

# Offred's Complicity and the Dystopian Tradition in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

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ONE OF THE MAJOR AREAS of debate among scholars of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is the question of Offred's heroism. Is she a valiant rebel challenging the regime's domination and oppression? Or is she a powerless victim of Gilead's oppression? Or is she instead a willing or unwitting participant in the regime?

Those who see Offred as a rebel, such as Michele Lacombe, Hilde Staels, and David S. Hogsette, cite her irony, her language play, her insistence on retaining personal memories, and even the fact that she "wrote" the Tale in the first place as subversive.<sup>1</sup> For Coral Ann Howells and others such as Hilda Staels, storytelling is Offred's means of survival and resistance, reinforcing her identity and challenging those who would silence her (93). The problem with this view is that she did not in fact "write" anything; as numerous critics have reminded us, the text we have is a much later reconstruction — by male scholars with not very feminist opinions — of audiotaped fragments. Offred commits nothing to paper because she cannot and she would be in serious trouble if she tried. Similarly, Jeanne Campbell Reesman argues that Offred's "voice offers a moving testament to the power of language to transform reality in order to overcome oppressive designs imposed on human beings" (6). While it may be true that Offred transforms her own reality, Gilead remains as fictionally real as ever, and as the Historical Notes tell us it gets even worse after Offred's account (e.g., 316). Carol L. Beran says that "Offred's power is in language" (71), but we need to ask how much power that truly is. If this is resistance, as J. Brooks Bouson notes, it is a very silent and ineffectual kind (147).

The fact that Offred takes no overt action against the regime leads other critics to see her less as a heroine than as a victim. Bouson, for example, describes Offred as "the victim of circumstances, not an active

agent capable of directing the plot of her own life" (154), and Maroula Joannou sees Offred's primary goal as physical survival (148). Michael Foley and Jamie Dopp even use the "Victim Positions" outlined in *Survival* to explain Offred's situation and that of other female characters. Peter G. Stillman and S. Anne Johnson see Offred's individuality being "inexorably" broken down by Gilead's brainwashing efforts (73), and in her recent study, Erika Gottlieb says, "Since the dystopian regime denies its subjects' free will, the central character cannot be made responsible for his or her ultimate failure or defeat in the repressive system that overpowers individuals" (109). Stillman, Johnson, and Gottlieb see this inevitable defeat of the dystopian protagonist as a trope of the genre, but is that fatalistic view accurate? Even if it were true, it is difficult to see how we can square this image of Offred with the forms of resistance, however limited, that she does engage in, and the fact that the Gilead regime is fairly new and has not had an opportunity to brainwash its citizens to such an extent. Critics who insist that Offred is merely a victim fail to take into account the fact that the novel is about power relationships in general — not just the power held by Commanders over Handmaids, or even men over women — and that Offred herself exercises power (mainly sexual) over Fred, Serena Joy (see 171), and others. Taking a somewhat different approach, Sandra Tomc attributes Offred's passivity to Atwood's nationalist agenda. She argues that Atwood seems to be "advocating what looks more like traditional femininity than an insurgent feminism" (73); "what concerns her is not a feminist politics of emancipation, but the nationalist politics of self-protective autonomy, an autonomy which . . . eventually translates into an advocacy of traditional femininity" (74). Offred, she claims, reflects Atwood's preference for passive responses to gender repression while symbolizing a nationalist resistance:

Atwood's internalization of a nationalist political paradigm produces a heroine whose sole resistance goes on inside her head, a resistance at once indistinguishable from passivity and masochism and uncomfortably synonymous with traditional stereotypes of feminine behaviour. (77)

Tomc here makes the fundamental error of conflating the author with the first-person narrator. That Offred responds passively to Gilead's fundamentalist totalitarianism does not mean Atwood endorses her position.

Danita J. Dodson also says that “Atwood superficially portrays the enslaved Handmaid as the helpless heroine who is abused by a gothic villain” (80), but then goes on to present a case that Offred is complicit in the creation and perpetuation of the Gileadean regime: “the Handmaid ultimately confesses her own contribution to the dystopian situation in Gilead” (80). Dodson is one of a number of critics who see Offred as a participant in the regime. Offred’s oft-quoted distinction between ignorance and ignoring is the main evidence against her: “We lived, as usual, by ignoring. Ignoring isn’t the same as ignorance, you have to work at it” (66). All who “ignore” are equally guilty of the results of that complacency, a point Hannah Arendt makes in her study of totalitarianism in saying that the masses desire or are at least complicit in the establishment of such regimes (see esp. 306-08, 311-25; on totalitarianism in fiction, see Glasberg). Stillman and Johnson offer the harshest portrait of Offred’s complacency and complicity (77-81), but their argument is that her guilt lies in failing to act before Gilead was established; now, it is too late: “Under Gilead’s discipline, Offred is rapidly being stripped of what capacity she did have to act” (78). Jamie Dopp agrees: “By definition, a dystopian tale takes place in a world in which it is ‘too late’ to act, a world in which there is no longer a possibility of resistance. . . . The idea is to shock the reader by the horror of what might follow if action is not taken now” (49). The assumption here is that protagonists in dystopian works fail because they cannot succeed. But is this really the case for dystopian protagonists? We will return later to the details of Offred’s betrayals — of women in general, of her mother, of Moira, and so on. For the moment, it is important to note that many have recognized that Offred has played a role in her own oppression, whether or not she can do anything about it now.

The debate over whether Offred is to be admired as a rebel, pitied as a victim, or condemned as a coward and even a quisling often focuses on her love affair with Nick. Some, like Chris Ferns (*Narrating* 137) and Arnold E. Davidson, argue that in a world that outlaws passionate love, Offred’s relationship with Nick is a subversive one simply by its very nature, leaving aside the question of whether he is a member of Mayday or an Eye. Atwood herself provides support for this position in her comments during the round table discussion following an address at the Université de Rouen: “the way I view it is pretty much standard dystopia *Nineteen Eighty-Four* thing, which is that if the regime forbids

love affairs, then one of the rebellious things that you can do is *have one*" (19). Lucy M. Freibert says that Nick "serves to release Offred to sexual abandon and freedom to record her tale" but then ambiguously adds, "Through her friendship with Nick she even discovers satisfaction with her life" (288). Is this "satisfaction" meant to be something positive? Others have more clearly argued that far from being a form of rebellion the relationship becomes a means of escape, even escapism. Madonna Miner sees it as an overly conventional "romance" through which "the novel subverts the subversive force of love" and reveals "love's limitations" (37); Mohr similarly views the affair as draining Offred of any rebelliousness she might have: "the subversive potential of love is undercut. Repeatedly, Offred is paralyzed by her love relationships" (251).

Atwood's own view of Offred is clear: she has described Offred as "an ordinary, more-or-less cowardly woman (rather than a heroine)" (qtd. in Cooke 276).<sup>2</sup> Efforts to see her as an active subversive thus fly in the face of Atwood's intent and the textual evidence.

To understand Offred's attitudes and behaviour, we need to trace her roots in the dystopian tradition, looking at how other protagonists in dystopian novels have been portrayed and what political point those portrayals are designed to convey.<sup>3</sup> Of course, other critics have placed the novel in the dystopian tradition; reviews, studies, and Atwood's own words have situated the novel in that tradition since the year it was published (see Prescott's early review). In fact, in one of the earliest articles published on the novel, Amin Malak traces *The Handmaid's Tale's* sources in Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1924), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949)<sup>4</sup> Atwood has been quite explicit about the novel's dystopian roots from the beginning; in interviews she gave in 1985 and 1986 she pointed to the ways it follows the conventions established by various works of dystopian fiction, especially Orwell's novel,<sup>5</sup> and reiterated her point in the talk she gave at the 2003 Academic Conference on Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy ("*The Handmaid's Tale*"). But the focus of these studies and comments has been on the novel's plot and structure rather than on Offred's characterization. Thus, while some critics have discussed Offred's complicity and others have traced the novel's generic roots, no one, to my knowledge, has ever put the two together. What, then, can that tradition tell us about whether and to what degree Offred

is complicit, both before the coup that brought Gilead into being and after? More specifically, what can the tradition tell us about Offred's relationship with Nick, beyond the fact that such sexual relationships are common features of dystopian novels?

To understand the role of complicity in dystopian fiction we need to look at the genre's sources, above all the text that inspired Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*, considered to be the first modern dystopia.<sup>6</sup> Zamyatin derived the major themes of his novel from Dostoyevsky's works, most importantly the Grand Inquisitor episode of *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880). The central issue of the debate between the Grand Inquisitor and the imprisoned Christ is the choice between freedom and happiness. The Inquisitor says to Christ,

Didst Thou not often say then, 'I will make you free'? But now Thou has seen these 'free' men . . . Yes, we've paid dearly for it . . . but at last we have completed that work in Thy name. For fifteen centuries we have been wrestling with Thy freedom, but now it is ended and over for good. . . . let me tell Thee that now, to-day, people are more persuaded than ever that they have perfect freedom, yet they have brought their freedom to us and laid it humbly at our feet. . . . for the first time it has become possible to think of the happiness of men. Men created a rebel: and how can rebels be happy? (260-61)

The Church has removed the burden of freedom from its adherents and replaced it with the certainty of happiness. Here, we should read "happiness" not so much as synonymous with joy but in the utilitarian sense of the satisfaction of basic needs and desires and the removal of pain. The Inquisitor continues:

nothing has ever been more insupportable for a man and a human society than freedom. But seest Thou these stones in this parched and barren wilderness? Turn them into bread, and mankind will run after Thee like a flock of sheep, grateful and obedient, though for ever trembling, let Thou withdraw Thy hand and deny them Thy bread . . . No science will give them bread so long as they remain free. In the end they will lay their freedom at our feet and say to us, 'Make us your slaves, but feed us.' (262)

Later, the Inquisitor asks, "Didst Thou forget that man prefers peace, and even death, to freedom of choice in the knowledge of good and evil?"

Nothing is more seductive for man than his freedom of conscience, but nothing is a greater cause of suffering” (264). The burden of choice will remain with the Church — in other words, those in power: “we care for the weak too. They are sinful and rebellious, but in the end they too will become obedient. They will marvel at us and look on us as gods, because we are ready to endure the freedom which they have found so dreadful and to rule over them” (263). People desperately need to have something or someone to worship and to belong to a community:

So long as man remains free he strives for nothing so incessantly and so painfully as to find some one to worship. But man seeks to worship what is established beyond dispute, so that all men would agree at once to worship it. For these pitiful creatures are concerned not only to find what one or the other can worship, but to find something that all would believe in and worship; what is essential is that all may be *together* in it. (263)

As for those who rebel against authority, because humans are such weak creatures “they will see at last, the foolish children, that, though they are rebels, they are impotent rebels, unable to keep up their own rebellion” (266).

In *We*, Zamyatin creates a world embodying the results of choosing the “happiness” that comes with surrendering moral and political freedom to a community and an authority. In *OneState*, the individual is taught to replace “I” with “We” and freedom with acceptance of the absolute authority of the Benefactor. As the State Poet, R-13, tells the narrator, D-503:

Those two in Paradise, they were offered a choice: happiness without freedom, or freedom without happiness, nothing else. Those idiots chose freedom. And then what? Then for centuries they were homesick for the chains. That’s why the world was so miserable, see? They missed the chains. For ages! And we were the first to hit on the way to get back to happiness . . . we’re simple and innocent again, like Adam and Eve. None of those complications about good and evil. Everything is very simple, childishly simple — Paradise! . . . that is what protects our nonfreedom, which is to say, our happiness. (61)

The Benefactor makes the same point during the “inquisition” scene at the end:

What is it that people beg for, dream about, torment themselves for, from the time they leave swaddling clothes? They want someone to tell them, once and for all, what happiness is — and then to bind them to that happiness with a chain. What is it we're doing right now, if not that? The ancient dream of paradise. (207)

One might think that if given the choice between freedom and lack of it, most people, particularly in liberal democratic societies, would likely choose freedom, particularly if they have enjoyed it for some time. In a crisis, however, it is common for people to surrender their freedom willingly to a government or other authority offering them security and freedom *from* uncertainty, danger, fear, hunger, etc. It is worth mentioning here that Mary McCarthy, in her negative review of *The Handmaid's Tale*, finds the novel implausible. She does not consider it likely that religious fundamentalism could ever gain political power in the United States. Many of her criticisms could be as easily directed at *Nineteen Eighty-Four*; how likely would it be for a form of Stalinist socialism to gain power in England? The point in dystopian texts is not plausibility but exaggeration designed to attack current tendencies. Furthermore, some fifteen years after McCarthy's review was published, in the wake of September 11, the United States government passed, and the populace largely acceded to, the Patriot Act and its curtailing of civil rights — this in a country that sees itself as the world's bastion and champion of individual rights.

We established a pattern repeated in such novels as *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in which the dystopian regime emerges out of a crisis: war, overpopulation and resulting starvation, and so on. OneState began in the wake of the 200-Years War.<sup>7</sup> The “brave new world” came about after the Nine Years' War; as Mustapha Mond tells John Savage,

What's the point of truth or beauty or knowledge when the anthrax bombs are popping all around you? That was when science first began to be controlled — after the Nine Years' War. People were ready to have even their appetites controlled then. Anything for a quiet life. We've gone on controlling ever since. It hasn't been very good for truth, of course. But it's been very good for happiness. (179)

Oceania and the other totalitarian states in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* emerged out of revolutions and perpetuate themselves through con-

stant war, having agreed to divide up the world and maintain their hegemony through a never-ending crisis. The government in Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1962) engages in thought control as a way of dealing with youth violence, with the full support of a frightened populace. Later, when Alex puts on a humiliating show for the government Minister, the chaplain complains to Dr. Brodsky: "Its insincerity was clearly to be seen. He ceases to be a wrongdoer. He ceases also to be a creature capable of moral choice." Dr. Brodsky replies by saying, "We are not concerned with motive, with the higher ethics. We are concerned only with cutting down crime" — to which the Minister adds, "And . . . with relieving the ghastly congestion in our prisons" (99). A criminological crisis becomes the pretext for the elimination of moral freedom. (Compare these lines to S-4711's comment to D-503: "when a man's freedom is reduced to zero, he commits no crimes" [Zamyatin 36].) In Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), on the other hand, Chief Beatty traces the roots of the government's efforts to control people's thoughts and behaviour not so much in a crisis as in the willingness of people to be fed cultural pap; they encourage the burning of books by losing the desire to read them:

Ask yourself, What do we want in this country, above all? People want to be happy, isn't that right? Haven't you heard it all your life? I want to be happy, people say. Well, aren't they? Don't we keep them moving, don't we give them fun? . . . Serenity, Montag. Peace, Montag. Take your fight outside. Better yet, into the incinerator. . . . If you don't want a man unhappy politically, don't give him two sides to a question to worry him, give him one. Better yet, give him none. Let him forget there is such a thing as war. . . . Don't give them any slippery stuff like philosophy or sociology to tie things up with. That way lies melancholy. . . . The important thing for you to remember, Montag, is we're the Happiness Boys, the Dixie Duo, you and I and the others. We stand against the small tide of those who want to make everyone unhappy with conflicting theory and thought. (54-56)

Thus, contrary to the impression some historians of dystopian fiction and scholars of *The Handmaid's Tale* seem to have, dystopian regimes are not so much imposed from above as sought from below.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, what precipitates the coup that installs Gilead is a massive drop in population and fertility because of environ-



mental damage, particularly toxic wastes. In addition, there is rampant crime, including violence against women. When Aunt Lydia and a Commander recount the dangers women faced in our time (128, 231), we cannot help but nod in uncomfortable recognition. The immediate trigger is “the catastrophe, when they shot the President and machine-gunned the Congress and the army declared a state of emergency” (183).

Dystopian regimes are then kept in place by the acquiescence of a complacent citizenry that accepts and may even enjoy its comforting oppression. The common image of a dystopian society is that it is the exact opposite of a utopia; in the latter, people are generally happy, while in the former, they are miserable. Instead, the two genres mirror each other in many ways, particularly in that most residents of dystopias are happy or at the very least satisfied, and the (supposed) rebels are anomalies in their societies. To the extent that he is unhappy, D-503 is in a distinct minority; John Savage and (briefly) Bernard Marx are horrified by the satisfaction Lenina and virtually everyone else — from Alphas to Epsilon Semi-Morons — feel at their sensually indulgent but spiritually empty lives; we see less resistance than enthusiastic participation in Oceania’s Hate Weeks, mutual surveillance, and rewriting of the truth; and Montag’s wife, with her yearning to fill her final blank wall with a television screen, is far more representative of her society’s cultural-pap-consuming masses than Montag himself. The protagonist meets a member of the opposite sex, is thereby drawn into a revolutionary movement and attempts to rebel, but normally fails. Along with the misconception that residents of dystopias are generally unhappy, some scholars — even recent ones — see the protagonists of dystopian novels as heroic but doomed revolutionaries, dedicated warriors for freedom who are crushed by systems they cannot defeat (see Gottlieb, and Stillman and Johnson). Such critics interpret the protagonists’ romantic relationships as profound expressions of emotion and political engagement, and their defeats as tragic.

In fact, the “heroes” of the most influential dystopian novels — that is, Atwood’s sources — are anything but heroic. D-503 becomes enamoured of I-330, a female member of the rebel group Mephi, for reasons that have little to do with politics. With the “X” in the middle of her forehead she represents for him an unknown, a tantalizing and alluringly dangerous mystery. She appeals to his passionate side, which

has been effectively repressed by his society's insistence on mathematical logic. Yet he retains his belief in OneState, praising the Gas Bell used on dissidents in terms that directly allude to Dostoyevsky's Grand Inquisitor:

this has a high purpose, the security of OneState — in other words, the happiness of millions. About five centuries back, when the work in Operations was only just getting under way, there were certain idiots who compared Operations with the ancient Inquisition. But that's just as stupid as equating a surgeon doing a tracheotomy with a highway robber. They might both be holding the same knife in their hand and doing the same thing — cutting a living human being's throat open — but one of them is a benefactor and the other's a criminal. (78-79)

D-503 never fully abandons his belief that “the unknown is in general the enemy of man” (114). He is shocked by the dissent during the Day of Unanimity (141), and continues to build the craft Integral that will carry OneState's system to the stars. When he finally agrees to join Mephi, it is mainly because of I-330, and many critics argue that while he briefly becomes an “I” instead of a part of “We,” he simply trades one form of blind obedience for another (e.g., Kern 13; Scholes and Rabkin 206). In the midst of the rebellion, he asks I-330, “What's the point of all this? In the name of the Benefactor, what point is there if everyone is already happy?” (168). Later, he refers to his relationship with her as his “wonderful captivity” — hardly the sign of someone enjoying a new-found freedom. He is prepared to participate in the Mephi's sabotage of Integral, then learns of a new operation that will eliminate the imagination. It appears at first to be his salvation (171), and in the end, out of fear of the punitive Machine of the Benefactor, D-503 chooses his beloved Integral and the operation. He betrays I-330 to the government (220-21) and becomes once more a loyal citizen of OneState, saying, “I hope we'll win. More — I'm certain we'll win. Because reason has to win” (225).

In *Brave New World* there are two protagonist-rebels: Bernard Marx and John the Savage. Bernard, like D-503, feels not so much rebellious as ill; he desperately wants to be “normal” but cannot. Far from being a true subversive, then, he seeks nothing more than to fit in. He romanticizes Lenina, decrying the way others speak of her “as though she were a bit of meat” — as if she feels in any way diminished by that

(46). The true extent of his heroism is revealed when Mustapha Mond threatens to exile him:

“Send *me* to an island?” He jumped up, ran across the room, and stood gesticulating in front of the Controller. “You can’t send *me*. I haven’t done anything. It was the others. I swear it was the others. . . . Oh, please don’t send me to Iceland. I promise I’ll do what I ought to do. Give me another chance. Please give me another chance.” The tears began to flow. “I tell you, it’s their fault,” he sobbed. “And not to Iceland. Oh, please your fordship, please. . .” And in a paroxysm of abjection he threw himself on his knees before the Controller. (177)

John appears to be a better candidate for the status of “hero,” but careful examination of his behaviour reveals that he, too, acts out of questionable motives. Like Bernard, he romanticizes Lenina; indeed, critics have noted that he has been conditioned by his reading of Shakespeare as much as Bernard and others have been conditioned by the Central London Hatchery and Conditioning Centre (see, e.g., Brander, and esp. Lobb). John suffers from a martyr complex, which he exhibits while still at the Reservation, when he is denied the opportunity to be whipped (96-97). He wants to put on a show for others (97), and later has that opportunity when it is clear he cannot change the Brave New World. Instead of engaging in real political action, he retreats to a lighthouse. He is turned into, and more importantly turns himself into, a spectacle, engaging in self-flagellation for an audience. His suicide may be a cry of despair, or it may be a grand, theatrical gesture of the sort he has learned from his narrow reading. In either case, it is hardly an act of political resistance.

Winston Smith is little better than his dystopian predecessors. He embarks on his love affair with Julia fully aware that he and the relationship are doomed. In a way, he exhibits as much of a martyr complex as John, in his case over his guilt at taking food from his mother. His love affair is not so much a subversion of Oceania as an escape, as symbolized by the glass paperweight:

He had the feeling that he could get inside it, and that in fact he was inside it, along with the mahogany bed and the gate-leg table, and the clock and the steel engraving and the paperweight itself. The paperweight was the room he was in, and the coral was Julia’s

life and his own, fixed in a sort of eternity at the heart of the crystal. (154)

Winston knows that that sense of eternity is an illusion:

Both of them knew — in a way, it was never out of their minds — that what was now happening could not last long. There were times when the fact of impending death seemed as palpable as the bed they lay on, and they would cling together with a sort of despairing sensuality. . . . But there were also times when they had the illusion not only of safety but of permanence. So long as they were actually in this room, they both felt, no harm could come to them. Getting there was difficult and dangerous, but the room itself was sanctuary. It was as when Winston had gazed into the heart of the paperweight, with the feeling that it would be possible to get inside that glassy world, and that once inside it time could be arrested. Often they gave themselves up to daydreams of escape. (158)

It is noteworthy how similar this vision of a static, and therefore preferable, world is to Oceania's own totalitarian denial of history. Winston and Julia wonder how to join the Brotherhood, the supposed rebel organization, and assume O'Brien is their way in (159). Winston's fatalism is evident: "the Party was invincible. It would always exist, and it would always be the same. You could only rebel against it by secret disobedience or, at most, by isolated acts of violence such as killing somebody or blowing something up" (160). Julia is anything but a revolutionary; she only cares about the personal and immediate: "she only questioned the teachings of the Party when they in some way touched upon her own life" (160). In an oft-quoted exchange, she tells him, "I'm not interested in the next generation, dear. I'm interested in us" and he replies, "You're only a rebel from the waist downwards" (163). O'Brien pretends to be a member of the Brotherhood long enough to make Winston incriminate himself (179-80); as O'Brien describes the violent crimes he and the Brotherhood are supposedly prepared to commit, we are told that a "wave of admiration, almost of worship, flowed out from Winston towards O'Brien" (182). When Winston and Julia are finally captured, O'Brien throws Winston's own words back at him, showing how easily supposed rebels can become no different from their "evil" oppressors (283). Finally, when faced with the rats in Room 101, Winston exchanges fatalism for abjection: "Do it to Julia! Do it to Julia! Not me! Julia! I don't care what you do to her. Tear her face off, strip

her to the bones. Not me! Julia! Not me!” (300). These are hardly the words of a courageous but helpless rebel; they are more reminiscent of, and may allude to, Bernard Marx’s pleas.

Those who see Winston as a victim rather than a complicit participant in Oceania’s totalitarianism forget the delight he takes in his job before meeting Julia. He enjoys the creative art of manipulating history: “Winston’s greatest pleasure in his life was in his work. Most of it was a tedious routine, but included in it there were also jobs so difficult and intricate that you could lose yourself in them as in the depths of a mathematical problem” (46). Here, Winston displays most clearly his roots in Zamyatin’s mathematical protagonist. It is only when he cannot reconcile what he knows with what he must say, and when his obsession with his personal past causes him to question his country’s, that he begins to dissociate himself from his work. Until then, however, he is every bit as guilty as O’Brien of perpetuating Newspeak, Doublethink, and all the other horrors of Big Brother’s regime. Like Bernard and D-503, what he wants at the end is to be comfortable again — to be free from harm more than free of oppression.

Indeed, of the protagonists in the major dystopian works that preceded *The Handmaid’s Tale*, only Guy Montag is truly heroic. He sacrifices his entire comfortable — albeit loveless — existence, albeit only after he is provoked by an attractive member of the opposite sex. He kills Beatty and runs for his life, then agrees to become a “booklegger”: one who memorizes and thereby preserves works of literature. Alex of *A Clockwork Orange* is never truly a rebel — merely anti-social — and he is willingly co-opted by the State to turn his violence against its enemies.

Thus, D-503, Bernard Marx, and Winston Smith ultimately abandon their half-hearted, often libido-engendered rebellions and choose freedom from pain and hardship instead. It is precisely this type of “freedom” that Gilead offers; as Aunt Lydia tells the Handmaids (expressing sentiments like those of the Grand Inquisitor and various dystopian leaders), “There is more than one kind of freedom. . . . Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don’t underrate it” (34). One might easily dismiss this kind of freedom as meaningless, except for the fact that Lydia’s statement comes after a harrowing description of the “rules” that govern women’s behaviour in our society and thereby limit their illusory

“freedom to” (34). It is important to recognize how much Offred — for all her ironic disdain for its absurdities — accepts Gilead’s protective embrace.

As many critics have noted, and as Offred confesses, before the installation of the Gilead regime she was very complacent (Dodson 80-81). It was easy for the fundamentalists to take away her freedoms because she never truly valued them, let alone sought to defend them (Gottlieb 105). Recalling the hotel room where she had her trysts with Luke, she thinks, “Careless. I was careless, in those rooms” (61). Offred begins to accept where she is and what she is doing; at first, for example, she refers to her bedroom as “the room where I stay” (59), but then, reacting violently to the possibility that it had been searched, she asks, “Was he in my room?” and notes the change: “I called it *mine*” (59). When Janine is subjected to a ritual humiliation over her rape at the age of fourteen, Offred joins the others in chanting, “*Her fault, her fault, her fault*” and when Janine breaks down, “Crybaby, crybaby, crybaby”. She then acknowledges her guilt: “I used to think well of myself. I didn’t then” (82). Offred participates fully in Gilead’s violent rituals: Particutions, Salvagings, and so on (Rigney, “Dystopia” 132-33). Part of Salvaging involves expressing solidarity with the other women, including shared responsibility:

I’ve leaned forward to touch the rope in front of me, in time with the others, both hands on it, the rope hairy, sticky with tar in the hot sun, then placed my hand on my heart to show my unity with the Salvagers and my consent, and my complicity in the death of this woman. I have seen the kicking feet and the two in black who now seize hold of them and drag downwards with all their weight. I don’t want to see it any more. I look at the grass instead. I describe the rope. (288)

Note that here the process of narrating is not a form of subversion but of escape: she would rather describe the rope than what she is helping to do with it. She says of the Ceremony, which critics often see as a form of ritualized rape, “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” (105). Later, Offred remembers the day she was fired, and asks, “What was it about this that made us feel we deserved it?” (186). The answer may be that Offred and the other women took their freedom for granted and did nothing to assert or defend it; instead,

Offred, for one, belittled her mother (see esp. 189-90) and other feminists, including her best friend, Moira. The complacency of women is illustrated by the declining readership for the sorts of books Moira and her feminist collective publish (187). When protests break out, Offred avoids them:

There were marches, of course, a lot of women and some men. But they were smaller than you might have thought. I guess people were scared. And when it was known that the police, or the army, or whoever they were, would open fire almost as soon as any of the marches even started, the marches stopped. . . .

I didn't 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. By this time I'd started to cry, without warning, and to sit beside the bedroom window, staring out. I didn't know many of the neighbours, and when we met, outside on the street, we were careful to exchange nothing more than the ordinary greetings. Nobody wanted to be reported . . . for disloyalty. (189)

Offred does not say she herself is afraid — she refers only to other people's fear, and Luke's urgings that she not participate. Either she lacks courage or she is too apolitical to take a stand as her rights are being abolished. It is also significant that in her encounters with other women she begins to behave like a cowed, paranoid Handmaid before she actually becomes one. Later, when a Guardian who has been convicted of rape is brought forward, Offred feels the authorized emotions she is expected to: "despite myself I feel my hands clench. It is too much, this violation. . . . We jostle forward, our heads turn from side to side, our nostrils flare, sniffing death, we look at one another, seeing the hatred" (190-91). Apparently, she has found something to rouse her to anger at last — but only when she is supposed to, and against a State-sanctioned target. One can only wonder how different her fate might have been had she aimed her rage at her oppressors. This is a freedom that she actually relishes and values: "we are permitted anything and this is freedom, in my body also" (291). Afterward, she sees how insane Janine has become: "Easy out, is what I think. I don't even feel sorry for her, although I should. I feel angry. I'm not proud of myself for this, or for any of it. But then, that's the point" (292-93). She tells Fred that

what she wants most is to know what is really going on (198), but then in private admits, “Maybe I don’t really want to know what’s going on. Maybe I’d rather not know. Maybe I couldn’t bear to know. The Fall was a fall from innocence to knowledge” (205). Her preference for “ignoring” thus continues.

Offred’s ultimate confession of guilt comes after she begins her love affair with Nick. As we have seen, dystopian heroes become involved in such relationships for other than purely political reasons. While the act itself may be subversive, it does not involve or lead to any real challenge to the State. Indeed, it may have the opposite effect, reinforcing a character’s fatalism (as in the case of Winston Smith) or romanticism (as in the cases of Bernard Marx and John). As for Offred, there is evidence that her affair is conducted with the tacit approval of at least one of her superiors, Serena Joy, so that she can become pregnant at last (216). Offred says,

I wish this story were different. I wish it were more civilized. I wish it showed me in a better light, if not happier, then at least more active, less hesitant, less distracted by trivia. . . . So I will go on. So I will myself to go on. I am coming to a part you will not like at all, because in it I did not behave well, but I will try nonetheless to leave nothing out. After all you’ve been through, you deserve whatever I have left, which is not much but includes the truth. (279-80)

Why does she begin a sexual relationship with him? Is it to subvert the laws and mores of Gilead? “I went back to Nick. Time after time, on my own, without Serena knowing. It wasn’t called for, there was no excuse. I did not do it for him, but for myself entirely. I didn’t even think of it as giving myself to him, because what did I have to give? I did not feel munificent, but thankful, each time he would let me in” (280). The meaning of the relationship for her and its effects on her are important to note: “Being here with him is safety; it’s a cave, where we huddle together while the storm goes on outside. This is a delusion, of course. This room is one of the most dangerous places I could be. If I were caught there would be no quarter, but I’m beyond caring” (281-82). Ofglen tries to get her to spy on the Commander, but she says, “the Commander is no longer of immediate interest to me” (282). Later, she adds, “I can’t, I say to Ofglen. I’m too afraid. . . . Anyway I’d be no good at that, I’d get caught” (283). Yet, as we have seen, for the sake of her own romantic desires she is “beyond caring” about getting



caught. She admits the truth: “The fact is that I no longer want to leave, escape, cross the border to freedom. I want to be here, with Nick, where I can get at him” (283). Her complacency and complicity come to the fore most explicitly in what she says a few lines later: “Truly amazing, what people can get used to, as long as there are a few compensations” (283).

After the Particicution discussed above, she finds comfort in the household’s activities: “Now I am going shopping, the same as usual. I even look forward to it. There’s a certain consolation to be taken from routine” (294). She is thus now prepared to surrender to her new conditions. After meeting the new Ofglen, she becomes frightened anew, and thinks about what she might do if she were tortured:

I would not be able to stand it, I know that; Moira was right about me. I’ll say anything they like, I’ll incriminate anyone. It’s true, the first scream, whimper even, and I’ll turn to jelly, I’ll confess to any crime, I’ll end up hanging from a hook on the Wall. Keep your head down, I used to tell myself, and see it through. It’s no use. (297)

Thus, she would submit more quickly than Winston Smith does. Her close call leads her to thank God: “Now that you’ve let me off, I’ll obliterate myself, if that’s what you really want. . . . I’ll give up Nick, I’ll forget about the others, I’ll stop complaining. I’ll accept my lot. I’ll sacrifice. I’ll repent. I’ll abdicate. I’ll renounce” (298).

She does think of ways to rebel, but even in her most potentially destructive plans, her ultimate solution is escape, via suicide. She imagines ways to fight back:

I could set fire to the house, for instance. I could bundle up some of my clothes, and the sheets, and strike my one hidden match. If it didn’t catch, that would be that. But if it did, there would at least be an event, a signal of some kind to mark my exit. A few flames, easily put out. In the meantime I could let loose clouds of smoke and die by suffocation. (303-04)

Alternatively, “I could go to Nick’s room, over the garage, as we have done before. I could wonder whether or not he would let me in, give me shelter. Now that the need is real” (304). In the end, she does nothing.

Finally, just as she is about to be taken away in the van, she thinks, somewhat too late, "I've been wasting my time. I should have taken things into my own hands while I had the chance. I should have stolen a knife from the kitchen, found some way to the sewing scissors. There were the garden shears, the knitting needles; the world is full of weapons if you're looking for them. I should have paid attention" (305). This is not the first time she says she would like to have a weapon, such as the shears (e.g., 161), but she never tries to get them. One cannot help feeling that she could have paid attention before Gilead was created, or at any time during her days as a Handmaid. Instead, she engages in what is at this point fairly easy bravado.

The obvious counter-argument is that Offred can do nothing. But as we have seen, dystopian heroes are never as helpless as they like to believe; they demonstrate a desire for happiness over freedom when confronted with a stark choice. In Offred's case, there are clear, if not pleasant, alternatives. Critics have long recognized that Moira is Offred's revolutionary alter ego, engaging in the sorts of subversive acts that Offred herself is afraid to. If Moira can overcome one of the Aunts and try to escape (140-43), presumably Offred can, too; Moira's main role in the novel may well be exposing Offred's cowardice through the difference between how they behave. At the end, however, Moira is caught and forced to work at Jezebel's, where she makes her own compromises to survive and even enjoy herself (261). Disappointed in her, Offred says, "I'd like to say she blew up Jezebel's, with fifty Commanders inside it. I'd like her to end with something daring and spectacular, something that would befit her" (262). At no time, of course, does she propose doing something like that herself. It is therefore not surprising when Moira, in an offhand remark with great implications, tells Offred, "You were always such a wimp" (234).

Mohr argues that Offred's behaviour should not be "so easily and self-righteously dismissed as cowardliness from the safe distance of being snuggled into an armchair" (256-57). Gottlieb similarly defends Offred by saying that we have no right to judge her; "it would be unfair to single out Offred for blame" since so few of us would likely do any better (140). But that is precisely Atwood's point: totalitarian regimes arise because people are too complacent or afraid to resist them, or actually welcome them. Our own cowardice or selfishness does not excuse Offred's; instead, her cowardice and complicity convict us all,

because we share it. As Rigney says, Atwood's point is that "the individual is truly a part of the whole and shares responsibility for every aspect of the system, including the perpetration of atrocity. . . . No one is exempt from guilt, no one is blameless, Atwood implies, when it comes to the creation of a Gilead" (*Margaret* 114-19).

Offred's attitudes and behaviour are therefore not merely personal failings, and she certainly does not represent Atwood's ideal in how to respond to totalitarianism. As the dystopian tradition makes clear, Offred embodies quite the opposite. Like the dystopian protagonists who provided the models for her characterization, Offred is guilty of complacency, complicity, and selfish concern for her own private needs and desires. She prefers freedom from pain and acceptance of comfortable paternalistic domination over dangerous political commitment. While she does not belong to the upper levels of Gilead's power hierarchy, then, she is no less responsible for its destruction of freedom, for its atrocities, and indeed for its very existence.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See also Carminero-Santagelo 32 and esp. Deer.

<sup>2</sup> The line appears in the manuscript version of Atwood's article, "If You Can't Say Something Nice, Don't Say Anything At All" (Atwood's papers at the University of Toronto, MS 200 Box 147), on page 18, but was omitted from the published version, which appeared in Libby Scheier et al., eds, *Language in Her Eye* (1990). I would like to thank Natalie Cooke and her research assistant, Meena, for tracking down the source of the quotation.

<sup>3</sup> For the terminology in this study, I am relying on Sargents' important articles.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Ferns; Bannerjee; Davis; Fever; Harris; Hunter; Ingersoll; Baccolini, "Gender and Genre" 21-24.

<sup>5</sup> See esp. "There's Nothing in This Book" 66; "An Interview with Margaret Atwood" 142.

<sup>6</sup> See Morson for the roots of dystopian fiction in Russian literature.

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of the connection between the novels, see Connors.

<sup>8</sup> For discussions of the tropes of dystopian fiction, see esp. Aldridge, Booker, Elliott, Gottlieb, Hillegas, Kumar, Moylan, Shklar, and Walsh.

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