



Linguistik-Server Essen

Gabriele Twohig:

**The Politics of Language: A Device of Creativity and Power in
Margaret Atwood's Novel *The Handmade's Tale***

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Universität GH Essen, Fachbereich 3, FuB 6

Universitätsstraße 12, D-45117 Essen | <http://www.linse.uni-essen.de>

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1. Introduction

Despite

“widespread agreement among readers and critics that Margaret Atwood is not only a major poet but very likely the best poet writing in Canada today“¹

and probably in other countries as well, she is still relatively unknown in Germany today. This is why the main corpus of this thesis will be introduced by a brief summary of Mrs. Atwood’s career.

Margaret Atwood’s novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a rich example of what can be done with and through language. A few of its aspects shall be looked at in detail in this article, the emphasis being on **the creativity and power through language**. Following the overview over Atwood’s career, her views on language, politics, creativity, and power will be presented before investigating how these ideas are brought to life in *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

The author wishes to emphasise that the intention of this thesis is not to concentrate on Margaret Atwood’s style as a writer but solely towards the world and characters she creates, what they are like and what they do – not how she creates them.

2. Margaret Atwood

Margaret Eleanor Atwood was born in 1939 in Ottawa, Canada, and read English Literature in her home country as well as the USA and Great Britain. She also taught university courses in these countries. Mrs. Atwood is a member of two writers’ unions, one Canadian and one international. Although her range of literary genres encompasses television and radio scripts as well as reviews and critical texts, she is best known for her short stories, novels and poetry for which she won several awards.

Two of her works stand out as of major importance: *Survival*, a critical work on minorities of the literary world, mainly Canadian, and *Surfacing*, a novel rated by cri-

¹ E. Mandel, p. 53.

tics as one of the most important works of the 20th century for its revolutionary use of language.

Margaret Atwood's topics are most varied in range but one can nevertheless observe that there are certain themes reoccurring throughout her work. Some of these are language, politics, power, and creativity.

3. Margaret Atwood's concept of language, politics, power, and creativity

3.1. Language

Margaret Atwood is a writer and as such naturally concerned with language. She puts it simply as:

“That's what writing is made of.”²

Language is a writer's tool to describe and to evoke feelings, images, situations, ideas, etc. This tool, however, is not without difficulties:

“[...] language is always both a tool, a medium, and something that limits. It's always both things.”³

Language is not always fit to express sufficiently what one feels, sees, thinks, etc. It consists of a system of rules that one must accept for better or worse, and often devices are lacking. But the beauty of language is that one can also be creative with it by stretching the established rules and finding new words, new meanings, new ways of reading – in a word: adding new dimensions. It is exactly this that Margaret Atwood practises in her works:

“Language changes within our lifetime. As a writer you're part of that process – using an old language, but making new patterns with it.”⁴

² M. Atwood, quoted from M. E. Richards, p. 1.

³ M. Atwood, quoted from M. E. Richards, p. 2.

⁴ M. Atwood, quoted from M. E. Richards, p. 25.

The way the individual uses and understands language, according to Margaret Atwood, depends strongly on what she calls “cultural relativity”⁵, i.e. a person’s cultural, social, and personal background. Language is thus a strong device for the individual to express the self. It will become clear later in this thesis that “language”, particularly when considering cultural relativity, does not only mean verbal communication (writing, reading, speaking) but non-verbal communication as well (comprising visual, tactile, and similar devices), thus embracing a large part of the field of semiology⁶.

Thrown into a different cultural environment, the individual needs to understand the other cultural relativity and has to adapt to it to a certain degree in order to find a place in society and a means of expressing him/herself. It also gives insights into how both the “mother culture” and the foreign culture work:

“[...] if you travel to other cultures and see which parts of the body are considered exposable and which parts are not, then you realize a lot of things about your own culture.”⁷

But for now let’s just concentrate on the verbal aspects of language.

3.2. *Politics and power*

Margaret Atwood has travelled widely which helped her to understand and to study her own culture. Being an author, she chose to increasingly express in her medium that she observes and understands what is going on around her:

“I began as a profoundly apolitical writer, but then I began to do what all novelists and some poets do: I began to describe the world around me.”⁸

⁵ M. E. Richards, p. 25.

⁶ The field of “semiology or semiotics investigates the structure of all possible sign systems and the role these play in the way we create and perceive patterns (or ‘meanings’) in sociolinguistic behaviour. The subject is all-inclusive, therefore, dealing with patterned communication in all its modes (sound, sight, touch, smell, and taste) and in all contexts (e.g. dance, film, politics, eating, clothing).“ -- D. Crystal, p. 399.

⁷ M. Atwood, quoted from M. E. Richards, p. 27.

⁸ M. Atwood, quoted from M. E. Richards, p. 6.

In other words, “the world“ (=social life) is inherently political, and describing it is a political act. Thus language gains a political dimension – which is not always free of restraints:

“And politics has to do with what kind of conversations you have with people, and what you feel free to say to someone, what you don’t feel free to say.“⁹

This means that the way in which one expresses oneself and whether one is subject to any restrictions in doing so or not, is another political factor. This factor may be internal, in the individual, but most likely it is external, inflicted upon the individual by other persons. This is where the power comes in. According to Atwood, ‘political’ also means

“[...] having to do with power: who’s got it, who wants it, how it operates; in a word, who’s allowed to do what to whom, who gets what from whom, who gets away with it and how.“¹⁰

Summing up this idea, one can say that for Atwood language is inherently political, and through its use the individual defines his/her position in society. Language is a device of power which an individual can use for him/herself, and it can be used as a power against him/her through restriction and suppression.

“Powerlessness and silence go together.“¹¹

3.3. Creativity

Since language has such a strong political power, it seems a vital question to ask whether language is a symptom or a cause of reality.¹² Atwood does not provide us

⁹ M. Atwood, quoted from M. E. Richards, p. 11.

¹⁰ M. Atwood, quoted from M. E. Richards, p. 7.

¹¹ M. Atwood, quoted from N. T. Bazin, p. 118

¹² The concept of language as a symptom of reality means that language responds to social forces and reflects society. In contrast, the concept of language as a cause of reality expresses that language causes conditions in society by establishing ideas which become a driving power. For example, countries exposed to snow have a large number of words for “snow“ to distinguish its different consistencies. We do not have as many words for “snow“ simply because snow is not a vital part of our life. Language here is a symptom of reality.

with an answer to this linguistic problem but she is aware of its existence, as M. E. Richards states:

“The literature suggests that Atwood has a definite interest in speculating on this area and that she continues to explore its implications.”¹³

Taking neither side, Margaret Atwood explores both theories in her work. It is certain, however, that through language thoughts and feelings might be inspired and evoked – which seems to be the core of the power of language.

And another thing is for sure: If language is a cause of reality, then it will be all the more powerful if it is used creatively, opening new readings, inspiring new thoughts, and thus creating new realities.

According to Atwood, there are different positions one can assume in using the power of language, and the best of them is

“to be a creative non-victim”.¹⁴

In other positions, energy gets either suppressed or it is used up in the battle against restrictions. In the “creative non-victim” position, however,

“you are able to accept your own experience for what it is, rather than having to distort it to make it correspond with others’ versions of it (particularly those of your oppressors).”¹⁵

In other words, in this position all energy can flow into the language instead of the environment surrounding the author. Here,

“creative activities of all kind become possible.”¹⁶

If one of these words, one unknown to us, were transported into our language, it would widen our awareness of reality, “cause” another reality for us. Here language acts as a cause for reality.

¹³ M. E. Richards, p. 20.

¹⁴ Atwood: *Survival*, p. 38.

¹⁵ Atwood: *Survival*, p. 39.

¹⁶ Atwood: *Survival*, p. 38.

To fully bring the politics of language, its power and creativity to life, Atwood acknowledges the need of an audience:

“It is my contention that the process of reading is part of the process of writing, the necessary completion without which writing can hardly be said to exist.”¹⁷

If language is to have its full impact, it needs a recipient, a reader or listener: Otherwise it is only going half the way. And this recipient has to bring his/her share of creativity to the story told in order to bring its contents to life.

Whether the two different creativities being applied to the same story actually do coincide, and whether they *have* to coincide, is yet another question which will not be dealt with in this thesis.

4. The Handmaid's Tale

It seems practical to look at the system of Gilead first before investigating how a member of its society behaves. In point 4.1. Gilead shall be dealt with before going on to evaluating in point 4.2 what Offred makes of her (new) cultural relativity.

4.1. The politics of language in Gilead

4.1.1. The order of the State

The Handmaid's Tale is a dystopian novel, its plot set somewhere in the not so far future (the novel was published in 1985):

In the territory of the former USA, a fundamentalist State has come into force by military overthrow. This State, named “Gilead“ after a Biblical State, is governed by a totalitarian regime that holds power over its subjects in two ways: fear and silence. People who do not behave in a conforming manner get threatened, tortured, killed, and everywhere in the State there are watchposts, armed guardians on patrol, and searchlights. Free communication does not exist any more, “free“ denoting here that you might say what you actually want to say, that you can read what

¹⁷ Atwood, quoted from M. E. Richards, p. 7.

you want to read, and that you can write what you want to write. Magazines, newspapers, and books of any kind (Bible excepted) are banned. But whereas men still have access to reading and writing, these techniques are forbidden to women by punishment. Reading, for example, is punished by the loss of a hand on third conviction. So even things as ordinary as store names or signposts are being replaced by pictures.

Everyone who “functions“ is given their particular place in society. For men, there are the categories of

- “Commanders of the Faith“ (those in charge, although one never finds out what exactly they do)
- “Eyes“ (spies and security workers)
- “Angels“ (soldiers)
- “Guardians“ (domestic servants to the Commanders and civil servants)

There is a fifth, unnamed group of men, the poor and powerless ones which have no name, probably because they are of no significance to the State.

Women are not posted in any position which could in the least be called high-ranking – with one exception: “Aunts“ who prepare and educate another “class“ of women for their new purpose, the “Handmaids“. Due to rigid contraceptive methods, toxic environmental pollution, radiation from faulty power plants, and other things, the fertility rate in the population has sunk to a minimum. Those women who still can conceive and bear children are being educated in “Rachel and Leah Centres“ by the formerly mentioned Aunts to become loyal, self-denying Handmaids. After “graduating“, they are distributed to the households of the Commanders. Their purpose there is to conceive from and bear a child for the Commander and his (sterile) wife.

Women who cannot reproduce serve either as “Marthas“ in the Commanders’ houses, responsible for the household chores, or they are being sent into the Colonies as “Unwomen“, on the grounds of some accusation or other, to clean up toxic waste or to do other hard labour.

“Normal“ life still goes on in the lower ranking families. There the wives (“Economives“) carry out every type of work which in the families of higher status is divided between several women.

This system of naming after function illustrates perfectly that Gilead had created a new cultural relativity, a new language – “new“ to its people who formerly used to live in a free and democratic State. This culture has taken away much of the vocabulary and the multiplicity of the former USA, reducing it to a small number of “politically correct“ statements. It is thereby also reducing the multiplicity in thought, using the linguistic theories of language as a cause for and/or symptom of reality for its purpose.

It is invaluable to have a closer look at this new culture, the ideas its language portrays and *how* it portrays them:

4.1.2. Gilead’s language system

The language in Gilead does not only operate by sieving out “dangerous“ material but also by setting up new rules. People no longer bear significance through their personality but through their function in society. The cruellest of these namings is certainly those of “Unwomen“ and “Unbabies“, denoting that these persons have no worth left whatsoever – no worth *for* society and thus no worth *in* society. The only reason why they are being given a name at all is to serve a bad example and to scare other citizens.

To make publically known what a person is valued for and to make sure that they only take the liberties that they are being ascribed, every “class“ of people have their specific dress code. Again, this device is stronger for women than for men. All men wear more or less the same uniforms of dark colours (black, grey, or green), and the differences between their functions are rather expressed in “accessories“ (crests, guns, briefcases etc.) than in the uniforms as such. The differences between the classes of women, on the other hand, are evident through a distinction in colours that almost hurts the eye: Aunts wear brown uniforms, Marthas dull green dresses, the wives blue dresses, Handmaids flashing red dresses, and the Econowives wear dresses that are striped red, blue, and green.

As mentioned before, this visual classification is an expression of a person's worth to the system. But it is much more than that: It also defines the individual's worth for him- or herself, it generates a certain type of self-esteem. The public opinion is a powerful influence on the individual's self-perception, even more so if it is so strikingly demonstrated.

In addition, instead of several individuals, there are now classes, masses of people. Masses are easier to direct and to manipulate than individuals, and it makes it easier for people to deal more brutally, coldly with one another.

It is interesting to investigate whether the colours picked to distinguish the different classes of people were chosen at random or whether they bear a significant meaning. With the brown uniforms of the Aunts one automatically connects military ranks, and military education, which in a sense is what the Aunts stand for. But what about the other uniforms?

There is one indication which suggests that they were chosen according to some kind of system, and that is the fact that the Econowives wear striped dresses – striped in the three colours of the functions that they unite: wife (blue), Martha (green), and Handmaid (red). So might there be a meaning behind the “basic” colours? A possible answer may be found by combining traditional Western meanings – which are in accordance with the liturgical tradition; since Gilead is a fundamentalist society it seems obvious to look at the clerical roots of the “colour coding” – with the *Farbenlehre*¹⁸ (science of colours) of Goethe. The latter has to be seen in the context of his time, of course, but his findings about the psychology of colours are still of relevance today:

Green is usually, as well as in the Christian tradition, a symbol of life hope. This coincides with the fact that this is also the colour of nature, nurture, things growing. And indeed, the Marthas in *The Handmaid's Tale* are occupied with keeping the kitchens and caring for the food. It is also the colour of the Guardians who help to care for things as well: gardens, cars, domestic matters, etc. Goethe says that green is a

¹⁸ taken from *Goethes Farbenlehre*, J. Pawlik.

colour of calmness and content – which is exactly what describes the Marthas and Guardians that we get to know in the novel.

Blue is generally perceived as a colour of spirituality, things not bound to the earth. It bears no specific liturgical meaning. It is the colour of the sky and often described as “cold“ or “the colour of distance“. The Commanders’ wives that one gets to know are characterized by similar adjectives: detached, cold, inapproachable, and “dead“ to earthly things, love in particular. In addition, they embody a subtle form of threat to the Handmaids. Goethe says exactly this in his *Farbenlehre*, that blue is a colour that gives one a feeling of coldness, a subtle negative energy, but otherwise emptiness.

For black and grey one can find two different meanings: In most Western societies, black is accepted as the colour of mourning. Grey might be seen as a colour of subtler devastation. This would explain why the Unwomen are dressed in grey: A nondescript shade of death to come. Scientifically speaking, black (just like white) is not a colour. Goethe explains that intelligent, educated people have a tendency to detest colours and resort to either black or white. This coincides with *The Handmaid’s Tale* where the “intelligent“ group of people (the Commanders) are dressed entirely in non-coloured clothes.

The most interesting and outstanding of these colours is certainly red. Popular views tend to ascribe it both an effect of sexual attraction and intense warning. In any case, it is a signalling colour that attracts attention. At the same time, it is the colour of blood and as such symbolizes both pulsating life and pain. Goethe adds that red contains all other colours, and that it is the most sublime of them all. He says that it is a colour of serenity, splendour, and grace. In Christian tradition, red is the colour of martyrs¹⁹ and of the Holy Spirit. Excluding the sexual attraction, all

¹⁹ In the “Historical Notes“ at the end of the novel one learns that red might have been a “borrowing from the uniforms of German prisoners of war in Canadian ‘P.O.W.’ camps of the Second World War era.“ (THT, 319) This would coincide with L. York’s view that “the uniforms are [...] merely variations of the pre-Gilead part [...]. Rather than heralding the advent of a new regime, uniforms more often drag us back into the nightmares of history from which we are trying to awake.“ (L. York, p. 15) This, however, would only be true for someone who actually has knowledge of such historical facts.

this is minutely what defines the function of a Handmaid, as shall be illustrated in the next paragraph.

Summing up, one can say that Gilead's use of colours is by no means coincidental. The "coding" combines common knowledge and the psychological effect of colours. However, the totalitarian State does not employ specifically religious characteristics.

As shown above, Gilead's politics of language are forceful, effective, and extremely perfidious, even down to the general psychology of colours and so it holds a strong power over its citizens, over

"[...] a whole society – a society which one day took off its old clothing of individuality and diversity and assumed the uniformity of a theological dictatorship."²⁰

4.1.3. The position of the Handmaids

In all this, the Handmaids hold a kind of "special" position: "Special" because they are both the most privileged and most repressed group. They are most privileged in the sense that they get the best food, the best "body maintenance", respectful treatment, and they do not have to do anything that is not connected with conception and healthy childbearing. But they are the least privileged in the sense that they are *not allowed* to do anything that has no connection with childbearing. They have no freedom of movement, no possessions, no task to fulfil except the aforementioned. And, what is worst, they do not even have the little freedom of speech left that is still at the disposal of others. They have no possibility whatsoever to express anything personal, let alone to express it in the fashion that they themselves choose. Their "communication" among each other on their daily prescribed walks (which are basically to keep their abdominal muscles in working order) consists of preset phrases like "Blessed be the fruit" or "May the Lord open".

As these conditions indicate, Handmaids get defined solely through their bodies, their functioning ovaries – and through their Commanders. Even in the houses,

²⁰ L. York, p.8.

they are no longer known by their former names but by a construct of the Commander's name plus an initial "Of-", thus forming a patronymic "Offred", "Ofglen", "Ofwarren", etc. This has several effects:

If there is a change of Handmaids in the house, there is never a change of names. Thus the personality of the Handmaid is wiped out and one will not be able to trace her in future. It also indicates that the Handmaid herself does not count; she does not identify herself through herself but through her Commander, economically just as much as verbally. Language is taken from her – and she is taken away from language.

It is quite obvious why Handmaids are held in such rigid circumstances. Gilead has to deep any risk at bay that might endanger the society, not only from outside but also from inside the border. The most apparent and immediate threat is the low birth rate. This is the reason why the Handmaids are so important, even essential to Gilead, and thus they are being guarded well – with all the positive and negative notions of this word.

Another indication exists that shows how highly the Handmaids are rated: Only Commanders, the highest ranking people in Gileadean society, are entitled to a Handmaid. This, however, is not a distinction for the Handmaids but for the Commanders: They are considered worthy to reproduce. "Natural selection" is engineered. Even though Gilead might like to see itself as a "women's society", in reality it is a patriarchal system.

It is plain to see that Gilead exerts enormous power over its citizens not only but to a great extent through language. "Language" here must certainly be seen in the broader context of verbal *and* non-verbal expression. Every human being expresses him- or herself not only verbally but also non-verbally. A look into the field of semiotics provides one with a variety of reading other than verbal. If the verbal part is taken away, the non-verbal part steps in and gains in meaning.

4.1.4. Everything "talks"

In fact, in Gilead *everything* in social life "talks", even the smallest things like body-exposure, body-posture, eye-contact, the position one takes in a group of people,

how long one spends in the toilet, etc. – they all convey a meaning, as it says in the novel:

“In this household [=State; the author], little things mean a lot.” (THT, 218)

This type of “language“ is not new but in Gilead it takes an intensified turn.

The frontier between verbal and non-verbal communication wanes and the two fields merge into one. One of the most perfidious installments in the heart of Gilead’s power is the use (or prohibition) of EYES. This word takes up several meanings: First of all, it is the name of one of the male function groups, the “Eyes“. They are spies who try to see what is hidden. Secondly, an eye with a wing forms the crest of the government. This might be an allusion to the symbol of the Eye of God: After all, Gilead is a fundamentalist society. However, it also brings to mind the motto of George Orwell’s 1984, “Big Brother is watching you“ – like God, this eye sees everything and it is everywhere:

“The Eyes of God run all over the earth.” (THT, 203)

But whereas God means to induce trust and peace, Gilead’s eye spreads distrust and fear.

On a third level, the new society sports the common belief that to see the eyes is to know a person. Since it is not the intention of the suppressors that people should know each other – it might lead to alliances and conspiracy – it is safest to keep the eyes averted.

For fear of being betrayed or of seeing things that are better not seen, people might naturally keep their eyes down. But as for the Handmaids, again, they have no freedom to choose. Their dress code includes big, heavy white wings as headgear which keep them from seeing and being “seen“. Any hints of friendship among them are highly suspicious, and time with other Handmaids is restricted. In addition, mirrors are kept away from them, and thus, in a manner of speaking, the Handmaids cannot see, “know“, reassure themselves of themselves.

The “mirrors“ that they *do* get, however, are the other Handmaids. Every Handmaid can see herself in her shopping partner: The dress, the behaviour, the language, the aim in life, all is exactly the same, because it is prescribed. In this “mirror“, they do not get to see what they really are but what they are supposed to be.

Gilead sets up other ways of “knowing“ people, namely in watching how they behave. As mentioned before, there are several rules that people must obey to avoid suspicion from any onlookers. This includes humble postures, no lingering, etc. One of the most intense scenes that describes the regime’s language and its politics, is the “Women’s Salvaging“. Basically, this is a public hanging of dissenters (mostly Handmaids) but the government presents it as a “sad“ duty fulfilled in order to protect the community. All women of a district have to assemble for this spectacle in a sort of arena next to what used to be the university, arranging themselves in a strict order: Handmaids in the front, kneeling on the floor (Handmaids always either stand or kneel in public, expressing their subordination and humble rank), Marthas and Econowives around the edges, being overlooked (=watched) from behind by the higher seated wives, and, from a stage in front of them, by the Aunts. The coup of using women to educate and punish other women, again, is a clever move. Being handled by someone of your own “species“ rather than by someone strange is so much more powerful.

The hanging as such is done in a way that makes the Handmaids partakers in the execution, showing their obedience and consent by touching the rope in unity and placing a hand on their hearts.

To see someone of your own group being killed and, worse, having to consent to it, causes aggression. Gilead is aware of this potential, and to keep it under control, the hanging is followed by a special feature: A man, accused of raping and killing a pregnant Handmaid, is led to the arena where he is left to the Handmaids. They can do with him whatever they want. Again, however, it is vital for the women not to stir suspicion in the onlookers by holding back or by seeming uninterested. One Handmaid who rushes forward to give the man a merciful quick death by kicking his head, publically gives away her disloyalty to the regime.

All this has an unreal and grotesque feeling to it. The government requires behaviour and confessions that they know are hollow shells. All seems like a big masquerade, a pageant, a performance, and everyone is constantly “on show“. There is an institution that epitomizes all of Gilead’s hollow, empty values: The so-called “Soul Scrolls“. These are machines that print out prayers as they say them. They are kept in stores with shatterproof glass which no-one ever enters. People phone to order prayers and pay via their credit cards. Those prayers are not of any use: They are not spoken by anyone who could give them meaning, and no-one listens to them. The printed paper gets shredded up and recycled immediately after the print. It is merely the fact of ordering them that counts because it shows loyalty to the system and can help promotion. These machines show more than anything else that Gilead cherishes a “religion“ whose “God“ is the government itself, and the only words that are left are hollow shells which are neither intended to bear meaning nor to be heard.

Summing up, Gilead is a system that makes clever use of verbal language through heavy restrictions, abandoning of old forms and thus old realities, and at the same time setting up new linguistic conventions and, with it, new realities. In reducing the means of verbal communication to a minimum, it gives the remaining non-verbal means highly symbolic meanings, both in executing its power and in spotting dissenters – a very basic, non-abstract system but highly psychological and perfidious.

4.2. Offred: Power through creativity with language

Paradoxically enough, the reader learns about all this through a member of the most repressed group: Offred, a Handmaid. She manages to tell her story despite Gilead’s regime. Two centuries later a number of music tapes are being found on which she taped her story, using the musical interludes as a disguise. The book is a “transcription“ of her recordings. But the reader is told this only at the end of the novel. Even though Offred’s narration is most likely a recollection of what happened to her, she uses the present tense most of the time and seems to be talking to herself, only in a few paragraphs addressing a hypothetical listener/reader. Thus her story reads like an “in flagrante delicto“ recording of her thoughts. And her

thoughts are indeed what makes her powerful – the ideas and the language she uses *in* Gilead, not later on, out of Gilead's bounds.

Admittedly, through her recordings, Offred triumphs over the oppressive regime in the long run: Her tapes have an impact long after Gilead is forgotten about. But this is of little use to her inside the prisonlike State. It is something else that is truly remarkable: She maintains, adapts, and even further develops her own language, and thus her own voice, *inside* the borders of the totalitarian State which help her to survive. Of course, there is not much freedom for voice in Gilead, at least not on a person's outer surface. But there is always the inside as a refuge, a sanctuary. Offred withdraws into herself with her language, and from there she generates an amazing realm of creativity: Ideas, ways of reading, realities, etc., as will be shown later.

4.2.1. Body talk

This does not mean that her inside action makes her immobile on the outside, on the contrary. Offred is simply wide aware of Gilead's politics of language and is careful not to give herself away. What is more, she subverts the regiment's non-verbal language, in some cases beating it with its own weapons:

In the Rachel-and-Leah-Centre, Offred meets an old friend of hers, Moira. Keeping up this friendship against the hostile environment is in itself a subversive act, as has been described before. But Offred and Moira go further: They manage to arrange times when they can meet in the toilet and talk through the partition walls. They even physically touch each other for consolation and in conspiracy – only two fingers stuck through a hole in the wall but this means so much in a society where bodies are hidden away behind clothes and not meant to be touched, not even by the individuals themselves. The Handmaids in particular are deprived of sensuality:

“[...] in my night gown, long-sleeved even in summer, to keep us from the temptations of our own flesh, to keep us from hugging ourselves, bare-armed.” (THT, 201)

As a signal for their meetings, Moira and Offred use their bodies as well: A hand with all fingers stretched out means: 'We'll meet in the toilets in five minutes time.' Like Gilead intended, body language, signs, and other non-verbal devices replace abstract language, but within this system some citizens set up their own codes, a

secret language: They form a subversive potential. Or they beat the system at its own game: Moira succeeds in escaping from the Centre by dressing up as an Aunt. Of course, in order to fully avoid suspicion from others, she has to adapt the posture of an Aunt as well and look as if she knew where she was going. She uses Gilead's set-up to her own advantage. Offred, who is never quite as radical as Moira, contemplates using her dress to hide things in it, and she (literally) manages to look behind uniforms:

“He sits up, begins to unbutton. Will this be worse, to have him denuded, of all his cloth power? [...] Without his uniform he looks smaller, older, like something being dried.“ (THT, 266/267)

Also, women have not forgotten about “old“ signals that have worked since the beginning of mankind and that have only gained in power because the State tries to subdue them: Sexual stimuli. Surely, not much of this has a chance in Gilead, and Moira finds herself in deep trouble when she tries to escape the Centre by seducing Angels. But it is the small victories that count, and Offred successfully swings her hips in front of a watchpost:

“As we walk away I know they're watching, these two men who aren't allowed to touch women. They touch with their eyes instead and I move my hips a little, feeling the full red skirt sway around me. It's like thumbing your nose from behind a fence or teasing a dog with a bone held out of reach [...]. I enjoy the power, the power of a dog bone, passive but there.“ (THT, 32)

In general, women are being thrown back into an earlier stage of mankind, a more basic, “raw“, uncivilized, less abstract state of being. As Mario Klarer writes:

“Es scheint, als mache die weibliche Hälfte des Staates Gilead einen Schritt zurück in primitive *vor-schriftliche* Anfänge menschlicher Zivilisation. Frau-Sein heißt in Gilead, *vor-schriftlich* zu werden und sich den *Vor-schriften* der Männer zu fügen.“²¹

²¹ M. Klarer, p. 155.

In contrast, men live in a “hochgradig literalen“²² (highly literary) reality with electronic media of all kinds. The highest-ranking of them make the rules that all other citizens have to submit to.

Women re-discover their bodies – however, not in a vain and sexual fashion, these aims are declared sin in Gilead – but as an organ of perception and “speech“. It would probably be more apt to say that women re-develop, sharpen their senses:

“We learned to lip-read, our heads flat on the beds, turned sideways, watching each other’s mouths. In this way we exchanged names, from bed to bed [...].“ (THT, 14)

4.2.2. New codes

Very soon, Offred gets an idea of Gilead’s “cultural relativity“, its politics of language, and develops her own devices to circumvent the restrictions inflicted upon her. A common means of by-passing the rules among the Handmaids is to develop a whispering voice. When the danger of being caught seems reasonable, they exchange information between each other in

“clipped whispers, projected through the funnels of our white wings. It’s more like a telegram, a verbal semaphore. Amputated speech.“ (THT, 211)

It becomes a sort of secret language between them – “There’s no one near, we can speak more freely, but out of habit we keep our voices low.“ (THT, 212) – a habit that makes them a unity, particularly in contrast to other “kinds“ of people. At one point, the wife of Offred’s Commander, Serena Joy, plots with Offred; they break rules together in order to succeed in making Offred pregnant. In the event, Serena falls into a whisper and thus, without knowing it, adapts the way of the Handmaids:

“[...] her voice low and conspiratorial.“ (THT, 240);

“Odd, to hear her whispering, as if she is one of us. Usually wives do not lower their voices.“ (THT, 234)

²² M. Klarer, p. 154.

The whisper is a sign of disobedience, conspiracy, and makes one part of a special group. The Handmaids also have a few terms of their own that gives them a feeling of power, however little, mostly achieved through disrespect and irony:

“[...] these machines [Soul Scrolls; the author] are known as Holy Rollers but only among us, it’s a disrespectful nickname.” (THT, 175)

“There is something powerful in the whispering of obscenities, about those in power. There’s something delightful about it, something naughty, secretive, forbidden, thrilling. In the paint of the washroom cubicle someone unknown had scratched: *Aunt Lydia sucks*. It was like a flag waved from a hilltop in rebellion. (The mere idea of Aunt Lydia doing such a thing was in itself heartening.)” (THT, 234)

One time, Offred and her shopping partner Ofglen commit a number of subversive acts as they stand in front of “Soul Scrolls“. Here, at the institution that sums up the whole being of Gilead, Ofglen asks a question that points into the heart of the fundamentalist State:

“ ‘Do you think God listens, ‘ she says, ‘to these machines?’ “ (THT, 176/177)

It is a moment of truth that is accompanied by a look into each other’s eyes using the front window of “Soul Scrolls“ as a mirror. In a double sense, Offred and Ofglen subvert Gilead’s institutions to see the true colours of one another.

“ ‘No’, I say. She lets out her breath, in a long sigh of relief. We have crossed the invisible line together.” (THT, 177)

But in the end, all this is like drops of water on a hot stone. In general, a “minimalist“ life prevails for the Handmaids:

“I pick the egg out of the cup and finger it for a moment. It’s warm. Women used to carry such eggs between their breasts, to incubate them. That would have felt good. The minimalist life. Pleasure is an egg.” (THT, 120)

She finds herself longing for things she used to despise in her former life, like talking about illnesses, gossiping, listening at doors... anything that could grant her “spiritual survival, [...] life as anything more than a minimally human being.”²³

“How I used to despise such talk. Now I long for it. At least it was talk. An exchange, of sorts.” (THT, 21)

4.2.3. Playing with language: Being a creative non-victim

Offred’s true power lies within herself. It is her own language that helps her to stay sane and alive. It gains her small victories for herself that she lives on, and in the end it also makes her triumph over Gilead. The way she does this is truly remarkable, particularly considering the situation that she is in. She tells her story orally but it is told in the fashion of a literary tradition. Thus she also obtains the power that comes with literacy in contrast to orality. To fully evaluate what this means, it is helpful to draw up a chart from what Mario Klarer says:²⁴

Mündlichkeit ist (Orality is)	Schriftlichkeit ist (Literacy is)
• subjektiv (subjective)	• objektiv (objective)
• konkret (concrete)	• abstrakt (abstract)
• gegenwärtig (present view)	• historische Perspektive (historic view)
• kontinuierlich (continuing)	• bewahrend (conserving)
• systemerhaltend/konservativ (conservative)	• revolutionär/innovativ (revolutionary, innovative)

Offred’s achievement in telling her story – and the powers that come with it – shall be looked at in detail with the aid of these characteristics.

²³ *Survival*, p. 33.

²⁴ M. Klarer, p. 153-155.

4.2.3.1. *Subjective - Objective*

Offred's narration is naturally subjective, as she tells from her point of view, and we do not get to know anything that she herself does not know – because she has not experienced them. She has no other way of knowing. At the same time, however, she is very objective in her way of describing her experiences. She manages to detach herself and describe with a clear, critical, vivisectioning eye, not blinded by Gilead's strategies. Her objectivity is often cutting sharp and surprisingly dry, laconic:

“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.” (THT, 104/105)

One wonders how she manages to keep so calm, objective, and descriptive in situations where an emotional explosion or collapse would seem more likely. It probably helps her to play down the cruelty and humiliation in her life.

Often she manages to see things from a different angle through irony and silent laughter, reducing people to size where she can handle them:

“Even at her age she still feels the urge to wreath herself in flowers. No use for you, I think at her, my face unmoving, you can't use them any more, you're withered. They're the genital organs of plants.” (THT, 161)

Laughter in itself possesses a subversive power. It is no coincidence that both the rebellious Moira and Offred's predecessor who left an inscription in the cupboard are depicted as people whose ability to laugh is an important part of their character.

Maybe Offred also uses her objectivity to remind herself of her reality when she is in danger of slipping too far into herself, into a “better”, a dream-world:

“The good weather holds. It's almost like June, when we would get out our sundresses and our sandals and go for an ice-cream cone. There are three new bodies on the Wall.” (THT, 53)

Other women go crazy, insane, diving into the past from which they don't resurface. Offred knows that this is a danger she has got to avoid:

“Sanity is a valuable possession; I hoard it the way people once hoarded money. I hoard it so I will have enough when the day comes.” (THT, 119)

Having power over herself, being able to move from subjectivity to objectivity, makes Offred less open for other people's power.

4.2.3.2. Concrete - Abstract

Offred's way of describing is highly abstract. She moves in “meta-levels” of all sorts: Meta-communication, meta-thought, meta-language, etc. She does not stick with describing realities as they are but she takes considerations about reality into her narration, too:

“I'll take care of it, Luke said. And because he said *it* instead of *her*, I knew he meant *kill*. That is what you have to do before you kill, I thought. You have to create an it, where none was before. You do that first, in your head, and then you make it real. So that's how they do it, I thought. I never seemed to have known that before.” (THT, 202)

This is a detection of theories on highly abstract levels: Psycholinguistics, mind styles, linguistic theories, etc. In general, Offred is very good at detecting underlying structures to things, intelligent and creative in her resources. She is constantly reading behind the lines, trying to read people's minds behind their utterances, taking the full range of semiotics to her aid in a world where verbal language is made so impersonal that one can neither give meaning nor read any meaning from it:

“ ‘Let that be a reminder to us,’ says the new Ofglen finally. I say nothing at first, because I am trying to make out what she means. She could mean that this is a reminder to us of the unjustness and brutality of the regime. In that case I ought to say *yes*. Or she could mean the opposite, that we should remember to do what we are told and not get into trouble, because of we do we will be rightfully punished. If she means that, I should say *praise be*. Her voice is bland, toneless, no clues there. I take a chance. “Yes,” I say.” (THT, 296)

Her abstract way of thinking and describing is a power for Offred. Since language has become intense in Gilead, a single phrase, even the tone of voice, can carry a number of meanings, and a “wrong“ answer, however small, can give away whether a person is a true supporter of the system or not. To be able to read this “language“ is a power, and so is the ability to “talk correctly“. Anything in Gilead carries meaning, and it is important to get it right for inner and outer survival.

Offred does not only apply this way of reading and talking to her environment but to herself as well:

“If I ever get out of here - Let’s stop here. I intend to get out of here. It can’t last forever. Others have thought such things, in bad times before this, and they were always right, [...] it didn’t last forever. When I get out of here.“ (THT, 144; emphasis G. Twohig)

She has the power to rethink her thoughts and thus create a new reality for herself, create the sense and feeling of hope. On the other hand, she also has the power to refuse things for herself:

“The door of the room - not *my* room, I refuse to say *my* [...] is not locked.“ (THT, 18)

4.2.3.3. Present view - Historic view

Offred’s understanding and use of language has not always been as deep as it is in this narration. In actual fact, her way of telling can only be explained from her knowing different societies. She belongs to a “transitorial generation“ (THT, 127) in Gilead which still has the knowledge of former times. Offred is determined not to lose this historic view because it gives her a perspective that helps her to survive. As a symbol for this, she holds her name – her real name, the one she had in the time before Gilead. It stands for what she used to be able to do and how other people used to see her, and as such it gives her power. It gives her even more power as she keeps it a secret: She cannot be known. Telling someone her name, as she does later on with Nick, gives that person power over her.

On several occasions, Offred recalls her past life, comparing the way she used to live then to her new cultural relativity. It is only through confronting the two that she gains a deeper insight into the politics and powers of language in general. It helps her to understand the new reality, to value what she used to have, and to not give up hope. She “wakes up to” the powers and possibilities of language.

In intertextual references (e.g. prayer “Our Father“, THT, 204/205, or René Descartes’ “Cogito ergo sum“, THT, 179), Offred both contrasts the two cultural relativities and expresses her innermost feelings.

4.2.3.4. *Continuing - Conserving*

In recalling the past, Offred often describes herself in contrast to her friend Moira. Moira is a much more outgoing, flamboyant character than Offred. This is expressed in the way she acts but also in her use of language which is strong, disrespectful, inventive, and in a sense innovative because she, as a woman, takes up a rather “male“ mode of expression – what is observed by linguists to be “male“, e.g. swearing and using sexual language. Moira finds it much harder than Offred to live a subdued life as a Handmaid, and she undertakes a repeated attempt to escape from the Centre. Offred looks to Moira for consolation and hope because she herself is not able to try and make any kind of escape. In the event, however, Moira is the one who ends up in a dead end and Offred has the power to keep her friend alive through building her a verbal “monument“:

“I’ve tried to make it sound as much like her as I can. It’s a way of keeping her alive.“ (THT, 256)

Offred has, and uses, the power to conserve, particularly through recording her story in the end.

Knowing that language is an expression of the personality, Offred also concludes from language to the person. She finds an inscription in her wardrobe which she assumes must have been written by her predecessor:

“*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*. When I imagine the woman who wrote them, I think of her as about my age, maybe a little younger. I turn her into Moira [...]: quir-

ky, jaunty, athletic, with a bicycle once, and a knapsack for hiking. Freckles, I think; irreverent, resourceful.“ (THT, 62)

And she is astoundingly right with her assumption:

“I tried that out on Rita, the day I found the message. Who was the woman who stayed in that room? I said. Before me? [...] Which one? she said [...] The lively one. I was guessing. The one with freckles. You knew her? Rita asked, more suspicious than ever. I knew her before, I lied. I heard she was here. Rita accepts this.“ (THT, 63)

There is only one characteristic of Offred’s story that could hint at its oral origin: The style is of rather simple structure – with main clauses one after the other and few subordinate clauses – and quite repetitive. The reason might be that it is far easier to talk (and to memorize) in a simple rather than complicated sentences. However, instead of classifying this style as a literary device, one could see it as a form of mind style²⁵. In that case her dry, objective, cutting, and short sentences are an expression of Offred’s feelings, attitudes, intentions, etc., rather than a proof of an oral tradition.

4.2.3.5. *Conservative - Innovative*

In all this, Offred is extremely innovative, the last and most powerful characteristic of literacy, according to Klarer. The Handmaid keeps up a playfulness with language throughout her narration, searching for multiple meanings behind words, following them up to their roots, giving them new meanings.

“I sit in the chair and think about the word *chair*. It can also mean the leader of a meeting. It can also mean a mode of execution. It is the first syllable in *charity*. It is the French word for Flesh. None of these facts has connection with the others. These are the kinds of litanies I use, to compose myself.“ (THT, 120)

²⁵ “mind style“ (Mentalstil): “Der Begriff des Mentalstils [...] verweist also auf den besonderen Aspekt der (unbewußten oder bewußten) Stilgebung, der weniger - wie etwa beim Stil im allgemeinen - auf ästhetische, funktionale, situativ-kontextuelle, gattungsmäßige and ähnliche Determinanten, sondern speziell auf Einstellungen, Attitüden, Meinungen, Werthaltungen, Weltanschauungen, psychische Befindlichkeiten, also auf mentale (kognitive und emotionale) Einstellungen, bzw.

Through this, she “composes herself“, gives herself a form, a body, a valuable unity because all that Gilead has left her is

“fragments, like a body caught in crossfire or pulled apart by force.“ (THT, 279)

She vivisects words, finds and displays different meanings and realities, illustrating that

“context is all.“ (THT, 154)

It helps her to clear her mind, it keeps her busy (“There´s time to spear. This is one of the things I wasn´t prepared for - the amount of unfilled time, the long parenthesis of nothing.“ THT, 120), and it shows what is on her mind. Playing with language is a device to test a person´s knowledge and to show what track of thought he/she takes; it is a way into the person.²⁶ Also, Offred frequently expresses herself in metaphors as an effective stylistic device to both bring across exactly what she wants to say and to express, on a psycholinguistic level, so to speak, what is on her mind. It is no coincidence that she uses many animal, children, and moon metaphors: They reflect the deeper feeling of hers that her state of being in Gilead is that of an animalistic, victimized, underprivileged, purely biological, pre-civilized being which has others to make up her mind for her.²⁷

Offred succeeds in bringing multiple meanings even into single words in an otherwise unforeboding context. With a new meaning of a word, however, the context may change completely. Already in the opening paragraph of the story she opens

Befindlichkeiten, der Charaktere/Sender zurückzugehen scheint. [...] Der Begriff des Mentalstils z.B. kommt an psychologischen Fragestellungen nicht vorbei.“ R. Nischik, *Mentalstilistik*, p. 3.

²⁶ This is exactly what happens in the Commander´s room when he and Offred play Scrabble. This game´s purpose is to play with language. The more innovative and varied the words and ideas, the more points one scores, and who scores most points wins. Scrabble thus epitomizes exactly what Offred does all the time with her language. Why she laughs after the first meeting with the Commander is not quite certain: Maybe she laughs at seeing this concept of power symbolized in a harmless game she once used to rate as trivial; maybe it makes her laugh to see what helps her to survive in Gilead is the concept of a cardboard game; maybe she laughs because Scrabble shows her that she is more intelligent and powerful than the ones officially in power -- after all, it was a piece of cake for her to win against the Commander.

²⁷ “Aufgrund des bei metaphorischer Sprachgebung implizierten Übertragungsprozesses [...] stellt Metaphorik einen der potentiell aussagekräftigsten Untersuchungsbereiche für Mentalstilstudien dar.“ R. Nischik, *Mentalstilistik*, p. 11.

up a fan of facets with one word: “Palimpsest”²⁸. (THT, 28) In the first place – and this is what Offred says explicitly – it is a word describing the past, the former cultural relativity that has been erased or reversed in meaning to put another in its place. Still, the former culture and meaning has not been destroyed, at least not to the ones who remember and who can read “reverse meanings“. The past is still hovering over Offred and the “transitorial generation“, no matter how forcefully those in power might try to stamp it out: The new era has been engraved on the background of their knowledge.

A second reading of the word suggests that Offred is going to do just this with Gilead’s culture: Take the language that it uses and print another meaning on the reverse side of it. She takes words, turns them around, piles up meanings to create a variety and a perspective:

“What I need is perspective. The illusion of depth, created by a frame, the arrangements of shapes on a flat surface. Perspective is necessary. Otherwise there are only two dimensions. Otherwise you live with your face squashed against a wall, everything a huge foreground [...]. Your own skin like a map, a diagram of futility, crisscrossed with tiny roads that lead nowhere. Otherwise you live in the moment. Which is not where I want to be.“ (THT, 153)

As a result of this proceeding, she encourages the reader to do the same with her story: Read beneath the obvious, reveal other meanings.²⁹

On a different note, the word “palimpsest“ illustrates that Offred is an educated and eloquent woman; it unlayers her personality.

Carrying this game of playing and interpreting language to extremes, the use of “palimpsest“ might also open the reader’s eyes to the possibilities of language that are at his/her hand: We can look up words, we have access to sources of knowled-

²⁸ “Palimpsest“: 1- A piece of writing-material or manuscript on which the original writing has been effaced to make room for other writing. 2- A monumental brass turned and re-engraved on the reverse side. The Concise Oxford Dictionary, 1990. p. 857.

²⁹ In doing so, one can of course not help noticing that her creativity, awareness, and sharpness come to a dangerously low point when Offred indulges in an affair with Nick. But the question why it is

ge, and in using them, a world of possibilities opens up before us – possibilities that we may not have been aware of before.

Looking at the forms of media that are involved in *The Handmaid's Tale*, one might also say that Offred's original narration is a palimpsest, as her audio-recording has been transferred to paper. Even though none of the words gets lost, their original meaning can get somewhat clipped or altered without the pronunciation. Writing is a much more limited form of expression for the individual than speaking: Where it would take a speaker only a certain colouring of his/her voice to portray a whole range of intentions and meanings, it takes a number of words to bring the same intention to paper – and often even that is not really successful because written language is limited in that sense. To stress certain pronunciations, some words are printed in italics; often paragraphs are given to help bring meanings across; but on the whole, the non-verbal side of written language is extremely limited – or, to be exact, there is no such thing as a non-verbal side to written language.

As illustrated, Offred has developed a powerful language of her own through contrasting her old, familiar cultural relativity with the new, Gileadean one. Her “litanies“ of revolt are made through creativity where Gilead is only a “genius“ (THT, 319) in the synthesis of already existing devices. Through her creativity Offred is in a non-victim position. With this background one can read sentences like

“I never looked good in red, it's not my colour.“ (THT, 18)

as a refusal of the fundamentalist, totalitarian regime – which in return brought Jessie Givner³⁰ and Michele Lacombe³¹ to read this revolt even in Offred's name: “Off-red“³².

that she is suddenly using “traditional grammars“ (Madonne Miner, p. 164) would give enough material for yet another thesis.

³⁰ Givner, p. 59.

³¹ Lacombe, p. 7.

³² This hypothesis demands, at least partly, that Offred had any form of influence on the name she wore in Gilead. Under this condition it seems a little far-fetched to really read her name as a revolt since it is most likely a matter of coincidence.

This “name-game“, however, inspires a different idea. Looking up the name of “Gilead“ in the Bible, one can find that it used to denote an area of Northern Jordan. The society there was characteri-

Offred accomplishes her goals not by establishing a new form of language but by taking the “old language and making new patterns with it“. Thus there is no real need for a new language.

Despite her creativity, however, Offred naturally comes to the limits of language:

“I made that up. It didn’t happen that way. Here is what happened [...]. It didn’t happen that way either. I’m not sure how it happened; not exactly. All I can hope for is a reconstruction: the way life feels is always only approximate.“ (THT, 275)

“What I feel is more complicated than that. I don’t know what to call it.“ (THT, 68)

4.2.4. The need for a recipient

Offred succeeds in counteracting Gilead’s victimization through linguistic playfulness and inventiveness. But it is “only“ survival which she achieves. In order to gain the necessary completion of her story, through which she earns a reflection, a body, a self, she desperately needs a recipient: “To live in prison is to live without mirrors. To live without mirrors is to live without the self.“³³ She needs a mirror to be reassured of her own existence with all its value and depth:

“But if it’s a story, even in my head, I must be telling it to someone. You don’t tell a story only to yourself. There’s always someone else. Even when there is no-one. A story is like a letter.“ (THT, 49/50)

This is why she tells her story although

“it hurts to tell it over, over again. Once was enough: wasn’t once enough for me at the time? But I keep on going [...]. By telling you anything at all I’m at least believing in you, I believe you’re there [...].“ (THT, 279)

In telling, she imagines someone listening to her and giving her her full self:

zed by “Will ye steal, murder and commit adultery, and swear falsely, and burn incense unto Baal, and walk after other gods whom ye know not [...].“ (Jeremiah, 7.9) Since this portrays what is also true for the Gilead of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, one might be lead to believe that it could be a naming introduced by Offred herself. But the “Historical Notes“ prove that the name of Offred’s State was indeed Gilead.

³³ From the poem “Marrying the Hangman“. M. Atwood 1987, *Poems. 1976-1986*.

“[...] I believe you into being. Because I’m telling you this story, I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are.” (THT, 279)

But she also means: “I tell, therefore I am.”³⁴ She knows telling the story makes sense:

“ ‘Tell me everything.’ Moira shrugs. ‘What’s the point?’ she says. But she knows there is a point, so she does.” (THT, 255)

By now the reader knows to read this as: Offred knows that there is a point in telling. And so she does.

In the end her story finds a recipient: A group of scientists has found her tapes, and a professor gives a talk on the findings. During his sermon, it becomes clear that this kind of audience is probably not quite what Offred was hoping for. This man ridicules parts of Offred’s story and thus makes her a victim again.³⁵ He cannot evaluate the information he has: He regrets that Offred has not told her audience more about the system of Gilead as such, thus misreading the whole concept of the story. He really tears Offred’s literary body into “fragments, like a body caught in crossfire or pulled apart by force.” or, as Nancy Bazin puts it:

“[...] the historians [...] silence her story as effectively as death might have.”³⁶

But who does actually lose out here? Is it Offred whose story is treated with violence, ignorance, and disrespect, denying it its power, or is it the professor and his audience who simply lack the ability to decode Offred’s language and remain blind to her creativity and power? Probably both. The beauty of a story, however, is that it can reach a wide audience and inspire *many* ways of reading.

5. Conclusion

Language, or rather: The use of it, is a device through which an individual defines his/her position in society, and the type of language allowed by the State defines

34 Baccolini, p. 144.

35 Beran, p. 72.

the person's influence and power for her/himself and within the society. By knowing and contrasting different cultural relativities, language in particular, one gains deeper insight into one's own cultural surrounding, thus increasing knowledge and power. Giving oneself a background to "scoop from" and being creative, being able to create depth where otherwise there would be only a surface: This is the "secret" that Offred knows and she uses it to survive.

A recipient is needed, however, in order not to have a story stick with the individual. To give language and the meaning, the politics and hence the power conveyed its full impact, it has to be mirrored by someone else but the creator. Only then can a story told unfold its potential.

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³⁶ Bazin, p. 125.

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