxury" (180).

For Offred, access to language, no matter how mundane, is euphoric. In this passage, Atwood explores the sensual and provocative nature of language. Offred feels the words, she feels their power; they offer possibilities and alternatives. Through language, Offred realizes, comes thought and a renewed sense of self. With language, she no longer has to suffer being defined by others. Language offers her the chance for self definition and self affirmation.
However, there are certain drawbacks to Offred's word-playing liaison with the commander. Although she feels somewhat empowered—"It's difficult for me to believe I have a power over him, of any sort, but I do" (272)—she also realizes that her lack of fear, diminished through her empowerment, can be dangerous. She knows that any power she has is of "an equivocal kind" (272). She knows who holds the real power, and that she is really no more than the Commander's mistress. (One step up from a Handmaid, to be certain, but a baby step at best.) A chasm remains between her and the Commander—in relation to power, choice, and freedom—and that chasm is never filled in. The hierarchical power structure is not overturned. She can never quite join with him because the power structure, which he helped create, will not allow it. Language in Gilead is patterned to separate rather than to join, and as their attempts to connect through playing Scrabble illustrate, even intellectual intercourse in Gilead is disjointed and unfulfilling. As Offred states, "If it were sex it would be a swift furtive stand-up in an alley somewhere" (194).

Through exploring this inability to join in communication, Atwood illustrates yet another duality at work in both the novel and the "real" world: oppositional and asymmetrical ways in which conversational goals are generally perceived by males and females. In both her internal and external ways of speaking, Offred typically
illustrates what might be defined as "feminine" ways of speaking. As linguist Deborah Tannen points out, the goal in feminine communication is intimacy which focuses on creating connections and forming community. On the other hand, in masculine discourse, the goal is to achieve or maintain status by keeping the "upper hand" in conversations, "winning" discussions, and dominating conversations. In status-oriented conversations, an individual perceives the world, and therefore engages in it, as "an individual in a hierarchical social order in which he is either one-up or one-down" (Tannen 24). Tannen suggests that conversations in this world are negotiations in which people try to achieve and maintain the upper hand if they can, and protect themselves from others' attempts to put them down and push them around. Life, then, is a contest, a struggle to preserve independence and avoid failure. (25)

Due to his goals of achieving/maintaining status and avoiding failure, the Commander "speaks" a language whose rules are governed by logic and reason and driven by his fears of being perceived inadequate and/or weak. He must keep the upper hand in his exchanges with Offred; he continues to assert his authority over her. In speaking with her, he continues to command, rather than suggest, the terms of the conversation. He orders her to play Scrabble with him (and she knows the consequences of making him feel
silly by "shrieking with laughter" at the request, so she complies); he sets the limits on the amount of time that they will play; he decides when the game is over and tells her when it's time for her to "go home." Therefore, even though he allows her access to language, the rules governing the context of the language are still in his control. He is still in control of her mind, her body, and her actions. On other occasions as well, the Commander decides what he and Offred will converse about (in linguistic terminology, he initiates conversational topics—a sign of conversational dominance) and in which context they will speak. The context is generally one of her submission to his authority, and it is also drained of thought and emotion. When Offred does bring up the topic of the "message" and asks what happened to the woman who wrote it, the Commander tells her that she hanged herself, and then adds, "That's why we had the light fixture removed. In your room" (243). But he states all of this, not with emotion nor with a sense of sadness or of loss, but rather with "thoughtfulness" (243).

With his lack of emotion, Offred comprehends, once again, how little valued she is in Gilead. Even with (or possibly especially with) the Commander, Offred realizes that she is still no more than an object, although she's gone from being an object of reproduction to an object with whom the Commander can sinfully Scrabble and even "dress up" like a plaything for an illegal and illicit "night on the
town" at Jezebel's. She realizes that she is a replacement for his former mistress, and that she, too, is replaceable, as shown in her line, "If your dog dies, get another" (243). Communication, then, when its terms are dictated in a masculine way—when the speaker's goals are to avoid humiliation, preserve independence, and avoid failure—will act to further disconnect and alienate others. It restricts movement and further isolates the communicators into their respective spheres of nothingness. It does not unite and join—it divides and conquers.

Offred's conversational goals, however, focus on connecting with others and forming bonds of mutual respect and trust. Her primary goals are to build a sense of community, renew a sense of hope, and reaffirm herself in an effort to make sense of the world. The desire to achieve these goals is based on her effort to overcome her sense of nothing, in order to continue reconstructing and continue in her process of becoming more than an object. In attaining these goals, then, her primary focus is not on the hierarchical, adversarial contexts of speech, but rather on language's power to unify and join. From her interactions with others, Offred desires intimacy and approaches the world as "an individual in a network of connections" (Tannen 25). In this world, Tannen suggests, individuals strive to make connections in an effort to avoid isolation. Their chief goal is the formation of community, in an effort "to
protect themselves from others' attempts to push them away" (25). Tannen states that people whose conversational goals focus on intimacy have a world view wherein "life is a community, a struggle to preserve intimacy and avoid isolation" (25). In her effort to establish connections with others, to negotiate rather than "dictate" what is known about the world and about the self, Offred continues to strive to "commune" with the other, to form bonds of intimacy and trust.

However, because she and the Commander still converse in ways that their previous language, in times before Gilead, dictated—rational, unemotional, and status oriented—they fail to agree on what the world means and what they mean in relation to each other, or what the goals of their conversations truly are. Their conversational goals remain in opposition. This conflict in conversational goals only acts to further confuse Offred in her quest to reconstruct herself. Is she an object, useful primarily only for breeding purposes who moves up the hierarchy and becomes an object with which the Commander might "entertain" himself, whether sexually, in game playing rendezvous, or to be watched during her "illicit reading that seems like a kind of performance" (239)? Or is she more than that? Does he really see her as a thinking, feeling being? Offred doesn't ever answer these questions directly; she never
states what she "is" to the Commander. Instead, she defines herself in relation to him by what she isn't:

To him I'm no longer merely a usable body. To him I'm not just a boat with no cargo, a chalice with no wine in it, an oven—to be crude—minus the bun. To him I'm not merely empty. (211)

She has become more than nothing, but still defines herself in relation to nothing. She remains immersed in the confusing, painful, and difficult process of "becoming," in which ambiguity and uncertainty play a major role.

Although much of the dialogue between the Commander and Offred reflects this status/intimacy opposition; it is not only Offred who strives for intimacy nor the Commander who strives for status. Indeed, in some instances, these roles are reversed and the Commander allows his "feminine" voice to replace his masculine voice. Instead of struggling for dominance, he desires intimacy as shown most noticeably in his request that Offred kiss him "as if [she] meant it" (181). However, when the Commander strives for intimacy, it is as if he is using a foreign language, or at least a language with which he is not familiar. Offred, fluent in the language of intimacy, realizes this immediately. She hears not only the words he speaks, but also the rhythm, the intonation, and the diction. She catches the "falsity" of the conversation, even the falsity of his word choice (describing himself as "an ordinary kind of guy"), which
cause her to be on the defensive. Although she is aching for communication and feels "speech backing up inside of her," she resists The Commander's attempts at intimacy, thinking, "If I talk to him I'll say something wrong, give something away. I can feel it coming, a betrayal of myself. I don't want him to know too much" (239). What she feels is at risk is her self, the self she has been able to reconstruct up to this point. She chooses not to take the risk, as much as she, too, desires intimacy and conversation.

Therefore, although Offred realizes that the Commander wants intimacy, she also realizes that she cannot give him what he wants. He is her adversary, one whom she has learned not to trust. Even though he strives for intimacy, the falsity of his request and his unfamiliarity with the language of intimacy cause her to pull away from him. She understands that intimacy is something not won through force nor might nor conversational dominance, but rather that it requires a pre-established bond of trust, something that Offred does not feel has yet been established between them. So, although the Commander has become more real for her through the sharing of language (as she states, "He is no longer a thing to me. That was the problem . . . It complicates" [207]), she still cannot trust him with intimacy. At this point, she cannot risk trusting him at all. Ironically, what she has achieved through distancing
herself from him are the masculine goals of status oriented speech: she does not give anything away and preserves whatever dignity and independence she feels she has gained at this point in Gilead.

In most of their conversations, Offred and the Commander continue to oscillate between intimacy and status as the goals of their exchanges. Their goals are always in opposition because the society which dictates their respective places in a hierarchical system has "written the rules" which predetermine them to be adversaries. He is powerful; she is weak. He makes decisions; she abides by them. He defines himself; she is defined by him. He is free; she is enslaved. They exist in opposition; hence, their discourse reflects and reinforces this oppositional, adversarial relationship. Whether either speaks a feminine or a masculine language, they continue to speak in opposition. Therefore, they never are able to truly communicate, and are confined to playing word games with one another without ever forming a strong connection or creating a bond of intimacy.

With the Commander, Offred is never able to strike a balance. She continues in her pursuit to unify the polarities between masculine/feminine ways of being and ways of knowing, but she never overturns the system. She proceeds in the spaces in between dichotomies, and searches
for a way of being which will allow her to endure while hoping to prevail.

According to Sherrill Grace, this tendency to work through, rather than overturn, dichotomous relationships and to resist the tendency to pattern the world as a system of oppositions, is a distinctly Canadian world view. Rather than embracing either pole of a dichotomous extreme—particularly those of social/individual, subject/object, male/female, or public/private—thereby lending credence to and reinforcing these dichotomous patterns, Grace states that Canadians have historically striven to construct a vision which is "pluralistic and communitarian," one which is "resistant to subject/object dichotomies" (3). It is this Canadian (although not exclusively Canadian) commitment to community, to the formation of bonds and relations between individuals, specifically through language, that weaves the fabric of many of Atwood's texts and is particularly evident throughout Offred's narrative in The Handmaid's Tale. In this sense, language is the mediator, or agent of interaction, which is essential for working through the tension caused by dichotomies. In Grace's words, language fills in the "space in between" poles in a dichotomous relationship. In discussing two previous novels by Atwood (Bodily Harm and Surfacing), Grace concludes that Atwood refuses to be silenced by the "space between," and she consistently affirms the power of language to
fill in the gap, to create a third way of being out of
the either/or alternatives which her system resists and
at moments negates. (3)

The Handmaid's Tale attests to Atwood's resistance against
embracing either term in a dichotomy. In her narrative,
Offred resists embracing either the static concepts of being
or of nothing; she knows that in Gilead, both are illusions
and she can be defined by either or by both at the same
time. In the final analysis, her narrative is a textual
record of her reconstructive process of "becoming," a
process which demands interaction with others, through
language, in an effort to reconstruct and affirm her own
consciousness and make her world meaningful. And as
Offred's narrative demonstrates, through writing the space
between, she comes to know her self.

This chapter has examined the ways that Offred's
narrative writes and "fills in" the blank text, the space
between dichotomies and disparate entities. In Chapter 3, I
will examine the ways that Atwood writes the space between
yet another dichotomy, that of darkness and light. Chapter
3 will also explore the relationship between--or "space
between"--reader and writer, focusing on how each might join
with the other--interacting through the written word--in an
effort to make the world of the text, and possibly even
their own worlds, more meaningful.
CHAPTER 3

AMBIGUITY, UNCERTAINTY, AND THE QUEST FOR FREEDOM

Writing, no matter what its subject, is an act of faith; the primary faith being that someone out there will read the results. I believe it's also an act of hope, the hope that things can be better than they are. If the writer is very lucky and lives long enough, I think it can also be an act of charity.
Margaret Atwood, "An End to Audience?"

Through her narrative, Offred writes the space between many dichotomies, and in the process, reconstructs her self. However, at the end of her narrative she is once again positioned between another pair of contrasting images: the images of darkness and light. In this final scene, she once again confronts ambiguity--her death or her new life--an ambiguity which she has learned can be more freeing than the illusion of certainty because of the possibilities and choices it offers. Therefore, in the novel's closing scene, Offred chooses once again to immerse herself into the space between, and "step[s] up, into the darkness within; or else the light" (378).

For readers who don't share Offred's appreciation for ambiguity and uncertainty, for those who don't perceive the freedom inherent in ambiguity, this scene may be frustrating. It leaves unanswered questions. But for Offred, who has learned to see in the darkness as well as in the light, the scene allows her the opportunity to once
again go beyond either/or ways of knowing and being. The ambiguity she confronts allows her to enter the realm of uncertainty, the realm where choices and alternatives reside. But in order to appreciate and even embrace ambiguity, Atwood seems to suggest that one must be able to see in and appreciate both the darkness and the light, and moreover, to appreciate any source of light, no matter how little there is to see by. Atwood makes this point not only in *The Handmaid's Tale*, but also in the final lines of her later novel, *Cat's Eye*. In the final scene of that novel, the central character and narrator, Elaine, looks out the window of an airplane and states,

> Now it's full night, clear, moonless and filled with stars . . . Echoes of light, shining out of the midst of nothing. It's old light, and there's not much of it. But it's enough to see by. (445)

The final lines of both *Cat's Eye* and *The Handmaid's Tale* reinforce Atwood's view that developing "night vision"--the ability to see in the dark as well as in the light and to see a source of light where there appears to be only darkness--is of utmost importance in making sense of both the characters' selves and the worlds of the novels within which they exist, as well as making sense of our selves and the world within which we exist.

Like many of Atwood's other protagonists, Offred learns to see as well in the darkness as in the light and to
appreciate any source of light, particularly the source which comes from within herself. In Gilead, Offred had to learn to see in both; as indicated by the structure of the novel, she spent most of her time in both literal and figurative darkness. Structurally, the novel is divided into fifteen sections, eight of which are entitled "Night," a structure which highlights a repetitious and continuing darkness punctuated by flickers of light. Throughout the novel, Offred makes her way through the literal and figurative darkness of Gilead—a spiritual, psychological, and intellectual darkness—and in the process develops a strong sense of "night" vision. It may be that one of the purposes of her narrative is to enable her imagined listener and future readers of the text to develop this same sense of night vision; to enable them (us) to "read" both her culture and their own culture in the manner which she has "read" and written the "text" of Gilead.

In her quest to see clearly in both the darkness and the light, Offred has relied on the power of language to write the space between dichotomies and contrasts to reconstruct her self. In highlighting the contrast of light and dark at the conclusion of the narrative, Atwood seems to suggest that even the terms themselves are ambiguous. Even those things which seem most clear—the most well-lit—may be the ones that are the most dark. This point was illustrated in Offred's narrative: those in power, those
who thought they saw the world most clearly and attempted to
structure a society which would act as a "light" to the rest
of the world, clearly were swallowed up in the darkness of
their power. Instead of constructing a source of light, the
powerful in Gilead created a psychological, spiritual and
intellectual void of darkness.

But Offred learned to see in and make her way through
the darkness. She tried to make sense of it, telling of it
through her narrative, and reconstructing her experiences
through language. However, she soon discovered that
language has a paradoxical power all its own: like the
light/dark dichotomy, it has the power both to liberate and
to confine. Offred was confined when language was "used
against her" through the acts of labeling or when its use
was restricted by the powerful in Gilead. But she also
found that even within the intellectual darkness of Gilead,
language offered her the opportunity for freedom and for
reconstruction.

Instead of focusing only on the dark and imprisoning
qualities of language, Offred learns that freedom is
possible, even within the confines of Gilead, even within
the confines of language. She experiences a sense of
freedom through telling her story. In the telling, she
reconstructs not only her self but also reconstructs events,
showing, in effect, that within every text there are "gaps"
which offer alternatives and possibilities. Even within the
rigid and repressive system of Gilead, there are opportunities to recreate and re-invent. There is the power for change, for reconstruction. Because she identifies the power that exists within the narrative, through telling her story, Offred realizes that she is not powerless after all. She has the power to reconstruct her self and her story through the telling of it, and though she could seize upon this power and fabricate any part of the narrative for any purpose, she continually struggles against fabricating her story. Instead, aware that what she offers is a reconstruction, she identifies the ambiguity involved in telling any story and enables us to see how language can be both clarifying and distorting. In her narrative, she strives to provide the reader with as complete and fully contextualized account of her experiences in Gilead as possible, to enable us to see the ambiguity and to become aware of the many possibilities that reconstructions offer.

One of the first times Offred reconstructs events is after the Commander asks her to kiss him. She tells that she thought about stabbing him with the sharp end of a toilet lever, how she would feel "the blood coming out of him, hot as soup, sexual, over [her] hands" (181). Immediately, though, she admits that she really didn't consider killing him at the time, that she only "put it in afterwards" (181). Because she understands the power of language to reconstruct both selves and events, to change
history so-to-speak, she understands that she can add or delete details as necessary to achieve a specific purpose. Offred sees that language is not static, but rather that it is malleable and fluid, and with this realization she further realizes that she has the power to change events, and even to change her life, through her reconstruction of it.

Although language has given Offred a sense of power it is a power that she seems to fear as well as desire. She seems to be aware that there is something frightening about this power of language and reconstruction, similar to the fear identified by Michel Foucault as he "considers from the outside what might be strange, frightening, and perhaps maleficent about discourse" ("The Order of Discourse" 1155). This frightening component of discourse is its uncontrollability, an uncontrollability which allows for alternatives but also has the potential to create utter chaos. As Foucault states:

It seems to me that beneath this apparent veneration of discourse, under this apparent logophilia, a certain fear is hidden. It is just as if prohibitions, barriers, thresholds, and limits had been set up in order to master, at least partly, the great proliferation of discourse ... I imagine in our society there is a profound logophobia, a sort of mute terror against the surging up of all these statements,
against all that could be violent, discontinuous, pugnacious, disorderly as well, and perilous about them—against this great incessant and disordered buzzing of discourse. (1164)

Similar to Foucault, Offred discovers that the rules governing language are imposed from the outside and can be removed to reveal language's fluidity. But with this discovery, she at once identifies its freeing qualities, while at the same time she confronts the chaos and discontinuity that that freedom entails, the very aspects of language that terrify the powerful in Gilead. Offred develops a love for words, but it is a love which cannot be nurtured in an environment where logophobia—the fear of words—reigns. Therefore, although she loves words and language because of the freedom inherent in them, her love of words is continually squelched by a regime which fears the proliferation of meaning, who fears the "violent, discontinuous, pugnacious, and disorderly" qualities of language. Because of their fear of language, the powerful in Gilead desperately strive to control it by imposing prohibitions, barriers and thresholds in an effort to master not only language, but also the people who use the language. By enforcing these restrictions on language, they simultaneously strive to enforce restrictions on the growth of human consciousness, and to turn subjects into objects, symbols into signs, and consciousness into
non-consciousness. It is no wonder that Offred desires language: it offers her alternatives to Gilead.

Although Offred loves the freeing qualities of language, she also seems to fear the power which comes along with choosing freedom through gaining access to language. As Foucault warns, "Discourse is not simply that which translates struggles or systems of domination, but it is the thing for which and by which there is struggle, discourse is the power which is to be seized" (1155). This struggle is evident throughout the novel; it is a struggle between the powerful who strive to restrict discourse and the people who strive to redefine themselves and negotiate "reality" through the exchange of discourse. Gilead vividly illustrates Foucault's assertion that discourse is the struggle, a struggle which is centered on the will for power.

However, Offred rebels against the will for power. She has the opportunity to seize the power that language offers her, but she resists. Her narrative affords her the opportunity to tell and recreate events in any way that she likes. Although she has the power to recreate and reconstruct history through the telling of her tale, she struggles against fabricating her story. Therefore, instead of fabrication, she strives for authenticity, for a reconstruction which centers on the confusion and ambiguity which encircle events as they happen and which is multiplied
in the retelling of those events. She does not ignore the ambiguity; rather, she identifies it and works through it, presenting scenes in all their complexity to her listener, providing all the context that she possibly can.

However, so difficult is the task of contextualizing experience that Offred finds, at least twice, that it is impossible to capture all that surrounds an experience, all that the experience is embedded within. She realizes that what can truly be offered is only a reconstruction of events. Nothing can be retold (nor remembered) exactly how it occurred because the context within which it occurred can never be fully recaptured. As Offred states, "A movie about the past is not the same as the past" (306). The best one can hope for is a reconstruction which is not the Truth in any absolute sense, but which, in Offred's words, "includes the truth" (344). When telling the story she is acutely aware that it is a reconstruction because

It's impossible to say a thing exactly the way it was, because what you say can never be exact, you always have to leave something out, there are too many parts, sides, crosscurrents, nuances; too many gestures, which could mean this or that, too many shapes which can never be fully described, too many flavors, in the air or on the tongue, half-colors, too many. (174)

Like Offred herself, her story, as a reconstruction, resists uniformity, correctness, and exactness. Because the telling
of a story is not the same as living the story, there will always be something left out, something not captured nor fully explained. However, Offred is so completely conscious of the fact that context is of the utmost importance in interpretation that she fills in all that she possibly can in the telling of the tale.

Because Offred is well aware of the many ways that context influences—some might even say "determines"—the interpretation and/or reconstruction of experiences, she offers two different versions of her first rendezvous with Nick. The first is a highly sensual account, centered within the context of desire, passion, and a desperate need for intimacy. And although it is a powerful and believable reconstruction, Offred tells us that it really didn't happen that way, and goes on to offer another version, this time centered in a less romantic context.

In the second version, Offred takes into account another level of the context which surrounds the experience. It is the context of the "set up"; she tells that Serena Joy arranged the encounter because of her obsession to have a child by any means. Because of this overriding context, the second version is told with much less passion, and it also loses some of the sensuality and immediacy of the first. Instead, in the second version, Offred describes the awkwardness and the disconnection which stem from the context which surrounds the experience— the acknowledgment
that both she and Nick have agreed to Serena Joy's offer, an acknowledgment which simultaneously suggests a lack of power, choice, and autonomy. In this context, both Offred and Nick remain under Serena Joy's power and control.

Although the first version suggests that they have both regained some autonomy, choice, and status as subjects, the second version undercuts the power of the first. In the second version, Offred illustrates how both she and Nick are really still immersed in the sphere of objectivity. Indeed, the "corny and falsely gay sexual banter" which they exchange in the second account reinforces the false and stilted context within which the experience is embedded. Offred herself states that the language acts as "an acknowledgement, that we are acting, for what else can we do in such a setup?" (339). What else can they do in this context? Their choices seem to be either to ignore the context of the "setup" completely—as Offred does in the first account—or to acknowledge it and "play their parts" as sincerely as the context will allow. Through juxtaposing these two distinctly different interpretations of the same scene, Atwood illustrates just how crucial context is in the interpretation (or reconstruction) of experience and also in the textual record of experience.

Although Offred does feel a sense of power through the ability to reconstruct events, she also realizes that being conscious of the many ways that events can be interpreted,
even within the moment in which they occur, can be
(paradoxically) both confusing and clarifying. After she
offers both versions of her meeting with Nick, Offred
admits, "I'm not quite sure how it happened: not exactly.
All I can hope for is a reconstruction: the way love feels
is always approximate" (340). Here, she seems to imply that
experiences, like love, cannot be recaptured precisely
because they defy the space/time boundaries that we impose
on them. They can never be recaptured whole and intact
because they do not happen whole and intact. Experiences
are embedded within a context so complex that they
continually take new forms and shapes with each
reconstruction, with each retelling. They cannot be
reconstructed exactly because the subject who recounts them
is embedded within the context which surrounds them.
Through experiencing the moment, Offred becomes part of it.
She is not an objective observer who gathers and records
precise data for later distribution. Rather, she loses
herself in the experience (or perhaps relinquishes herself
to the experience), and therefore, becoming a part of the
context so integral to the recounting of experience, she is
always conscious of the fact that she can never relate,
exactly, what she has experienced. All is a reconstruction
embedded in and interwoven with the context which is all.

Offred's efforts to fully contextualize her
surroundings, the tale, and her self give the text its life
force. It is a force which has its source in the desire for freedom. Through her narrative, she strives not only to free her self, but also to free her text, to allow it the possibility for multiple interpretations and reconstructions. In doing so, she relinquishes the illusion of authority implied by her authorial stance, and struggles against "ownership" of the text or of future interpretations of the text. Once again, she seems to be struggling against the will for power, and in doing so, seems to echo the words of feminist writer and philosopher Helene Cixous who states, "I set my sights high: I demand that love struggle within the master against the will for power" ("A Woman Mistress" 1247). Love, then, becomes a way of struggling against the will for power in an attempt to promote an environment—or text or language—within which power and authority are decentered and equalized. However, love in this sense is not the same as passion, nor is it the same as romantic or sexual love, although it may be expressed in these forms of love. Rather, Offred's love might be more clearly defined as the expression and actualization of generosity. Love, in the form of generosity, enables her to give of her self—in the form of energy, time, and commitment—to the text. It is a love which drives her to contextualize her narrative as fully as possible and to offer it the opportunity to find its own expression as she creates it and at the same time relinquishes the illusion of control over it. It is almost
as though she decides, like the writer depicted in Sartre's "Why Write" that

[A writer's] decision to write supposes that he [or she] withdraws somewhat from his [or her] feelings, in short, that he has transformed his emotions into free emotions, as I do mine while reading him; that is, that he is in an attitude of generosity. (380)

As Sartre's passage suggests, the writer who writes with an attitude of generosity expects the same generosity from his or her readers. It is a reciprocal relationship, based on trust, wherein the writer relinquishes control of the text in order that the text find its expression in the interaction between reader and writer. In this sense, neither the writer nor the reader seizes the will for power; neither one seizes control of the meaning-making endeavor. Instead, both relinquish control and negotiate the meaning of the text. As Sartre goes on to say,

[Read]eading is a pact of generosity between author and reader. Each one trusts the other, each one counts on the other, demands of the other as much as he [or she] demands of himself [or herself]. (379)

This "pact of generosity," then, is not a form of unconditional love, one wherein the writer makes no demands on the reader. Rather, it is a love based on reciprocity, one wherein the writer demands the same generosity—in the form of energy and commitment—from her reader that she
demands from herself. But, as Sartre notes, "Nothing can force the author to believe that his reader will use his freedom, [just as] nothing can force the reader to believe the author has used his. Both of them make a free decision" (380). Both reader and writer, then, have the freedom to enter into a pact of generosity, but the freedom inherent in this endeavor does not guarantee that either one will meet the demands of the other. A writer who writes in a spirit of generosity, who trusts that his or her readers will reciprocate the love that is offered by demanding as much from themselves as they demand from the text, is truly in a precarious position. A text created in a spirit of generosity faces a very uncertain future, because not every reader will answer the demands placed upon him or her by the text. Therefore, to write in a spirit of generosity almost demands that the writer take a Kierkegaardian "leap of faith"—a leap of faith in the reader's ability and/or desire to reciprocate the generosity that the author has given, to put as much effort and commitment into reading the text as the author put into writing it.

Because the writer can never determine if his or her intent will be actualized in future readings of the text, writing becomes an act of faith. The writer must have faith that his or her readers will enter into the pact of generosity and join in the writer's quest to make the world meaningful. In this light, then, the "demands" which Sartre
suggests that the reader and writer have for one another might be more clearly defined as "offers." The writer, writing from a context of generosity, extends to the reader an offer to enter into the pact of generosity in hopes that the reader will reciprocate with generosity—in terms of the expenditure of time, energy, and effort—when reading the text. This reading, truly can never be demanded; it rests on a concept of freedom which allows for multiple interpretations and multiple reconstructions. It is the same freedom Offred strove for throughout her imprisonment in Gilead, and it is the same freedom that she offers her narrative.

Many readers, however, can not or will not enter into a pact of generosity. These readers will continue to imprison texts within their own ideological and contextual constructs. In the following chapter, I will explore the ways in which the epilogue of The Handmaid's Tale, a seemingly disconnected section of the novel entitled "Historical Notes on THE HANDMAID'S TALE," illustrates the tendency of many readers to imprison texts within their own ideological constructs. Chapter 4 will also explore the dangers that stem from overlooking our own preconceptions and assumptions when reading and interpreting texts and how this tendency to overlook our own "contextual constructs" might further stifle the proliferation of meaning. As Atwood vividly demonstrates in the epilogue, every reading
is a reconstruction of the original text. Therefore, once an author relinquishes control of the text and places it into the hands of future readers, the text's future is filled with uncertainty. But this uncertainty is essential for any text which represents the human quest for freedom; it is based on the trust a writer has in his or her readers that the meaning-making endeavor will continue regardless of the contextual constraints—the assumptions and preconceptions—that the reader brings to the text. It is a trust that is essential in any effort to "connect" and commune with others, and it is a trust that helps us navigate through uncertainty and ambiguity in an effort to negotiate a new—and preferably improved—"reality."
CHAPTER 4
CONTEXTUAL CONSTRUCTS AND CONSTRAINTS

If we cease to judge this world, we may find ourselves, very quickly, in one which is infinitely worse.
Margaret Atwood, "Witches"

Although Atwood consistently demonstrates that "context is all" throughout the novel—both through offering reconstructions and through providing as much context as possible within the text—her strongest statement regarding the importance of context is not found within Offred's narrative. Instead, it is found in what surrounds the central text. It is found in the statement Atwood makes by centering Offred's narrative within an historical context, the context of the past which precedes it and the future which awaits it. Both the novel's dedication and its epilogue, which frame the central text of Offred's experience, serve to illustrate how context affects not only the creation of a text, but furthermore, how it affects future interpretations of that text.

The dedication serves to show the relationship between "real life" and fiction. By juxtaposing the "real life" experiences of Mary Webster and Perry Miller with the fictional experiences of Offred and Professor Pieixoto (in the epilogue) Atwood questions the distinction often associated with the words "real life" and fiction. Instead
of showing these entities as contrasts, Atwood merges "real life" experience and fictional experience to show that the boundary between them is not as clear nor as rigidly defined as some would like to believe. This chapter explores the ways that Atwood once again "writes the space between" yet another dichotomy, the dichotomy of "fact" and fiction.

One of the people to whom Atwood dedicates the novel is Mary Webster. Webster was one of Margaret Atwood's ancestors who lived during Puritan times—a Puritanism loudly echoed within Atwood's Gilead—who was tried and hanged as a witch. Amazingly, though, Webster survived the hanging and lived to tell about it. In her essay "Witches," Atwood tells that Webster (who she states is her "favourite ancestor") survived the hanging because "they had not yet invented the drop: in those days, they just sort of strung you up" (331). On many levels, Webster's experience is hauntingly similar to Offred's: both women lived in oppressive, radically fundamentalistic times and both faced a death sentence for their "crimes against the state." However, on another level the similarities are not as apparent. Although the historical record indicates that Mary Webster escaped imminent death because, as Atwood states, "she had a strong neck" ("Witches" 331), Atwood does not offer us the same certainty concerning Offred's escape from Gilead nor her subsequent survival. Although it is possible that Offred was rescued by Nick and the Mayday
Underground, it is also possible that she was lead to her death by Nick, the man she trusted, whose final words to her were, ironically, "Trust me" (377). If we trust Nick, if we believe that he was only pretending to hand Offred over to the authorities, then it is possible to believe that Offred escaped the walls of Gilead and survived. However, if we do not trust Nick, if we believe that he was actually one of the "Eyes" who pretended to love Offred, but instead, abused her trust and turned her over to the authorities, then it is possible to believe that Offred never escaped nor survived Gilead. On this point, Atwood remains ambiguous. But even if Offred did not physically survive Gilead, an important part of her did survive. What survived Gilead in either case is the text of Offred's life and her journey through the darkness of Gilead. Like Mary Webster who left the story of her life for future generations, Offred leaves for us the text of her life, a text which becomes the focal point for future "historians" who may then use it as "data" in their quest to reconstruct the past and assemble the textual record of history.

One of these real life historians is Perry Miller, another to whom the novel is dedicated, who was an historian and Professor of American Literature at Harvard University when Atwood studied there. Miller was, as critic Harriet Bergmann notes, "a scholar of Mary Webster's repressive and religion-dominated society, just as James Darcy Pieixoto,
the academic who reads a paper on Offred's tale in the epilogue, is of Offred's" (College English 851). In dedicating the novel both to the woman who lived to tell her story (Webster) and the man who retold--and reconstructed--her story two hundred years later (Miller), Atwood provides an example from the real world which questions the "reading" of history that is passed down to future generations. This question, then, becomes one of the importance of context in any interpretive endeavor, and a warning to all who "decontextualize," deconstruct, or minimize both people and texts.

In the epilogue, we leave the unfamiliarity of Gilead and are transported two hundred years into the future, to the year 2195, which, ironically, is seemingly more familiar than the more recent "future" of Gilead. In the epilogue, we are presented with "a partial transcript of the proceedings of the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies." The keynote speaker at the symposium is Professor James Darcy Pieixoto, an historian who delivers a paper entitled "Problems of Authentication in Reference to The Handmaid's Tale." Through Pieixoto, Atwood brilliantly satirizes those who, like Perry Miller at Harvard and the Commander in Gilead, are in a particularly powerful position: those who have the power to interpret texts and whose interpretations are often sanctioned by the power structures which these people help create. Atwood seems to suggest that, in very
dangerous ways, the interpretations and reconstructions offered by those in power—whether in the academy or in the political realm—often act to rigidify texts and limit other possible interpretations of those texts. In Gilead, those in power imposed a single interpretation on Biblical texts which constrained not only the texts, but also the people within the walls of Gilead. Likewise, in the epilogue, Professor Pieixoto hands down a single interpretation of Offred’s text which constrains her and limits future interpretations of her text. Atwood’s understated yet scrupulous use of irony in the epilogue acts to reinforce her assertion that "context is all" in any interpretive endeavor, whether it be an historical document, a fictional text, or the world as "text."

Atwood sets the epilogue at the fictional University of Denay, Nunavit, which is phonetically translated to "Deny, None of it." Besides serving as a satirical commentary on the nature of academic conferences, the environment depicted in Denay also serves to illustrate the firm hold that hierarchical power structures and paradigms have on the collective consciousness of both modern and "native" cultures. As commentator Arnold Davidson has suggested, Denay may represent the future nation that a number of native people in Canada—particularly those of Inuit ancestry—wish to form in the north. Davidson suggests that this nation would be one in which "the traditional ways of
the natives [would] replace the Western ways of their oppressors" (119). However, as the epilogue shows, although the native people—if names are any indication—have indeed formed their own nation, they have not overturned the system which oppresses them. Rather, hierarchical power structures seem to have remained intact, and as Davidson suggests, so do the institutions that embody them (119).

On a surface level, the environment Atwood creates in the epilogue seems to be much more civilized and egalitarian than the Gileadean environment. In this future nation, women have once again achieved "equality," as illustrated by the fact that a woman, Professor Maryann Crescent Moon, chairs the convention. However, at a deeper level, Atwood seems to suggest that the "equality" attained in this future society may be suspect, and furthermore, that we might do well to look more closely at what we term "equality" in our own culture. For instance, despite Professor Crescent Moon's rise in status in the academic community, her duties as chair seem to parallel those of a social chairperson: she organizes nature walks, fishing expeditions, and sing-songs, and she seems to be more concerned with extracurricular activities than with academic concerns, as seen in her reminder to Professor Piedxoto to "keep within his time period ... [because] none of us wants to miss lunch, as happened yesterday" (380).
Although women have regained some status and power in this society, it may be—as Offred realized her own sense of power was in Gilead—"of an equivocal kind" (272). For example, after informing the audience of all the changes in the social calendar, Crescent Moon turns the floor over to Professor Pieixoto who immediately sets out to relegate women—in particular Professor Crescent Moon and Offred—to the margins of the discourse. He begins his "little chat" with a derogatory and demeaning reference to Professor Crescent Moon, referring to her as the "charming Arctic Chair" which he is sure the audience is "enjoying" as much as they enjoyed the previous night's "charming Arctic Char." Of course, the word arctic in this sense could refer to what is most likely Crescent Moon's Inuit ethnicity—in which case the pun seems to be a racial slur—but the word also elicits sexist connotations of "cold" and "frigid." And lest the audience miss the sexist connotations of his remark, Pieixoto is quick to point out that he is using "the word 'enjoy' in two distinct senses, precluding the obsolete third" (381), an attempt at humor which has, at its center, the humiliation and degradation of women.

Professor Pieixoto continues to trivialize women and their experiences by making them the "butts" of his jokes, a strategy whereby he gains the illusion of power over them. Further attempts at humor at the expense of women occur in his reference to the Underground Femaleroad as the
"Underground Frailroad" (381) and his insistence on pointing out the "pun" in the title of Offred's narrative, "particularly that having to do with the archaic vulgar signification of the word tail, that being, to some extent, the bone, as it were, of contention in that phase of Gileadean society of which our saga treats" (381). By belittling women and their experiences, Professor Pieixoto strives to center himself within the discussion, thereby maintaining power and control over the "subject" under discussion. Of course, since this society is set up as a contrast to Gilead, and also speaks in much more familiar language (familiar, especially, to any academic who has sat through a similar "fascinating and worthwhile talk"), these lines are rather clever, but the laughter (or chuckles or even groans) they elicit may be an indication that this society has not advanced all that much, nor learned very much, from Offred's account of Gilead. Atwood may be suggesting that in contrast to Gilead, Denay appears to be more "well-lit," but in relation to the light that Offred reads by, it is still immersed in darkness. Likewise, in contrast to Gilead, the environment in Denay is much more familiar to us, but it is a familiarity that may blind us to the continued use of language to devalue women and their experiences.

Particularly relevant in terms of the devaluative power of language is Pieixoto's consistent use of the words "item"
and "document" in reference to Offred's story. Both of these terms act to "objectify" and trivialize the narrative --and the narrator--in very dangerous ways. During his discussion, Pieixoto reveals that he and his colleague, Professor Wade, discovered and transcribed "some thirty tape cassettes" which contained Offred's original, spoken narrative. Besides transcribing her words, they also found that they had to "arrange the blocks of speech in the order which they appeared to go" (383). And while he does admit that this "arrangement" is based on guesswork and is to be regarded as "approximate," he does not treat the final text--the final construct--as an approximation. Rather, he continues to appropriate the text and refuses to negotiate its meaning. Instead of entering into a pact of generosity with Offred, Pieixoto rewrites and reinterprets Offred's words and diminishes her presence in the text.

Although Offred was well aware, even at the moment she was telling her story, that whatever form her narrative took after its conception, "it [would] be a reconstruction too, at yet another remove" (173), she still may not have been prepared for the countless removes that occur before it reaches its final form, those removes caused by the passage of time and the misreadings of "historians." Nevertheless, Offred's efforts to contextualize her life in Gilead and her process of rebelling against uniformity and correctness in reconstructing her self remain within the text. Offred
provides all the context that she possibly can in an effort to help her "listener" see in and through the darkness of Gilead.

However, instead of paying attention to the context which Offred strove so painstakingly to provide, Pieixoto ignores the context of her narrative—all the flavors, colors, gestures, crosscurrents—and in the process decontextualizes Offred in much the same way that the powerful in Gilead decontextualized her upon her immersion into Gilead. Through his reconstruction, he erases her from the text in much the same way as she tells that she was erased from her daughter's life by the Gileadeans. Echoing through the text are Offred's feelings about being erased from the text of her daughter's life, and by extension, the text of her own life:

Time has not stood still. It has washed over me, washed me away, as if I'm a woman made of sand...I have been obliterated for her...I am only a shadow now...A shadow of a shadow...I am not there. (296)

As Atwood demonstrated throughout the novel, through force and might, the Gileadean government was able to decontextualize Offred and remove her from the history of her daughter's life. But in the epilogue, Atwood shows that it would be left for future historians to decontextualize Offred once again by removing her from her own text, the only record of the self she had become. Ironically,
however, Offred predicted that she would be erased from history even while she was in the process of composing herself through her narrative. She states, "From the point of view of future history . . . we'll be invisible" (295). It is a point that Pieixoto does not dispute—or perhaps does not see—but in the text, Offred tells exactly how she feels about being deconstructed not once, but twice: "I can't bear it, to have been erased like that" (296). Pieixoto, obviously unaware of the contextual constraints that influence his interpretation, overlooks these remarks and most of the context that Offred provides in her narrative.

Besides overlooking the context that Offred provides, Professor Pieixoto also overlooks what appears to have been one of Offred's main concerns: the importance of her name. Throughout the novel, Offred states that she has "hidden her name, like a buried treasure" (108), a treasure which she does not give away freely, but offers only to those she can trust. In the novel, the only person she entrusted her name to was Nick. However, she also entrusts it to us, if we are able to see it. At the beginning of her story, Offred lists five names: Alma, Janine, Delores, Moira, and June. In the course of the narrative, each of these names is accounted for, except for the last name, June. It is quite possible that this is Offred's name, although possibly not her "real" name. During his presentation, Professor Pieixoto informs us that the other names were used as protective pseudonyms,
and quite probably, the name June is no exception. But because Offred knows that a name conveys a sense of identity, it is likely that she would choose the name "June" because of the many connotations which derive from the single word, connotations which might convey her own sense of self. Offred may have chosen the name June because it suggests a source of light: June is the time of year when there is more light than darkness, which may suggest that through her narrative she offers us a source of light by which to read the Gileadean culture and also our own culture. In fact, Offred herself associates her name with images of light. She says,

[My] name has an aura around it, like an amulet, some charm that's survived from an unimaginably distant past . . . my name floats there behind my eyes, not quite within reach, shining in the dark. (108)

Offred's name has survived from the past—both her own past and the "future past" which separates her from Pieixoto—and it remains within the text, shining in the dark, for those who can see it. The name June, then, acts to reinforce one of Atwood's strongest points, specifically, striking a balance between dichotomies, particularly between darkness and light. By offering us her name, Offred simultaneously offers us a source of light with which to balance the darkness of Gilead, and also the darkness which surrounds us in our own world. To miss the context of balance between
darkness and light is to miss what appears to be Atwood's strongest point: in making sense of the written text and the "world as text," we must be able to "see" in the darkness as well as the light. Like Offred, we must develop night vision.

Professor Pieixoto, however, remains night blind and misses most of the context that Offred provides in her narrative. Instead of finding clarification, then, the narrative continues to puzzle him, and he laments that

[T]he past is a great darkness, and filled with echoes. Voices may reach us from it; but what they say to us is imbued with the obscurity of the matrix out of which they come; and try as we may, we cannot always decipher them precisely in the clearer light of our own day.  

Pieixoto, convinced that the "light" of his own day is much better to "read" history by, fails to recognize that we can only understand and make sense of Gilead, of oppression and horror, if we immerse ourselves within the heart of darkness from which these atrocities emerge. Only if we can identify the darkness itself, and then learn to see in and through the darkness—becoming as acutely aware of the shadows as well as the well-lit images—can we learn from the past and see into the present darkness which continues to surround us.
Unfortunately, Pieixoto is unable—or possibly unwilling—to see all the context that Offred provides within the text, mainly because his concerns are not the same as Offred's concerns. Offred is concerned with showing the human element of the text; Pieixoto is concerned mainly with authenticating her story and specifically with establishing the Commander's true identity. In fact, most of the paper he reads at the symposium focuses on these two points. In his paper, he reveals that he has narrowed the historical evidence to two "brilliant, ingenious gentlemen" --Waterford and Judd--one of whom is most probably the "real" Commander. His main regret is that Offred did not have the "instincts of a reporter or a spy" because if she had, she could have then gathered all the "evidence" that he so desperately wants. As he states, "What would we not give, now, for even twenty pages or so of print-out from Waterford's private computer!" (393). Pieixoto is not concerned with the human element--the subject--of the text; rather he is concerned with gathering hard evidence --objects--from the regime, and in this quest he continues to marginalize Offred and her experiences through appropriating her text.

While Pieixoto diligently searches historical records and documents for clues about the Commander's identity, he overlooks--and in effect, silences--the voice which calls out from the text. But, as Offred knows, he cannot silence
her completely; she knows that "[w]hatever is silenced will clamour to be heard, though silently" (196). We are left then, with the voice of a woman who has struggled within and finally survived Gilead. Her story is a story of survivalism.

Survivalism may not be as "weighty" as Pieixoto's concern to collect "hard data" which would once-and-for-all establish the authenticity of the tapes, but it is extremely important in understanding Offred's message and by implication, Atwood's message. In her essay "Canadian-American Relations," Atwood defines the philosophy of survivalism:

Survivalism, of course, is not the same as tragedy or existential despair or even pessimism about the human condition. It's being stuck in a blizzard with one match; a kind of minimalism, fine, but if you get that fire lit it's a triumphant event, considering the odds. (387)

Offred's text has survived the atrocities of Gilead. The existence of the tapes--and Pieixoto's subsequent transcription and reconstruction of them into text--affirms her survival and her existence. It is an existence that is trivialized by Pieixoto, but one that continues throughout time for readers who are able to see it. Although Pieixoto strives to force Offred back to "the blank white spaces at the edges of print . . . in the gaps between the stories"
(74), her narrative resists the boundaries that his interpretation forces upon it. Offred has written and filled in the spaces between and her voice demands to be heard.

Only those who refuse to read what she has written within the context she provides, only those who insist on erasing her from history, will continue to lament with Pieixoto that "many gaps remain" (393) within the text. Indeed, many gaps will remain in any text, particularly those texts which resist the boundaries—hence interpretations—that future readers, influenced by their own social, political, and psychological contexts, impose on them. But a voice will survive within the text, even though it remains uncertain how that voice will be "heard."

Offred knows that by relinquishing the illusion of power and authority over her text she offers the narrative the same possibilities for freedom that she herself wanted within Gilead. She also knows that she cannot determine how the text will be read by future readers. No matter how much context she provides, the text will be framed by the history that preceded it and the future that awaits it. It will be read not only within the context she provides, but also within the contextual and ideological constructs of her future readers. Centered between the past and the future, the text's future is as uncertain as Offred's future was at the end of the novel. At the end of her narrative, Offred
finds herself "between two [strangers], one on either side" (378), who lead her toward an uncertain future. Likewise, after she relinquishes control of her text, it also finds itself centered between two "strangers," the strangers of the past and the future. And like Offred, who has "given herself over into the hands of strangers, because it can't be helped" (378), so too her narrative must be given over into the hands of strangers—like Pieixoto and Wade, but also like us—whose readings will finally determine the meaning of the text.

But if we learn to read as Offred has, by balancing the darkness and the light, by choosing to enter into a pact of generosity with her, the text will answer many of our questions. With each reconstruction and reinterpretation, Offred's voice, which silently clamors within the text, continues to provide the context essential for interpretation. Even so, she seems to be aware that in any interpretive endeavor, there will always be questions, and in a sense, she predicts Professor Pieixoto's final—possibly rhetorical—question, "Are there any questions?"

By closing the novel with this final, enigmatic line, Atwood seems to suggest that there will always be questions with no simple answers, or whose answers remain in the darkness which continues to threaten the light.
CONCLUSION

If language is as old as consciousness itself, and if language is a practical consciousness-for-others and, consequently, consciousness-for-myself, then not only one particular thought but all consciousness is connected with the development of the word. The word is a direct expression of the historical nature of human consciousness.

Lev Vygotsky, Thought and Language

As presented in the Introduction, Whorf's hypothesis of linguistic determinism suggests that there are many ways that language appears to determine an individual's world view. Of utmost importance is the way that language, as a vast pattern system, aids in the creation of cognitive schemes which enable us to gain knowledge about ourselves and the world and in the process, aid in the construction of our consciousnesses. Because language is so closely linked to thought processes, if it is regarded as static, if symbolic meaning is stifled, then the formation of cognitive schemes will be adversely affected. Placing restrictions on language and/or limiting the creation of meaning results in a simultaneous restriction in the growth of knowledge and of consciousness.

Margaret Atwood vividly illustrated this restrictive meaning-making environment throughout Offred's narrative and possibly even more importantly, in the epilogue which follows the narrative. However, although Atwood highlights and explores the fundamental capacity of language to govern
our world view, I do not believe that she completely adopts a Whorfian philosophy of linguistic determinism. Rather, through Offred's narrative, she shows that there are ways to rebel against and even transcend linguistic determinism. To accomplish this goal, however, people must first identify the ways that language can be "used against" them: through the linguistic acts of labeling, through restricting language to certain segments of society, and through sanctioning single interpretations of any "text," whether spoken, written or experienced.

Once aware of the many ways that language may constrain our thought processes, we can find ways to rebel against becoming victims of language. Instead of believing that language only reflects "reality," we can empower ourselves by perceiving language as a powerful means to create new realities. We do not have to regard as final the provisional analysis of the external or internal world that is formulated through our language. Through linguistic awareness, we might, instead, avail ourselves of the many possibilities offered by language. If we can identify in language the potential for determinism, we can rebel against those aspects of language which may constrain our ability to freely process information and construct alternative realities.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood presented us with a world so alien that it was readily apparent how language was
used to subjugate and oppress the citizens of Gilead. But as Whorf suggests, looking at different cultures—even fictional cultures—may be one way to gain a clearer perspective of our own culture. Rather than seeing only the foreign and alien aspects of diverse cultures, we might gain more insight into our own culture by seeing the similarities between cultures. It has been argued that the atrocities that occur in Gilead could never occur in the "real world." However, as Atwood has stated in an interview with Cathy Davidson, everything that happens in the novel is "true" and has, in some form, happened in the "real world" (in Arnold Davidson 115). Although the atrocities which occur through language abuse may be more apparent in the Gileadean world than they are in our own, we need only look at the way that Professor Pieixoto, in the epilogue, uses language to assert his power while he simultaneously diminishes the power of others to see how language abuse is a reality in "our world" as well.

If the environment in the epilogue can serve as a model of our own society, then identifying the ways that Pieixoto's discourse mirrors our own may offer profound insight into the ways that we are oppressed—or the ways that we oppress others—through the use of language. Therefore, by identifying the ways in which language might limit our world view, especially on a subconscious level, we can become more sensitive to the political contexts of
language which act to subjugate and oppress people in our own culture. By learning to "read" our culture as Offred read hers--through developing a keen awareness of and sensitivity to language--we might, like her, tap into the many possibilities offered by language and reconstruct not only our internal worlds, but reconstruct our external world as well.
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