

1993

A comparison of Margaret Atwood's dystopian text, *The Handmaid's tale*, and Catherine Helen Spence's utopian text, *Handfasted*

Kay Kanaar
University of Wollongong

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/theses>

University of Wollongong

Copyright Warning

You may print or download ONE copy of this document for the purpose of your own research or study. The University does not authorise you to copy, communicate or otherwise make available electronically to any other person any copyright material contained on this site.

You are reminded of the following: This work is copyright. Apart from any use permitted under the Copyright Act 1968, no part of this work may be reproduced by any process, nor may any other exclusive right be exercised, without the permission of the author. Copyright owners are entitled to take legal action against persons who infringe their copyright. A reproduction of material that is protected by copyright may be a copyright infringement. A court may impose penalties and award damages in relation to offences and infringements relating to copyright material.

Higher penalties may apply, and higher damages may be awarded, for offences and infringements involving the conversion of material into digital or electronic form.

Unless otherwise indicated, the views expressed in this thesis are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the University of Wollongong.

Recommended Citation

Kanaar, Kay, A comparison of Margaret Atwood's dystopian text, *The Handmaid's tale*, and Catherine Helen Spence's utopian text, *Handfasted*, Master of Arts (Hons.) thesis, Department of English, University of Wollongong, 1993. <https://ro.uow.edu.au/theses/2188>

A COMPARISON OF MARGARET ATWOOD'S DYSTOPIAN TEXT, *THE
HANDMAID'S TALE*, AND CATHERINE HELEN SPENCE'S UTOPIAN
TEXT, *HANDBASTED*

a thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the award of the degree

MASTER OF ARTS (HONOURS) IN POST-COLONIAL LITERATURES

from

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG



by

KAY KANAAR, BACHELOR OF ARTS (HONOURS)

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

1993

PREFACE

The two texts which have been compared in this thesis are *Handfasted* written by the South Australian author Catherine Helen Spence and *The Handmaid's Tale* written by the Canadian author Margaret Atwood. Although written nearly one hundred years apart both books follow the tradition of the utopian genre, although Spence's attitude to the future is much more optimistic than Atwood's. Spence creates a utopia in her fictional American Columba where the inhabitants, male and female, experience religious and social tolerance. The radical practice of handfasting has given the inhabitants of Columba freedom to change sexual partners every year if they are not satisfied and any children from the union of handfasted parents are privileged in Columba. They are the only ones who are taught to read and write and form the bureaucracy of the Plantation of Columba. Atwood, on the other hand, has created the dystopian Republic of Gilead where any aberrations from the religious and social practices of this mythical American society are brutally punished. The inhabitants of Gilead are ruled by fear and there is not even the pretence of equality in Gilead. Women are required to be silent and, to guarantee that silence, they are under constant surveillance.

In the tradition of utopian texts there is a narrator who reveals to the reader the ideological and social practices of the utopian/dystopian societies described in the book. However, the narrator of *Handfasted*, Hugh

Victor Keith, is in the tradition of the naive narrator of utopian fiction, who is a visitor from the outside world. He has in this case two guides who explain to him the way of life of the inhabitants of Columba. In contrast, Atwood's narrator, Offred, is an inhabitant of Gilead who belongs to one of the new classes created by the regime. She is a Handmaid whose function is to act as a surrogate mother and produce the children of the Commander and his Wife to whom she is assigned. There is biblical precedent for this practice in the story of Rachel, Leah and Jacob and although officially the sexuality of all women is denied by the new white supremacist regime some bizarre sexual practices have been introduced such as the insemination Ceremony where it becomes obvious that the Commander, his Wife and the Handmaid form a menage a trois. The examination of gender relations is a major concern in the two texts reflecting the feminist concerns of both writers.

Finally, the last point of comparison between the two texts is they are both colonial/post-colonial discourses. Although Spence's novel was written during the colonial period, according to the definition of post-colonial given in Chapter Three it may still be regarded as a post-colonial text and it is treated in this way. However, the writer sometimes positions herself as belonging to the imperial centre and at other times to the margins. Atwood, on the other hand, is always writing

from the perspective of the marginalised in a post-colonial, patriarchal society.

The points of comparison outlined above determine the structure of the thesis. Chapter One is an introduction to the two texts and their writers, Chapter Two examines the use of the utopian/dystopian genre in both texts and examines the way in which gender-relations are explored. Chapter Three considers the colonial/post-colonial concerns of the text and Chapter Four sums up the similarities and differences found between the two novels, *Handfasted* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, written almost one hundred years apart.

INTRODUCTION

Handfasted (1879) by Catherine Helen Spence and *The Handmaid's Tale* (1987) by Margaret Atwood were written approximately one hundred years apart but there are some interesting points of comparison to be made between the two works of fiction. The primary ones are that they were written by women, whose concerns are gender-based, in reaction to the patriarchal societies of their time; they both have women as central characters even though *Handfasted* has a male narrator who is romantically involved with the female protagonist. The images of women in the two fictional texts under consideration are highly individual if not original. Both narrative discourses are set in a mythical America, although in *Handfasted* Spence creates a utopia where religious tolerance is practised and Atwood, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, a dystopia which is extremely intolerant of any deviations from the state approved religion. Finally both texts explore colonial/post-colonial issues.

Spence and Atwood have created imaginary worlds in their novels, significantly both set in America, because they want their readers to reassess their own society's customs and institutions based on patriarchal ideology, which oppress women and children. *Handfasted* was Spence's sixth novel. Her first novel *Clara Morison* was published in 1854, followed by another one, *Tender and True*, in

1856, and it was another eight years before her next novel was serialised in the *Weekly Mail* and later published under the title *Mr Hogarth's Will* in 1865. Her fourth *Hugh Lindsay's Guest*, appeared in serial form in the *Adelaide Observer* during 1867, then as *The Author's Daughter* in 1868. The novel which preceded *Handfasted* was *Gathered In* for which Spence could not find an English publisher and although it was serialised in the *Adelaide Observer* from September 1881 to March 1882, it was not published in book form until 1977. The manuscript of *Handfasted* was presented unsuccessfully for a competition run by the *Sydney Mail* in 1878 and was not published until 1984.¹ Spence wrote only one more piece of extended fiction, a short story entitled 'A Week in the Future' which was serialised in *Centennial Magazine* in 1888-9, and then published in 1889.² Spence remarked in her *Autobiography*, "Novel writing had not been a lucrative occupation" ³ and she turned her attention to journalism, and various political and social reform movements to which she was committed throughout her long life.⁴ A large part of that life was occupied by her interest and involvement in the electoral reform movement and The Boarding-Out Society of South Australia which tried to find respectable working class homes for destitute children. These two particular interests of Spence are canvassed in the text *Handfasted*. It was not until the 1880s that Spence became a committed member of the women's suffrage movement, yet that is an issue raised in *Handfasted*. We can only speculate whether or

not Spence would have continued writing fiction if it had been better received by the critics and if it had paid more. However, she must have felt discouraged by the rebuff she received for daring to challenge the patriarchal dominance of Australian culture, in *Handfasted*. Spence was concerned about "the bridle on the tongues of women" imposed by "law and custom" and the suppression of her own text is a further example of that.⁵

The Handmaid's Tale is also Atwood's sixth novel and was first published in 1986.⁶ Margaret Atwood is one of Canada's most eminent novelists, poets and critics. Her first volume of poetry, *The Circle Game* (1966), won the Governor-General's Award. Since then she has published nine volumes of poetry and a study of Canadian Literature, *Survival*. Her first novel *The Edible Woman* was published in 1969, followed by *Surfacing*, *Lady Oracle*, *Life Before Man*, *Bodily Harm* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, winner of both the Arthur C. Clarke award for Science Fiction and the Governor-General's Award. It was also short-listed for the Booker Prize - and it is now a major film, with a screenplay by Harold Pinter. She has also published two collections of short stories, *Dancing Girls* and *Bluebeard's Egg*. Her most recent novel, *Cat's Eye*, published in 1989, was also short-listed for the Booker Prize.⁷ In common with Spence and despite her acclaim as a writer, Atwood has also been attacked in a sexist way by male critics. They have attacked her she

claims, as though she were an evil witch and Atwood suggests that it shows their fear of women.⁸ Significantly, *The Handmaid's Tale* is dedicated to Atwood's ancestor Mary Webster, who was hanged for a witch but survived.⁹ One of the main concerns of this text, which is also a concern in *Handfasted*, is the silencing of women. The Handmaids in particular have to speak by rote, if they speak at all. That is, they have to use the prescribed expressions they have learnt at the Rachel and Leah Training Centre where their indoctrination as Handmaids has taken place and like most women they are forbidden to read and write. The exception to the rule are the Aunts who are used by the regime to keep the other women under control. Atwood claims in *Second Words* that all powerful women are on trial for witchcraft, in other words, women who challenge the belief of a patriarchal society that they are inferior are immediately suspect,

*We still think of a powerful woman as an anomaly, a potentially dangerous anomaly; there is something subversive about such women, even when they take care to be good role models. They cannot have come by the power naturally, it is felt. They must have got it from somewhere. Women writers are particularly subject to such projections, for writing itself is uncanny: it uses words for evocation rather than for denotation; it is spell-making. A man who is good at it is a craftsman. A woman who is good at it is a dubious proposition.*¹⁰

Atwood is pointing to the fear of articulate women by men who feel that they are challenging their privileged position in a patriarchal society. In the past they could claim that such women were in league with the devil and

so destroy them. In the fundamentalist Republic of Gilead they are able to silence women by also claiming any woman who challenges the dominance of the patriarchal state is sinful and challenging God's authority. It was a similar situation in the patriarchal society in which Spence lived, and even though women were not still being punished by "the ducking stool in public"¹¹ the opposition to women speaking in public was deeply embedded in custom and lore. Spence wrote in her autobiography, "of the innumerable proverbs relating to the sex [women], the most cynical are those relating to her use of language."¹² Spence and Atwood challenge those checks put on women's language in each of their texts under discussion.

In *Handfasted* Spence has a naive narrator of Scottish descent, Hugh Victor Keith, a young and respectable doctor who has left his native Melbourne to travel abroad and take photographs of what he sees. He travels first to China and Japan and then to San Francisco where he engages the services of a guide, Sam Peters a "half-breed" , who is to take the narrator "to out of the way places in search of adventure and game" (p.30). Sam Peters robs Hugh Victor Keith and abandons him. Hugh Victor has to make his own way to the mountain range he sees in his field glass where he hopes to find water and game. Instead he stumbles across the hidden valley of Columba established by Scottish colonists whom he had heard about from his grandmother before he left on his

journey. He is found by one of its inhabitants Liliard Abercrombie, who is the main character in the text and is to become the narrator's handfasted partner and his companion when he returns to the outside world. Whilst in Columba she and Hugh Keith, to whom she is then handfasted, make Hugh Victor Keith welcome in their home and explain the customs and laws of their utopian state to him. To avoid confusion the narrator is known as Hugh Victor or just plain Victor in Columba. Spence by giving her narrator and another major character in the text the same name aims to show the close relationship between her narrator and the Columbans - he is both a colonist and a distant relation to many of the early settlers - whilst demonstrating that the colonials who come from the same good Scottish stock can, given the right circumstances, produce an ideal society which is organised along different social, political and religious lines to those of other British colonies. Spence shows in *Handfasted* that social equity and justice are possible through legislation.

The narrator also functions as the innocent traveller who comes from the outside and finds himself in a community organised differently both socially and politically to his own and he has a guide(s) to explain to him how it works. This is a standard device in utopian texts. When Hugh Victor and Liliard leave Columba they travel to major American cities, Europe and then to Australia, where they are constantly comparing what they see and

experience to life in Columba. Liliard and Hugh Victor's roles are then reversed, he is the guide and she is the naive traveller and outsider.

In Spence's utopia of Columba women are treated as equals although before the colonists left Scotland in 1745 that had not been the case. The change in gender-relations was brought about by the practice of handfasting which sanctions trial marriages so that women and men are not committed for life to an unsuitable partner and nor do they have to take responsibility for any children conceived during the handfasting period unless they choose. Spence was deeply concerned about the unjust marriage laws of her time which favoured men and disadvantaged women and children.¹³ Through the practice of handfasting those previously disadvantaged groups are privileged. Handfasting was a practice initiated and formalised by one of the founders of Columba, Madam Marguerite Keith. It originated in remote parts of Scotland where there were few priests. A man and a woman promise mutual fidelity for a year and a day, and live as man and wife until the time expires. They may then marry, separate, or extend the handfasting up to two or three times before having to make a decision. In the novel the reason for introducing the practice was because of the number of young Scottish men living with the Indian girls in the early years of the settlement. Madam Keith did not want the young girls exploited but at the same time the colony's young adventurers could not marry *heathens* so

during the handfasting period the young Scotsmen had to try and convert them to Christianity. If their conversion was effected then they could marry as long as both partners were willing. Religion plays an important part in Spence's novel, however, it is based on relatively liberal Christian ideology when compared to the Calvinism of Spence's own youth, but this is an issue which will be explored in Chapter Two. As Madam Keith explains in her diaries, if there were children produced from the handfasting union and the couple parted after handfasting then the child belonged to the mother, but if "it had been at her wish the parting took place, when the father could claim it, and in that case it should then be brought up like one of our own [Scottish colonists'] children."¹⁴ The practice proved so successful that Madam Keith extended it to the whole colony. This revolutionary institution removed the taint of illegitimacy from children who became "God's bairns" (p.56) and the mother of the child did not suffer the disgrace of bearing a child out of wedlock.

Women in *Handfasted* do not have to assume the roles of wife and mother which is expected of them in a patriarchal society and not all women in Columba are expected to confine their activities to the domestic sphere. Spence's narrator Hugh Victor Keith, believes handfasting "is the strangest thing you have struck out here" (p.55). By nineteenth century standards it is quite a radical idea that the child conceived during the

handfasting period can inherit either of the parents' names depending on which one claims it, or carry both parents' names if they decide to share the "burden" (p.55). In giving children the opportunity to inherit the mother's name Spence is sanctioning matrilineal descent which would again have affronted a patriarchal society. The Columban resident, Hugh Keith, a distant relation of the narrator who, together with the main female character Liliard, describes the political and social practices of Columba to the naive narrator, is amazed that in the outside world such children could be considered burdens. In Columba they are adopted by the state if neither parent wants them and are, as stated previously, given a privileged position. Unlike the other inhabitants of Columba "God's bairns" are taught to read and write and those with "the greatest gifts are made into ministers and teachers, male and female, and have access to the few books ... in Columba" (p.57). The children, girls and boys, who are "God's bairns" form the public service of Columba and are known only by their Christian names until they marry when they take on the names of the wives and husbands they choose. Spence's narrator is reflecting his and Spence's society's values when he expresses astonishment at the liberal sexual practices of Columba but the reaction to the novel in real life was more extreme.

Handfasted was considered subversive by the *Sydney Mail* where it was sent in 1879 as an entry in their

competition. It was rejected on the grounds that "it was calculated to loosen the marriage tie - it was too socialistic, and consequently dangerous" (*Preface*, p.viii). The suppression of Spence's text was very successful since it was not published until 1984. In 1922 the manuscript of *Handfasted* reached the archives of the South Australian State Library but "as far as can be known, Spence never submitted the manuscript to a publisher" (*Preface* p.ix). The patriarchal society of Spence's time could not accept a text which suggested that society could be organised along different lines, with women given equal access to education , sexual freedom, freedom of speech and freedom from the burden of unwanted children. Also, by removing the stigma of illegitimacy, children and their mothers were not made to suffer social ostracism - in Columba all children are wanted children - another revolutionary idea for the time. Of course, children are also wanted in Atwood's imaginary dystopian Republic of Gilead in *The Handmaid's Tale* but in that society women are oppressed and it is part of their function to be the child bearers - they are definitely confined to the domestic sphere. Gileadean society resembles Columban society in that gender-relations and reproduction are a key organising principle but in Gilead they are used to subjugate women because Atwood has portrayed a patriarchal society controlled by a white supremacist government.

In Gilead women have no "freedom to" do anything, only "freedom from" having to take control of their own lives and "freedom from" sexual molestation outside the home (p.34). Women's sexuality is suppressed in Gilead and officially men's sexuality is also regulated but in this Church State where religion is used ideologically to justify the enslavement of many of its inhabitants the privileged white males of the society are given a great deal of freedom, including sexual freedom. The amount of sexual freedom that members of Gileadean society have is directly related to the amount of power they hold.

The narrator in the *The Handmaid's Tale* is a woman but unlike the male narrator of *Handfasted* she is the central character in the text. Offred is a Handmaid in Gilead, formerly the United States of America but given a new biblical name by a fundamentalist Christian group which has seized power. We learn from the Epilogue of the novel entitled "Historical Notes on *The Handmaid's Tale*" that Offred escaped from the home of her Commander, a member of the ruling elite in Gilead, and whilst in hiding put her story onto audio cassette tapes. We are not told whether she eventually survives, but the tapes are discovered in the twenty first century and a transcription of them is made by two Professors who put the tapes in what they consider a logical order. The edited transcription is published as *The Handmaid's Tale*. Atwood's epilogue undermines the security of the reader who must question the validity of a narrative - not only

does the narrator admit at times to be not telling the truth but also the narrative has been tampered with by a couple of "experts". Atwood's narrator has a very different function to Spence's narrator, an issue which will be explored further. In the text, Offred describes her experiences as a Handmaid as well as revealing in a fragmentary manner the events that led to the setting up of the totalitarian state of Gilead. The reader is plunged into the nightmare world of the novel which is reminiscent of Orwell's *1984*, as Offred and her fellow Handmaid, Ofglen, fear that the subversive conversations they have whilst on shopping expeditions will be overheard by hidden microphones. Also, the Republic is constantly at war with its neighbours as well as having to contend with civil war. The scenes of destruction described in some of the colonies where enemies of the state are sent to clean up radioactive wastes, and the description of the vans and the methods of intimidation used by the Eyes, are further reminders of that other dystopian visionary text, *1984*.

Gileadean society is regimented and the functions of its members are defined by a system of colour-coding which removes individuality. The Commanders of the Faithful are at the top of Gileadean Society and predictably dress in sober black, their Wives in blue which is an apt choice. Blue is a colour associated with depression of the spirits and brooding both feelings which the Commander's Wife, Serena Joy communicates to Offred. But the colour

blue is also associated with strict or rigid morals, noble or royal heritage, as in "blue-blood" and fidelity as in "true blue". It is appropriately symbolic in representing the ambiguous position and power of the Commanders' Wives. Their daughters wear long white dresses favoured by virgins and by association brides, which again defines their function in Gilead as future wives and mothers.

At the other end of the scale is the colour red chosen for the Handmaids, the scarlet women, who have had to prostitute themselves in order to survive. Yet, it is also the colour which exemplifies life and fertility because of its association with blood and menstruation and rich red fertile soil. Nevertheless, Offred uses "blood" (*p.19*) as an ambiguous image in the text with both positive and ominous connotations. The Handmaids in common with all Gileadean women, wear veils as an integral part of their habits, but in addition to veils they have to wear wimples, which not only conceal their faces but also restrict their view of the world - another insidious method of control exercised by the totalitarian government.

The Marthas, who are the servants, dress in green. They are not permitted to have sexual intercourse, further evidence of their lowly status. The Guardians of the Faith also dress in green uniforms, "with crests on their shoulders and berets: two swords, crossed, above a white

triangle. The Guardians aren't real soldiers. They're used for routine policing and other menial functions, digging up the Commander's Wife's garden for instance, and they're either stupid or older or disabled or very young, apart from the ones who are Eyes incognito" (p.30).

In Gilead, as in all totalitarian states, great power is wielded by the secret police known as the Eyes, a group reminiscent of Hitler's Gestapo, the F.B.I., and the C.I.A. to name just a few. Those Eyes who are not incognito wear grey suits. The Eyes drag away suspected criminals in the middle of the night or even off the streets in broad daylight. Offred's vivid description of one such incident confirms the similarities between Orwell's *1984* and *The Handmaid's Tale*,

...Right in front of us the van pulls up. Two Eyes, in grey suits, leap from the opening double doors at the back. They grab a man who is walking along, a man with a briefcase, an ordinary looking man, slam him in the back against the black side of the van. He's there a minute splayed out against the metal as if stuck to it; then one of the Eyes moves in on him, does something sharp and brutal that doubles him over into a limp cloth bundle. They pick him up and heave him into the back of the van like a sack of mail. Then they are inside also and the van moves on (pp.178-179).

It is events such as these which keep the inhabitants of Gilead in a state of fear and at the same time brutalise and dehumanise them. All Offred can feel is relief that it wasn't her. People such as these taken off the streets may after compulsory torture hang from "the Wall" (p.41), or if they are not killed that way may be saved for men

or women's salvagings where they will be ripped apart - an activity designed to allow the repressed members of Gileadean society an opportunity to give vent to their feelings of impotence and rage against their oppressors.

The sexual politics of the regime dictates that those Guardians with no connections, that is, with low status, not be issued with a woman - the patriarchal society of Gilead is quite blatant about its sexual politics. Guardians may, however, be promoted to the Angels and become real soldiers who are used to fight the enemies of the state and the heroes amongst them will be chosen to marry the Commanders' Daughters.

Near the bottom of Gileadean society are the Econowives dressed in their red, green and blue which signifies that they combine the roles of Handmaid, Martha and Wife. As their name suggests they are very economical for the State to maintain. However, they are not privileged just because they are allowed to have sexual intercourse. They are producing future labourers for Gilead if they are lucky. These women are worn out and wearied by the heavy work they do, although, according to the Republic's propaganda, when times improve there will be no Econowives in Gilead. These poor women also have to face the risk of producing an Unbaby, since the genes of the inhabitants of Gilead have been affected by radiation, poisons such as pesticides, and diseases, such as a new strain of syphilis. The Handmaids, and any other child

bearing women, also risk producing an Unbaby aptly, although horrifically, named a "shredder" (p.123).

In terms of power, the Aunts are the antithesis of the Econowives in Gileadean society. They wear a brown uniform, a colour favoured by the Nazi Party of Germany. The Aunts control the Rachel and Leah Centre, which is nicknamed the Red Centre by the Handmaids who are interned there until their conditioning is complete. The Aunts are one of the privileged groups of women because they are useful as gaolers. Their role as instruments of the patriarchal state will be discussed further in Chapter Two. Briefly however, their duties include the re-education and policing of the Handmaids and performing the duties of Madams at Jezebel's, organising Salvagings and acting as Midwives and control agents at Birthing Ceremonies, where both Handmaids and Wives are present. Their instruments of control are cattle prods which hang from their belts because women are not trusted with guns. Cattle prods are quite appropriate since they are instruments of the dehumanising process and Handmaids are after all only valuable because of their breeding potential.

At the other end of the scale are the Unwomen, who are either too old to be productive and haven't managed to join the Aunts, or women who are too recalcitrant to be conditioned, such as Offred's feisty mother. The Unwomen are sent to the Colonies along with non-conformist men,

who make up about twenty five percent of the Colonies' population. They clean up radioactive waste, without wearing any protective clothing and they do not survive for long. The Colonial or marginalised men and women wear long grey dresses, which according to Moira "is supposed to demoralise the men" (p.261), but it also signifies that they are Gender Traitors.

The Handmaids function as surrogate mothers. They are assigned to Commanders and their Wives who cannot have children. They exist because there is biblical precedent for their role. The Handmaid's role is authorised by the story of Jacob, Rachel and Leah,¹⁵ although, as Offred comments, the regime is quite capable of making up biblical quotes or changing them if the quotes do not suit their purposes. Since only the privileged few are allowed to read, and that definitely excludes most women, then the Commanders feel fairly secure in tampering with biblical text according to their needs. The Ceremony which Offred describes to the reader has formalised "the mouldy old Rachel and Leah stuff" which Offred and the other Handmaids had "drummed" into them at the Training Centre. (p.99). Offred relates her experience of the Ceremony in a fairly matter-of-fact and detached manner although we do notice a shift in her attitude towards it when she and her Commander begin seeing each other on a personal level. Nevertheless, the Ceremony itself remains the same,

The ceremony goes as usual.

I lie on my back, fully clothed except for the healthy white cotton underdrawers...

A mist of Lily of the Valley surrounds us, chilly crisp almost. It's not warm in this room.

Above me, towards the end of the bed, Serena Joy is arranged, outspread. Her legs apart I lie between them, my head on her stomach, her pubic bone under the base of my skull, her thighs on either side of me. She too is fully clothed.

My arms are raised; she holds my hands, each of mine in each of hers. This is supposed to signify that we are one flesh, one being. What it really means is that she is in control of the process and thus of the product. If any. The rings of her left hand cut into my fingers. It may or may not be revenge.

My red skirt is hitched up to my waist, though no higher. Below it the Commander is fucking. What he is fucking is the lower part of my body. I do not say making love, because this is not what he's doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and only one is involved. Nor does rape cover it: nothing is going on here that I haven't signed up for. There wasn't a lot of choice but there was some, and this is what I chose...

At least he's an improvement on the previous one, who smelled like a church cloakroom in the rain; like your mouth when the dentist starts picking at your teeth; like your nostril. The Commander, instead, smells of mothballs, or is it some punitive form of aftershave? Why does he have to wear that stupid uniform. But would I like his white, tufted raw body any better?

Kissing is forbidden between us. This makes it bearable.

One detaches oneself. One describes (pp.104-6).

The imagery of death and decay, exemplified by references to Lily of the Valley and detritus removed by the dentist again establishes strongly the relationship between this imagined world and the one created in 1984. There is a mood of detachment and mundaneness in this passage which transforms the Ceremony into a farce created by a patriarchal elite who are trying to control all aspects of human life in Gilead. They are unable to control Offred's satirical thoughts and humour is employed

throughout the text as a subversive weapon against the totalitarian regime. Also, the motifs of victimisation, imprisonment and finally survival which recur throughout the text are notable in this passage. Despite the ordeals the fictional characters endure, Atwood does not want an escapist reading of the text, where the reader can sympathise with the sufferers and confirm that they are powerless in this situation. Atwood wants the reader to realise that Offred is implicated in her own oppression, an issue that will be explored in the following chapters.

Apart from the utopian/dystopian function of the two texts which demands that the reader reflects on her/his own society's ideological practices the two texts have interesting similarities in their narrative structures. Although *Handfasted* tends to be a linear narrative with the fairly uninteresting but reasonably reliable narrator organising the events as he experienced them on his adventure we have the recollections of Hugh Victor's Grandmother, which take the reader back to the past and also the diaries of Madam Keith which again creates a movement from the present to the past. In addition to this structure there is the journey of Liliard into the outside world which resembles the imagined future of Columba that she outlines for Hugh Victor in Chapter IV of Book Five, which is entitled "Liliard's Forecast". Atwood's novel also shifts from present to past although much more frequently than *Handfasted*, and it does end

with the future. However, Spence and Atwood's attitude towards that future is problematic.

Firstly, let us consider Spence's portrayal of the future for Columba which entails the end to the practice of *Handfasting* and the provision therefore made for deserted children, the introduction of industrialisation and capitalism into Columba's agrarian-based economy, and the opportunity for all the inhabitants of Columba to learn to read and write. Interestingly, and not surprisingly, when we consider Spence's own religious experiences Liliard does not predict a return to the strictness of the old Puritanism. Spence was converted from Calvinism to Unitarianism in 1856 when she was thirty one. She said about this conversion,

*The dark pall which enveloped heaven and earth was lifted; the confused conscience was made clear and straight; the rebellious heart was made submissive and contented under his ministrations. I have been a very cheerful person ever since, more comfortable to my friends, and more serviceable to the world.*¹⁶

Despite Spence's optimism about the maintenance of more relaxed religious practices the other predictions are disturbing, although realistic. The type of society which is envisaged by Liliard has capitalism and patriarchy as its ideological foundation. For Liliard though, and Spence in real life, this type of society does give more scope for charitable actions and for opportunities to fight for a more equitable world. Spence was a reformer and believed it was possible to legislate for changes

which would make society more equitable . Atwood on the other hand is not optimistic.

The reader may have been lulled into a false sense of security by the ending of *The Handmaid's Tale* since the narrator has escaped from the house of the Commander and we realise that somehow she has managed to tell her story. Also, when we read that the "Historical Notes" are "a partial transcript of the proceedings of the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies, held as part of the International Historical Association Convention, which took place at the University of Denay, Nunavit, on June 25, 2195" (p.311), the reader may think there is life after Gilead. Much to the reader's dismay, however, Atwood's imagined future world has kept in place the customs of patriarchy. The reader's suspicions are first aroused by the pun on "Denay Nunavit" and these reservations are confirmed by the academic, who is the keynote speaker and one of the people who edited and compiled *The Handmaid's Tale*. He asserts, "in my opinion we must be cautious about passing moral judgement upon the Gileadeans ... Our job is not to censure but understand" (p.315). Further confirmation is given for mistrusting the impulse towards optimism on the part of the reader when it is realised that the speaker's sexist jokes, which are a reflection of a patriarchal society, are well received by the audience. The future is really the present and the reader is being warned that the elements for the establishment of a totalitarian,

patriarchal society are present now, a point that will be developed further. The epilogue together with the unreliability of the narrator, which undermines any strong identification with her on the part of the reader, is an important part of the narrative structure of *The Handmaid's Tale*. We are encouraged not to trust the narrator since she admits to giving us "reconstructions" (p.144). The narrator also gives us alternative interpretations of the same event which throws doubt on any of the story she is telling. Atwood wants readers to avoid an escapist reading of the text, challenging them to take notice of the trends in their society.

Notes

¹ Susan Magarey, *Unbridling the Tongues of Women* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1985), p.53.

² Magarey, p.53.

³ Magarey, p.54.

⁴ Spence lived from 1825 - 1910.

⁵ Catherine Helen Spence, *An Autobiography*, extracts in Helen Thomson (ed.), *Portable Australian Authors. Catherine Helen Spence* (St.Lucia, Queensland: UQP, 1987), p.445.

⁶ It was not published by Virago until 1987, which is the edition referred to in quotes in this thesis.

⁷ Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (London: Virago, 1987).

⁸ Barbara Hill Rigney, *Women Writers. Margaret Atwood* (London: Macmillan Education, 1987), p.104.

⁹ Hill Rigney, p.131.

¹⁰ Hill Rigney, p.131.

¹¹ Spence, *Autobiography*, in Thomson (ed.), *Portable Authors. Spence*, p.445.

¹² Spence, *Autobiography*, in Thomson (ed.), *Portable Authors. Spence*, p.445.

¹³ Spence explores the issue in an article entitled "Marriage Rights and Wrongs", published in *The Register* on 15 July, 1878 and reproduced in Thomson (ed.), *Portable Authors. Spence*, pp.499-503.

¹⁴ Catherine Helen Spence, *Handfasted* (Melbourne: Penguin, 1984), p.200. Subsequent quotations will be

followed parenthetically by the page number to this edition.

¹⁵ Jacob was given two wives named Rachel and Leah who were sisters. According to Genesis when the Lord saw that Leah was less loved than Rachel, He made it possible for her children to have children, but Rachel remained childless. After Leah had borne Jacob four children Rachel became jealous of her sister and said to Jacob, "Give me children, or else I will die." Jacob became very angry with Rachel because he said it was not he stopping Rachel from having children but God. Rachel then gave Jacob her slave girl Bilhah to sleep with so that Bilhah could have a child for her. Rachel then became a mother twice through Bilhah. By this time Leah realised that she had stopped having children so she gave her slave girl Zilpah to Jacob, who also had two children to Jacob. According to Genesis the Lord then made it possible for Rachel to have more children.

¹⁶ Magarey, p.78.

UTOPIA/DYSTOPIA

In *Handfasted* Spence writes about an imagined society whose members are socially and politically equal, except for the the privileged state wards known as "God's bairns" (p.56), who in the outside world would be labelled illegitimate. In Columba they hold all the public service positions and are the only ones who learn how to read and write. Nevertheless, the majority of the inhabitants of Columba are very satisfied with the organisation of their utopian society and accept the privileging of this historically underprivileged group. When the narrator, Hugh Victor Keith, discovers the hidden valley of Columba he nicknames it "Happy Valley" (p72) because of the obvious contentment of the majority of people living there. There could be some irony intended here, however, because for the main female protagonist, Liliard, it is a stifling and imprisoning place despite its harmony and delight.¹ On the other hand, Atwood in *The Handmaid's Tale* writes about a dystopian society in which there is a totalitarian government which rules by fear and therefore represses most of its inhabitants, particularly women.² However, despite these differences, both authors use of the utopian/dystopian genre offers a point of comparison since both texts use narrators who reveal the practices and ideologies of the societies they observe and both follow the tradition of Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516),

written "to engage the readers in a critical analysis of the customs and institutions, the dominant ideological practices of their time."³

Spence gives her novel a contemporary setting, challenging her readers to examine the inequities and social evils of their own society which are not necessarily irremediable. For example, the revolutionary practice of handfasting in Spence's utopian *Columba* removes the taint of illegitimacy and all the attendant social problems as well as liberating women and men from forced marriages and/or the burden of unwanted children. In contrast, as Atwood's discourse on the futuristic society of Gilead progresses, the reader becomes aware that all the conditions for the establishment of an elitist, misogynist, hierarchical society are already present within contemporary societies, such as the United States of America. As the story unfolds, the allusions, for example, to Nazi Germany remind readers of the cyclical nature of history but also makes them look afresh at their own society. In other words, the utopia/dystopia genre "defamiliarise[s] and restructure[s] our experience of our own present."⁴ Spence and Atwood are challenging the reader to reassess the ideologies and practices underlying society and governing the interaction between members of the society, but Atwood's novel does not express the optimism of Spence's text.

At the close of *Handfasted* the reader is given the impression that Liliard and the narrator will fight for gradual reform within Victorian society which will give opportunities to the less privileged groups. Spence placed great faith in reform through legislation but Atwood's ending is far more pessimistic. The sexist jokes made during the historical conference presented in the Epilogue by the keynote speaker and compiler of *The Handmaid's Tale*, which are quite well received by the audience, leave the reader feeling uneasy about the future. Nevertheless, Atwood has claimed elsewhere that she is not a pessimist, just a realist. There is a note of warning for readers, particularly women, to pay attention. Atwood by "defamiliaris[ing] and restructur[ing] our experience of our own present" allows us to assess our position in a patriarchal society and the inherent inequities of such a society. Spence shares Atwood's interest in the relationships between women and men and the ideological practices regarding women in a patriarchal society, even though Spence is much more optimistic regarding the future position of women. Therefore, the gender concerns of the two texts are another significant point of comparison between them which will be explored in this chapter since they reveal the feminist focus of the two writers.⁵ There is however, an underlying irony throughout Atwood's text which distinguishes it from *Handfasted*. And finally, Columba and Gilead are established according to particular religious doctrine, although religious tolerance is

preached in Columba, whereas in Gilead, it is religious intolerance.

In the utopian Columba, which "was a curious political and social experiment on a small scale under the most favourable circumstances" (p.334), Spence's imagined early settlers set about establishing a colony free of poverty, prostitution, dissipation and many other social evils found in "civilised" countries. Columba evolves into a colony in which most its citizens, men and women, are equal, except for the privileged "God's bairns". There is, from a twentieth century perspective, a marginalised group, the Indians, who have been dispossessed by the settlers when their land was appropriated. Spence, although not revealing any sympathy towards them as a group, does write sympathetically of the position of the Indian women who live with the white settlers. The acknowledgement of the Indians' rights to the land is dismissed fairly quickly in the novel. There is a mention of it in the autobiographical narrative of one of the founders of Columba, Madame Keith, which Hugh Victor found in the margins of Blaise Pascal's *Pensees* and translated from French to English. Madame Keith expresses the "misgivings" of herself and her son Victor, "as to whether we had done the right thing in coming to this peaceful valley to take their [Indians'] land from them." (pp.195-6). Spence does tend to portray Indians or half-breeds in the text as shifty, unreliable characters. Those she favours who are of mixed race, such as Liliard,

are shown to have inherited the best from both races. The white settlers in the book tend to be portrayed as admirable, hardworking people who are worthy to inhabit the utopian Columba firstly because they are of Scottish descent and secondly because of the British colonialist view shared by Spence that they are superior to the indigenes.

Spence's readers are expected to compare Columba to their own society and reconsider, from a different perspective, the social evils which are taken for granted in societies outside Columba, particularly poverty and inequality between the sexes. This is particularly obvious when the naive Liliard leaves Columba with her handfasted partner Hugh Victor Keith. They plan to return to his native Melbourne, but on the way visit America, Europe and finally Great Britain. While in America, Liliard must confront the evils of poverty and prostitution, both of which she has never experienced in Columba because they are non-existent there.

Nevertheless, Spence makes the reader aware that Columba has its shortcomings. Even in Columba there are problems with the system of government, which ultimately drive Liliard away, and which are summed up in the chapter of the book entitled, "Some Short-comings in the Columban Constitution",

There was one result of the peculiar domestic arrangements enforced in Columba which Madame Keith and her son and the early Council probably never

anticipated. In their eager desire to give perfect freedom in matters of love and marriage to every member of the community, and their determination that the children of separated parents should in no respect suffer, they had erected side by side with the simple representative institutions of a pure democracy, a sort of irresponsible bureaucracy, superior in intelligence, in education and in administrative ability to the people's choice through election. As we have seen, all the professions, religious, medical and legal, and what we shall call the civil service, were recruited not from the ranks of the ordinary citizens, but from those children who were solemnly renounced by their parents and given over to the State...It had none of the evil elements of a hereditary caste, nor had it the mischievous effects of a body like that in the United States liable to be changed at each presidential election but it had a great influence in stifling ambition (pp.229-30).

It is significant that, after Spence's narrator has recovered from his initial amazement at the system of handfasting, he is not at all perturbed by such a revolutionary and, by nineteenth century standards, immoral practice but instead pinpoints the "stifling of ambition" as a more serious fault within the organisation of Columban society. Liliard, Spence's female protagonist, leaves Columba with Hugh Victor, not just because she loves him, but because she feels her ambitions are stifled in Columba. Spence in *Handfasted* is putting forward the cause of women earning a living. Through earning a living it is possible to have "a room of one's own".⁶ Spence did not believe that women's activities should be confined to the domestic sphere. Her own life exemplifies that, since she was a novelist, a journalist, a preacher, an unpaid welfare worker, a teacher, and a political agitator.

The woman whom Liliard most admires in Columba is Sister Dorothea, who was one of "God's bairns", and therefore educated for a vocation outside the home. Unfortunately, because of the "shortcoming" in Columba's constitution, Liliard who has great talents as an orator and story teller could not pursue a career suited to these talents - only the domestic sphere is open to her. Liliard pines for a challenge. Liliard admires and envies Sister Dorothea,

Because she could read and write, and teach and pray and because she had one little girl all to herself; aye, and maybe because she had to fight hard to get her. (p.127)

Sister Dorothea had made a mistake in her choice of handfasted partner so that he, Neil Scott, was entitled to keep the child from their union. Neil Scott, however, allowed Sister Dorothea to have the girl on the understanding that she gave him half the money she earned. When the daughter turned fifteen she could legally choose to live with her mother, which she did, and Sister Dorothea then stopped the payments to Neil Scott. Sister Dorothea had therefore to pay quite dearly for independence, but at least she is equipped with an education, which gives her the opportunity to do so. Therefore, she does not have to earn a living in the usual and expected way in a patriarchal society, by marrying. Sister Dorothea's decision is one which Spence would have supported. Jeanne Young, writing as though she were Spence, reported a conversation which Spence had had with friends during a week at Victor Harbour,

*I remember one day being asked whether I was not sorry I never married. 'No,' I replied, 'for, although I often envied my friends the happiness they find in their children, I have never envied them their husbands.'*⁷

Spence and her mother established various households of women and children in South Australia, "which were financially stable even if they continued to have to look at both sides of a shilling."⁸ In contrast to the optimism that Spence expresses that nineteenth century women may move out of the domestic sphere, Atwood in *The Handmaid's Tale* looks into the future and shows a return of women to the domestic sphere, which is an indicator of their enslavement.

Unfortunately, in Gilead, the push of some feminists in the women's movement, exemplified by Offred's mother, for a return to old-fashioned values in regard to pornography and abortion, was appropriated by the Christian fundamentalists, and turned against women. The anti-pornography book burnings, one of which Offred recalls she was dragged along to as a child, and women's rallies against backyard abortion and violence, which again Offred's feminist mother attended, were all used by the right wing government as justification for censorship and repression and provided evidence of how bad things were for women in the "old days" (p.129). Aunt Lydia, a Handmaid trainer, functions in the book as an apologist for the regime as well as a dispenser of ideologically sound homespun philosophy. She claims that in the past,

In the days of anarchy it was freedom to. Now it is freedom from - don't underrate it...we were a society dying of too much choice. (pp.34-5)

Women no longer can make choices. There are no more abortions, for example, in Gilead, because in common with Columbian society, every child is a wanted child, but because Atwood is writing about a dystopia women have little control over conception or whether or not they will keep their child. The Handmaids are exploited as surrogate mothers but, like all women, their sexuality is officially denied. The sexual freedom practised in Spence's Columba is the antithesis of Gilead's attitude to sexuality. The women's movement by wishing to censor pornography and by taking part in book burnings have given an opportunity for eventual universal censorship in Gilead and the denial of women's sexuality. Although the intentions of the feminists were to free women from oppression, their oppressors have appropriated their arguments and subverted them. Serena Joy, and women like her, in the past presented and supported the more extreme forms of the return to old values, the most significant being the return of women to the domestic sphere. The narrator comments ironically on Serena Joy's role in enslaving women in Gilead,

She doesn't make speeches any more. She has become speechless. She stays in her home, but it doesn't seem to agree with her. How furious she must be, now that she's been taken at her word. (p.56)

Speechlessness is the common condition of all women in Gilead, except for the regime's chosen spokeswomen and control agency, the Aunts. The Aunts are part of the

women's culture which has been constructed in Gilead. They are leaders who have adopted the "alpha-style" of leadership favoured by this patriarchal society.⁹ This style of leadership is a "male power style" which is "direct and aggressive."¹⁰ However, the power given to the Aunts is illusory since men control it. The Aunts have further contributed to the devaluation of the women's movement in Gilead by appropriating some of the arguments of the movement on behalf of the patriarchy. Again Offred comments ironically after being present at the ritualistic birth of another Handmaid's child,

Mother...Wherever you may be. Can you hear me? You wanted a women's culture. Well, now there is one. It isn't what you meant, but it exists. Be thankful for small mercies. (p.137)

Another manifestation of that women's culture in Gilead is the women's "Salvagings". The narrator describes one such gathering where a man is literally torn apart by the Handmaids for an alleged rape. He is a political prisoner of the regime who is used as a scapegoat so that the women can give vent to the frustration they feel at their own imprisonment. The "Salvaging" is no more acceptable to Atwood, or the reader, because a man is the victim. In a patriarchal society we think of women as the only victims. The man is shown to be a victim in this society as much as the women who rip him to shreds. Ofglen acknowledges in regard to the man, "He was a political...he was one of ours" (p.292). However, more importantly, both men and women are implicated in their

victimisation. Through the guise of her "Historical Notes" which concludes *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood demonstrates that the conditions are present for the establishment of a society which oppresses its members particularly women. The keynote speaker, who is one of the academics responsible for the production of *The Handmaid's Tale*, makes comments in his address to the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies, held on June 25, 2195, which leaves the reader with a feeling of unease. Even though the Symposium is still held in a future time we, the readers, are positioned to look back on Gilead and we therefore share the Symposium's retrospective look at the past, as well as being positioned to view it as our possible future. When the speaker rationalises the existence of Gilead and "avoids, under the guise of objectivity, taking a moral or political stand,"¹¹ the reader becomes aware not only of the misogynist tendencies of a distant future but those present in our own society which will mould the ideology and practices of that future.¹² The keynote speaker claims in his address that,

...in my opinion we must be cautious about passing moral judgement upon the Gileadeans. Surely we have learned that such judgements are culturally specific. Also, Gileadean society was under a good deal of pressure, demographic and otherwise, and was subject to factors from which we ourselves are more happily free. Our job is not to censure but to understand. (Applause). (pp.314-5)

Atwood is pointing to the conditions that are still present for the enslavement of women but she is also in

her text not excusing women who have colluded in their victimisation,

Maybe none of this is about control. Maybe it isn't really about who can do what to whom and get away with it, even as far as death. Maybe it isn't about who can sit and a who has to kneel or stand or lie down, legs spread open. Maybe it's about who can do what to whom and be forgiven for it. Never tell me it amounts to the same thing. (pp.144-5)

By showing Offred's complicity in her oppression Atwood is confronting women with the message that they are implicated in their oppression by men. This is certainly making women re-evaluate their position. The reader observes Offred as she moves through, what Atwood describes in *Survival* as, the "Basic Victim Positions".¹³ This victim model was produced to explain the Canadian colonisers' relationship to their new environment, but it is equally applicable to women or any marginalised group, who are victims. Nevertheless, Atwood expresses reservations in regard to the victim model, "I've presented the model as though it were based on individual rather than social experience."¹⁴ This, however, means that it lends itself to the analysis of Offred's positioning as victim. Offred in describing pre-Gilead society remembers staying in hotel rooms when she had "freedom to",

I could lift up the telephone and food would appear on a tray, food I had chosen. Food that was bad for me no doubt, and drink too. There were Bibles in the dresser drawers, put there by some charitable society, though probably no one read them much. There were postcards, too, with pictures of the hotel on them, and you could write on the postcards and send them to anyone you wanted. It seems like such an impossible thing, now; like something you'd made up.
(p.61)

Firstly, these lines surprise the reader with the idea that such a mundane and "ordinary" experience should now be considered by the narrator to be quite extraordinary, since under the Gileadean regime people, especially women, have had the right to act individually and independently withdrawn. It is now "ordinary" (*p.43*) to live in fear and have every facet of everyday life right down to the food eaten controlled by the imperial centre. Secondly, these lines also reflect Offred's confusion regarding freedom, as she recognised it, before the advent of the totalitarian government of Gilead. Just because Offred could order food and drink and choose to read and write does not necessarily mean she had freedom of choice. Meeting Luke, her future husband, in hotel rooms did offer an escape for her from her abysmal flat, which is all she could afford on her pay as a computer operator for an insurance company (*p.181*), but it is a superficial measurement of her freedom and she does not dwell on the circumstances which have driven her to those hotel rooms. She is having an affair with a married man and therefore her choices are fairly limited regarding when and how they meet. At this stage and up until she loses her job, which is after she and Luke are married, Offred denies her victimisation. She is not politically conscious and the mistaken conviction that "innocence is merely/ not to act", as Atwood writes in "The Arrest of the Stockbroker", is the ultimate illusion.¹⁵ Offred moves from this Position to the next one, Recognition and Confrontation. This occurs when Offred's bank account is

frozen so that she does not have access to the money she has earned and she is dismissed from her job as "discer" (p.182). It is ironical that she is a computer operator, since it is this technology, that is in place, which allows the regime to move so quickly when it suspends the rights of its citizens. Offred recalls at the time she lost her job, women felt as though they deserved to be without work. This feeling is reinforced by the attitude of her husband, Luke,

That night, after I'd lost my job, Luke wanted me to make love. Why didn't I want to? Desperation alone should have driven me. But I still felt numbed. I could hardly even feel his hands on me.

What's the matter? he said.

I don't know, I said.

We still have...he said. But he didn't go on to say what we still had. It occurred to me that he shouldn't be saying 'we' since nothing that I knew of had been taken away from him.

We still have each other, I said. It was true. Then why did I sound, even to myself, so indifferent?

He kissed me then, as if now I'd said that things could get back to normal. But something had shifted, some balance. I felt shrunken, so that when he put his arms around me, gathering me up, I was small as a doll. I felt love going forward without me.

He doesn't mind this, I thought. he doesn't mind at all. Maybe he even likes it. We are not each other's any more. Instead, I am his.

Unworthy, unjust, untrue. But that is what happened. So Luke: what I want to ask you now, what I need to know is, Was I right? Because we never talked about it. By the time I could have done that, I was afraid to. I couldn't afford to lose you.

(pp.192-3)

Even though Offred is confronting the situation, she does not confront Luke. Cranny-Francis explains Offred's silence as one "based on fear."¹⁶ Offred at this point is just concerned about her own survival and her responsibility to her nuclear family, rather than to

other repressed people within society. Offred did not go on any of the marches,

Luke said it would be futile and I had to think about them, my family, him and her. I did think about my family. I started doing more housework, more baking. I tried not to cry at mealtimes.

(p.189)

Moirra offers a clue at this time about how Offred should be reacting. When the Constitution was suspended she warned Offred, "Here it comes...They've [the regime have] been building up to this. It's you and me up against the wall baby" (p.183). Moirra does go "underground" but she, like Offred, ends up at the Leah and Rachel Training Centre. Nevertheless, Moirra's fighting spirit gives them all hope. It is Moirra who warns Offred against the next phase, Position Three, which Offred does move into, but then passes through. Offred spends some time, whilst in this phase, looking longingly at the space in her ceiling which the chandelier once occupied. It was removed because her predecessor had used it to commit suicide. Offred also contemplates using the hook in her closet to hang herself. However, she moves through this stage before she can follow through on her ideas, into Position Four, which is that of Non-victim. We are aware of the transition from Position Three to Position Four, when Offred is frightened by Moirra's indifference, on meeting up with her at Jezebel's,

But how can I expect her to go on, with my idea of courage, live it through, act it out, when I myself do not?

I don't want her to be like me. Give in, go along, save her skin. That is what it comes down to. I want gallantry from her, swashbuckling heroism, single-

handed combat. Something I lack. (p.261)

Offred has valued her own physical survival above sisterhood and by doing that has sacrificed her own integrity.¹⁷ Offred, in common with the other women in Gilead has sacrificed, due to her non-involvement, her freedom, her identity and even parts of her memory. However, Offred does become involved, firstly with Nick, and then through recording her history of the Gileadean regime. Her relationship with Nick demonstrates that she is taking independent action, which is later validated by Nick engineering her escape from the Commander's house. Her political responsibility is to warn another world,

I keep on going with this sad and hungry and sordid, this limping and mutilated story, because after all I want you to hear it, as I will hear yours too if I ever get the chance, if I meet you or if you escape, in the future or in Heaven or in prison or underground, some other place...By telling you anything at all I'm at least believing in you, I believe you're there, I believe you into being. Because I'm telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are. (p.279)

Atwood is concerned with the power of the spoken/written word. The writer's art is language and through words the oppressed may be given a voice. In *True Stories* Atwood writes,

*A word after a word/after a word is power.*¹⁸

Spence it may be claimed would support Atwood's view. Her biographer, Magarey, in the closing lines of *Unbridling the Tongues of Women* writes about the debt owed to Spence by the early Australian Suffragettes,

... their work drew inspiration, and strength, from

*the remarkable battle that Catherine Spence had waged already, for decades before they were born, to wrest from patriarchal provincialism a hearing for the voices of women. All of us who speak, and expect to be heard, today, owe a tribute to Catherine Spence.*¹⁹

Spence through her journalism, literary works and public speaking asserted the right of women to have their voices heard. Her heroine Liliard is a gifted public speaker and resolves in the novel that she and Hugh Victor will "act together" to try and "regenerate" society in Victoria because they know from their experiences in Columba that "hereditary pauperism" and vice "are not necessary" (pp.332-5).

Another point of comparison between the two colonies is that they are both organised along religious lines, but whereas in Spence's utopia religious tolerance is practised, in Atwood's dystopian society religious doctrine is used to justify the oppression of women and any other dissident groups. One of Spence's political functions in *Handfasted* is to comment on the negative aspects of capitalism and the doctrines of Calvinism, which some philosophers have argued gave ideological support to the acquisition of great wealth. Columba could be established because the settlers left Scotland prior to the Industrial Revolution, and, under the guidance of Madame Keith, the "paralysing" doctrines of original sin and election and retribution, or predestination as it is also known, were ignored.²⁰ Spence demonstrates how a society derived from the same cultural and ideological

background as that in which capitalism flourished, could take a different path, one which would result in the greatest happiness for all; a classless society, free of poverty and other social evils found in Western capitalist societies. Liliard's disquietude is demonstrated by Spence's description of the poverty Liliard sees in New York,

There are poor slums in New York as in any old world city; there were many wretched immigrants who had not yet found work or food, there were drunkards male and female and their families; there were lazy vicious fathers and slatternly mothers, and sharp faced thievish children, who looked starved and half clothed. (p.304)

This passage comments on the poverty experienced by the unemployed in an industrialised country. Spence expresses a belief in *Handfasted*, through her agent Liliard, that this poverty is remediable.

Spence believed that poverty need not be inherited, a belief which ran contrary to the patriarchal ideological belief of the time. Also prostitutes are not born prostitutes, it is economic need which drives women to prostitution. Spence asserted that it is environment and not heredity which is crucial to the formation of character. Liliard comments on the deserted and neglected children of Columba,

'Of course our children were those of the least worthy...but by training they were made our superiors; and this training was given by the generation of the same class which had preceded them. You saw the homes they had with the teachers were happy ones...' (p.333).

Spence uses *Handfasted* to push the cause of the Boarding-Out System, which occupied a great deal of her own time and energy in colonial South Australia. In *Handfasted* Spence looks to her beloved Scotland to give more credence to the idea. Under the scheme "all [children] are boarded out with respectable poor people and show no marked deficiency in intellect or morals" (p.333). Liliard functions as a visitor from a utopian world who views the poverty and social evils resulting from it with horror and disbelief, so that the readers will be prompted to view it afresh and reassess their own attitude to this condition - poverty is remediable and so are the attendant social evils.

When the Scottish adventurers left in 1745 and were never heard of again, they established a society with an agrarian-based economy. It cannot be said that Spence was opposed to industrialisation ²¹ (her heroine Liliard's appreciation of the machinery she sees outside Columba, reflects Spence's own appreciation but she was), like Liliard, concerned about the social problems which accompanied industrialisation and the resultant dislocation as described in the passage above. Madame Keith's autobiographical writings record that the colony of Columba was established without a minister or a schoolmaster, and that the Reverend Archibald Keith's library was destroyed. Marguerite Keith and her son were consulted on everything since they represented the largest sum of money invested in the new colony. It was

Madame Keith who was able to influence the religious teachings of the new colony, which were based on her interpretation of the Gospels, since "all the catechisms, larger and smaller, were destroyed" (p.198). The religion of Columba was simpler and more liberal than the religion of her youth. Madame Keith's rejection of Calvinism's "paralysing" doctrines of original sin and predestination reflects Spence's own rejection of them and her adoption of Unitarian doctrine, which was guided by "the rationalism of the Enlightenment."²² Spence was an avid and diverse reader, having read and lectured on Buddhism, Luther, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the novels of George Eliot, and the work of William Booth and the Salvation Army.²³ Spence was an admirer of John Stuart Mill, and mixed in intellectual circles in South Australia as a result of her involvement with the Unitarian Church, which "introduced her not only to the rationalism of the Enlightenment, but also as she noted 'a number of interesting and clever people.'"²⁴ Her reading, discussions and Christian Unitarian doctrine opened the way for the rejection of the excesses of Calvinism, and her fictional work *Handfasted* reflects this as well as her interest in social welfare. Columba is free of the worst aspects of capitalism, but whether or not Spence consciously linked the Calvinist doctrine of election and reprobation to the growth of capitalism is a matter of conjecture. Max Weber, thirty years after *Handfasted* was written, was to use this as his central argument in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.²⁵

According to Weber "the faithful" have an intense need for "proof of election", and

*...as God is the entire world's master, so it is by mastering in turn his portion of the world that the faithful can operate as God's own instrument - and thus gain some psychological assurance of his own status as an elect.*²⁶

The capitalist's calling in the world is to work relentlessly, steadily and systematically to accrue capital and the faithful capitalists or entrepreneurs distance themselves from associates, suppliers, customers and competitors by treating them with formal correctness, and "styling most inter-personal relations as those akin to a contractual nature."²⁷ This is because his associates and others may be amongst the damned and so the entrepreneur has to restrain impulses of sympathy and solidarity towards them and act individualistically. In contrast to this ideological stance, Spence's utopia of Columba is characterised by a relaxed attitude to religion allowing them to have "playacting" in the Kirk, no Sunday School for the children, who need a "rest" on Sunday just like the "grown folk" and dancing "on the green" (pp.62-3); the solidarity of the settlers; and economic equity.

Economic equity in society was something Spence was to argue for in her political writings for the rest of her life.²⁸ In a series of articles on the early days of South Australia written for *The Register* between 26 October 1878 and 9 November 1878, the same year

Handfasted was entered in *The Sydney Mail* competition, Spence suggested that her colony was the nearest one could get to a utopia in the civilised world, which is another expression of her belief that it is possible to improve the lot of the traditionally less privileged in society,

*In the early days of a free colony we see something of that Utopia, where man learns the usefulness, the dignity, and the blessedness of labour, where work is paid for according to its hardness and its disagreeableness, and not after the standard of the overcrowded countries where bread is dear and human life cheap. And in such a colonial community we can also see that intelligence improves the quality of work done; that the educated labourer has more foresight and endurance, more enterprise and resource, than the ignorant, and thus turn his work to better account. Perhaps never in any human society did circumstances realize the ideas of the community of labour and the equality of the sexes so fully as in South Australia in the early days.*²⁹

A journalist, who went to hear her preach in 1895 on "The Democratic Ideal", remarked that even he "felt slightly shamed by her 'vigorous incisive' attack on the growth of monopoly and luxury in the United States, and her appeal against social organisation which left some people in poverty."³⁰ Liliard and the narrator are the author's mouthpieces in *Handfasted* when they discuss the economic state of the outside world. Liliard expresses regret at the contempt she had felt for Columba's "ways and its institutions" (p.334), but as the narrator points out and Liliard echoes, "it was a curious political and social experiment on a small scale" (p.334). Spence's comments on the early days of South Australia seem to echo that comment and by analogy the narrator's own Colony of

Victoria could also be seen in a similar light. In fact attention is constantly drawn to the diminutive proportions of Melbourne in terms of society and physical size when compared to foreign cities like those in America which the narrator and Liliard visit. Furthermore, in regard to the utopian Columba Hugh Victor also claims that,

'...no such continuous equality of conditions could be possible in a wider field open to all the disturbing elements of different degrees of talent, industry, thrift and opportunity, not to speak of monopoly...' (p.334-5)

Spence echoes the narrator's anti-capitalist sentiments in the series of newspaper articles she wrote on the early days of the South Australian colony,

Better than the acquiring of colossal (sic) fortunes by individuals is the more equal distribution of wealth in a community, and although the prospect of the rise to a higher class is a wonderful stimulus to energy and thrift, it is perhaps of more consequence that the hewers of wood and drawers of water should be tolerably comfortable.³¹

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood also exposes the excesses of capitalism which have resulted in environmental disasters such as stockpiles of radioactive waste in the Colonies, which have to be cleaned up mainly by exiled women. Atwood explores the excesses of a white fundamentalist religious government, which in theory also decries the excesses of capitalism and promises, for example, that when times improve "no-one will have to be an Econowife" (p.54). The government of Gilead promises their version of utopia for all true believers, which includes the oppression and silencing of women as well as

a rigid class structure. In Gilead the white supremacist male regime uses the its interpretation of the teachings of the bible, in particular the Old Testament, to give authority to the repression of its subjects. Although women suffer the brunt of the attack no cultural or religious group different from the dominant one is safe. Quakers and Baptists suffer as much as Jews and Catholics. It is all part of the orchestrated repression and silencing of minority groups in Gilead. There is not even a pretence of equality engendered by the Gileadean regime. The hierarchical structure is strictly adhered to and reinforced by the uniforms the inhabitants of Gilead are forced to wear.

Spence's and Atwood's fictional worlds are very different in their practices even though their creators share some attitudes towards equality between the sexes, capitalism, patriarchy and the silencing of women. The main point of difference is that Spence is an optimist and Atwood a pessimist, although she would prefer to be called a realist.

NOTES

¹ This could be an allusion to Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas*.

² Amin Malak, "Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and the Dystopian Tradition," *Canadian Literature*, no.112, Spring 1987, pp.10-11. Malak identifies the features of dystopias found in three classic works, Zamyatin's *We*, Huxley's *Brave New World*, and Orwell's *1984* as "Power, Totalitarianism, War"; "Dream-Nightmare: Fantasy: Reality"; "Binary Oppositions" which dramatises the conflict between individual choice and social necessity;

"Characterisation" which is two-dimensional and which lacks positive assertive characters; "Change and Time" which is non-existent and static; and "Theoretical Discourse".

³ Anne Cranny-Francis, *Feminist Fiction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), p.110.

⁴ Frederic Jameson, "Progress Versus Utopia; or, Can We Imagine the Future?" in Brian Wallis (ed.), *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation* (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art in association with David R. Godine, 1984), p.244. Jameson's comments were made in regard to the science fiction genre but Atwood's text is dystopian science fiction and even though Spence's text is definitely not science fiction Jameson's statement is applicable to utopian/dystopian writing in general.

⁵ Malak, p.11. Malak identifies Atwood's feminist focus as distinguishing it from earlier dystopian discourses.

⁶ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Granada, 1977).

⁷ Magarey, p.192.

⁸ Magarey, p.48.

⁹ Anne Cranny-Francis, *Engendered Fictions* (Kensington, NSW: New South Wales University Press, 1992), p.97.

¹⁰ Cranny-Francis, *Engendered Fiction*, p.97.

¹¹ Malak, p.15.

¹² Michael Foley, "Satiric Intent in the 'Historical Notes' Epilogue of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*," *Commonwealth*, vol.11, no.2, Spring 1989, p.45.

¹³ Hill Rigney, p.132.

¹⁴ Margaret Atwood, *Survival* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972), p.201, quoted in Fleming Brahms, "Entering Our Own Ignorance: Subject -Object Relations in Commonwealth Literature," *World Literature Written in English*, vol.21, no.2, 1982, p.223.

¹⁵ Hill Rigney, p.109.

¹⁶ Cranny-Francis, *Engendered Fiction*, p.149.

¹⁷ Hill Rigney, p.121.

¹⁸ Hill Rigney, p.121.

¹⁹ Magarey, p.194.

²⁰ Magarey, p.78.

²¹ Magarey, pp.169-70.

²² Magarey, p.79.

²³ Magarey, p.85.

²⁴ Magarey, p.79.

²⁵ Gianfranco Poggi, *Calvinism and the Capitalist Spirit. Max Weber's Protestant Ethic* (London: Macmillan, 1983), p.53.

²⁶ Poggi, p.65.

²⁷ Poggi, p.73.

²⁸ Magarey, p.133.

²⁹ Thomson (ed.), *Portable Authors. Spence*, p.528.

³⁰ Magarey, p.87.

³¹ Thomson (ed.), *Portable Authors. Spence*, p.532.

A colonial/post-colonial reading of *Handfasted* and *The Handmaid's Tale*

Handfasted and *The Handmaid's Tale* are colonial/post-colonial texts, a point of comparison which will be explored in this chapter. They position themselves as colonial/post-colonial texts partly because of the nationalities of the writers; Spence was a South Australian and Atwood a Canadian. Secondly, the setting of the two novels is America, although the specific settings are mythical. The American setting is interesting because both writers view America as a colonising power or the imperial centre against which they are writing, despite the texts being written one hundred years apart. Thirdly, both novels depict fictional indigenous or marginalised groups within the societies they create. Also, both novels deal with the colonising experience and the issue of survival within an alien or harsh environment. Finally, *Handfasted* and *The Handmaid's Tale* are concerned with the imposition of the language of the privileged group on the marginalised/indigenous peoples.

In examining the issues raised by the colonial/post-colonial nature of the two texts it may be found that some issues overlap with those discussed previously. Furthermore, it must be acknowledged that there are links between post-colonialism, post-modernism, post-

structuralism and feminism, so that some issues and some strategies used by the writers which are identified as post-colonial may in other instances in the texts be read as feminist or, in the case of Atwood, as post-modernist. However, the two texts do lend themselves to a post-colonial reading for all the reasons outlined above and that is the concern of this chapter.

The term post-colonial is used in this chapter "to cover all the culture [which includes literature] affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonisation to the present day."¹ Consequently, both Spence and Atwood fall into the category of post-colonial writers, even though Spence often shares the views of the imperial centre. For example, her attitude to indigenous people is a white supremacist one, however, that is an attitude that is still evident in modern times in some post-colonial writers' works. Taking this into consideration it is necessary to qualify the above definition, which does not distinguish between what Hodge and Mishra in *Dark Side of the Dream* have called "oppositional post-colonialism" and "complicit post-colonialism."² Subversion is not necessarily present "equally" and "everywhere" in "post-colonial societies."³ Thus, the post-colonial societies to which Spence and Atwood belong, according to this definition, would be considered "complicit" in their colonisation, since Australia and Canada were settler colonies. Likewise, the mythical American societies created in the two texts would be

considered to portray "complicit post-colonialism" but within these "complicit" post-colonial societies there are groups in "opposition" to the imperial centre - in Spence's *Handfasted* it is the Indians of Columba and in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* it is the women, the marginalised group referred to as "the indigenous" in the "Historical Notes" (p.320). Therefore, in applying a post-colonial reading to the texts it will emerge that some groups depicted in the novels will be shown to be in opposition to the imperial centre whereas others are distinguished by their co-operation and acceptance of the colonial process either as victims or victimisers.

The authors of *Handfasted* and *The Handmaid's Tale* write convincingly of the experience of colonisation of the fictional characters in their texts because of their own colonial heritage. Spence, although not born in South Australia, was a willing migrant and in her writing, both fiction and non-fiction she declares proudly that she is an Australian nationalist. Her narrator in the text, Hugh Victor Keith, is favoured by Spence since he embodies many of the positive aspects found in colonists. He is honest, hardworking, has an intelligent and enquiring mind and is not a snob. Spence is attacking the materialism of wealthy imperialist, capitalist societies like America in her text as well as expressing her national pride by contrasting her narrator and his lover Liliard, with their pompous and supercilious hosts while in New York, the Burgoynes. The youthful Burgoynes, in

particular, embody the worst aspects of colonisers and although they may be considered to be members of the New World they consider themselves to be culturally and intellectually superior to Liliard and Hugh Victor representatives of the even Newer World. In the Burgoyne's American society the Old World evils of poverty, which is indicative of enormous class inequities, and prostitution are prominent.

The young Burgoyne's of New York consider that physically and culturally their women are superior to the young colonial women represented by Liliard. They are critical of Liliard's physique and complexion, of which Spence and her spokesperson, the narrator, approve. Liliard's large but well proportioned features come from honest hard physical work and exercise. Her complexion, which is the colour of a pomegranate (red-brown), is due to outdoor activity and to her American Indian heritage. The Burgoyne women in contrast to Liliard are in the narrator's eyes "washed out and emaciated" (p.311), even though they consider themselves superior in all respects,

Somehow they took her (Liliard) at first for half a savage, and me for a semi-civilised Australian. Although their father and mine had studied together, there appeared to be a difference between an old New York family like theirs, and a Scotchman who had taken the retrograde step of settling in Australia. All the people who went west lost refinement and social advantages and they could not believe in the civilisation and intelligence of Melbourne
(pp.311-2).

Hugh Victor is articulating the outrage Spence feels at the suggestion that Australia is uncivilised and marginal when measured against the imperial centre, in this case New York. New York represents civilisation; to go west is to enter the "wild west", where there is a lack of law and order, very little cultural enlightenment, physical discomforts and minimal separation of members of different social classes. It can be seen from this extract that the Burgoyne's are fixing Liliard and Hugh Victor with their objectifying gaze and judging them by their own cultural and social values which Spence considers too materialistic. Spence's narrator writes, "The Burgoyne's thought to dazzle Liliard by the extravagant New York society" (p.313), and with regard to religion as practised in New York he registers Miss Burgoyne's disapproval of Liliard's reaction to an Episcopal service,

Miss Burgoyne was shocked at this untaught half-savage objecting to the beautiful litany when the wealthiest and most pleasure-loving of New York citizens posed as miserable sinners, only spared all sorts of evils by special mercy, humbly implored. These things seemed to Liliard altogether artificial and factitious, while the ritualism was either too much or too little (pp.313-4).

Hugh Victor is offended by the arrogance which governs such an attitude - the Burgoyne's consider that they belong to the most advanced stage of civilisation and that Hugh Victor and Liliard, who are representatives of their respective societies are less advanced than

themselves. Hugh Victor writes ironically of the Burgoynes' attempts to "civilise" Liliard,

While I congratulated myself on the justness and liberality of her judgement and opinions, they were condemning the stupidity that did not reward the pains they took with her for they were willing to patronise, to educate and polish the girl who might by and by in ignorant colonial society, be supposed to be an American (p.312).

The Burgoynes believe also that their own society is not only more advanced than colonial society, but that the Colonials who can be "read" or interpreted by them are unable to understand such an advanced society as that found in New York. Not only are they misreading Liliard's intellectual capacity but also assuming that she is unable to understand their views and values, not that she is actually rejecting them. This is a typical attitude of the coloniser towards the colonised and one which Spence through her mouthpiece the narrator is taking umbrage at and resisting. Hugh Victor and Liliard have qualities which are found in successful colonists. They have enquiring minds, they are hardworking and their lives are not dominated by aspirations to belong to a higher social class. Liliard is certain because of what Hugh Victor has told her that Melbourne society is superior to any other place they visit outside Columba and has already developed a feeling of loyalty towards it - Liliard and Hugh Victor are reflecting Spence's own national pride and faith in the superiority of a younger colonial society when compared to the entrenched social inequities and consequent evils found in older societies. Spence in

Handfasted is also attacking the materialism of capitalist societies like America, which through colonisation aim to improve their material well-being. However, in the pursuit of pleasure and their own comfort the socially superior give no thought to the less fortunate and to the inequities within their own society.

In a series of newspaper articles entitled "Some Social Aspects of South Australian Life" published in the same year that *Handfasted* was written, Spence expresses her pride in colonists such as her fictional hero, Hugh Victor, who is morally and intellectually superior to the inhabitants of the Old World and Americans, such as the Burgoynes, from old New World families - their vision has been clouded by luxury and indulgence,

If a colonist is observant and thoughtful he has in his power to contribute many valuable suggestions on economical and social questions to older communities than his own. If his field of vision has been limited and affairs appear on a small scale compared to theirs he has the counterbalancing advantage of seeing things with greater clearness and distinctness than can be done in a large, complex, and highly civilized society. He can distinguish the necessary from the useful, the useful from the agreeable; he has had so often to choose between these things for himself without regard to the opinions or prejudices of other people that he has learned comparative value.⁴

Spence is subverting the discourse of the imperial centre through challenging the superiority of the older, more highly civilised societies such as those in many parts of North America. It is interesting that in 1879 Spence has identified America as an imperial centre. Probably her

motives for writing against America rather than Britain were motivated by caution, since she lived in a British colony where many of the colonists still had strong feelings of loyalty to Britain and often considered it to be "home". Spence's loyalties, as stated previously, were to Scotland, nevertheless, since she had migrated she shifted authority to the colonies where she now belonged. She was fighting the "cultural cringe" felt by many of her contemporaries. Thus, Spence accords a privileged place to the Scottish people in her text reflecting the pride she has in her Scottish heritage and running parallel to that is her pride in Colonial Australian society. Hugh Victor Keith and the Scottish colonisers of Columba share a pride in their Scottish origins. Spence clearly accords a privileged place to Hugh Victor's grandmother who takes a role in Hugh Victor's and his family's life similar to the role of Marguerite Keith in Columban society. The grandmother is able to comment as a matriarchal figure on the worth and value of colonial life and colonials. Since the grandmother did not migrate to Australia until she was quite old, she can compare the Old World and the New and give authority to the narrator's judgements since she has helped to mould his character and views. Hugh Victor's grandmother also functions as an apologist for those Scottish people who opposed the "Union Act", which "was held for more than half a century to have been a degradation of the old nationality, and was brought about by the most shameful practices between the English Government and the Scottish

legislature" (p.368). It was this Act which Marguerite Keith's diaries record prompted some of the "Scottish borderers" to join the Columban expedition because "they thought England got all the advantage in getting peace and prosperity, while Scotland had lost national honour and seemed to have no advantage" (p.187). Spence is articulating the dissatisfaction of the colonised in this passage. However, the reader is aware that the Scots people are colonisers themselves, which is an issue to be explored later in this chapter. Spence does not deal as sympathetically with the position of the colonised Indians in Columba as she does with the colonised Scots, which exposes her racist attitude, although the Indian women who have been converted to Christianity are given a privileged position.

In contrast to Spence's *Handfasted* Atwood's novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, is not a platform for expressing any pride Atwood may feel in being a descendant of former colonists or in being Canadian but it does convey an understanding of colonisation and the feelings and thoughts of the colonised, who in the novel are women and dissident males - males, that is, who are also challenging the authority of the patriarchal society and the white supremacist government which controls that society. Atwood's ancestors were seventeenth century American Puritans who left America as political refugees, and through exile got to Canada.⁵ Offred, Atwood's narrator, is in a similar position to them in the novel

and when Atwood writes of the colonies of New Gilead a sense of exile is conveyed to the reader - those who are sent there never expect to return to the imperial centre. Atwood has shown an interest in some of her other literary works in the colonial experience and she does write convincingly from the viewpoint of a colonial.⁶

It is significant that Spence in the 1870s and Atwood approximately one hundred years later chose America as the site for their visionary worlds. Although America developed into an imperialist power, historically it was a colony and the place of destination for many religious groups who sought freedom of worship or wished to escape religious persecution at home. In Spence's novel they are Presbyterians who were originally led by Archibald Keith whose religious outlook was very narrow. In Atwood's novel it is a fundamentalist and puritanical Christian group that has gained supremacy over other religious denominations.

Another reason for Spence's choice of America is that when her Scottish adventurers set out in 1745 it was the place of destination for many potential colonists who wished to improve their economic opportunities. Many of the colonists of Columba hoped to better themselves in the New World and as Spence has written elsewhere colonies give those sort of opportunities to thrifty and hardworking men and women.⁷

Atwood's choice of an American setting is more complex. There is firstly the concern in the 1980s that America was dominated by conservative forces or the New Right who wished for a return to old values which includes returning women to the home. "Their argument runs that, in order to revitalize the capitalist economy, create a moral order and strengthen America at home and abroad, policymakers must aim to re-establish the dominance of the white patriarchal family."⁸ So it is quite appropriate that Atwood should make a projection into the future and write about an "American society reshaped by such conservative pressures."⁹ Also, as noted elsewhere, Atwood is expressing a Canadian concern in *The Handmaid's Tale* regarding America's imperialist intentions towards Canada.¹⁰ That also is articulated in the "Historical Notes" by the speaker at the Symposium on Gileadean Studies, "the Canada of that time did not wish to antagonize its powerful neighbour, and there were roundups and extraditions of ... refugees" (p.323).

Another aspect of the novels which identifies them as colonial/post-colonial and which is another point of comparison between the two texts, is the presentation of indigenous or marginalised groups within the imaginary societies depicted in the texts. Spence's treatment of the Indian men and women is different. Spence presents Liliard's Indian woman ancestor as a noble savage. The narrator's "pet name" for Liliard is Palahna, who was a revered Indian woman married to Ralph Abercrombie, the

younger, one of the heroes of the early settlement. Hugh Victor says to Liliard that she is "at heart half a savage" (p.308). However, when Hugh Victor calls her this it is meant as a compliment to her courage and steadfastness, even though it still reflects Spence's own racist attitude prevalent amongst nearly all colonisers of her time. In her attitude to the Indians Spence identifies with the colonisers rather than the colonised. When the Burgoynes describe Liliard in similar terms to Hugh Victor as "half a savage" the connotations are definitely negative as well as racist.

In common with other colonial/post-colonial writing which explore the relationship between the Indians or indigenous peoples and the white male colonists Spence uses the trope of "polytropic man."¹¹ Peter Hulme traces its use from,

*the epithet applied to Odysseus in the first line of the **Odyssey**. Usually translated as something like "the man of many ways"¹² it contains at least three interconnected meanings: one is simply 'much travelled'; another is something like cunningly intelligent' or even 'slippery and deceitful'. ...and the third is 'much given to troping, to the use of tropes'.¹³*

There is no definite proof that Spence would have had in mind the story of John Smith, one of the leaders in the American colony of Virginia in the seventeenth century, when she created the story of Palahna and Ralph Abercrombie but there is a close resemblance between Palahna and Pocahontas the young and intelligent Indian woman who saved John Smith's life when he was captured by

Indians. John Smith was a good example of polytropic man in the seventeenth century,

He was, as a colonist, almost by definition much travelled. He had the kind of cunning intelligence that enabled him to escape from difficult situations. Or - to be more precise ...it is not so much that 'he had' that cunning intelligence, but rather that the colonial narratives of the period - present him as that kind of hero.¹⁴

As a hero figure polytropic man "embodies the ideology of individualism".¹⁵ Ralph Abercrombie from the description of him in the text seems very similar, although Spence describes Ralph Abercrombie as "a true hero" who had only ever fought the Indians "in self defence" (p.66). Ralph Abercrombie is well travelled, he is "a gentleman" and he is "brave" (p.64). Ralph had to rescue Palahna when her Indian father and brothers had kidnapped her and "all sorts of ambushes and ruses [were] practised on both sides" (p.65) before he rescued her and carried her to safety.

Palahna, an Indian figure in the mould of Pocahontas, cut Ralph Abercrombie's bonds when he was captured by her tribe and escaped with him. She and Ralph were the first couple to be handfasted, a practice introduced to the colony "to secure these poor ignorant women in some rights as against the stronger and cleverer men" (p.200). There is a hint of "the polytropic man" in the description of the men as "stronger and cleverer" than the ignorant "savages". In common with Pocahontas, Palahna's baptism provides "'independent' evidence of the

superiority of European culture."¹⁶ Palahna is, therefore, a 'good' Indian ¹⁷ and Liliard, being her descendant, is doubly privileged since she is also the descendant of Ralph Abercrombie whose father had originally discovered the valley where Columba is situated and which he believed could be made into a "paradise" as long as they could defeat the Indians who had possession. Through the marriage of the young Ralph Abercrombie and Palahna Spence wishes to show that the best of both worlds has been combined. The story of Ralph and Palahna and John Smith and Pocahontas does diverge at this point because they never marry. Pocahontas is baptised however, renamed Rebecca, and marries another Englishman .

In contrast to these good Indian figures, Palahna and Liliard, are a half breed Indian, Sam Peters, and Ninian. In common with Liliard, Ninian is descended from an Indian woman and a Scotsman but unlike Liliard is a "bad" Indian. Nevertheless, Ninian has opportunities in Columba to do well since he is one of "God's bairns" but he is too corrupt to be satisfied with that. Ninian has more "Indian blood in him" than Liliard and "far more of their disposition" (p.94). He is described by the narrator as a "slight dark man" who feels annoyance at "them that pride themselves on what they call their pure blood" (p.67), expressing his jealousy of and opposition to the colonisers. Spence and her narrator frown upon this attitude because it exposes Ninian as an ungrateful

Indian. He proves himself to be a liar, a thief and a potential murderer. Spence in her text seems to identify here with the colonisers rather than the colonised. In contrast, Atwood in portraying Gileadean society gives a privileged position to the colonised by making her narrator a Handmaid.

As mentioned previously Atwood refers to women as "the indigenous" in the "Historical Notes" and we have already explored their positioning as a marginalised group. However, there are other marginalised groups alluded to in the text. Anyone belonging to a religious sect other than the state approved one is suspect and likely to hang from "the Wall". Jews had to convert, or emigrate to Israel. They were only given that choice because they were declared "Sons of Jacob". However, in naming them that the totalitarian government is appropriating their culture and denying difference which allows not only for domination but also possible conversion, which is also the intention of the Columbian colonisers towards the Indians in Spence's text - it attests to the colonisers superiority. Offred creates some doubts in the readers minds about the fate of the Jews who emigrated and again brings to mind visions of the Nazis who were supposedly shipping the Jews off to their designated homelands when they were really sending them to the gas chambers. Offred writes of the Jews

A lot of them emigrated, if you can believe the news. I saw a boatload of them, on the TV, leaning over the railings in their black hats and their long

beards, trying to look as Jewish as possible, in costumes fished up from the past, the women with shawls over their heads, smiling and waving, a little stiffly it's true, as if they were posing; and another shot, of the richer ones lining up for the planes... You don't get hanged only for being a Jew though. You get hanged for being a noisy Jew who won't make the choice. Or for pretending to convert. That's been on the TV too: raids at night, secret hoards of Jewish things dragged out from under beds, Torahs, talliths, Mogen Davids. And the owners of them, sullen-faced, unrepentant...(p.211).

The Jews are once again scapegoats and their religious practices portrayed as magical and witch-like with secret rituals and symbols such as the Star of David, "Mogen David", a Jewish religious symbol which was formerly used as a magic charm. The concept of magic is a subversive one and is exploited by Atwood throughout the text.

The black Americans have also been culturally appropriated by the white supremacist government who refer to them as "Children of Ham" (p.93). They have been given Judaeo-Christian origins. In common with the Jews, the Children of Ham are being resettled but they are not being shipped back to Africa, instead they are being sent to "National Homelands", such as North Dakota (pp.93-4). The concept of National Homelands appears to be an allusion to South Africa and is there to prompt the reader to reconsider the events of the present - a utopian device. The Children of Ham are having their role as slaves reinstated in the New Gilead.

Spence and Atwood are concerned with presenting the colonising experience and both deal with the issue of survival in their texts and the "garrison mentality" of

the colonisers.¹⁸ Spence's pioneers were cut off from the outside world and had to work hard in the early years of settlement to get enough food to survive. They lost their supplies when some of the settlers guarding them were attacked by pirates before they had even reached the valley where Columba was to be established. Also, they had to contend with hostile Indians once the Indians realised they were going to stay. However, the settlers and the Indians were united when there was the threat of an attack from the Spaniards and a treaty was signed which "allotted to the Scotch settlers and the Indians each their several bounds." In Madam Keith's diary she records that Mr Abercrombie, Ralph's father or grandfather - we are not sure which one - had wanted to exterminate the Indians but that she and Victor Keith were reluctant to do so because of the misgivings they felt in invading the valley and dispossessing the Indians. That is a fairly enlightened view for the 1700s and it is fair to assume that Madame Keith is expressing Spence's own doubts about colonisation and the process of acquisition of land from the indigenes. Spence however, was enthusiastic about the benefits it brought to the colonists. Therefore, Columba was named in honour of both Christopher Columbus and the dove "colombe" (p.208) - it was viewed as a haven of rest by the settlers. The colonists saw the valley as "a little refuge in the wilderness" (p.208) where they had walled themselves in when threatened by a Spanish attack and had since then chosen to remain isolated from the outside world. They

exhibit the "garrison mentality" described by Northrop Frye in his discussion of Canadian literature, which is also the mentality exhibited by the regime in Gilead.

The Gileadean regime is always at war with rival religious sects and "Canada of that time did not wish to antagonise its powerful neighbour" (p.323) by accepting refugees from Gilead. It would be seen as a hostile act since the power and authority of the regime would be significantly undermined. However, the supporters of the Republic of Gilead view the state as an Eden where women such as the Handmaids have "freedom from" torturously tight dresses, wearing uncomfortable high heeled shoes, having plastic surgery, starving themselves and many other indignities to attract a male partner. The price women pay for achieving that freedom seems very high to a modern Western reader. Women in Gilead are now confined to the domestic sphere and are enclosed within that sphere.¹⁹ The image of enclosure is reinforced by Offred's own room, her "waiting room" where she spends a great deal of her time in despairing reverie and "composes in her mind the narrative Atwood presents to her reader."²⁰ The image of enclosure and imprisonment is also reinforced by the Aunts' use of cattle prods to control the Handmaids and the comparison of women to domesticated animals, in particular pigs, which are often bred for slaughter. The Handmaids are also branded or tattooed which reinforces their comparison to domestic animals as well as being an allusion to the method of

identifying inmates in Nazi concentration camps, further reinforcing the feeling of inhumane imprisonment and confinement in the text.

Atwood in discussing Canadian literature in her critical text, *Survival*, maintains that is "essentially a literature of failure".²¹ Such literature,

*reflects an attitude to life that aims no higher than survival...the English Canadians recognized it explicitly in their pioneer literature and implicitly in their literary identification with animals, whom they see as quintessential victims and whose triumph can be no more than to live on and to face another danger, if they are fortunate, another survival.*²²

Offred shares this attitude with those early pioneers. She has to survive in the misogynist totalitarian society in which she finds herself. Offred is in physical danger and she also has to resist the temptation of going mad. She observes when Janine another Handmaid goes insane that, "she's let go, totally now, she's in withdrawal...Easy out, is what I think" (p.292).

In addition to resisting madness, Offred also has to resist the feeling of being imaginary. In common with others who have been colonised Offred does not feel as though she has an identity, which is her own and individual. Even in the time prior to becoming a Handmaid, she says that before she married Luke she felt "imaginary" and only "solidified" after her marriage (p.60); "A man's usage conferred identity on her".²³ When

Offred, Luke and her daughter unsuccessfully attempted to escape from Gilead Offred writes of her feelings then,

...I feel: white, flat, thin. I feel transparent. Surely they will be able to see through me. Worse, how will I be able to hold on to Luke, to her, when I'm so flat, so white? I feel as if there's not much of me; they will slip through my arms, as if I'm made of smoke, as if I'm a mirage, fading before their eyes. Don't think that way, Moira would say Think that way and you'll make it happen (p.95).

Apart from identifying the feelings that Offred shares with many colonised people, that feeling that she doesn't really exist and that existence can only be conferred on her by the colonisers, this passage also touches on one of the subversive strategies used by the narrator in the text to help escape her oppressors - the power of love. Interestingly, Atwood gives us contradictory messages about love. Yes, it does make the narrator unreliable at times because of her romantic and unrealistic attitude to love, but it is also a subversive tactic that may be used against the regime. It is the unpredictable nature of love that makes it unreliable, and runs counter to the totalitarian regime who control the inhabitants of Gilead by fear. Offred's love for her daughter, her mother, Moira, Luke and Nick keep intact her individual identity which is important to her survival. Her "shining name", which readers may deduce is June since it is the only Handmaid's name mentioned which does not belong to any other character in the text, and is one of the names the Handmaids whisper from bed to bed at The Rachel and Leah Training Centre when they are getting acquainted: "Alma.

Janine. Dolores, Moira. June" (p.14). It is a name associated with love²⁴ and when it is used by those Offred loves, such as Nick and Moira, it challenges and negates her positioning by the authorities as "a missing person" (p.113). Offred's concealment of her name is a device used to position her as a trickster figure as well as being a means of protecting her loved ones in the case of her autobiography being found by her oppressors. The trickster figure is a common subversive device used in post-colonial texts to challenge the authority of the imperial centre. The unreliability of the narrator is of course reinforced when she keeps reminding us, "This is a reconstruction" (p.144). Also, in the "Historical Notes" we are told the text is the reconstruction of a couple of academics who published the tapes which were not found in any established order.

Love is also important in *Handfasted* but it is not used as a subversive device, although Spence does have some fairly interesting views on the matter. She seemed to suggest in her fictional writing, that there should be no marriage without love and that marriages between partners where there is a great difference in age are not a good idea because for domestic harmony there also needed to be sexual compatibility.²⁵ In *Handfasted* when Liliard and Hugh Victor are separated, while he visits Scotland and she stays in London to work amongst the poor, she reveals that Mr Campbell is interested in marrying her. Mr Campbell has learned that Liliard and Hugh Victor are not

married and he hopes to win her away from her handfasted partner. Liliard, however, in her letters to Hugh Victor dismisses Mr Campbell as "your middle-aged rival" (p.352). On the other hand, the marriages between the young Scottish settlers and the young Indian women could work because the partners were similar in age and once the Indians were converted to Christianity there could be no impediment to their union.

The final point of comparison between *Handfasted* and *The Handmaid's Tale* as colonial/post-colonial texts is related to the imposition of language on the indigenous populations of the imaginary worlds depicted in the texts. In *Handfasted* Liliard, an Indian descendant, perceives the acquisition of reading and writing as empowering and it is the bane of her life that she is not one of "God's bairns". Women, like herself, have to use knitting as an aid to remembering stories and other things of importance, and men such as Hugh Keith, whittle sticks. Spence however, suggests because Liliard cannot read or write her listening skills are highly developed and this aids her greatly in learning all that she has to learn when she leaves Columba with her handfasted partner, Hugh Victor Keith. Spence seems to hold contradictory views on the necessity of reading and writing because she shows that Liliard's skills of public speaking, in particular story-telling, have been sharpened by her good memory and reliance on the spoken word. Spence was a renowned public speaker herself and

was very concerned that women's voices, which historically were silenced, be heard.²⁶ However, Spence is also a realist and in societies outside Columba there is a need for the skills of reading and writing. When Liliard forecasts the future for Columba once it is opened up to the outside world, she predicts that there would be schools set up for adult men and women to learn to read because, "When two or three had learned, they would have such an advantage over the rest, that there would be a great meeting of the people, and there would be night schools, all over Columba" (p.300).

In *The Handmaid's Tale* those who have access to the written word are also advantaged. Women, who Atwood refers to in the "Historical Notes" as the indigenous population of Gilead, are not allowed to read, to write or even to speak unless it is by rote. The exception to the rule are the Aunts. "*Blessed are the silent*" (p.100) is one of the Beatitudes the Handmaids are taught at the Leah and Rachel Centre. Offred mourns for the "twenty veiled daughters" whose arranged marriages she witnesses at one of the Prayvaganzas, who will "always have been in white, in groups of girls", and who will "always have been silent" (pp.230-1). Playing Scrabble with her Commander is a subversive activity that has become "forbidden", "indecent" and "dangerous", and something the Commander "can't do with his wife" (p.149). Despite the obvious irony intended by Atwood in these lines it does alert the reader to the power wielded by those who

control the printed and spoken word. When the Commander plays Scrabble with Offred he is making a statement about their relationship which is Commander and mistress. It is not something he could do with his wife, it is forbidden and dangerous. Although Offred in her unreliable way would like to think better of him - that he is trying to make life more bearable for her - he is instead making his own life more exciting. She writes of this experience,

...What had I been expecting, behind that closed door, the first time? Something unspeakable, down on all fours perhaps, perversions, whips, mutilations? At the very least some minor sexual manipulation, some bygone peccadillo now denied him, prohibited by law and punishable by amputation. To be asked to play Scrabble, instead, as if we were an old married couple, or two children, seemed kinky in the extreme, a violation too in its own way. As a request it was opaque.

...I thought he might be toying, some cat-and-a-mouse routine, but now I think that his motives and desires weren't obvious even to him. they had not yet reached the level of words (p.163).

The idea of playing Scrabble as an obscene act seems ludicrous and although Atwood through her use of the subversive technique of irony is inviting the reader to laugh at the excesses of the totalitarian government, therefore undermining their authority and power, she is also warning the reader against complacency. Comedians today might make us laugh at their impersonations of Hitler by sending up his more ridiculous idiosyncracies, but that does not mean he is any less dangerous as a cult figure amongst neo-Nazi groups. In the final analysis, *The Handmaid's Tale* leaves the reader concerned about the

Human Rights abuses, the control of language by the totalitarian being just one further example of that abuse.

The two texts *Handfasted* and *The Handmaid's Tale* therefore position themselves very clearly as post-colonial texts because both Spence and Atwood write convincingly about the experience of colonisation and the relationship between the imperial centre and the margins. However, in some of Spence's attitudes such as that towards the indigenes in the text she positions herself as coloniser. This creates a tension at times in the text and therefore we have characters such as Madam Keith and her son Victor expressing reservations about the dispossession of the Indians while the narrator, one of their descendants, describes Ninian in a disparaging way as a "half-Indian" (p.68) and then lovingly, although patronisingly, refers to Liliard as "half a savage" (p.308). Atwood, on the other hand, clearly establishes her empathy with the marginalised and does not waver. Her irony constantly undermines the authority of the imperial centre and makes her position clear.

NOTES

¹ Bill Ashcoft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back* (London: Routledge, 1989), p.2.

² Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra, *Dark Side of the Dream* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1991), p.xi.

³ Hodge and Mishra, p.xii.

⁴ Catherine Helen Spence, "Some Social Aspects of South Australian Life," *The Register*, 26 October - 9 November 1878, in Thomson, *Portable Authors. Spence*, p.526.

5 Michele Field, "Margaret Atwood's Colonial Days", "The Good Weekend" in *Sydney Morning Herald*, July 25, 1987, p.28.

6 Her collection of poems, "The Journals of Susannah Moodie", and her critical text, *Survival*, reflect her interest in the experience of colonisation.

7 Spence, "Some Social Aspects of South Australian Life," Thomson (ed.), *Portable Authors. Spence*, p.527.

8 Dorothy Jones, "Not Much Balm in Gilead," *Commonwealth*, vol.11, no.2, Spring 1989, p.31.

9 Jones, p.31.

10 Linda Hutcheon, '"Circling the Downspout of Empire": Post-Colonialism and Postmodernism,' *Ariel*, vol.20, no.4, 1989, p.155.

11 A trope is a figure of speech which has a set of meanings maintaining an oppositional relationship. All tropes are related to mobility.

12 This is from Lattimore's translation of *The Odyssey of Homer*, quoted in Peter Hulme, "Polytropic Man: Tropes of Sexuality in Early Colonial Discourse" in Francis Barker (ed.), *Europe and its Others* (Colchester, Essex: University of Essex, 1985),

13 Hulme, p.20.

14 Hulme, p.20.

15 Hulme, p.22.

16 Hulme, p.26.

17 Hulme, p.27.

18 Northrop Frye, *The Bush Garden. Essays on the Canadian Imagination* (Toronto: Anansi, 1965), pp.225-6.

19 Jones, p.34.

20 Jones, p.34.

21 George Woodcock, "Bashful But Bold: Notes on Margaret Atwood as Critic" in Arnold E. Davidson and Cathy N. Davidson (eds.), *The Art of Margaret Atwood* (London: Anansi, 1981), p.231.

22 Woodcock, p.238.

23 Suzy McKee Charnas, *Walk to the End of the World* (New York: Ballantine, 1974, p.162.

24 There is an allusion to the song "By the Light of the Silvery Moon": *Love, said Aunt Lydia with distaste. Don't let me catch you at it. No mooning and June-ing around here, girls.* (p.232).

25 Magarey, p.45.

26 Magarey, pp.141-2.

Conclusion

Since *Handfasted* and *The Handmaid's Tale* have been written approximately one hundred years apart, the former depicting a utopia and the latter a dystopia, readers may think that the texts offer few points of comparison. However, this thesis has aimed to draw out the similarities as well as the differences between the two texts and demonstrate that they have much in common.

Firstly, the two authors, Spence and Atwood, write from a feminist perspective. Their novels are concerned with gender-relations and the oppression of women in a patriarchal society. It has been shown that Spence was very supportive of women who wished to move outside the domestic sphere and take a more active role in public life, since that was the goal which she pursued and achieved in her own life. Spence was very optimistic about the future roles that women would have outside the home. Atwood shares Spence's concern about women's confinement to the domestic sphere but she is not at all optimistic about the future. It is shown in the novel, that if present misogynist tendencies within society continue, women are faced with the very real threat of a confinement to the home.

Spence and Atwood also raise the issue of women's sexuality. In Spence's utopian *Columba* women and men are

entitled to engage in trial marriages without the fear of producing unwanted children. There is no stigma attached to illegitimacy in Columba due to the revolutionary practice of handfasting which allows the adoption of children who are not wanted by either parents. Those children, 'God's bairns' become part of the elite class of bureaucrats in Columba. There is equality between the sexes in Columba, although men and women who are not 'God's bairns' have very narrow vocational choices. Nevertheless, the position of women and children, in particular, is much worse outside Columba in so-called advanced capitalist societies, where they are adversely affected by poverty, homelessness, illegitimacy and prostitution. Liliard however, shares Spence's optimism that the reform of society is possible through legislation and benevolent organisations such as the Boarding-Out Society.

On the other hand, in Atwood's dystopian Gileadean society women are given absolutely no freedom to move beyond the domestic sphere, unless they belong to the Aunts - their sexuality and separate identity is denied. Women's degree of usefulness is proportional to their roles as mothers and/or wives. Thus Offred, the narrator, has to breed because she has functional ovaries, an important attribute in a society whose numbers have been decimated by chemical, biological and nuclear disasters, all products of a capitalist society. In contrast to the

'happy valley' of Columba, Gilead is a dismal and terrifying place in which to live.

However, both *Handfasted* and *The Handmaid's Tale* convey a sense of enclosure which is one of the post-colonial concerns of the texts identified in Chapter Three. Although prosperity and harmony abound in the 'happy valley' of Columba an independent character such as the female protagonist, Liliard, feels stifled. Most of the other inhabitants seem quite contented but Liliard's enquiring mind and her desire to read and write, which is denied her, lead to her dissatisfaction. Since she is not a 'God's bairn' she has no opportunity to move beyond the domestic sphere and although she is an admired public speaker and story-teller this is not satisfying enough for her. She is attracted to the narrator, Hugh Victor Keith, because he comes from the outside world and can satisfy some of her curiosity about the places which she longs to visit. She has her opportunity when she and Hugh Victor are handfasted and leave the valley to return to his Colony of Victoria. They tour other parts of America and Europe, including Britain, before returning to his homeland, which gives Liliard an opportunity to experience the shortcomings of those societies and compare Columba which then appears in a much better light.

The enclosure experienced by Atwood's narrator Offred is much more oppressive than Liliard's. The feeling of

imprisonment women and men experience in Gilead pervades the text, although women's oppression is more extreme since they are denied access to the written word and their freedom of speech is curtailed, in some cases non-existent. When Offred finally rejects her positioning as a victim and pursues an affair with Nick she is constantly under threat of detection. Offred only has the opportunity to reveal the plight of herself and other women in Gilead only when she escapes and goes underground. Although we are unsure of her ultimate fate, the tapes she records revealing the oppressive practices of the patriarchal society of Gilead are published as a transcript. Ironically, two experts/academics from the future have made decisions about the order of the tapes and edited them before having them published. When one of them reveals the misogyny of that future world through the sexist jokes he makes in the Epilogue to the book the readers are made to feel uneasy and uncertain about the future, and the present which will mould that future.

Both Spence and Atwood, through their use of the utopian/dystopian genre, want their readers to look at their own society from a different perspective by defamiliarising it. Liliard as a visitor from a utopian society can make comments and judgements about social inequities and injustices which make readers reassess them. Atwood, although presenting in *The Handmaid's Tale* and the Epilogue the misogynist tendencies of some future

world, forces the readers to look afresh at the present which is shaping the future.

Finally, in regard to the post-colonial concerns of the texts, although Spence and Atwood are concerned with the oppressed in society Atwood does not represent indigenous people at all in the body of the text and their representation in the "Historical Notes" Epilogue is very ambiguous. Spence, on the other hand, does represent indigenous people but from a colonisers' perspective which reveals her racist attitude, one still found today in some post-colonial writing. In contrast, Atwood is careful to show the oppression of various racial and cultural groups in Gilead in a very bad light which establishes her non-racist viewpoint. Spence and Atwood do look at society differently because they belong to different centuries but the feminist and post-colonial focus that they bring to their novels overrides many of those differences and allows a meaningful comparison to be made of the two texts.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back*. London: Routledge, 1989.
- Atwood, Margaret. *Survival*. Toronto: Anansi, 1972.
- Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. London: Virago, 1987.
- Brahms, Fleming. "Entering Our Own Ignorance: Subject Object Relations in Commonwealth Literature." *World Literature Written in English*. vol.21, no.2, 1982, pp. 218-40.
- Cranny-Francis, Anne. *Engendered Fictions*. Kensington NSW: New South Wales University Press, 1992.
- Cranny-Francis, Anne. *Feminist Fiction*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990.
- Field, Michele. "Margaret Atwood's Colonial Days." "The Good Weekend." *The Sydney Morning Herald*. 25 July 1987. pp.27-29.
- Foley, Michael. "Satiric Intent in the 'Historical Note of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*.'" *Commonwealth*. vol.11, no.2, Spring 1989, pp.44-52.
- Frye, Northrop. *The Bush Garden*. Toronto: Anansi, 1965.
- Hill Rigney, Barbara. *Women Writers. Margaret Atwood*. London: Macmillan Education, 1987.
- Hodge, Bob and Vijay Mishra. *Dark Side of the Dream*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1991.
- Hulme, Peter. "Polytropic Man: Tropes of Sexuality in Early Colonial Discourse," in Francis Barker (ed.). *Europe and its Others*. Colchester, Essex: University of Essex, 1985.
- Hutcheon, Linda. "'Circling the Downspout of Empire': Post-Colonialism and Post-Modernism". *Ariel*. vol.20, no.4, 1989, pp.149-75.
- Jameson, Frederic. "Progress Versus Utopia; or, Can We Imagine the Future?" in Brian Wallis (ed.). *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*. New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art in assoc. with David R. Godine, 1984, pp.239-52.
- Jones, Dorothy. "Not Much Balm in Gilead." *Commonwealth*. vol.11, no.2, Spring 1989, pp.31-43.
- Magarey, Susan. *Unbridling the Tongues of Women*. Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1985.

Malak, Amin. "Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and the Dystopian Tradition." *Canadian Literature*. no.112, Spring 1987.

Poggi, Gianfranco. *Calvinism and the Capitalist Spirit. Max Weber's Protestant Ethic*. London: Macmillan, 1983.

Spence, Catherine Helen. *Handfasted*. Melbourne: Penguin, 1987.

Thomson, Helen (ed.). *Portable Australian Authors. Catherine Helen Spence*. St.Lucia, Qld: UQP, 1987.

Woodcock, George. "Bashful But Bold: Notes on Margaret Atwood as Critic" in Arnold E. Davidson and Cathy N. Davidson (eds.). *The Art of Margaret Atwood*. London: Anansi, 1981.

