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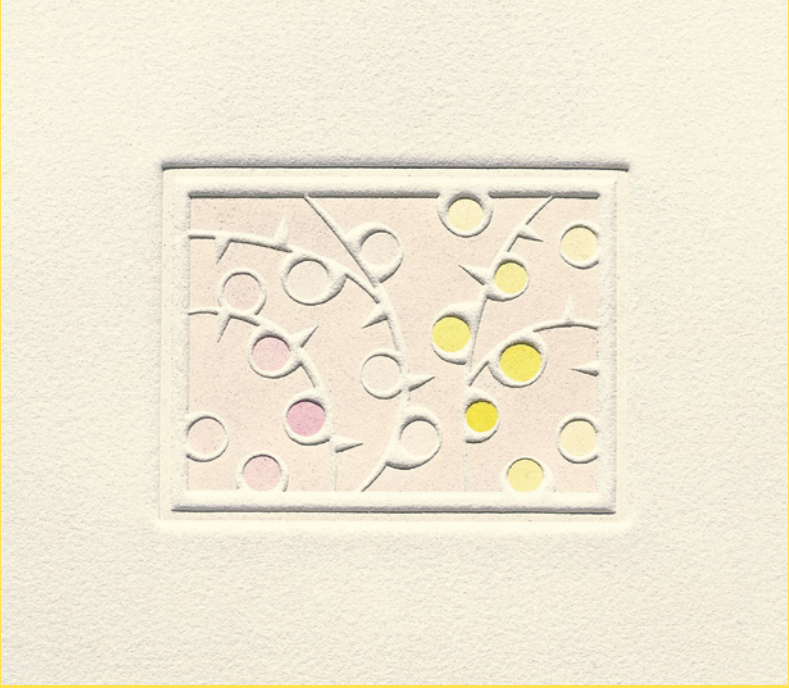

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Atwood at 80

Guest Editors: MICHELLE GADPAILLE and JASON BLAKE

Journal Editors: SMILJANA KOMAR and MOJCA KREVEL

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Introduction

Introduction: Atwood at 80

When Margaret Atwood celebrated her 80th birthday in November 2019, there was a feeling that the occasion called for a burst of applause – figuratively speaking. Around Europe, many Canadian scholars and Canadian Studies Associations responded with a range of activities. Slovenia contributed handsomely: first, with an event at the Univerzitetna knjižnica Maribor – *Fourscore and More: Margaret Atwood at Eighty* – and second, with this special issue dedicated to Atwood's recent work.

With a tight deadline for submissions, we were lucky to have the cooperation of a conference: *Margaret Atwood 80: Central European Interpretations / Margaret Atwood 80: interprétations de l'œvre en Europe Centrale*, which was jointly sponsored by Károli Gáspár University of The Reformed Church In Hungary, Pázmány Péter Catholic University and Eötvös Loránd University. The organisers graciously included *ELOPE*'s Call for Papers in their programme, and several of the papers published here originated from that initiative.

Atwood herself found the time to help open the conference (virtually) with a few words – "Wait a minute! 80? What happened? Just the other day I was 77! Where did the time go?" – and some illustrations of her "Writing Burrow," as well as of illustrations depicting her need to turn down some invitations and requests for interviews.

Originally, the editors envisioned a concentration on Atwood's 21st-century works; however, this worthy objective gave way under the cultural dominance of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood's 1985 novel. Given the recent appearance of its sequel, *The Testaments* (2019), the pair of novels inevitably garnered considerable critical attention (not to mention a Booker Prize for the latter).

Contributors to this issue range from young scholars at the beginning of their careers, to experienced scholars who have devoted much of their careers to Atwood. Both voices are welcome and show the long-lasting relevance of Atwood's oeuvre.

Coral Ann Howells' overview of the later Atwood reminds us that Atwood continues to reinvent herself as a writer. Her literary output in recent decades has been wide-ranging, and the articles collected here bear witness to this range, even if Atwood the poet, Atwood the non-fiction writer, Atwood the children's author, and Atwood the comic book author are not present.

Though some of the articles collected here focus on the red-clad handmaids and the world of Gilead, others look to perhaps lesser-known Atwood creations. In addition to a postcolonial approach to Atwood's *Cat's Eye*, there is a consideration of Atwood as a postmodern myth-rewriter in *The Penelopiad*, Atwood as the creator of *MaddAddam*'s post-apocalyptic world, along with a paper highlighting the challenges of translating Atwood's deceptively straightforward prose, and, finally, an examination of Atwood the illustrator.

The editors wish to thank all those whose silent contributions made this special issue possible: the translators – Tjaša Mohar, Tina Ritlop, Tadeja Tement, Tadej Todorović and Simon Zupan – and the journal editors – Andrej Stopar and Mojca Krevel.

Michelle Gadpaille, University of Maribor, Slovenia
Jason Blake, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia
Guest Editors of ELOPE Vol. 17, No. 1 (2020)

Part II

Articles

Coral Ann Howells
University of Reading / University of London,
United Kingdom

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Atwood's Reinventions: So Many Atwoods

ABSTRACT

In *The Malahat Review* (1977), Canadian critic Robert Fulford described Margaret Atwood as "endlessly Protean," predicting "There are many more Atwoods to come." Now at eighty, over forty years later, Atwood is an international literary celebrity with more than fifty books to her credit and translated into more than forty languages. This essay focuses on the later Atwood and her apparent reinvention since 2000, where we have seen a marked shift away from realistic fiction towards popular fiction genres, especially dystopias and graphic novels. Atwood has also become increasingly engaged with digital technology as creative writer and cultural critic. As this reading of her post-2000 fiction through her extensive back catalogue across five decades will show, these developments represent a new synthesis of her perennial social, ethical and environmental concerns, refigured through new narrative possibilities as she reaches out to an ever-widening readership, astutely recognising "the need for literary culture to keep up with the times."

Keywords: later Atwood; fiction post-2000; dystopia; popular fiction; digital technology; *MaddAddam*; *The Testaments*

Atwood v iskanju novega: Številne podobe

POVZETEK

Kanadski kritik Robert Fulford je v *The Malahat Review* (1977) Margaret Atwood opisal kot »neskončno protejsko« in napovedal: »Atwood bomo videli še v številnih podobah.« Štiri desetletja kasneje je Atwood pri osemdesetih svetovna literarna zvezdnica z več kot petdeset izdanimi knjigami, prevedenimi v več kot štirideset jezikov. Pričujoči esej se osredotoča na Atwood v poznejšem obdobju in na njeno novo podobo po letu 2000, ko se je opazno odmaknila od realistične pripovedne proze k bolj popularnim žanrom, kot so distopije in grafični romani. Atwood kot ustvarjalno pisateljico in kulturno kritičarko vse bolj zanima tudi digitalna tehnologija. V prispevku so njena dela, nastala po letu 2000, obravnavana v luči njenega ustvarjanja v obdobju petih desetletij. Njihov razvoj predstavlja novo sintezo aktualnih družbenih, etičnih in okoljskih vprašanj, obravnavanih s pomočjo novih pripovednih možnosti, ki se odpirajo ob iskanju poti do vse širšega kroga bralcev in zavedanju, da »mora iti književna kultura v korak s časom«.

Ključne besede: Atwood v poznejšem obdobju; proza po letu 2000; distopija; pop-proza; digitalna tehnologija: *MaddAddam*; *Testamenti*

1 Introduction

In 1977 when *The Malahat Review* published the first collection of critical essays on Margaret Atwood, Robert Fulford, the influential Canadian arts critic and editor of *Saturday Night* predicted, "There are many more Atwoods to come" (Fulford 1977, 98). Now at eighty, forty years later, Atwood is still displaying "that freakish combination of personal magic, artistry and infallible timing" (Sandler 1977, 5) which have made her an international literary celebrity. Her latest novel *The Testaments*, co-winner of the Booker Prize, was top English-language bestseller in 2019, while the Hulu +MGM television adaptations of *The Handmaid's Tale* have hugely increased her popular profile as her Handmaids have escaped from the novel into the real world, where those iconic costumes have become a universally recognisable symbol of feminist protest. Her Canadian award of the Adrienne Clarkson Prize for Global Citizenship in 2018, together with her many international prizes, confirms the evolution of her global persona as a major writer and public spokesperson on human rights (especially women's and Indigenous rights) and environmental issues. Though Fulford was referring rather slyly to Atwood's public image when he claimed that, "For the media, Atwood is endlessly re-usable because she is endlessly Protean" (Fulford 1977, 98), her long literary career has also confirmed his prediction.

This essay will focus on the later (or rather, the latest) Atwood in its critical assessment of her apparent reinvention since 2000. In this period, she has published twenty-two new volumes of fiction and non-fiction, poetry, children's stories, and recently four graphic novels. There has been a marked shift of emphasis away from realistic fiction towards genre fiction, especially dystopias, together with increasingly urgent warnings of environmental disaster, while the digital revolution has become a more evident presence in her storytelling, where we find frequent references to social media and new technologies featuring as transformative elements in plot construction. In *Hag-Seed*, for example, spectacular theatrical effects recreated by computer simulation as 3-D virtual reality are important agents in a secret revenge plot where political chicanery is unmasked. This essay argues that Atwood's post-2000 fiction represents the latest stage in her revisiting of two perennial concerns with survival and the endless mystery of what being human might mean. Her themes, her ethical emphases and her narrative strategies have not changed, though there has been a widening of scope in addressing global issues and a more daring experimentalism in her mixing of highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow genres. For Atwood, "A word after a word after a word is power" ("Spelling," Atwood 1982, 64), which is the subtitle of Nancy Lang and Peter Raymont's new documentary previewed in Toronto in November, emphasising the importance of language and storytelling in her work (Lang and Raymont 2019). I have deliberately avoided the term "late style," which seems inappropriate for such an endlessly inventive writer, but as Lee Clark Mitchell remarks of artists with long careers, "Even when they seem to maintain a certain continuity, they rarely persist as static or unchanging, though what we observe in late efforts often illustrates what has been latent all along" (Mitchell 2019, 25–26). This is true too of Atwood, as I argue in this retrospective reading of her work across five decades.

I shall consider first her signature reinventions post-2000, her five dystopias (all set in the United States), where Atwood resembles her aging Sybil: "I tell dark stories / before and after

they come true" (Atwood 2007, 106). Atwood believes that these narratives come straight out of reality, "these times of threat and rage" when "the ground shifts beneath our feet, and mighty winds blow, and we are no longer sure of where we are. Also, we are no longer sure of *who* we are. Whose face is that in the mirror?" (Atwood 2017, 70). In the *MaddAddam* trilogy, her post-apocalyptic epic written over ten years, she takes a decisive leap beyond her three Canadian historical novels of the 1990s to address global concerns and her ever-widening international readership. She engages with our contemporary anxieties about the climate crisis and advances in bioengineering, exploring what Amelia Defalco describes as "the uneasy relationship between contemporary biotechnology and bioethics in a biocapitalist economy" (Defalco 2017, 438).[1]

2 Later Atwood

Atwood begins her fiction with a global disaster scenario in *Oryx and Crake*, a Last Man narrative where we see Snowman, the only human survivor of a pandemic plague, now living on the beach in a world wrecked by climate change, bioterrorism and genetic engineering, where his only companions are those childlike transgenic humanoids called Crakers (after their creator who also engineered the pandemic). Atwood sounds all the alarm bells from the beginning with her now-famous questions: "What if we continue down the road we're already on? How slippery is that slope? What are our saving graces? Who's got the will to stop us?" (Atwood 2005, 323).The trilogy offers various possible answers to all these questions as it traces a wide narrative arc from *Oryx and Crake* through *The Year of the Flood* with its eco-spiritual cult of God's Gardeners, to *MaddAddam* where she imagines what survival might look like after apocalypse. It ends with her fantasy of a new posthuman generation of human-Craker hybrid persons and interspecies co-operation, her vision of a New Jerusalem which marks the beginning of a new historical cycle. This is close to science fiction, for the future is unknowable, and it all depends on the choices we make now. Here we see Atwood's characteristic double vision fully displayed, where her well-documented scientific research is transformed through narrative art into speculative fiction. Certainly, the transgenic Crakers are a new departure for her, though we need to see them in context. *Oryx and Crake* was published on the 50th anniversary of Watson and Crick's discovery of the structure of DNA and the same year that the entire human genome was sequenced. Atwood is not anti-science, but believing that "fiction writing is the guardian of the moral and ethical sense of the community" (Atwood 1982, 346), she warns against the unforeseen consequences of biotechnology experiments without ethical boundaries. Referring to the Crakers, she reflects on what it means to be human as she asks: "How far can human beings go in the alteration department before those altered cease to be human? ... Now that we ourselves can be the workmen, what pieces of this work shall we chop off?" (Atwood 2011, 91).

The transgenic Crakers represent a radical alternative to anthropocentric blindness, which threatens dire consequences for humanity and for our living planet. They form one thematic strand in her speculations on human survival in the trilogy, where her environmental

[1] For a more extensive analysis, see Coral Ann Howells, "Dire Cartographies: Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* Trilogy (2003–2013)," *The Anglo-Canadian Novel in the Twenty-First Century: Interpretations*, eds. Maria and Martin Löschnigg (Heidelberg: Universitatsverlag Winter, 2019), 21–32.

warnings reach a new high point of urgency. In a recent interview she pointed out that she "did climate apocalypse quite thoroughly in the *MaddAddam* trilogy," then added "Maybe not thoroughly enough, because I think it is actually going to be worse" (Atwood 2019b). Atwood grew up in a family of early environmentalists, spending a large part of her childhood in northern Ontario and in northern Quebec, and she and her late husband Graeme Gibson were passionate environmental campaigners for decades. Art and life come together in her 1970s fiction and non-fiction, where she directly addresses her Canadian readers in *Surfacing* and *Survival*. The threat of pollution is there in the first sentence of *Surfacing*, where "The white birches are dying, the disease is spreading up from the south" (7), and in *Life Before Man* (1979), a central topic is extinction: "Does she care whether the human race survives or not? In her bleaker moments, of which, she realises, this is one, she feels that the human race has it coming" (Atwood 1992b, 101). Her warnings about environmental catastrophe are there throughout her poetry and short stories, in poems from the 1960s like "Elegy for the Giant Tortoises," then in the 1980s with "Frogless" and "Marsh Languages," and in the 1990s with "Hardball" where the future is rolling towards us "like a two-ton truck in the wrong lane" (Atwood 1992, 93). There is also a passage reminiscent of H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* in *The Blind Assassin* in an old woman's apocalyptic vision of a huge metal pterodactyl which threatens to destroy all human life (Atwood 2001, 583), while in *The Tent* "Many things are howling out there, in the howling wilderness" (Atwood 2006, 143). Wilderness, that iconic Canadian landscape image in Atwood's early writing, returns in savage form in the trilogy as her environmental concerns have widened beyond national space to a worldwide nightmare where the human race is on the edge of extinction.

After the trilogy, Atwood turns away from global disaster back to the network of contemporary human relations, anxieties and hopes as her dystopias loop closer to our present, with *The Heart Goes Last* and *The Testaments*, her sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale*, for "History does not repeat itself, but it rhymes" (Atwood 2019c, 407). As a sequel, *The Testaments* has a long backstory. As Atwood remarked, "Some books haunt the reader. Others haunt the writer. *The Handmaid's Tale* has done both" (Atwood 2012a). Her return to Gilead is the latest stage in what has been labelled "the Handmaid phenomenon," for the original novel and its hugely successful television adaptation and the new book all form part of a continuum. When she announced her new novel in 2018, she said, "Dear Readers, everything you've ever asked me about Gilead and its inner working is the inspiration for this book. Well, about everything. The other inspiration is the world we've been living in." Atwood reclaims her story in real time, negotiating across the television series with her daring references to Trump's America: "For a long time we were going away from Gilead and then we turned around and started going back towards Gilead, so it did seem pertinent" (Atwood 2019b). She also alludes to the rise of right-wing fundamentalism, the refugee crisis, the #MeToo movement and the global climate emergency. But once again Atwood has surprised her readers with her reinventions as she sets her narrative fifteen years after the ending of *The Handmaid's Tale* when Offred climbs into the black van. This is not Offred's story, nor is it principally about Handmaids, for Offred is only a shadowy presence, the Handmaids are peripheral figures, and the signature colour has changed from red to green. Is this possibly a sign of hope and renewal? Atwood has chosen a different fictional space from her earlier novel and the television series, leaving Offred's story to Bruce Miller, the TV showrunner, though with certain provisos: "Hands off

Aunt Lydia," and "Don't touch that baby!" adding "I've given him a lot of blank space that will be his to fill" (Atwood 2019b). She remains in authority over her own story.

To quote Offred, "This is time, nor am I out of it" (Atwood 2005a, 47), and in the space between *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* the totalitarian state of Gilead has become worse. No longer is it a society in transition, with continual tensions between a collective memory of the time before and life under a newly imposed ideology, for in this Middle and Late Period it has become embedded as a brutally repressive regime with its mass executions, its secret service of Angels and Eyes, its updated surveillance systems, and its doctrine of biological essentialism. Women's bodies are at the service of the state as child bearers, not only with the Handmaid system but also with the new generation of girls who are raised illiterate and groomed for early arranged marriages. Like *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Testaments* focuses on the stories of women in Gilead, though instead of Offred's singular narrative, there are three female narrators: wicked old Aunt Lydia and two younger women who belong to Gilead's second generation, Agnes and Daisy (also known as Jade and finally revealed to be "Baby Nicole"). Through these different women's voices Atwood offers a wide perspective on Gilead's history, its present state, and the mechanisms that presage its collapse. This is completely different from Offred's prison narrative where she tells her Commander that she would like to know:

> "Know what?" he says.
>
> "Whatever there is to know," I say ... "What's going on" (198).

Following the structural design of the *MaddAddam* trilogy which develops from Snowman's single eye-witness account in *Oryx and Crake* to its multi-voiced sequels, so *The Testaments* is a multidimensional narrative. Not only are there three voices, but within these eye-witness narratives, Atwood interweaves her socio-political commentary with an array of popular fiction genres, for this is also a crime story, a spy thriller, a revenge tale, and a Girls' Own adventure story, and this novel has two endings. Through its multiple time dimensions, Atwood has created a historically shifting novelistic structure, telescoping the narrative present (the novel as we read it) with the past, for what we have been reading is all archival evidence, as we discover in the academic conference at the end, where Atwood projects a fictive future beyond Gilead's collapse with the "subsequent Restoration of the United States of America" (414).

If that ending reminds us of *The Handmaid's Tale*, so do its thematic continuities, for this too is a novel about power and powerlessness, about the sexual abuse of women, and female strategies of resistance to patriarchal tyranny. However, Offred was powerless to do anything except save her own sanity in her secret defiance of the regime (as are Agnes and Nicole), whereas Aunt Lydia is a woman with power – *some* power – though she too must plot in secret. It is through the interconnectedness of these women's voices that Atwood constructs different forms of discourse to accommodate women's representations of their own gendered identities and their diverse forms of resistance to the patriarchal structure of oppression in which they are trapped. Originally presented as separate segments, their stories gradually intertwine as the narrative develops, so that by Chapter 20 ("Bloodlines") we hear all three voices together.

Aunt Lydia, now the Director of Ardua Hall and the fearsome controller of the women's side of the Gileadean enterprise, is the dark centre of this novel. Night after night, she sits in her private sanctum in the college library writing the secret history of the crimes of Gilead and of her own crimes: "Over the years I've buried a lot of bones; now I'm inclined to dig them up again – if only for your edification, my unknown reader" (Atwood 2019c, 4). An old and endlessly cunning survivor, she is aware that "Knowledge is power, especially discreditable knowledge" (35), to be hoarded and used when necessary as a lethal weapon. Within her history she writes a defence of her own life, where her Ardua Hall Holograph reveals a more complex female subject than the sadistic figure from *The Handmaid's Tale* and the television series as we learn her backstory. Her survival narrative and her justification for the choices she has made do not necessarily make her more sympathetic, for she remains a morally compromised figure, who is a collaborator with the regime, a double agent for the Mayday resistance movement, and finally Gilead's nemesis. As the latest in a long line of "spotty-handed villainesses" (Atwood 2005c, 171–86), she is a keeper of secrets and a ruthless strategist who finally gets her revenge. Atwood, who is always critical of stereotypes, insists there is no simple gender division between masculine and feminine qualities: if men are capable of treachery and violence, then so are women. Aunt Lydia is also the arch-plotter in a narrative which begins in a library, then accelerates into an adventure story on the high seas, only to end with Aunt Lydia alone in that library where, her revenge accomplished, she sits waiting for exposure and a traitor's death. Ever resourceful and always one step ahead, she plans to finish off her life with a stolen phial of morphine, choosing her own way to die: "Isn't that freedom of a sort?" she wonders with her customary sense of irony (32).

The two younger narrators continue Offred's story from an oblique angle, for they are both daughters of Handmaids. Indeed, they are both the daughters of Offred, as they discover in their quest for their vanished mother, though their histories are very different. Agnes, stolen from Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale* when the family tried to escape to Canada, is brought up among the Gilead elite. Educated as a good, pious, submissive, God-fearing girl, she too is capable of small gestures of resistance to Gilead's pressures, and is finally saved from a grotesque marriage to an aging Bluebeard by Aunt Lydia, to be trained as an Aunt – after which her story develops in unexpected ways. Daisy/Nicole was born in the television adaptation and smuggled out of Gilead, growing up in Toronto with foster parents who are killed on her sixteenth birthday, when she discovers that she is "a forgery done on purpose" (39). A typical rebellious teenager, she studied Gilead in high school, and disapproves of the regime and all it stands for, but all this is theoretical and in no way prepares her for the shock of the real thing when she goes there. Arriving at Ardua Hall, she recoils at her spooky welcome which reminds her of "one of those scenes in horror movies where you know the villagers will turn out to be vampires" (321). An outsider who turns out to be Gilead's original poster girl, she is the one who becomes the main agent in Gilead's downfall, for she is the messenger who carries Aunt Lydia's scandalous exposure of Gilead's corruption out to Canada on a microdot embedded in a tattoo in her arm. She and Agnes are destined to be the avenger's destroying angels. "Land safely," Aunt Lydia prays (392). And they do.

The Handmaid's Tale has been transformed into a thriller, and Offred's ambiguous exit "into the darkness within; or else the light" (307) has been refigured as a double ending here, one

light and one dark. The two girls make it to freedom in Canada where they deliver their damning document cache, which immediately goes on the news, presaging the collapse of Gilead, and they finally meet their mother – the only time that Offred appears in the novel. But this ending in the light of restoration and promise of renewal is juxtaposed with the other ending in the dark, where Aunt Lydia, her revenge accomplished, sits in the library waiting for death: "It's late: too late for Gilead to prevent its coming destruction ... And it's late in my life" (401). Bidding farewell to her unknown reader, she knows all that will remain as her legacy is her manuscript, hopefully to be discovered in the future by someone like her earlier self, "a young woman, bright, ambitious," when Aunt Lydia's ghost will "hover behind you, peering over your shoulder: your muse, your unseen inspiration, urging you on" (403). She will be the latest member of the Atwoodian parade of female ghost voices, joining Offred and Penelope and Grace Marks and Iris: "By the time you read this last page, that – if anywhere – is the only place I will be" (Atwood 2001, 637).

The supplementary academic symposium offers a kind of closure, when Gilead has become ancient history and these women's words have been resurrected as their testaments, now facsimiles displayed by the same Cambridge professor who discovered Offred's tapes in a metal footlocker. There is however, one final surprise, as the professor repeats the words found on a stone statue, an epitaph to "Becka, Aunt Immortelle," another of the tragic generation of Gilead's girls, which provide an uncanny reminder of women's self-sacrifice and resistance to Gilead's ideology, coded in words from the Old Testament: "A bird of the air shall carry the voice and that which hath wings shall tell the matter. Love is as strong as death."[2] There is the sense of an ending here, unlike in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Is this Atwood's farewell to Gilead? Characteristically, she leaves the way open, for when asked if there could be a third instalment, she responded: "Never say never to anything" (Atwood 2019b).

Turning to *The Heart Goes Last* (2015) and to the short story collection *Stone Mattress* which immediately preceded it, we find a wilder, stranger Atwood, a writer with a very Gothic imagination, someone who is fascinated by ghosts and hauntings, tricksters, and crimes and violence. These elements are not new, as a glance through her back catalogue indicates: a poetry collection called *Murder in the Dark* (1983) and one called *Good Bones* (1992), novels with titles like *Bodily Harm* (1981), *The Robber Bride, Alias Grace* and *The Blind Assassin* in the 1990s, and books of criticism with titles like *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature* (1995) and *Negotiating with the Dead* (2002), not to mention *Moving Targets: Writing with Intent* (2004) or *Moral Disorder* (2006). Indeed, these criminal tendencies are highlighted in Sharon Rose Wilson's essay collection entitled *Margaret Atwood's Textual Assassinations: Recent Poetry and Fiction*, with its focus on "Atwood's 'assassinations' of traditional genres, plots, narrative voices, structure, technique, and reader expectations" (Wilson 2003, xiii). Atwood views everything through her double vision, where on the one hand, her fiction focuses on contemporary socio-political and ethical issues, and on the other, she destabilises realism by hinting at hidden worlds and dark psychological impulses beneath civilised surfaces, even in her non-fiction study of finance and economics, *Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth* (2008). There is always an excess which disturbs us and stimulates our imaginations.

[2] These quotations are from *Ecclesiastes* 10:20 and *The Song of Solomon* 8:16.

The later Atwood returns to the popular fictional forms that have always been part of her stylistic repertoire, displaying a new freedom as she plays with genre fiction in the digital age, appealing to a younger generation who work and read online, and the digital revolution has become an insistent presence in her work. She has always loved popular fiction – comics, B movies, fairy tales and wonder tales – and has used these faintly disreputable genres throughout her career, repurposing them to fit her current agendas. Scholars have been analysing her subversive use of popular forms since the 1970s[3] as she has reinvented them in her ongoing series of narrative experiments, combining fictional artifice with social critique. Glancing quickly across her oeuvre, we may note her parody of the Harlequin romances in *Lady Oracle*, her postmodern Gothic fairy tale in *The Robber Bride* and her revisionary readings of Canadian history as Gothic or crime fiction in *Alias Grace* and *The Blind Assassin*, to mention some random samples.

However, it is her increasing engagement with digital technology which has opened new possibilities for her examination of contemporary culture with her revisionary use of popular forms. Atwood herself is now an established online presence, and the history of her involvement with electronic and social media up to 2012 has been traced by Lorraine York in her study of Atwood's "growing interactivity; and multimedia celebrity" (York 2013, 123). Atwood has long been alert to the new dimensions of electronic communication, introducing her Long Pen (her remote book-signing device) in 2006, though it was with *The Year of the Flood* (2009) that she really became digital, with her Tour blog (now her environmental website) and her launch into social media with her Twitter account. She now has nearly two million followers. She has made forays into online publishing as well, with *The Happy Zombies Sunrise Home*, co-authored with Naomi Alderman for the internet story-sharing site Wattpad, and her e-serial *Positron* for Byliner, where four instalments were published (2012–2103) before she rewrote it as her novel *The Heart Goes Last*. There is very little reference to new technologies in her fiction before 2000, though since then such references have proliferated. Even Penelope, speaking from Hades, talks of "the new ethereal-wave system that now encircles the globe" (Atwood 2005, 19). We may remember that in *The Handmaid's Tale* Offred in her life before Gilead was a librarian whose job was transferring books to computer discs, but Gilead's surveillance systems were still modelled on George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (by contrast with its updated systems in *The Testaments*). In *Oryx and Crake* Jimmie thinks back to the 1990s when his teenage world had become digital with its video games like Extinctathon, its porn sites and emails, and by the second volume of the trilogy, even God's Gardeners, those environmental activists, have a secret laptop, and Crake is a master hacker, tutored by Zeb, one of God's Gardeners. Atwood's post-apocalyptic landscape is littered with the flotsam of a "modernity beyond salvage" (Hicks 2016, title page), and cross-currents of communication methods swirl through the trilogy, reflecting before and after, with a return to oral storytelling and the handwritten book in the new speculative future. However, Atwood had already initiated a new conversation with her readers, creating a social context of digital exchange in a community which stretches beyond

[3] For contemporary studies of this topic, see Reingard M. Nischik, *Engendering Genre: The Works of Margaret Atwood* (2000), Gina Wisker, *Margaret Atwood: An Introduction to Critical Views of Her Fiction* (2012), and Jackie Shead, *Margaret Atwood: Crime Fiction Writer: The Reworking of a Popular Genre* (2015).

the printed book. For her, one form does not replace another: "Every prediction – radio would kill books, it didn't; television would kill movies, it didn't; e-reading will kill books, it hasn't – these predictions have all been wrong. You're never going to kill storytelling, because it's built into the human plan. We come with it" (Atwood 2012b).

Her bravura display of storytelling in *Stone Mattress* with its nine tales is situated in a long tradition "as it evokes the world of the folk tale, the wonder tale, and the long-ago teller of tales" (Atwood 2014, Acknowledgements), while referencing the idioms and technologies of contemporary culture. "*Stone Mattress* is a veritable sampler of genre fiction revisited" (Howells 2017, 299), where Atwood segues between fantasy fiction of the "sword-and-sorcery variety" in "Alphinland," Gothic horror in "The Freeze-Dried Groom" and "The Dead Hand Loves You," crime fiction in the title story, to a futuristic dystopia set in an old people's home with "Torching the Dusties." While exploiting the appeal of popular fiction, Atwood continues in her role as cultural critic and wry observer of the human condition: "I think a lot of writing is an attempt to figure out why people do what they do. Human behaviour, both saintly and demonic, is a constant amazement to me" (Atwood 2017, 70). In these "tales about tales" she considers questions of aging and mortality, and the way that private fantasies often blur the borders between real and fictional worlds, where actions may have unforeseen consequences revealed only through the passage of time. The title story provides one fascinating example, where a sexual crime committed fifty years ago is finally punished by its female victim. Atwood is playing with the murder mystery plot here, devising a feminist detective story that turns out to be an older woman's revenge on her teenage rapist, "a just-so story about how a naïve, small-town girl turned into a serial man-killer. It is simultaneously a story about coming-of-age in a sexist world and learning how to settle your own scores" (Barzilai 2017, 329), a story for this #MeToo age written years before the term was invented. Interestingly, Verna Pritchard, the murderess, is an avid reader of crime fiction who knows the importance of clues, getting rid of clues and laying false ones, for in this cleverly plotted narrative, she occupies all the main roles of victim, murderess and detective – and she may have committed the perfect crime. One might suspect that Verna has read Atwood's "Murder in the Dark," a scary game about murderers, victims and detectives, played with the lights off, where the roles may alternate: "Just remember this, when the scream at last has ended and you've turned on the light: by the rules of the game I must always lie" (Atwood 1983, 50).

Liars and tricksters, private obsessions and abuses of public trust all feature in *The Heart Goes Last*, another of Atwood's reinventions of dystopia, this time as surreal, darkly comic social satire. Once again, we see her characteristic concerns with social problems, questions of human rights, and the relation between institutional or corporate power and the concept of individual freedom, unfolding this time in the context of Western capitalist consumer society. Atwood situates her dystopia specifically in time and place, in the north-eastern USA after "the big financial-crash business-wrecking meltdown that turned this part of the country into a rust bucket" (Atwood 2015a, 5). She projects a fantasised futuristic scenario, extrapolating from current trends to address our anxieties about surveillance as an insidious component of everyday life ("You never know what the central IT people are tracking" [Atwood 2015a, 57]) and our clusters of unease around advances in biotechnology and robotics. Atwood invites readers to consider serious ethical questions here, though presenting her message as

carnivalesque entertainment shimmering with fantasy, for this novel is her reinterpretation of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where dystopia fuses with Atwoodian Gothic in the digital age.

Adopting Atwood's own characteristic double vision, we might see this text as a prelude to *Hag-Seed*, her reimagining of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* set in an Ontario men's prison in 2013, or looking back, we might note its resemblance to *Lady Oracle*, her neo-Gothic novel of the 1970s, with its dimensions of ironic humour where realism collides with Gothic conventions. *The Heart Goes Last* is about prisons (or forms of imprisonment) and about escape fantasies, as Atwood speculates on the complexities of human psychology. "When you write down an account of human behaviour, the account may look a lot like activism, since language has an inherent moral dimension, and so do stories … even if the writer claims only to be bearing witness" (Atwood 2017, 70).

Positron, a privatised prison masquerading as a gated community, which sells the American Dream of peaceful suburban living, is at the centre of this dystopia. Behind its advertising rhetoric, Positron is a closed system rigidly controlled by sophisticated electronic surveillance, offering the illusion of safety to people who have lost everything in the 2008 financial crash. Atwood's protagonists, Charmaine and Stan, a young working-class couple down on their luck, are seduced into signing the contract to join this social experiment, not bothering to decode its deceptive title (Positron / To Prison). This is the genesis of a narrative whose wild plot twists come to resemble the "fierce vexations" of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, though ending, like Shakespeare's comedy, with healing and liberation. As Atwood interprets it, the *Dream* is dark and threatening, a haunted, fearful world full of illusions, distractions, conflicting desires and transformations, an image of the disorders of fantasy and imagination, as her epigraph from the play suggests:

> Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,
> Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend
> More than cool reason ever comprehends.

Atwood embroiders on these elements, using Shakespeare's technique of dédoublement, "Creating an illusion through doubles – it's one of the oldest theatrical gimmicks in the box" (Atwood 2016a, 108). Atwood constructs a double plot which fractures into multiple subplots, with two main protagonists offering a dual-focused narrative perspective, and Positron as a Place "where everyone will have two lives: prisoners one month, guards or town functionaries the next. Everyone has been assigned an Alternate" (42). This rosy utopian experiment needs to be read against its own dark double, Atwood's article with its Orwellian subtitle "We are double-plus unfree," published in *The Guardian* just before her novel came out; in this article she warns against absolutist systems and our careless surrender of hard-won freedoms, specifically connected to digital technology: "Are we turning our entire society into a prison? If so, who are the inmates and who are the guards? And who decides?" (Atwood 2015b). Her novel develops the theme of imprisonment through her "strategy of excessive doubling" (Bronfen 1992, 419), but like the founders of Positron, "care has been taken to maintain the theme [though] considerable amenities have been added" (43). It is some of

these added amendments in Atwood's narrative, namely escape strategies from imprisonment of several kinds and the consequent proliferation of doubles, disguises and split identities, that I shall discuss here.

Atwood's first poetry collection was called *Double Persephone*, and both she and her critics have explored the doubles trope in its multiple iterations ever since *The Malahat Review*, when Rowland Smith in his article noted Joan Foster's double life and her "shadowy twin" in *Lady Oracle* (Smith 1977, 144). It is with *Lady Oracle*, its Gothic emphases and its feminine escape fantasies that we find a shadowy double for Charmaine returning after forty years. Certainly, the themes are different, for *Lady Oracle* is concerned with issues of feminine authorship (Bronfen 1992, 415) in this story of a woman writer trapped inside the Gothic romances that she compulsively revises. As has been pointed out, this novel draws on "postmodern anti-essentialist theories of the self that developed in the late 1970s and 80s" (Tolan 2007, 85), concepts which have since been expanded by feminist theorists like Judith Butler and subsequently reframed in the context of intersectional feminism. Charmaine is not a woman writer; so far as we know, she writes only one note, "I'm starved for you!" signed as "Jasmine" and sealed with a purple lipstick kiss (Atwood 2015a, 46), and in *Lady Oracle* there is no Positron. However, what Joan and her readers and Charmaine have in common is their desire for escape from the prison of domesticity and the boredom of their safe, conventional marriages: "Escape wasn't a luxury for them, it was a necessity" (Atwood 1982, 34). Atwood asks, "Should we choose the safe cage or the dangerous wild? Comfort, inertia and boredom, or activity, risk and peril? Being human and of mixed motives, we want both" (Atwood 2015b). This is true for both Charmaine and Stan, who embark on parallel illicit affairs after a year in Positron, rebelling against both kinds of imprisonment. Here I shall focus on Charmaine's feminine fantasies and her double lives, which resemble Joan's Gothic escape strategies with her multiple identities, though the added dimension of digital surveillance opens up wider questions about privacy and individual freedom.

Charmaine's secret affair with Max, Stan's Alternate, has all the glamour and tawdriness of True Romance: "It was like the copy on the back of the most lurid novel in the limited-titles library at Positron. Swept away. Drugged with desire … All of that … She'd thought it was only in books and TV, or else for other people" (53). In fact, it is on TV, for their passionate encounters are all filmed on hidden video cameras, to be used as evidence in a complex plot engineered by Max's wife, Jocelyn, who is Head of Surveillance, in her plan to sabotage the Positron project. Of course, neither Charmaine nor the reader knows this, and from Charmaine's perspective this affair spells not only release from Positron and from dailiness, but a new sexual awakening for her: "It felt safe to be caged in, now that she knew she had this other person inside her who was capable of escapades and contortions she'd never known about before. It wasn't Stan's fault, it was the fault of chemistry" (56). Her affair adds another dimension beyond married love, for "She did love Stan, but it was different. A different kind of love. Trusty, sedate. It went with pet fish …and with Closure" (53). As Charmaine revels in her fantasies of desire, she gradually comes into focus as a more complex and duplicitous subject than Stan's sweetly retro Doris Day image of her: "He wouldn't have her any other way. That's why he married her" (48). Atwood has been exploring female subjectivity throughout her career, insisting that "women have more to them than virtue. They are fully dimensional

human beings. They too have subterranean depths; why shouldn't their many-dimensionality be given literary expression?" (Atwood 2005c, 185). An embittered Stan phrases it differently: "Everyone has a shadow side, even fluffpots like her" (101). Only much later will he discover that Charmaine has an even darker double in her role as Positron's Chief Medications Administrator, her Death Angel role of relocating dissidents "in a different sphere" by lethal injection, which has sinister implications for himself. Is Charmaine really a murderess? And did she really mean to kill him? But that is another story where nightmare fantasy is acted out in real life, a crisis and a tipping point in the plot which I shall not address here.

Charmaine's doubleness is literalised in truly Gothic form at Positron's Possibilibots factory – that lucrative department which trades in male fantasies with its manufacture of sex robots, "exact replica female sex aids … For home and export" (165) – where the Director, who is obsessed with Charmaine, has commissioned her life-sized replica. One day in Customization Plus, Stan sees his wife's disembodied head lying on the table gazing up at him, and his shock of horror has its parallel in Charmaine's shiver of terror when, via a Posipad image (for digital tech is never absent in Positron), she too sees what Stan has seen, "Her very own head, with her very own hair on it" (232). She has come face to face with her double, her "evil twin," who then takes revenge on the Director (thanks to the intervention of Jocelyn the arch-plotter) by trapping him in his act of fantastic copulation: "There shouldn't be too much bruising. But don't be surprised if you see him walking like a duck" (236). This episode is as wickedly funny as Stan's traumatic exit from Positron carrying Jocelyn's damning evidence of its abuses on a flashdrive hidden in his silver belt buckle when he is shipped out to Las Vegas disguised as an Elvis sexbot in a blue satin-lined coffin – a parody of Gothic live burial with a digital twist. But Charmaine's double games and Stan's trials do not end there, as they become helplessly entangled in an increasingly bizarre series of plot transformations where dystopia morphs into a twistedly parodic version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Like Shakespeare's play, it ends as a comedy, though with a rather malicious Atwoodian authorial grin, as she returns her characters to the real world, and fantasies are dispelled. Charmaine is forced to face the responsibility of being a free human agent, and the novel ends with her being dragged out of her imaginary Eden of settled married bliss as she and Stan are given second chances with an echo of the final words of Milton's *Paradise Lost*: "The world is all before you, where to choose." / "How do you mean?" says Charmaine (306). Atwood does what she does so often, fusing popular fiction with literary tradition, destabilising comfortable Happy Endings with reminders of serious ethical concerns.

3 Conclusion

Naomi Alderman's comment on Atwood's 80th birthday best summarises Atwood's complex appeal: "What people sometimes seem to forget about Margaret's work is that she manages to write about the darkest and most terrifying parts of human psychology in a way that is still deeply funny and full of dark strange hope" (Alderman 2019). In my critical assessment of her fiction since 2000, reading it through the lens of her earlier work, I have traced continuities, innovations and shifts in perspective as her texts have charted her responses to what is going on in the world around us, displaying what her London agent Karolina Sutton described as her ability to read the moment and see ahead. To this I would add her ability to read our

present dystopian moment in a wider historical context which holds out an ambiguous hope for the future. After all, would she have written the first book for the Future Library, not to be opened for a hundred years, unless she hoped that there would still be people who could read? Atwood's work may look different since 2000, with its new emphasis on popular fiction and the added dimension of digital technology to her narrative strategies, but she remains a traditional storyteller, and whatever Atwoodian topic we explore has a long hinterland, refigured in response to changing circumstances. Her work is full of strong continuities, and the comment she made about aging artists and creativity in relation to Shakespeare's late plays bears repeating for its relevance to herself: "Age doesn't make you a different person, or a different writer for that matter. I think it makes you a different version of who you already were" (Atwood 2016b, 25).

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Aleksandra Vukelić
University of Belgrade, Serbia

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Othering, Resistance and Recovery in Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*

ABSTRACT

This paper deals with Margaret Atwood's novel *Cat's Eye* and its depiction of alienation, victimization and recovery in the life of its protagonist, Elaine Risley. Highlighting Elaine's sense of displacement and her feelings of fellowship with minority figures, the paper provides insights into these processes by relying on postcolonial theories of othering and cultural resistance. It first explores how Elaine is bullied, marginalized and alienated when the cultural and social differences of a new environment make her a target for allegations of abnormality. The focus then shifts to Elaine's development and maturation as a form of recovery, as well as to the roles that art, memory and compassion play in this process. Ultimately, the paper concludes that *Cat's Eye* depicts both an instance of othering and the heroine's struggle to reverse it. However, even for Elaine, a member of the white middle class, such a reversal remains inevitably incomplete.

Keywords: Margaret Atwood; *Cat's Eye*; othering; memory; recovery; oppression; resistance

Podrugačenje, uporništvo in ozdravitev v romanu *Mačje oko* Margaret Atwood

POVZETEK

Prispevek obravnava roman *Mačje oko* Margaret Atwood in opis alienacije, viktimizacije in ponovnega postavljanja na noge njene osrednje junakinje, Elaine Risley. V ospredju je Elainin občutek nepripadnosti in sočutje do obrobnih figur, ki sta predstavljena s postkolonialnimi teorijami podrugačenja in kulturnega upora. V prispevku so uvodoma opisani načini trpinčenja, marginalizacije in alienacije, ko Elaine zaradi kulturnih in socialnih razlik v novem okolju postane tarča očitkov o nenormalnosti. Pozornost se nato preusmeri na Elainin razvoj in dozorevanje kot obliko postavljanja na noge, prav tako je predstavljena vloga umetnosti, spomina in sočutja v tem procesu. Prispevek se sklene z ugotovitvijo, da Mačje oko opisuje primer podrugačenja in nemoč osrednje protagonistke, da bi obrnila tok dogajanja. Vendar se celo za Elaine, belopolto pripadnico srednjega razreda, tak zasuk zdi neizogibno nepopoln.

Ključne besede: Margaret Atwood; *Mačje oko*; podrugačenje; spomin; postavitev na noge; zatiranje; upor

1 Introduction

Margaret Atwood's critically acclaimed 1988 novel *Cat's Eye* relates the story of Elaine Risley, a successful painter who returns to Toronto from Vancouver for a retrospective of her work, only to find herself haunted by the long-repressed memories of her childhood. What is revealed to lie at the heart of her buried trauma are the cruelties of her childhood friend Cordelia and the tumultuous, abusive bond between the two girls. To regain control over her life and a complete sense of self, Elaine must *negotiate with the dead*,[1] confronting the murky visions of her past and appeasing the phantoms that torment her.

As Carol Osborne points out, Atwood's highlighting of the recovery of lost memories makes *Cat's Eye* part of a wider trend in the fiction of its era, particularly prominent in the works of African American women writers (1994, 96). Atwood's project, Osborne further explains, is perhaps more conspicuously linked to works by Alice Walker and Toni Morrison in her novel *Surfacing*, which "deals with the way in which one culture, that from the United States, threatens to obliterate another, that of Canadians, especially the native population of the North" (Osborne 1994, 112). However, grouping Atwood, as a white Canadian, together with postcolonial writers is inevitably problematic. According to Linda Hutcheon, although "Canada as a nation has never felt central" and has suffered from a sense of marginality, discussing the white Canadian experience of colonialism alongside those of Africa, India or the Caribbean is "both trivializing of the Third World experience and exaggerated regarding the (white) Canadian" (Hutcheon 1989, 155). Hutcheon thus points out that it would be much more accurate to refer to the Indigenous Peoples when discussing Canada and its culture in the context of postcolonialism.

Cat's Eye, however, strengthens Atwood's bond to minority writers and issues with its insistence on exploring the isolation and oppression of those labeled as outsiders in a middle-class, Protestant community. As Eleonora Rao suggests, Elaine grows up in "a place where she feels like a foreigner, where she felt and still feels out of place, isolated and excluded as if she were a member of a different culture or race" (2006, 103). Elaine's community seems to draw a similar parallel between her and colonial outsiders: at one point, she overhears Aunt Mildred, a former missionary in China, say that Elaine is "exactly like a heathen" and that no amount of instruction can make her change her ways (Atwood 2009, 212).

In exploring Elaine's trauma, critics have dealt extensively with the depictions of isolation and exclusion in *Cat's Eye*, with authors such as Banerjee and Jones linking Elaine's susceptibility to bullying to her "cultural position of a savage" (Banerjee 1990, 516) and to her family's "nomadic lifestyle" (Jones 1995, 30). "Odd Woman Out," a review written by Helen Yglesias, draws attention to the heroine's "precarious sense of herself" and suggests that it is mirrored in the sense of displacement experienced by Mr. Banerji, her father's guest from India (Yglesias 1989, 3). Analyzing Atwood's depiction of Christianity in the novel, Derry relies on Homi Bhabha's theories to interpret Elaine's initiation into middle-class culture (2016, 97). On the other hand, he also suggests that Elaine's privilege inevitably separates her fate from those of

[1] The phrase is borrowed from Atwood's 2002 non-fiction *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing*, in which she compares writing to a descent to the underworld.

the actual minorities in the novel. Vickroy and Osborne have both discussed Elaine's "sense of separateness" (Vickroy 2005, 135) and the ways in which she responds to a hostile society, with Osborne arguing that "Atwood encodes racial difference within the text to accentuate Elaine's feelings of oppression" (1994, 104). What remains to be seen is whether Elaine's journey – including both her marginalization and subsequent resistance – might be explored using the notions which originate from colonial and postcolonial contexts, and to what extent.

While it must be emphasized that Atwood's protagonist Elaine, a white Canadian girl living in Toronto, is not by any means Indigenous or a member of a minority culture, and that her experiences of alienation cannot be equated with those of postcolonial subjects, this paper posits that postcolonial theory, as a framework for all critical theories dealing with human oppression (Tyson 2015, 398), might help to illuminate her experiences. In interpreting Elaine's victimization and the necessity of her confrontation with the past, the paper therefore relies on the postcolonial notions of othering and resistance, with a view to contributing to our understanding of both her community's intolerance and Elaine's path to recovery.

2 Elaine as a Displaced *Other*

One element that initially stands out in Elaine's recollections of the past is her family's unconventional lifestyle. The protagonist spends her early childhood in relative isolation with her parents and her brother Stephen, as their father, a forest-insect field researcher, pursues his work in the Canadian bush. The family's nomadic way of life changes when Elaine is eight, with her father taking a new position as a professor in Toronto. For Elaine, however, the change is far from an improvement: "Until we moved to Toronto," she confesses, "I was happy" (Atwood 2009, 23). In a new environment, comparing herself with other girls, whose company she used to long for, she starts for the first time to suspect that there may be something lacking in her life and her behavior, realizing that "more may be required" of her family and herself (Atwood 2009, 57).

What Elaine notices first is her family's financial status: as she puts it, their new home is "a far cry from picket fences and white curtains" (Atwood 2009, 37), and it "occurs to [her] for the first time that [they] are not rich" (Atwood 2009, 84). What is more, she becomes aware of her parents' unconventionality and their misfit status in the community. Her mother, for one, is not a typical housewife, which makes her seem like an oddity: she does not enjoy housework or shopping, prefers spending her time outdoors, never visits hairdressers and fails to teach Elaine about twin sets, mail-order catalogues and pageboy haircuts. Her father, on the other hand, is a quirky scientist who seems truly himself only when he "shed[s] his city clothing" and who doesn't believe in organized religion, which becomes a source of embarrassment for Elaine when she blunders her way through her first visit to church (Atwood 2009, 77).

Repeatedly reminded of her perceived peculiarity and unfamiliar with other girls' games and customs, Elaine grows apprehensive about making the wrong move in their company, sensing that she is "always on the verge of some unforeseen, calamitous blunder" (Atwood 2009, 55). Yet she manages to make friends with Carol Campbell, a girl who revels in Elaine's reputation of exotic anomaly, using it, as Osborne (1994) points out, to enhance her own status. For Carol, Elaine's behavior resembles the "antics of some primitive tribe: true, but incredible"

(Atwood 2009, 57). But if Elaine is like a member of a barbaric tribe, then it is only natural for her peers to assume that she must eventually be reformed and civilized – especially since Elaine's society, as she recalls, teaches children that

> in countries that are not the British Empire, they cut out children's tongues […] Before the British Empire there were no railroads or postal services in India, and Africa was full of tribal warfare, with spears, and had no proper clothing. The Indians in Canada did not have the wheel or telephones, and ate the hearts of their enemies in the heathenish belief that it would give them courage. The British Empire changed all that. (Atwood 2009, 93)

Such sensationalist depictions of brutish, spear-wielding barbarians rescued from their deprivation by the civilizing mission of the noble Empire – sardonically compiled by Atwood in this passage – seem bound to contribute to the girls' belief that Elaine, the closest thing to a savage that they have encountered, must be similarly reformed. It is at this point that the pieces cementing Elaine's status as one comparable with the position of the colonial 'other' begin to fall into place.

According to Gayatri Spivak, colonial discourse creates its 'others' by the process of 'othering.' The other is therefore the excluded or 'mastered' subject created by the discourse of power (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 1998). Spivak further argues that "by this process, the creation of borders between those who are insiders and those who are outsiders does not occur accidently but is intended and fuelled by established social laws, principles, and practices which mark boundaries between a group and other social groups" (Vichiensing 2017, 126).

In *Cat's Eye*, such social practices initially take the form of prescribed norms, customs and roles in puritanical Toronto, where Elaine and her family fail to meet the established standards of respectability. While community values place Elaine in a vulnerable position and implicitly encourage othering, within the group of girls this process is directly fueled by the appearance of Cordelia. As the leader of the group, Cordelia uses her power and authority to confirm and promulgate Elaine's othered status. She reinforces Elaine's sense of exclusion and inadequacy by reminding her at every turn that there is something abnormal about her:

> I worry about what I've said today, the expression on my face, how I walk, what I wear, because all of these things need improvement. I am not normal, I am not like other girls. Cordelia tells me so, but she will help me. Grace and Carol will help me too. It will take hard work and a long time. (Atwood 2009, 140)

Lacking the conventional background of her friends, Elaine becomes an easy target for Cordelia's allegations of abnormality. Looking for an outlet for her anxiety, she devises elaborate methods of self-harm and peels the skin off her feet; as Hite points out, this may be Atwood's allusion to Andersen's Little Mermaid, another woman who suffers mutilation in order to enter an alien universe (1995, 143). Meanwhile, Cordelia conveniently casts herself in the role of a civilizer by emphasizing Elaine's otherness, which ties in with the suggestion that, in the words of Valerie E. Besag, "girls who bully may alienate another simply to prove that they, unlike their target, are part of the group" (Jones 2008, 29).

In postcolonial terms, Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (1998) similarly maintain that imperial discourse needs its others to confirm its own reality. This is reminiscent of Said's assertion that the Orient has helped to define Europe, and that "European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self" (Said 1978, 3). The empire therefore engages in the process of constructing an enemy and "delineating that opposition that *must* exist, in order that the empire might define itself by its […] others" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 1998, 173).

In the same vein, Cordelia must construct Elaine's heathenish inadequacy to be able to assert herself by subduing it. But behind Cordelia's cruelties, as we later learn, is an attempt to channel her own sense of inadequacy within her family. Not as beautiful or gifted as her older sisters, Cordelia is somehow always the wrong person in the eyes of her father, whose words she mimics when she humiliates Elaine. Similarly, another person in the position of power who sanctions the othering of Elaine, proclaiming it to be God's rightful punishment, Mrs. Smeath, turns out to be an equally broken and pitiable figure: "I used to think they were self-righteous eyes," Elaine thinks while examining a portrait of Mrs. Smeath. "And they are. But they are also defeated eyes, uncertain and melancholy, heavy with unloved duty" (Atwood 2009, 477). Elaine's tormentors, it appears, are those who need her otherness to escape their own marginality and defend their identity as members of the dominant group.

Be that as it may, the suffering Elaine experiences at their hands is overwhelming; in her alienation, she identifies with the other outsiders in the novel – all of them, as Carol Osborne rightly points out, alienated from the dominant culture (Osborne 1994, 103). Later in her life, she immortalizes her gratitude to these displaced figures in the painting *Three Muses*:

> Mrs. Finestein, Miss Stuart from school, Mr. Banerji […] Who knows what death-camp ashes blew daily through the head of Mrs. Finestein, in those years after the war? Mr. Banerji probably couldn't walk down a street without dread, of a shove or some word whispered or shouted. Miss Stuart was in exile, from plundered Scotland still declining, three thousand miles away. (Atwood 2009, 479–480)

Mr. Finestein, the first "muse" listed by Elaine, is her Jewish neighbor whose little boy she babysits. When her friends tell her that the baby is a Jew, at the same time pointing out that the Jews killed Christ, Elaine quits the job for fear that she may not be able to protect the child. However, she feels there must be something heroic about the Finesteins, some ancient important matters that go along with being Jewish; in her suffering, Elaine admires them as members of a group that has endured extreme hatred and oppression.

Elaine's admiration for Mr. Banerji, her father's student from India, is perhaps the most obvious case of her identification with immigrants. "He's a creature more like myself," comments Elaine, "alien and apprehensive. He's afraid of us. He has no idea what we will do next, what impossibilities we will expect of him, what we will make him eat. No wonder he bites his fingers" (Atwood 2009, 153). Believing Mr. Banerji to be a fellow other, Elaine finds in him an unknowing ally; at one point she even dreams that he and Mrs. Finestein are her real parents. She longs for his visits, perceiving them as encouragements or confirmations that she is not alone:

> I lurk in the corner of the hallway in my flannelette pyjamas, hoping to catch a glimpse of him. I don't have a crush on him or anything like that. My wish to see him is anxiety, and fellow-feeling. I want to see how he is managing, how he is coping with his life, with having to eat turkeys, and with other things. Not very well, judging from his dark, haunted-looking eyes and slightly hysterical laughter. But if he can deal with whatever it is that's after him, and something is, then so can I. (Atwood 2009, 187–8).

Elaine finds consolation in seeing her separateness mirrored in Mr Banerji's unease when faced with strange food and foreign customs; nevertheless, this mirroring can only go so far. As Derry observes, Elaine, however oppressed, remains a figure of privilege: "she simply *is*, like her girlfriends, white and middle-class. And so when Mr. Banerji is harmed […], he disappears. When Elaine is harmed, she (eventually) rebels against her oppressors – with great success" (Derry 2016, 107).

Miss Stuart, the third alienated figure, is Elaine's teacher; unlike Mrs. Lumley, who teaches children about the superiority of the British Empire, Miss Stuart lets them freely learn about other cultures. In such lessons Elaine finds comfort and the possibility of a way out and other worlds existing beyond the one where she feels displaced:

> I desperately need to believe that somewhere else these other, foreign people exist. No matter that at Sunday School I've been told such people are either starving or heathens or both. No matter that my weekly collection goes out to convert them, feed them, smarten them up […]. If these people exist I can go there sometime. I don't have to stay here. (Atwood 2009, 191–2)

The older Elaine comes to understand that she was unable to grasp the gravity of displacement that her "muses" experienced, as evidenced by her contemplation of death camps, assaults and jeers of which she knew nothing (Atwood 2009, 479–480). Yet later in life, Elaine still seems to identify primarily with outsiders: her first lover is her professor Josef Hrbik, another immigrant who claims to have no country. In the same vein, highlighting the portrayals of racial difference in the novel, Osborne (1994, 104) goes on to state that "Atwood associates her more and more with the color black while her oppressors, Cordelia, Carol and Grace are aligned with white images." The existence of such black and white opposition, however, is not entirely supported by the text, since the girls are not consistently aligned with either color. For instance, the three girls who pressure Elaine to come out and play are portrayed as menacing shadowy figures, "almost black" and "too dark" (Atwood 2009, 161–2). Elaine's skin in old photographs, on the other hand, is "ultra-white" (30). Nevertheless, in the scene where Elaine almost freezes to death after falling into a creek, black and white imagery is pervasive: Elaine is a lone dark figure abandoned in the blinding darkness of the snowy ravine, her head "filling with black sawdust." Even the Virgin Mary, her imaginary rescuer, does not appear in her traditional image, but dressed in black, with her heart shining "like a coal" (Atwood 2009, 223–4). However, perhaps it would make more sense to interpret this darkness in terms of Elaine's feeling that she is "nothing" and her attempts to slip outside her own body into blackness (Atwood 2009, 204–205), than to see it as racial imagery.

The incident in the ravine is both the peak of Elaine's victimization and othering and the turning point of her childhood. Having survived the harshest of the girls' cruelties, Elaine finally sees through their threats and is able to walk away. "Nothing binds me to them," she thinks. "I am free" (Atwood 2009, 229). She abandons the girls and goes on to make new friends, forgets everything about the traumatic bullying, and ultimately even inverts the dynamics of her friendship with Cordelia upon encountering her again. Yet in *Cat's Eye* the act of walking away does not provide closure. Ostensibly grown-up and settled into a new life far from Toronto, Elaine is not entirely free from her friend's domination; many years later, the voice of nine-year-old Cordelia will drive her to attempt suicide. It should therefore be explored how the rest of her journey towards recovery unfolds, and whether the reversal of her othering might also be interpreted through the lens of postcolonial theory.

3 Resistance and Recovery

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said lists three separate but related topics that emerge in the cultural resistance and recovery of colonized spaces (Said 1994, 215–216). The first is the imprisoned nation's right to see its history wholly and coherently, restoring it to itself. He defines this as the act of a nation reclaiming, among other things, its pre-colonized language, culture and literature. The second is the idea of resistance as not merely a reaction to imperialism, but an alternative way of conceiving history. Said stresses the importance of *writing back* to the metropolitan cultures, disrupting or replacing their narrative with new styles, as a major component of this process. Finally, the third topic addresses a "pull away from separatist nationalism toward a more integrative view of human community and human liberation" (Said 1994, 216).

Elaine's status as a person displaced and othered because of her cultural difference allows for an attempt to transpose these aspects of resistance into Atwood's fictional world. Bearing in mind, of course, that Elaine is an individual dealing with personal trauma, the scope and nature of her struggle must inevitably differ from those of colonized nations and oppressed cultures; nevertheless, some parallels may be drawn between the two kinds of recovery.

3.1 Seeing Life Entire

After the ravine incident and the subsequent break with her friends, the young Elaine no longer sees herself as abnormal or weak; on the surface, she turns into an ordinary, cheerful and carefree girl. Her reinvention of herself, however, rests upon the suppression of unwanted and disturbing memories:

> I've forgotten things, I've forgotten I've forgotten them. […] I know I don't like the thought of Mrs. Smeath, but I've forgotten why. I've forgotten about fainting and about the stack of plates, and about falling into the creek and also about seeing the Virgin Mary. […] nobody mentions anything about this missing time, except my mother. Once in a while she says, 'That bad time you had,' and I am puzzled. What is she talking about? I find these references to bad times vaguely threatening, vaguely insulting: I am not the sort of girl who has bad times, I have good times only. There I am, in the Grade Six class picture, smiling broadly. Happy as a clam, is what my

> mother says for happy. I am happy as a clam: hard-shelled, firmly closed. (Atwood 2009, 237)

Although Elaine is never directly pressured into accepting another's version of history, her disconnection from the past emerges as a consequence of her trauma. Elaine's blocking out of painful memories, however indispensable as a coping mechanism, becomes a factor that inhibits her further development. It is evident that Elaine's recovery from the "bad times" is severely hindered by her act of forgetting them, especially if we consider the idea that seeing history as a whole is an integral part of resistance to oppression. This is supported by the fact that Elaine's fear and shame never entirely fade but resurface unpredictably and uncontrollably. There are feelings in her life for which she cannot account, like pieces of a puzzle that fit nowhere. Elaine paints objects of her childhood inexplicably "suffused with anxiety" (Atwood 2009, 395), feels a strange hatred for Mrs. Smeath, hears a child's voice urging her to slit her wrists, and seeks out statues of the Virgin Mary for no apparent reason. During a visit to Mexico, she finally finds a statue that, unlike others, does not leave her with a baffling sense of disappointment: it is the statue of the Virgin dressed in black. Elaine identifies her as "a Virgin of lost things, one who restored what was lost" and falls on the floor in front of her, but ultimately fails to think of something to pray for (Atwood 2009, 235).

Only much later, when visiting her dying mother in Toronto, does Elaine realize what lost things could be restored. While going through an old trunk, the two women uncover layers of items preserved from Elaine's childhood, including the cat's eye marble and the red purse she associates with the Virgin Mary. With the discovery of these items, Elaine rediscovers the symbolic language of her past and is able to remember: "I look into it, and see my life entire" (Atwood 2009, 468). She is therefore finally given the chance to reconnect with herself, comprehending the meaning of her "bad times," the origins of her anxiety, and her mother's need for forgiveness.

In depicting Elaine's emotional release, *Cat's Eye* stresses the importance of memory in the process of maturation, while also highlighting the need for reconnection with the spurned figures of the past. When it comes to Cordelia, however, this reconnection is for Elaine only imaginary; Cordelia is gone, and some of the stories to which she holds the key can never be recovered, which gives Elaine's journey a lingering sense of incompleteness. "Really it's Cordelia I expect," thinks Elaine in the final moments of her story, "Cordelia I want to see. There are things I need to ask her. Not what happened, back in the time I lost, because now I know that. I need to ask her why" (Atwood 2009, 485).

3.2 Painting Back to the Past

While Elaine may never get Cordelia's side of the story, it matters that she is able to uncover and tell her own. Her Toronto retrospective prompts her both to shape her story and retell it to herself, and to look at her oeuvre as a visual reimagining of her past. As Coral Ann Howells points out, the way Atwood represents Elaine's past is curiously doubled, with both a "discursive memoir version and a figural version presented through her paintings" (Jones 2008, 31). The discursive version is the one Elaine is able to shape after recovering her lost time and negotiating with the memories and ghosts she finds there. What is particularly

interesting is that she can construct her story in her art before consciously comprehending it; she paints its "figural version" before rediscovering her history and the language to express it. In Said's terms, Elaine therefore manages to use new forms to compose an alternative conception of the past. This act, reminiscent to some degree of the original concept of writing back, could be interpreted as an individual attempt at *painting back* to her oppressors.

The paintings offer an emotional outlet to Elaine by allowing her to portray her unresolved feelings and murky memories. She paints her "three muses" with gratitude; she depicts the Virgin Mary floating above a bridge, dressed in black and holding a cat's eye marble; she paints three small dark figures in a field of snow. With what she admits to be "considerable malice" (Atwood 2009, 477), she exacts her revenge by laboring on the mocking, distorted portraits of Mrs. Smeath, multiplied like bacteria and at one point grotesquely merged with Mrs. Lumley.

It is not, however, only the subject matter of Elaine's paintings that offers catharsis – it is also the act of painting itself. As Molly Hite suggests, the vocation of painter is a "professionalized embodiment of a one-way gaze" (Hite 1995, 140). In other words, it is a way to reverse the look that has condemned Elaine to the position of otherness and expose her oppressors to its humiliation: "I have said, *I see*" (Atwood 2009, 477).

It should, however, be pointed out that gaping and comical discrepancies repeatedly occur between what Elaine ostensibly aims to depict and outside interpretations. In the case of Mrs. Smeath, what Elaine intends to be mockery and vengeance is interpreted by critics as a compassionate portrayal of an aging female body. However, as Hite (1995) argues, it is not necessarily the viewers who misread the painting. Elaine herself is an unreliable interpreter of her own work, occasionally unaware of its potential layers of meaning. For instance, her subsequent sympathy for Mrs. Smeath's suffering is triggered precisely by those "malicious" paintings. It therefore appears that in Elaine's life, artistic representations both precede and exceed conscious knowledge, revealing the memories and realizations her consciousness has not yet unlocked.

3.3 Distancing and Reconnecting

Even if her paintings may unwittingly reveal traces of empathy, for much of *Cat's Eye* Elaine is deliberately trying to deny it. To protect herself from remembering her own experiences of abuse, she needs to avoid relating to fellow victims. Those self-defense mechanisms are what prompts her to be cruel and withhold empathy, believing that "young women need unfairness, it's one of their few defenses" (Atwood 2009, 430). Those she fails to show compassion for are often the women who are closest, or most similar to her. When Cordelia begins to "let herself go," failing exams and becoming sloppy, Elaine starts to avoid her, not entirely knowing why. "How can she be so abject? When will she learn?" (Atwood 2009, 295), Elaine thinks. "*Smarten up*, I want to tell her. *Pull up your socks*." When she hears about Cordelia's troubles with her domineering father, who tells her to "wipe that smirk off of [her] face," just as Cordelia used to command her, Elaine feels inexplicably threatened:

> There is that glimpse, during which I can see. And then not. A wave of blood goes up to my head, my stomach shrinks together, as if something dangerous has just missed

> hitting me. It's as if I've been caught stealing, or telling a lie; or as if I've heard other people talking about me, saying bad things about me, behind my back. (Atwood 2009, 299)

Much later in her life, Elaine similarly feels a strange surge of fury after Cordelia asks for her help, leading her to abandon Cordelia with a half-hearted promise of another visit. But Elaine's urge to distance herself from weak, suffering women is not limited to Cordelia. After Susie, a fellow student who is also having an affair with Mr. Hrbik, suffers a life-threatening abortion, Elaine comes to her aid, but also claims that she hardly even knows her: "I don't want to be implicated," she thinks. When Elaine comments that "[e]verything that's happened to her could well have happened to me," it might be expected that she will go on to identify with Susie. Instead, her final reaction is that of distancing, since "there is also another voice; a small, mean voice, ancient and smug, that comes from somewhere inside my head: *It serves her right*" (Atwood 2009, 376); this juxtaposition seems to highlight Elaine's unresolved and conflicted feelings towards herself as a victim.

Rather than inspire sympathy, the realization that she may not be too different from Susie or Cordelia prompts Elaine's guilty, conflicted retreat. In an act of self-preservation, she distances herself from those whose suffering reminds her of her own and threatens to bind her to them. Likewise, Elaine claims that sisterhood is a difficult concept for her to grasp; as Hite explains, she persistently "denies her inclusion in the category of women" (Hite 1995, 140). Victimized in a community of girls and unable to relate to them, Elaine retreats into the belief that boys are her allies. In their company, the "abnormality" that separates her from other girls can be used to her advantage: "Stunned broad, dog, bag and bitch are words they apply to girls. […] I don't think any of these words apply to me" (Atwood 2009, 280); "I think I am an exception, to some rule I haven't yet identified" (Atwood 2009, 330).

Elaine's willful separation from other women resembles what Said defines as separatism of colonized nations – inevitably complicated, of course, by the fact that she is allowed to align herself with the male majority during the process of her recovery. Derry's suggestion that Elaine's white middle-class background opens convenient paths towards rebellion – paths unavailable to actual minority figures – is perhaps even more pertinent in this context. However, the need for her to reconnect with others in order to heal is undeniable. The integrative view of humanity that she needs to adopt involves not only identifying with those who share her feelings of alienation and otherness – nor protecting herself by finding shelter within male communities – but also reconnecting with the women who acted as her oppressors.

This stage of Elaine's recuperation begins when, after uncovering her memories, she first manages to reconnect with her mother. She then comes to see Mrs. Smeath as a fellow displaced person; ultimately, she can see Cordelia for who she truly is: a lonely, frightened girl desperately trying to please her bullying father and displacing her feelings onto Elaine. Only then is Elaine able both to let Cordelia go and experience a cathartic re-enactment of her own trauma:

> There is the same shame, the sick feeling in my body, the same knowledge of my own wrongness, awkwardness, weakness; the same wish to be loved; the same loneliness; the same fear. But these are not my own emotions any more. They are Cordelia's; as they always were. […] I reach out my arms to her, bend down, hands open to show I have no weapon. *It's all right*, I say to her. *You can go home now*. (Atwood 2009, 495–6)

"Going home" signifies not only the girls' release from the cold darkness of the ravine, but also the resolution of Elaine's trauma in extending forgiveness and empathy to both herself and Cordelia. There may be some things in Elaine's past that can never be recovered; the scars of her trauma may never entirely fade. As the author concludes, Cordelia and Elaine will never be "two old women giggling over their tea." Nevertheless, for Elaine, the light of understanding and compassion that her hard-earned insights offer may prove to be "enough to see by" (Atwood 2009, 498).

4 Conclusion

It has been stated that the disappearance of Cordelia and her story, as the piece she needs to give back to Elaine, renders the recovery of the past in *Cat's Eye* incomplete. Yet Elaine is granted a tentatively happy ending, made possible by the emergence of a unifying compassion which constitutes a reversal of alienation and othering. Such a reversal, however, is achieved only when she can perceive Cordelia, her main tyrant, as her equally troubled twin.

This liberating realization – that the oppressor, is, in fact, a similarly weak and oppressed double – dramatically highlights the way Elaine's position diverges from the experience of postcolonial subjects. While her exclusion may bind her to other othered figures – perhaps in a manner that somewhat resembles the way white Canadian culture is linked to postcolonial issues by what Bharati Mukherjee calls a "deep sense of marginality" (as cited in Hutcheon 1989, 155). As a member of the dominant class, Elaine is given a much wider variety of options for rebellion and recovery. What the analysis of her experience through the lens of postcolonial theory highlights, however, is the complexity of attaining recovery for individuals who are othered and marginalized. In *Cat's Eye*, Atwood depicts such a quest – even if it is undertaken with Elaine's advantages – as immensely strenuous and never entirely complete.

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Bojana Aćamović
Institute for Literature and the Arts, Serbia

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Replenishing the *Odyssey*: Margaret Atwood's and John Barth's Postmodern Epics

ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on Margaret Atwood's novel *The Penelopiad* and John Barth's short stories "Menelaiad" and "Anonymiad," comparing the approaches of the two authors in their postmodernist retellings of Homer's *Odyssey*. Both Atwood and Barth base their narratives on minor episodes from this epic, with its less prominent or unnamed characters assuming the roles of the narrators. Using different postmodernist techniques, the authors experiment with the form and content of the narration, combine different genres, and demythologize the situations and characters. In their re-evaluations and reinterpretations of the *Odyssey*, they create works which epitomize Barth's notion of postmodernist fiction as a literature of replenishment. The comparative analysis presented in this paper aims to highlight the ways in which Atwood and Barth challenge the old and add new perspectives on Homer's epic, at the same time confirming its relevance in the postmodern context.

Keywords: Margaret Atwood; John Barth; postmodernism; mythology; *Odyssey*

Dopolnitev *Odiseje*: Postmoderna epa Margaret Atwood in Johna Bartha

POVZETEK

Prispevek obravnava roman *Penelopina preja* Margaret Atwood in kratki zgodbi »Menelaiad« in »Anonymiad« Johna Bartha ter primerja pristopa obeh avtorjev k postmodernistični priredbi Homerjeve *Odiseje*. Atwood in Barth svoje pripovedi opreta na stranske epizode v omenjenem epu in neimenovane osebe postavita v vlogo pripovedovalcev. S pomočjo različnih postmodernističnih tehnik se avtorja igrata z obliko in vsebino pripovedi, preigravata žanre in demitologizirata prizore in pripovedne osebe. Z novo preučitvijo in interpretacijo *Odiseje* ustvarita dela, ki utelešajo Barthov koncept postmodernistične fikcije kot dopolnitvene književnosti. Primerjalna analiza v prispevku osvetljuje načine, s katerimi Atwood in Barth prevprašujeta stare in nove poglede na Homerjev ep, pri tem pa utrjujeta njegov pomen v postmodernem kontekstu.

Ključne besede: Margaret Atwood; John Barth; postmoderna; mitologija; *Odiseja*

1 Introduction

Re-examination and re-evaluation of familiar stories from the past, questioning accepted truths and devising alternative versions to replace the existing ones have become the defining features of postmodern literature. In line with Lyotard's remarks on the decline of the grand narratives as authoritarian metadiscourses that posit indisputable universal truths and an increased interest in the plurality of competing small narratives, the postmodernists have turned their attention to individual events and characters, considering them from different angles in order to offer a more comprehensive picture of what happened. This approach is adopted when the "what-happened" refers to historical events as well as those depicted in the fiction of previous ages. Mythology has attracted particular interest as a vast repository of narratives suitable for retelling and revising.

Along with the *Iliad*, Homer's *Odyssey* is considered a foundational text of the Western literary canon. Rooted in the oral tradition of epic singing and covering a range of topics related to the universal human experience, it has remained attractive for millennia and inspired many works of art, music, and literature. In its themes and content, the *Odyssey* is significantly different from the *Iliad*, which is suggested by the very names of the two epics: while the latter points to a place, Ilion or Ilium (that is, Troy), the first is derived from a personal name and thus suggests a more personal story. The story of Odysseus, a cunning and adventurous king of Ithaca, who spends ten years engaged in the Trojan War and then another ten trying to return to his kingdom, conveys tales of the fantastic occurrences that befall the hero on his journey back home, but also portrays the circumstances of domestic life, social norms and customs in ancient Greece, as well as some common features of human nature. Its universality and timelessness are what has prompted some authors to use Odysseus's story as a basis for their narratives.

The literature of the late 20th and early 21st centuries has retained an interest in the stories and characters from the *Odyssey*, and the approach to it now reflects the general tendencies and aesthetics of the postmodern age. In comparison to modernism, the postmodernist attitude to classical texts in general is marked by demythologizing, deconstruction, and a lowering of "high" topics to the level of mundane experience, which often produces parodic versions of the originals; thus, it can be said that "where modernism is sincere or earnest, postmodernism is playful and ironic" (Nicol 2009, 2). In this paper we are looking into Margaret Atwood's and John Barth's postmodern reinterpretations of the *Odyssey* in works written almost forty years apart, but sharing some common features in the examination of the epic. Atwood and Barth are, each in their unique ways, distinguished representatives of North American postmodernism, and the *-iads* they wrote inspired by characters from Homer's epic are at the same time reappraisals of the classical European tradition and a confirmation of its lasting value. Challenging the status of myths as "immutable, universal stories," "teleological and transhistorical master narratives in literature," as well as "stories that tell us who we are" (Vautier 1998, ix), Atwood and Barth offer their New-World, or rather, Postmodern-World readings of Greek mythology.

2 The *-iads* of the New World: The *Odyssey* Retold

Margaret Atwood is renowned as a versatile author who has tried her hand at a number of genres, including historical fiction, speculative and dystopian fiction, metafictional fiction, as well as novels based on rewriting or parodying Gothic romances, fairy tales, classics, and stories from mythology. Her dialogue with Greek mythology began with her first poetry collection *Double Persephone* (self-published in 1961) and continued with her giving voice to characters such as Helen of Troy, Daphne, Circe and the Sirens in her later poems. Atwood crowned this interest in the women of classical mythology with the novel *The Penelopiad*, introducing Penelope and her twelve maids as the narrators and focalizers of the story. The novel appeared in 2005 as part of the *Canongate Myths Series*, a project gathering modern authors including Chinua Achebe, Karen Armstrong, David Grossman, Alexander McCall Smith, Victor Pelevin, and Dubravka Ugrešić, each of whom had "a task" to retell a myth of their choice from a contemporary viewpoint. The myth Atwood chose was the Odyssey-saga, and the perspective from which she examines it is predominantly feminist: the protagonist of her story is not the Trojan hero, but his wife Penelope, and alternating with the chapters of her prose narrative are the "Chorus Lines," performed by the twelve maids who were hanged by Telemachus towards the end of the epic. Aside from the feminist reading that unavoidably asserts itself in relation to Atwood's work in general, *The Penelopiad* invites a broad range of interpretative approaches and thus can be read as an innovative piece of postmodernist fiction and examined along with two stories by John Barth, an American author who is quintessentially postmodernist but in another vein.

Barth's contribution to the development of postmodernism extends beyond his fiction-writing. Apart from the novels and short stories that now serve as model texts of postmodern literature, Barth wrote theoretical pieces, the most significant of which are two essays on the condition of contemporary literature: "The Literature of Exhaustion" (1967) and "The Literature of Replenishment" (1980). The "exhaustion" refers to "the used-upness of certain forms or the felt exhaustion of certain possibilities," specifically, the decline of the novel as a major form of art (Barth 1984, 64). This, according to Barth, is not necessarily a cause for despair but a challenge for authors to introduce new modes and respond to the changes the new age brings. Rejecting the claims that "The Literature of Exhaustion" suggests "there is nothing left for contemporary writers but to parody and travesty our great predecessors in our exhausted medium," in "The Literature of Replenishment" Barth affirms that "literature can never be exhausted, if only because no single literary text can ever be exhausted – its 'meaning' residing as it does in its transactions with individual readers over time, space, and language" (Barth 1984, 205). As a reader and a writer, Barth himself has repeatedly entered into such transactions, primarily with four fictional characters frequently singled out as pivotal in his creative development: Scheherazade, Don Quixote, Huckleberry Finn, and Odysseus, the "four points in [his] literary imagination," the "four deities of [his] literary pantheon" (Gonzáles 2000, 202). In line with this, Barth sees the literature of postmodernism as combining the approaches and phenomena of the previous epochs with those of the modern age, which renders it a literature of replenishment and confirms the inexhaustibility of the art of writing (Barth 1984, 203–6).

Barth published his first short story collection, *Lost in the Funhouse*, in 1968, having already secured his place as a representative of postmodern writing with the novels *The Sot-Weed Factor* and *Giles Goat-Boy*. This "series of stories," as the author designates it, is experimental in many aspects. For Barth, it was an experiment in form, considering that it was his first attempt at writing short fiction, whereas the subtitle "Fiction for print, tape, live voice" reflects his intention to recognize the increased significance of multimedia in art and literature. A prominent place in Barth's stories is given to themes and characters from mythology, Christian as well as classical Greek, whose canonized versions are here reworked and presented from a different angle. A special place is devoted to the stories related to the Trojan War and its aftermath, but the focus is shifted from warfare to the background events and episodes only briefly outlined in Homer's epics. Barth's fascination with Odysseus's adventures is best reflected in the two final stories of the collection: "Menelaiad" and "Anonymiad."

The titles of Atwood's novel and Barth's stories, all three containing the suffix -iad, suggest that readers will be introduced to the life and adventures of notable personalities presented in the elevated style of epic poetry. In *The Penelopiad* and "Menelaiad" the titles disclose who these personalities are: Penelope, the wife of Odysseus, and Menelaus, the king of Sparta and Helen's husband. However, what readers find in these works hardly resembles classical epics in style or in content, considering that the authors are primarily concerned with deconstructing the story and its characters and devising their own explanations for specific problems. In true postmodern fashion, Atwood and Barth focus on the characters whose perspectives are neglected or insufficiently explored in the epic, or those who are completely marginalized and even anonymous, but perform quite intriguing roles. The aim is not to completely replace the existing narratives with new ones which would in turn become dominant, but to indicate that the canonical texts can be read in many different ways.

2.1 The Source Texts

For both Atwood and Barth, Homer's *Odyssey* is a starting point and the narrative basis of their own storytelling. The authors composed their works under the assumption that their readers were sufficiently familiar with the basic plot of the epic, if not with the alternative versions found in other sources. The readers' familiarity with the original text is crucial, since both writers focus on minor episodes or those considered to be digressions. The basis of "Menelaiad" is Book 4 of Homer's *Odyssey*, depicting Telemachus's visit to Menelaus in Sparta. This is, however, only one of seven narrative levels presented in this story, each containing an episode from the life of the Spartan king: his encounter with Helen in Troy, his return voyage to Sparta, his stay on the island of Pharos and encounters with Proteus and his daughter Eidothea.

The source of "Anonymiad" is an even more obscure episode from Book 3, referring to events at Agamemnon's court. The title character is a court minstrel who was ordered to keep watch over Agamemnon's wife Clytemnestra while the king was away in Troy and who was subsequently taken to a desert island by Aegisthus, Clytemnestra's lover, and left there to perish:

> And there was a man, what's more, a bard close by,
> to whom Agamemnon, setting sail for Troy,
> gave strict commands to guard his wife. But then,
> that day the doom of the gods had bound her to surrender,
> Aegisthus shipped the bard away to a desert island,
> marooned him there, sweet prize for the birds of prey,
> and swept her off to his own house, lover lusting for lover. (Homer 1996, 116)

These seven lines served as a foundation for Barth's story, in which the minstrel's tragic destiny is depicted from his own angle – blinded by his love of Merope, both his lover and muse,[1] the minstrel was duped into sailing to the desert island and, now abandoned, is trying to compose his life story using the materials available to him: squid ink and goat hide. Apart from those from the Trojan myth, "Anonymiad" presents other characters from Greek mythology; Barth refers to the nine muses, using their names to mark the amphorae from which the minstrel drinks his wine. The story is largely an experiment in metafiction, with the minstrel discussing his poetics and informing readers about the alternative versions he was considering. Apart from the pieces of traditional minstrelsy, he claims he has also written "imagined versions, some satiric" of what happened in Troy and Mycenae:

> I wrote a version wherein Agamemnon kills his brother, marries Helen, and returns to Lacedemon instead of to Mycenae; another in which he himself is murdered by Clytemnestra, who arranges as well the assassination of the other expeditionary princes and thus becomes empress of both Hellas and Troy, with Paris as her consort and Helen as her cook – until all are slain by young Orestes, who then shares the throne with Merope, adored by him since childhood despite the difference in their birth. (Barth 1988, 193)

Such sections should remind us that the stories recorded by Homer or any other author are man-made fictions created in specific circumstances and therefore only some of the numerous possible versions.

Whereas Barth's stories focus on particular episodes in the lives of their protagonists, Atwood's *The Penelopiad* is a more comprehensive account of Penelope's life (and death). The narrative is introduced by two passages quoted from the *Odyssey*,[2] which describe Odysseus's encounter with Agamemnon's soul in Hades and the hanging of the maids by Telemachus upon his father's return to Ithaca. Referring to two shorter episodes in Homer's epic, the two epigraphs introduce the main characters of Atwood's narrative, the "faithful," "flawless," and "constant" Penelope, who loyally "kept the memory of the husband of her youth" and the twelve hanged maids, as "long-winged thrushes or doves […] entangled in a snare" with heads in a row, nooses round their necks, and feet twitching in the air (Atwood 2006, xiii). The anonymity of the maids is retained, and Melantho ("of the Pretty Cheeks") is the only one with a personal name. The lines quoted from the original text point to the marginalized positions of these

[1] In Greek mythology, Merope is one of the seven Pleiades, the only one who married a mortal, Sisyphus.
[2] Lines 191–4 from Book 24 and lines 470–3 from Book 22, which is indicated by Atwood.

characters in the *Odyssey*, with Penelope defined in relation to her husband and the maids unnamed and considered as a collective, which will be sharply contrasted by their central positions and the first-person narration in *The Penelopiad*.

Although their narratives refer to specific lines from Homer's epic, the *Odyssey* is not the only source on which Atwood and Barth base their stories. Barth uses alternative accounts of Helen's absence from Sparta, primarily those from Robert Graves's *Greek Myths*. For both authors this work is of great importance, as it contains a range of sources, including works by Herodotus, Pausanias, Apollodorus, and Hyginus. In her introductory address, Atwood warns that "Homer's *Odyssey* is not the only version of the story," the mythic material being oral and local, "told one way in one place and quite differently in another" (Atwood 2006, xx) and, as we subsequently find out from the Notes section at the end of the book, the works she consulted in search of other versions are Robert Graves's *Greek Myths*, Homeric Hymns, and Lewis Hyde's *Trickster Makes This World*. Particularly interesting in this context is Hyde's study, which presents Odysseus as one of the trickster figures, a "polytropic" character – wily, versatile, and much-travelled (Hyde 1998, 52). Although the study focuses on male figures already canonized as tricksters, in an appendix Hyde also examines the relation between the trickster and gender. Observing that "the canonical tricksters are male because they are part of patriarchal mythology," Hyde wonders "why, if tricksters are disruptive and oppositional, they wouldn't be female *especially* in patriarchy" (Hyde 1998, 340). Atwood's *Penelopiad* responds to this question by showing that Penelope *is* a trickster figure, a woman who displays cunning and artifice and performs a much more active part than is commonly assumed.

For both Barth and Atwood, these episodes from the *Odyssey* are specific points where the two authors enter into a dialogue with the myth. Driven by unresolved narrative issues, both authors, more or less explicitly, indicate which questions have provoked them to imagine what is behind and beyond the well-known story. The key issue addressed in "Menelaiad," repeatedly voiced in the lines of the title character, is what prompted Helen to choose Menelaus over many other attractive suitors. In *The Penelopiad*, the problem questions are stated in the Introduction to the novel: "What led to the hanging of the maids, and what was Penelope really up to?" (Atwood 2006, xxi). The first seems to be more intriguing to the author, as she has "always been haunted by the hanged maids" (Atwood 2006, xxi), and although the title indicates that this is Penelope's epic, Atwood's novel has two main characters – Penelope and the twelve maids taken collectively.

2.2 The Narration

The fact that Atwood and Barth assign the leading roles to the characters who occupy ostensibly supporting roles in the *Odyssey* (Penelope and Menelaus), or are completely marginalized and even unnamed (the twelve hanged maids and the anonymous minstrel left on a desert island), is in line with the postmodern tendency of giving voice to the silenced ones. In contrast to the *Odyssey*, which is narrated from a third-person omniscient point of view, in these postmodern *-iads* the stories are presented through a first-person narration – the first person singular in the case of Penelope, Menelaus, and the minstrel,[3]

[3] As denoted in the story itself, the minstrel is narrating his story in the "first person anonymous."

the first person plural in the case of the maids – and the narrators are both focalizers of and participants in the narrated events. Their cognitive advantage is the spatial and temporal distance from which they tell their stories and which provides them with a broader – albeit limited – perspective on past events. Penelope and the maids speak from Hades, where they are active as spirits and still afflicted by past wrongs. Though Penelope states, "Now that I'm dead I know everything," she is aware that her current position is only quasi-omniscient, that her perspective is limited to her personal experiences, and therefore adds, "This is what I wished would happen, but like so many of my wishes it failed to come true. I know only a few factoids that I didn't know before" (Atwood 2006, 1).

In "Menelaiad" the question of narration is complicated by the fact that Menelaus the king of Sparta appears as the narrator at six different levels, six different points in space and time, whereas the all-encompassing frame story is told by the voice which "isn't the voice of Menelaus; this voice *is* Menelaus; all there is of him" (Barth 1988, 130). This disembodied entity, who in its final incarnation at the end of the story defines him- (or her-)self as "the absurd, unending possibility of love" (Barth 1988, 167), accentuates the instability of the inner six levels narrated by Menelaus in his lifetime.

In both Atwood and Barth the first-person narration and the narrators' involvement in the story suggest personal perspectives that add new interpretations to the canonized version of the myth, but also indicate the narrators' subjective points of view and biased depictions of events and characters, i.e. their unreliability. This is easily perceived in Atwood, where Penelope's story at times collides with the version told by the maids. Penelope's devastation on hearing about the death of her young maids is disputed by the maids' claim that the queen not only knew about their hanging but instigated it in an attempt to save her reputation and her life. This claim is voiced in the "Chorus Line: The Perils of Penelope: A Drama," where Melantho announces: "There is another story. / Or several, as befits the goddess Rumour, / Who's sometimes in a good, or else bad, humour" (Atwood 2006, 147). Discussing the appearance of "conflicting versions of events" in novels based on the minor-character elaboration, Jeremy Rosen observes that such narratives indicate "the myriad potential variations of number and reliability of narrative voices available," but also that "the technique of embedding competing narratives merely represents an extension or refinement of the skepticism in which the genre is rooted" (Rosen 2016, 109–10).[4] The "rumour" in the lines quoted above makes it doubtful whether the play the maids perform is a kind of *Mousetrap* for Penelope, or only some court gossip.

Atwood's and Barth's revisions of the *Odyssey* are to a large extent stories about storytelling, and this is emphasized by the narrative techniques. The works by both authors display daring experimentation with form and genre and even lean towards multimedia. Barth's collection, written at the time when McLuhan's theory on the new media was gaining ground, is subtitled "Fiction for print, tape, live voice," with each story intended to be performed in a specific way. As the "Author's Note" at the beginning of the book indicates, the stories "Menelaiad" and "Anonymiad" were designated for "printed voice" and for print, respectively. Atwood introduces several genres in the chapters narrated by the maids, including a record

[4] Rosen considers the minor character elaboration as a distinct genre of postmodern fiction.

of "The Trial of Odysseus" allegedly "videotaped by the maids." The maids' chapters are titled "Chorus Lines," which evokes both the chorus of the ancient Greek drama and contemporary musical productions and thus combines the pathos of classical literature with the burlesque of the modern age. That Atwood was concerned with the form of presentation as much as the content is confirmed by the fact that two years after the publication of the novel, *The Penelopiad* was performed as a play at the Royal Shakespeare Company's Swan Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon.

The story of Menelaus unravels through seven narratives levels, which form an intricate pattern of concentric circles, with narratives framing and framed by other narratives. This Chinese-box structure is marked by chapter numbers ascending from 1 to 7 and then descending from 7 to 1, but also by a complex and rather confusing punctuation, which makes it necessary for readers to be well acquainted with the original myth to follow who is talking to whom, when, and where. This is of particular importance in places where the characters "jump" from one narrative level into another within the same chapter, as is the case when the conversation between Menelaus and Peisistratus is suddenly interrupted by Proteus's words sounded from one of the previous narrative levels (indicated, too, through Barth's copious quotation marks):

> "'My own questions,' Peisistratus insisted, 'had to do with mannered rhetoric and your shift of narrative viewpoint.'
>
> """'Ignore that fool!' Proteus ordered from the beach."'
>
> "'How can Proteus –' 'Seer.' 'So.' (Barth 1988, 154)

Atwood's *Penelopiad*, on the other hand, is an experiment in genre-mixing. Accompanying the chapters with the traditional linear storytelling performed by Penelope are the "Chorus Lines," the chapters composed in various generic techniques and narrated by the twelve hanged maids. The maids enter into a dialogue with the main story told by Penelope and respond to the chapters immediately preceding theirs by offering their perspective on the topic at hand. For instance, Penelope's chapter "My Childhood" is followed by "The Chorus Line: Kiddie Mourn, A Lament by the Maids," in which the maids tell about their childhoods: "We too were children. We too were born to the wrong parents. Poor parents, slave parents, peasant parents, and serf parents" (Atwood 2006, 13). The maids narrate their collective story in verse and prose – in the shape of a nursery rhyme, a popular tune, an idyll in long free verse, a sea shanty, a ballad, a love song, a drama in iambic pentameter and rhyming couplets, an anthropology lecture, and a dramatic rendering of a court trial. These "lyrical interludes," as Susanne Jung designates them, serve as a "performative enactment of the silenced female voices of the *Odyssey*," but also as "an invitation extended to the reader to go in search of silenced voices haunting other texts of the Western literary canon" (Jung 2014/2015, 42). The variety of genres in which the maids' story is presented contributes to better visibility of their chapters, which stand conspicuously apart from Penelope's uniform prose narrative in a way that secures them special attention from the reader. In the story of the hanged maids, Atwood performs a deep reconsideration of the myth, and the generic experimentation should additionally highlight its significance.

2.3 The Heroes and the Heroines

The stories told by Atwood and Barth are personal stories of individual characters (or a group of characters) developed to convey not only the course of events, but also the narrators' distinctive lines of reasoning, emotions, attitudes, and value systems. As such, they reflect a broader tendency which implies "commitment to a subjectivist perspectivism compatible with the reigning tenets of liberal pluralism" characteristic of works with formerly minor characters as protagonists (Rosen 2016, 89). In the *Odyssey*, Menelaus and Penelope are at best supporting characters, as the spouses of more important personalities. As a king and a warrior, Menelaus also performs a distinguished social role, but this is far more prominently presented in the *Iliad*, whereas the *Odyssey* depicts him in his domestic setting. Penelope is primarily defined through her relationship with Odysseus and her role of a faithful and patiently waiting wife, who does show considerable cunning in avoiding the advances of the suitors, but who is nevertheless rather passive. Disregarding the grand narratives of war and life voyage, Atwood and Barth turn their attention to the intimate stories of these characters, which bear more relevance to the world of their readers. Placed in everyday situations and presented as ordinary people speaking ordinary language, Penelope and Menelaus lose the aura of the epic but gain a new dimension of humanness and come across as flesh-and-blood individuals, occasionally weak and insecure, thus becoming characters to which contemporary readers could easily relate on a personal level. Similarly, the anonymous minstrel and the twelve maids are no longer mere performers of tasks assigned by society but become fully human fictional characters.

Both Penelope and Menelaus are prompted to narration by moments from their past that still bother them, both are trying to resolve these issues through their stories, and both are doing this while disembodied: Penelope is speaking from Hades, having been dead for millennia, and the narrator of the frame story in "Menelaiad" is now only the voice of Menelaus. Atwood is particularly focused on the way Penelope is treated by men (her father, her husband, her son, and the suitors) and her responses to such treatment, as well as on her rivalry with other women (Helen most of all, but also the maids). The lines Atwood quotes in the epigraph refer to the "flawless" and "the constant Penelope" and thus evoke the proverbial faithfulness and patience of the eternal wife from Homer's epic. As Barbara Dell'abate-Çelebi points out, "faithfulness was not a choice in the ancient Greek world, as it was obligatory for women not to be adulterous;" nevertheless, her refusal to re-marry after many years of waiting can be seen as Penelope shirking her duties and is "extreme in a society like Ithaca" (Dell'abate-Çelebi 2016, 83). This is an indication of a strong will combined with the craftiness the queen of Ithaca displays in avoiding the suitors.

As Atwood herself has suggested, the presentation of Penelope in the *Odyssey* might be too simplistic, since we only see her weaving, waiting, crying, and in general, being exceptionally good, whereas, considering all circumstances, "she must have been doing a lot more than she's shown as doing in the *Odyssey*, because there's nobody else in charge of the outfit... She must have been a much more active, practical person than she's shown as being" (Tonkin 2005). Atwood's Penelope is telling her story from a considerable temporal distance from the narrated events, and her being a bodiless spirit of the underworld allows her to speak openly

and without fear of consequences. She does not enjoy her role of a faithful wife, "an edifying legend," "a stick used to beat other women with," and urges future women not to follow her example (Atwood 2006, 2). Throughout her narrative, we can see Penelope disappointed by her husband, who plays unexpected tricks on her and whom she suspects of unfaithfulness and lying. The memory of her wedding when Odysseus managed to win her hand is fraught with the feeling that he too was only trying to enhance his wealth and social status, that she was promised to him as "payment" for a service rendered to her uncle and handed over "like a package of meat" (Atwood 2006, 39). We see her haunted by the question why her father, King Icarius of Sparta, threw her in the sea when she was a baby; she is also depicted as the mother of a rebellious youth, Telemachus, who is growing increasingly disrespectful to her as he feels that he should not receive orders and lectures from a woman.

Penelope's story offers an insight into the social mores and customs of ancient times, which are quite relatable to modern society. The domestic troubles besetting Atwood's heroine and her responses to them are aspects to which 21st-century readers (particularly the female ones) can most easily relate and which most plainly position myths as conveyors of universal human experience. *The Penelopiad* also provides a glimpse into the circumstances in Hades – the interactions between the dead, the punishments administered in the dark grottoes, the outings to the world of the living, the dead being summoned by the living for advice and prophesies. The present Penelope, that is, her disembodied spirit, comes across as rather straightforward, intrepid, and curious (since she shows great interest in modern inventions, such as the light bulb), although she still lacks self-confidence when confronted with Helen. In *The Penelopiad* we observe Penelope changing from a timid and insecure fifteen-year-old bride to a strong woman keeping the household, taking charge and becoming an expert at bargaining, farming, and trading. Penelope is also quite censorious not only of the behavior of her husband, whose stories of sea-faring peril she disputes, offering more realistic versions of events, but also of the gods, whom she portrays as capricious and sadistic. Such presentation of Penelope's thoughts and feelings contrasts sharply with the submissiveness implied in the image of a patient and lenient wife.

The frame story of "Menelaiad" is narrated by what is left of Menelaus, his voice, speaking from a vantage point that offers a better understanding not only of what has been bothering him most – his relationship with Helen – but also of himself as Menelaus, the Spartan king, at different points in his quest for truth. The inner levels of narration, each embedded in the previous and framing the next, present different episodes from Menelaus's life, in each of which Menelaus the narrator is addressing different characters: Telemachus and Peisistratus in Sparta, Helen on the ship, Proteus on Pharos, Eidothea also on Pharos, Helen in Troy, and Helen in their bed. At the center of each story is Menelaus's doubt about his wife's feelings and her faithfulness, so that the powerful king of Sparta, who once managed to move thousands of Achaeans against the city of Troy, is presented as an ordinary husband vexed by domestic troubles. This could be a wealthy landlord or businessman welcoming guests, showing them around his home and trying to impress them with luxurious goods he acquired on his travels, while all the time keeping an eye on his flirting wife. Such dethronement of an epic hero produces a comic effect but offers another possible way of looking into the classical epic. Like Penelope in Atwood, Barth's Menelaus becomes a character with a complex emotional life

and developed psychology who undergoes significant changes throughout the story. At first unable to grasp that Helen chose him for such a simple reason as love, Menelaus will eventually accept Proteus's advice: "Helen chose you without reason because she loves you without cause; embrace her without question and watch your weather change. Let go" (Barth 1988, 161). Only after Menelaus has abandoned the rational approach will his tale start to disentangle, and he will be able to "let go": "I believe all. I understand nothing. I love you" (Barth 1988, 162).

Of particular interest in Atwood's and Barth's postmodern epics are the destinies of the anonymous characters: the maids and the minstrel. That both Barth and Atwood focus on characters originally presented only by their professions again reflects the postmodern tendency to bring marginalized groups on stage and into the spotlight. On the one hand, these characters become representatives of their social strata and gain a symbolic quality – the anonymous minstrel becomes a proto-poet, a forefather of all future bards and artists in general, who made a lasting contribution to literature by inventing *in medias res* as a type of narration; the maids come to symbolize the faithfulness betrayed by those who were supposed to protect them. On the other hand, the minstrel and the maids narrate their personal stories of their childhood and youth, their love life and entertainment.

The tragic destiny of the maids is what inspired Atwood to write *The Penelopiad* – choosing the topic for the *Canongate Myth Series*, "out of my unconscious, where I keep so many things, there appeared in particular the hanged maids, who have always bothered me about the *Odyssey*" (Tonkin 2005).[5] In Atwood's novel, the maids offer alternative versions of the events in Ithaca, occasionally contradicting Penelope, but they also give an account of their own tragic fate;[6] born as slaves, with few joyful events in their lives, they end up hanged by Telemachus, their peer and childhood playmate. The symbolism of the number twelve is clarified in a separate chapter titled "An Anthropology Lecture," and "Presented by: The Maids." Aside from "twelve apostles," the "twelve days of Christmas" and the "twelve months" of the year, the maids here establish a connection to mythical, pre-patriarchal times and suggest that their rape and hanging "represent the overthrow of a matrilineal moon-cult by an incoming group of usurping patriarchal father-god-worshipping barbarians" (Atwood 2006, 165). What is not explicitly suggested in the novel, but is at least an intriguing coincidence, is that the number of maids equals the number of jurors at a murder trial. The maids are the victims, but they also act as jurors, since there is nobody else either to plead their case or deliver a verdict. They haunt Penelope and Penelope's story, but they do this in an apparently playful manner, through a variety of prose and poetic forms. However, the person the maids haunt most of all is Odysseus, who cannot avoid them even in his afterlife. Penelope intimates that the maids make it impossible for the two of them to be together in Hades: "He sees them in the distance, heading our way. They make him nervous. They make him restless. They cause him pain. They make him want to be anywhere and anyone else" (Atwood 2006, 189). She has even tried to intervene and persuade them to stop haunting him, but the maids are persistent and in the final chapter, with an ironic title "We're Walking Behind You, A Love

[5] We can observe Atwood's interest in maids in her other works, as well, both poetry and prose, and perhaps most notably in *The Handmaid's Tale*, where the maids undergo similar psychological and physical torture.

[6] Although there are twelve of them, the singular is appropriate here since they are regarded as one entity throughout the novel.

Song," they declare: "We're the serving girls, we're here to serve you. We're here to serve you right. We'll never leave you, we'll stick to you like your shadow, soft and relentless as glue. Pretty maids, all in a row" (Atwood 2006, 193).

Penelope has been haunted by her maids ever since her youth, when she resented their mocking, lascivious jokes on her wedding day. In the years of waiting for Odysseus's return, she has succeeded in making an alliance with some of them, the twelve maids that will be executed, and in turning them into her confidantes. However, Penelope's dubious role in their hanging leaves room to wonder what kind of relationship existed between them. In presenting the tensions between Penelope and the maids, Atwood explores one of the recurrent themes of her works: rivalry between women and the strain of living in a culture "where women are trained in both self-surveillance and in exercising the surveillant gaze over other women" (Davies 2006, 62). As in the case of Atwood's earlier works, *The Penelopiad* places women in a world where they are pitted against each other and forced to win their place by destroying the others. Just as Penelope disregards the plights of the maids but uses them as instruments to preserve her position, so the maids haunt Penelope, her husband, and her story, seeking revenge.

2.4 Helen the Cousin, Helen the Goat

The fact that the focalizers of Atwood's and Barth's works are less prominent and even unnamed characters does not imply that those who play the leading roles in Homer's epics are marginalized or absent in these narratives. A character who receives considerable attention and undergoes significant transformation in the course of the postmodern demythologizing is Helen of Troy, or Helen of Sparta, Menelaus's wife and Penelope's cousin. Rumored to be Zeus's daughter, and therefore half-goddess, Helen is traditionally represented as a woman of outstanding beauty. When the Trojan prince Paris takes her away from her husband and her home, Helen becomes the immediate cause of the Trojan War, or as Christopher Marlowe famously phrased it, "the face that launched a thousand ships" (Marlowe 1967, 80). Helen's prominent position in classical mythology is undisputed, owing to the grand significance of the Trojan War itself; just as the fall of Troy represents "the myth of national origins for Western Europe," or even "a secular Fall," Helen can be said to hold "the status of a secular Eve" (Suzuki 1989, 13). The accounts from the classical literature differ in their views on Helen's virtue, on whether she eloped with Paris or was abducted, whether her actions were directed by the gods or her own will, and whether she was in Troy at all. The disagreements aover the question whether Helen's elopement can be considered the *casus belli* have been fostered by historical accounts claiming that the Trojan War was fought for purely economic reasons, which diminishes her role in it. However, in popular imagination, Helen is a woman whose stunning beauty became the cause of the greatest conflict in ancient times, and this perspective is the starting point for Atwood's and Barth's revisionist narratives.

In Barth's "Menelaiad" Helen is the focal point of the narration, and her name is the first word Menelaus utters to begin his story:

> "Helen," I say: "Helen's responsible for this. From the day we lovers sacrificed the horse in Argos, pastureland of horses, and swore on its bloody joints to be her champions

> forever, whichever of us she chose, to the night we huddled in the horse in Troy while she took the part of all our wives – everything's Helen's fault." (Barth 1988, 130)

Judging by Menelaus's posture in Homer's *Odyssey*, Helen's betrayal can be considered the crucial event of his life, so that

> his identity is solely that of a betrayed husband. Despite the Achaean victory and Helen's return, despite the riches gained in his seven years of wandering before returning to Sparta, Menelaus cannot be content, since he is unable to refrain from looking backward to the traumatic disruption of his domestic peace and to the war that came in its wake. (Suzuki 1989, 64)

Barth builds his story on the hurt feelings of this enraged, confused, and most likely cuckolded husband, and since Menelaus is the focalizer of the events, Helen is presented less as a half-goddess of mythical beauty and more as a cunning, deceitful, and flirtatious woman. Helen appears on all narrative levels of Menelaus's story, both as the subject of his narration and as his interlocutor, and her words are central to the narrative, in the metaphorical and physical sense: the word "love," as an answer to Menelaus's key question, is positioned in the middle of "Menelaiad." Helen is depicted as intelligent, astute and resourceful, but also as a lustful woman who is constantly trying to seduce everybody, including their much younger guests, Telemachus and Peisistratus. Menelaus scornfully observes her engaged in domestic duties (such as knitting) and makes sarcastic comments on her outward resemblance to Penelope, whereas Helen seems to disregard her husband's moroseness and complacently continues with her usual activities.

While "Menelaiad" presents Helen as an ordinary human, in "Anonymiad" she is utterly dehumanized and becomes a goat. The anonymous minstrel left on a desert island has only goats and amphorae of wine to keep him company and provide entertainment. He kills the goats for food and uses their hides to write his story, which he puts in the empty amphorae and casts into the sea. Helen is the last goat left, and the fact that she has outlived the others is hardly an accident, since she seems to be quite resourceful. The minstrel names her "Helen," for "so epic fair she seemed to me in my need, and cause of so great vain toil," but he also observes that the difficulty of catching her distinguishes Helen the goat from Helen the queen, since the latter "had never been so hard to get" (Barth 1988, 197). The minstrel's comments have an immediate comic effect but also express censure and ridicule of this formerly elevated character.

Penelope's perspective on Helen is that of a woman and a cousin. Female characters and the complicated relationships between them, fraught with rivalry, jealousy and insecurity, are among the core themes of Atwood's fiction and *The Penelopiad* is no exception. Penelope envies Helen for being more famous and more beautiful, as well as for never having been punished in childhood, which contrasts with her own father's attempt to drown her. Penelope cannot help comparing herself to Helen, and this makes her feel insecure and inferior. Even after death, Helen seems to be more popular: the magicians summoning the dead are much more interested in Helen than in Penelope, which Penelope acknowledges as understandable, but with a pinch of bitterness and sarcasm:

> If you were a magician, messing around in the dark arts and risking your soul, would you want to conjure up a plain but smart wife who'd been good at weaving and had never transgressed, instead of a woman who'd driven hundreds of men mad with lust and had caused a great city to go up in flames?
>
> Neither would I. (Atwood 2006, 22)

However, Penelope is by no means reconciled to her cousin's superior status and constantly tries to present her in a bad light.

Penelope's vision of Helen is similar to Menelaus's: she depicts her cousin as a woman "who loved to make conquests just to show she could" (Atwood 2006, 29), who would "flirt with her dog, with her mirror, with her comb, with her bedpost. She needed to keep in practice" (2006, 33), and who smiles dazzlingly in a way that would induce any man to think "that secretly she was in love with him alone" (2006, 42). According to Penelope, Helen seeks constant attention from everybody and is extremely vain. On the day of Penelope's wedding to Odysseus, Helen makes herself the central figure of the event, not only with her "intolerable beauty," but also with her snide comments about the bride and groom.

Penelope blames Helen for her own domestic misfortune. In the chapter entitled "Helen Ruins My Life," Penelope blames her cousin for the Trojan War and Odysseus's departure from Ithaca. Atwood's heroine has no doubts about this; the "wicked" Helen ran away with Paris of her own will; and the two of them even laughed at the Greek emissaries who came to reclaim the Spartan queen and the riches she had taken from the court. Penelope recounts the circumstances of Helen's first abduction by Theseus, which caused another war, and asserts that Helen even takes pride in the number of men who died for her – "she took their deaths as a tribute to herself" (Atwood 2006, 75). In Penelope's eyes, Helen is a vain and ambitious woman, craving attention and causing trouble for other people.

Helen haunts Penelope even in their afterlives, as is seen from their encounter in Hades, on Helen's way to her "spiritual bath." As always, Helen is followed by many male admirers (now all spirits) and speaks to Penelope in her usual condescending manner. An established view on these two characters is challenged when Helen confronts her cousin with an unexpected question: "How many men did Odysseus butcher because of you?" (Atwood 2006, 155). Much condemned as a woman whose actions led to the death of thousands of brave warriors, Helen puts a question revealing that Penelope too could be accused of the same "crime." Atwood takes no sides in her revision of the *Odyssey*, as her retold epic marks the places that merit more contemplation and asserts that nothing should be taken at face value. Helen's comment prompts us to view Penelope's position from another angle and suggests that considering Penelope an epitome of goodness and innocence might be oversimplification.

3 Conclusion

As Linda Hutcheon observes, "myths and conventions exist for a reason, and postmodernism investigates that reason. The postmodern impulse is not to seek any total vision. It merely questions" (Hutcheon 2004, 48). Atwood and Barth were driven by specific questions about

the *Odyssey* and based their works on episodes that are sufficiently unexplored in Homer's epic to be suitable for imaginative re-examination and are also relevant to the contemporary context. The retellings examined in this paper do not intend to modify the original storyline, but to offer a critical reappraisal of the material from the epic itself, taking into account alternative versions from other sources and penetrating the psychology of individual characters. The narrators and focalizers of the stories are less prominent or completely marginalized characters from the *Odyssey*, and it is through their visions that we see the familiar epic heroes and heroines living ordinary lives. Certain features and situations briefly mentioned in the original epic, but mostly obscured by the elevated tone of the whole work, are now rendered ironic and humorous. Aside from the first-person narration, Atwood and Barth employ several characteristically postmodern devices, playfully experimenting with narrative levels and different genres, some of which even imply multimedia presentations. In this manner the authors compose postmodern epics to replenish classical myth by introducing new interpretations and new perspectives. The demythologizing of situations and characters is not intended to denigrate the epic, but to show that beneath each myth lies a story that is universal and timeless and can never be exhausted.

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Beatrix Kiss
University of Debrecen, Hungary

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Elimination of Gender Equality in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the elimination of equality in *The Handmaid's Tale* in four areas, called the "4Ds": distinction, dependence, division and dominance. Distinction is a biological point of view in which the Handmaids' fertility becomes the foundation of their victimization. Dependence analyzes turning fertility into their obligation, integrating Foucault's "socialization of procreative behavior," leading to dependence on men. Division entails the physical division of Gilead into subgroups – Handmaids, Wives, etc. – along with the mental division created by distrust among people, harnessed to forestall rebellion. The last area, Dominance, connects the previous areas. Judith Butler's idea that "the body is a variable boundary," shows that the political power over the Handmaids' bodies equals dominance over society and the future, too. The article ends with the conclusion that destruction of women's rights eventually erases the notion of "woman."

Keywords: gender equality; division of labour; gender segregation; oppression; patriarchy; the body; women's rights; Margaret Atwood

Odprava enakosti spolov v *Deklini zgodbi* Margaret Atwood

POVZETEK

Prispevek obravnava odpravo enakosti v *Deklini zgodbi* na štirih področjih, imenovanih »štirje D-ji«: drugačnost (distinction), odvisnost (dependence), delitev (division) in prevlada (dominance). Drugačnost je biološki vidik, po katerem plodnost Dekel postane razlog za njihovo viktimizacijo. Odvisnost plodnost spremeni v njihovo obvezo, ki vključuje Foucaltovo »socializacijo prokreativnega vedenja« in povzroča odvisnost od moških. Delitev označuje fizično ločitev Gileada na podskupine – Dekle, Žene itn. – vključno z miselno delitvijo, ki zbuja nezaupanje med ljudmi in preprečuje upor. Zadnje področje, prevlada, povezuje prej našteta področja. Misel Judith Butler, da je »telo spremenljiva meja«, kaže, da politična moč nad telesi Dekel pomeni prevlado nad družbo in tudi prihodnostjo. Prispevek ugotavlja, da uničenje pravic žensk na koncu povzroči izbris pojma »ženska«.

Ključne besede: enakost spolov; delitev dela; ločitev po spolu; zatiranje; patriarhat; telo; pravice žensk; Margaret Atwood

1 Introduction

"I wait. I compose myself. My self is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech. What I must present is a made thing, not something born" (Atwood 2017, 66). These words from Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* effectively articulate what being a woman means in this 20th-century dystopia. Since its publication in 1985, the novel has been examined again and again, with critics attempting to unpack all the motifs, symbols, hidden messages and layers Atwood created. For example, Patricia F. Goldblatt has worked on how the novel (re)constructs its protagonist, Deborah Hooker on how the narration of the story uses the tools of orality, and the list could go on.

The aim of this article is to propose a new analytical perspective on this well-known and oft-analyzed novel by anatomizing its depiction of Gilead's gradual elimination of any possibility of gender equality. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, *gender equality* means "the act of treating women and men equally," but this seems a vague definition because of the blanks between the words, which give rise to with many questions. In their book *Fifty Key Concepts in Gender Studies*, Jane Pilcher and Imelda Whelehan summarize the major issues in the ongoing debates surrounding equality, asking whether equality is measured by opportunity or outcome, whether biological differences determine equality status, and whether women need to adopt "masculine norms" to achieve equality (Pilcher and Whelehan 2004, 38).

All these questions are raised in Atwood's novel – some more prominently than others, but each circles around the main point of this article: where and how can people treat each other equally? The answer to this question is a complex one and much previous research has suggested a simplified version: gender equality can be investigated in the private and the public spheres. Notwithstanding the fact that these aspects have also different sub-fields, I believe they are worth a closer look.

Descriptive and prescriptive gender stereotypes have been negotiated between society and literature for centuries. Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* shows this exchange in action. The way women and men should and do behave draws a line between the two genders, especially by binding women to the private sphere and men to the public. Essentially this is what the 19th-century social order handed over to the 20th century, feeding successive waves of feminism and leading to today's society where women and men have the same rights and similar opportunities – in Western societies. The historical struggle for gender equality occupies this article only indirectly; it arises only in connection with the mirroring effect Atwood uses in this novel.

The best-known issue in *The Handmaid's Tale* is women's oppression by and subordination to the new patriarchal society built by the Commanders; this subordination is justified on the basis of the problem of human infertility in Gilead. However, this newly established oppression cannot have been implemented in Gilead overnight. To examine and analyze the small steps leading to the elimination of gender equality in Gileadean society, I posit four stages, called the 'Four D-s,' through which women's position is returned to where it was in the 19th century or earlier. These 'Four D-s' are Distinction; Dependence; Division and Dominance, but since gender equality is a complex matter, these four parts will exhibit

overlap and interconnection. Moreover, the factors affecting them cannot be analyzed on their own but only in relation to one another.

2 The "4 Ds"

2.1 Distinction

The first field is *distinction* according to gender differentiation. Distinction takes various forms in the novel, but the key that joins them is the body. The concept of the body within gender studies "can be grouped into three broadly defined categories: the body as nature, the body as socially constructed, and embodiment" (Pilcher and Whelehan 2004, 6). All these categories can be found in Atwood's novel, but at this point I will reflect mostly on the body as nature, since the other two aspects will appear later in the other D stages.

As Shulamith Firestone has pointed out, the most distinctive characteristic separating women and men is biological difference: the capacity to conceive, carry a child and breastfeed it. Her study *The Dialectic Of Sex* analyzes the sex class that is constructed on the edge of political power, the natural body and the history of the oppression of women – overall, how sex discrimination works and how it could be changed. Her answer for this ongoing question is that to destroy inequality, we need to first eliminate this biological difference, perhaps by the use of advanced scientific methods, for example, the fertilization of eggs by sperm and growing fetuses in artificial wombs. Radical for their time (1970), Firestone's ideas have become commonplace in the 21st century and would have rendered Handmaids – and indeed, the ritualized and sexual Ceremony – unnecessary.

However, in Atwood's novel such scientific methods as are available fail to help the population overcome the falling birth rate; consequently, biological difference cannot be eliminated but instead is overemphasized by the gradual assemblage of all fertile women. Establishing a new social order becomes inevitable; if Gilead is to survive, the new society requires a new approach to female fertility. In the 1970s, Alice Rossi identified the key position of biological difference in the gender equality issue, arguing that women's superiority at caring for children meant that "equality between the sexes should not be achieved through women devolving childcare responsibilities to others, rather, equality should be achieved through securing proper societal recognition for women's distinctive, biologically rooted childcare abilities" (discussed in Sayers 1982, 148–9). Or, as the French feminist writers Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray have established, women's bodies (praised and valorised) could become a special source of women's empowerment (see Tong 1998; Whitford 1991). These approaches show clearly that biological differences need not preclude gender equality and they make it undeniable that the Commanders' plan was not just to save society from extinction but also to recreate covertly a strong patriarchy where women are dependent on men. This was achieved by taking natural differences of female and male bodies, strongly foregrounding these, and erecting an impenetrable wall between genders, with no recognition that gender could be other than binary.

However, that patriarchal mentality is not the only way in which *The Handmaid's Tale* separates men and women. Next to the biological differentiation there is also the social construction of

the body. Instead of emphasizing the similarities between sexes to bridge their inequality, the novel negates these similarities. For theorists Eleanor Maccoby and Carol Jacklin, it is biology that "constrains socialisation practices, making it possible for culture only to minimise, rather than eliminate, the effects of natural biological differences between women and men" (quoted in Pilcher and Whelehan 2004, 8), R. W. Connell identified some of the cultural practices that could act to negate similarities between the bodies of women and men. This negation can be done – and is done in *The Handmaid's Tale* – for example, by means of the clothing, or the overemphasis on prescriptive gender stereotypes (Connell 1987).

Atwood revealed in her Introduction to a 2017 edition of the novel that her idea of clothing for the Handmaids came from mid-Victorian costume and from nuns; however, the description of women's dress in the novel also bears a resemblance to 13th-century French fashion. In that era women wore simple, loose dresses, widening from the breast to the ankles, and mostly of one color – especially among servants – that bore the owner's crest, with the addition of a bonnet that followed strictly the form of the head, hiding their braided hair under it (Demanovszky 1979, 73–73). The narrator describes the Handmaids' clothing as follows: "[e]verything except the wings around my face is red: the color of blood, which defines us. The skirt is ankle-length, full, gathered to a flat yoke that extends over the breasts, the sleeves are full" (Atwood 2017, 8). The Marthas, meanwhile, wear "dull green, like a surgeon's gown of the time before. The dress is much like mine in shape, long and concealing" (Atwood 2017, 9). These characteristics ensure the differentiation of women from men by one glance at their clothing, while also returning women to a past when they had fewer legal rights. As for the symbolism of the dresses, Atwood wrote in the 2017 Introduction that "[t]he modesty costumes worn by the women of Gilead are derived from Western religious iconography – the Wives wear the blue of purity, from the Virgin Mary, the Handmaids wear red, from the blood of parturition but also from Mary Magdalene. Also, red is easier to see if you happen to be fleeing" (Atwood 2017, XIII). Despite Atwood's cynical final remark, this suggests that she chose female costumes in Gilead to reflect fundamentalist essentialism – which is the foundation of the Commanders' new order.

Prior to the creation of the Republic of Gilead, Offred's society had already demolished most prescriptive stereotypes; the new leadership, therefore, could not merely put women in old-fashioned clothes and expect them to behave according to the Gileadean ideal. "Boys and girls learn their social roles appropriate to their sexes, as this is marked by their body, through social interaction with successfully socialised adults and immersion in sex-typed culture, and reinforcements," says Helen Weinreich, continuing Maccoby and Jacklin's idea. Moreover, these scholars argue that it "is suggested within sex-role theory that gender inequalities can be reduced through altering socialisation into sex-roles, via, for example, non-sexist childrearing practices" (quoted in Pilcher and Whelehan 2004, 7–8). Atwood's recent sequel, *The Testaments*, offers a close look at the targeted upbringing of girls in Gilead, as Offred's daughter is reared within a Commander's home. In the opposite of "non-sexist childrearing practices," Gileadean society prescribes domestic craft for daughters and prohibits reading, deepening the inequalities between women and men that were evident in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Such inequality then triggers the mirroring action of eventual female empowerment. The Handmaids in the Red Centre are forbidden to show

confidence, to look anyone in the eye, or to speak without permission; even when allowed to speak, they can only use formulaic quasi-biblical phrases (e.g. "Praise be"). In short, their new social role after the mandatory brainwashing is to "[j]ust do your duty in silence" (Atwood 2017, 223). Although the uniforms and sex-based behavior might not be seen as major a gender issue as reproduction, it is important to highlight these minor aspects, not least because even seemingly superficial agents speak to gender inequality.

Why is it fundamental to use this body-based differentiation as the starting point of equality elimination? Because, as Firestone stated, "the natural reproductive difference between the sexes led directly to the first division of labor at the origins of class" (Firestone 1979, 9). This natural difference, compounded by social construction, leads to women's being dependnce on men, a condition which takes this article to the second stage of the '4 Ds'.

2.2 Dependence

As has been established, the basis for Gilead's new political order is the problem of barrenness – plus Gilead's leaders' peculiar interpretation of the Bible – which leads to the full abuse of those few women who can have children. This idea resonates with what Michel Foucault calls "a socialization of procreative behavior" (Foucault 1979, 104), which he explains as a "political socialization achieved through the 'responsibilization' of couples with regard to the social body as a whole" (Foucault 1979, 105). This idea suggests that the entire society is dependent on the Handmaids, which could lead to their being atop the hierarchy, eventually creating a new matriarchy. In *The Handmaid's Tale* Aunt Lydia, too, tries to make the Handmaids see how important they are by saying "[y]ours is a position of honor" (Atwood 2017, 13), the cynicism of which only becomes evident in *The Testaments* when Aunt Lydia is revealed as a non-believing double agent.

The potential for matriarchy was also suggested in the first "D" with the consideration of Cixous and Irigaray's approach. However, these were not the only theorists to propose the idea of matriarchy. For example, Sara Ruddick wrote about how feminine values (maternal and caring) should be considered as qualities that need centering, to replace 'masculine' values (Ruddick 1997). Although the Commanders do employ some centering, since Gilead is strongly dependent on the Handmaids' capacity, instead of "projecting their [women's] values into political life as a legitimate basis for women's citizenship" (Lister 1997, 95), they bind the Handmaids – along with other women in society – to their most important responsibility, assuring reproduction, thus binding them to the "protection" of the private sphere, while simultaneously excluding them from the public sphere. At this point we reach a historically familiar scenario common even in Western society prior to first-wave feminism.

First-wave feminism was a key factor in the improvement of women's status, but during the 20th century, dependence on men in patriarchal society was not entirely eradicated. As Sylvia Walby argues – mostly talking about Britain in the 20th century – patriarchy merely shifted from the private form to the public, that is, from women being dependent on men in the family to women being dependent on men because of limited participation in the public sphere (Walby 1990, 201). Dependence on men is not the invention of Atwood's novels nor of 19th-century patriarchy, because woman as property goes back to a much older idea.

The fundamental significance of the social contract – based on writings by theorists such as Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau – is undoubted, but Carole Pateman draws attention to the fact that the original social contract "is a sexual as well as a social contract; it is sexual in the sense of patriarchal – that is, the contract establishes men's political right over women – and also sexual in the sense of establishing orderly access by men to women's bodies" (Pateman 1988, 2). Female dependence was thus a deep-rooted issue before the literary creation of Gilead. What makes the dependence in Atwood's novel into a totalitarian plan to eliminate equality, is that women are restricted to the private sphere once again, which becomes the legal "territory" of the Commanders, where women exist only to be exploited in every aspect of life, as follows:

> a) *economically*, since the Marthas are forced to run the household and do everything that is necessary for the Handmaids, such as feeding and bathing. Even the handmaid herself can be considered as a job to 'do', as Offred states, "To them I am a household chore, one among many" (Atwood 2017, 48);
>
> b) *emotionally*; for example, the Wives are required to be part of the Ceremony and watch the entire sexual act but say nothing against it, even though one of them, Serena Joy, clearly shows loathing "as if the touch of my [i.e. Offred's] flesh sickens and contaminates her" (Atwood 2017, 96). This leads the narrator to question which of them suffers most, the Wife or the Handmaid;
>
> c) *sexually*, when the Commanders give the unwanted Unwomen the chance either to go to the distant Colonies – and starve to death – or to become Jezebels, who are basically prostitutes, whose existence allows the Gilead elite to abuse their power by breaking the very rules they have established;
>
> d) *biologically*, by using the Handmaids against their will as living vessels for reproduction in chosen families, without taking into consideration that they are human beings, not machines.

All these forms of exploitation happen simultaneously, until eventually women have no area in their lives where men are not their superiors and where they are not told what to do or be. This extreme coercion of women into oppression leads into the third D, which is the division of society and also of the self.

2.3 Division

The most visible area for the elimination of gender equality is the societal division into multiple sectors. Women and men form the most basic division – as demonstrated in the first D – then comes the duality of the public and private spheres, where men have full authority in the public sphere and only slightly less in the private sphere. As in the previous point, the dependence of women is a result of their severe restriction to the private sphere. However, even in this sphere where women should have some individuality, they are not an undivided female mass. They are divided into newly established social classes and given their own territories, with certain responsibilities and illusory rights.

Previously, I have pointed out the various ways in which women are exploited – economically, emotionally, sexually and biologically – and following this division, we can distinguish the Wives, the Marthas, the Handmaids, the Jezebels and the Econowives, all of whom have their own functions. For example, the "garden is the domain of the Commander's Wife. […] Many of the Wives have such gardens, it's something for them to order and maintain and care for" (Atwood 2017, 12). The Marthas, meanwhile, are responsible for the household chores, the cooking and cleaning. The Handmaids' have but one job: to give birth to the Commanders' children. Originally, as Heidi Hartmann states, the "domestic division of labour […] acts to weaken women's position in the labour market" (Hartmann 1982, 448), since dividing an already divided position reduces women's rights and strength to almost nothing in Gilead.

Nevertheless, we cannot analyze this division without paying attention to one of the most interesting groups, the Jezebels. Their group is a mixture of the old society and the new, as they are "working girls […] from the old times" who "couldn't be assimilated" (Atwood 2017, 239). Here Atwood is playing on the slang term for prostitute, but Gilead also groups them with other women who could have been considered inferior to the new order, such as sociologists, lawyers, or women in executive positions, all of them oppressed by the new law of Gilead, while allowing Commanders to break their own rules. In the sequel, *The Testaments*, Atwood aligns even Aunt Lydia quite closely to this group; as an educated professional who had worked as a family court judge and was thus used to power, she could threaten Gilead and so is coerced into collaboration with the power structure.

These groups represent the novel's constructed system of exploitation by fragmentation. This function-based division of women emerges clearly when the narrator talks about the ordinary women: "Econowives, they are called. These women are not divided into functions" (Atwood 2017, 24). In their functional unity, once the norm, they serve to highlight the issue of dehumanization of women. To explain this division, one could use the metaphor of a household gadget that is multifunctional: that is, all of today's women, who do multiple things, and concomitantly enjoy multiple rights. When, however, the parts are disassembled both functionality and rights are impaired.

As Offred says, "In this house we all envy each other something" (Atwood 2017, 53). This envy is implicated in another form of division that I have named mental division. René Descartes in the 17th century stated that "the human mind and the human body are fundamentally distinct from one another" (although this 'Cartesian dualism' was later challenged by many philosophers and social theorists); it is thus understandable that Gilead's system goes beyond physical segregation. Mental division, as I use the term, designates the serious distrust rooted in Gilead's society and epitomized by the continuous surveillance by the Eyes, who report to the leadership. Being watched is not uncommon, so it does not necessarily lead to such distrust as in this novel. However, the difference arises from the fact that nobody knows who the Eyes are or when they are watching. The novel thus operationalizes the idea of the panopticon, Jeremy Bentham's perfect prison layout. Nobody can trust anyone else, and the revelation in *The Testaments* of Aunt Lydia's longstanding treachery confirms this truth. Consequently, people in Gilead are not simply physically divided into distinct groups but are fully alienated from one another, always thinking that "[t]he truth is she is my spy, as I am

hers" (Atwood 2017, 19), as Offred says. Everyone inside this new society is trapped in their own mental prison, wondering, "Perhaps he was merely being friendly. […] Perhaps it was a test, to see what I would do. Perhaps he is an Eye" (Atwood 2017, 18).

2.4 Dominance

Although I have defined dominance as the fourth D as part of my theoretical apparatus, dominance is not an entirely separate field when it comes to eliminating gender equality. Rather, it is an end product of the other three Ds. All the Ds are interconnected, but dominance plays a major part in the other three, because the others comprise ways leading to the dominance of men in the dystopian society. Judith Butler aptly touches on this dominance: "the body is not a 'being' but a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated, a signifying practice within a cultural field of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality" (Butler 1999, 177). The body is the embodiment of the self, and because of its permeability, power over it can shift easily. "What you must be, girl, is impenetrable," Aunt Lydia instructs the Handmaids while their life is taken away from them and replaced by an existence governed by ritual penetration (Atwood 2017, 29).

In the novel, the Commanders have the political power to own a Handmaid, who is no more to them than a walking womb. This legal ownership eases their womb envy, which means that they want the only thing that women have but men do not and the only area in which women will always be superior to men. However, to save the nation from its demise, this new ownership needs to be that which has become normalized, and the Handmaids must accept that they are the only hope for Gilead. Considering the seriousness of the matter, and the importance of the Handmaids' fertility, it becomes understandable that the Commanders creation of Handmaids was motivated not by oppression of women but by the necessity of survival. However, taking away their choice, the freedom to decide if and in what way they will be part of this new society, is what makes the Commanders oppressors. "We were a society dying […] of too much choice" (Atwood 2017, 25), Offred confesses, referring to the society that preceded Gilead, offering a feeble explanation for Gilead's radical actions. Placing women in distinct groups with restricted functions to serve the country is what created the 'dual system theory' in debates about patriarchy. As Pilcher and Whelehan write, "In some versions of dual system theory, capitalism and patriarchy are understood as interdependent, mutually accommodating systems of oppression, whereby both systems structure and benefit from women's subordination" (2004, 94). Finally, these women are deprived of the only thing they were allowed and thus fully become the property of the dominant elite.

However, subsequent to the physical dominance which gives the Commanders and other leaders of Gilead the power to seize women's property, the oppression evolves into dominance over the thoughts of women, especially in the case of the Handmaids. As they are taught by the Aunts, "There is more than one kind of freedom. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of the anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are given freedom from. Don't underestimate it" (Atwood 2017, 24). By brainwashing them, making them believe that this condition is good for them and that suffering is for their benefit, both sides of the 'Cartesian dualism,' the mind and the body fall victim to totalitarian oppression.

We could argue that this brainwashing is merely a return to patriarchy, a modernized version of reality in previous centuries, but further consideration of how these women are demoralized, hurt and almost destroyed by the invasion of their bodies, reveals the crippling consequences of such dominance. By owning the bodies of fertile women, the male power elite in Gilead also own the entire reproductive capacity of the nation, which instantly confers on them authority over the future of not just their nation but possibly the human race.

3 Conclusion

I have anatomized the elimination of gender equality in four steps, starting from the overemphasis on the biological difference between men and women; continuing to the re-creation of female financial dependence on men; through the division of women's functions and powers; and, ultimately to a dominance so comprehensive that women would lack the will to contemplate independence, as the new slowly became the ordinary.

By the time the Commanders have fulfilled their plan to create Gilead, equality is no longer the sole casualty; this is the rationale behind the quotation at the beginning of this article, where Offred conceptualizes herself as a thing to be composed: "I wait. I compose myself. My self is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech. What I must present is a made thing, not something born" (Atwood 2017, 66). The proposed '4 Ds' comprise the intervening ways, overlapping areas that lead to the elimination of gender equality. They also form the starting points of something that goes beyond previous constructs of patriarchy. Since Offred considers herself as a construct, we understand that the notion of 'woman' has been erased from her mind – and from the minds of other women, who have internalized their objectification. Nevertheless, even such extreme erasure does not mark the end, because the elimination and objectification initiate an avalanche leading to a newly created sisterhood between alienated and oppressed women. This sisterhood would become the major motif in *The Testaments*. In relegating women to a debased position below even historical pre-liberation conditions, the Commanders fail to foresee the backlash against their oppression. Aunt Lydia's advice to novice – "Think of it as being in the army" (Atwood 2017, 16) – takes on renewed resonance in light of her role in the sequel, in which an army of sisters will reverse history and regain their freedom.

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Ewelina Feldman Kołodziejuk
University of Białystok, Poland

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Mothers, Daughters, Sisters: The Intergenerational Transmission of Womanhood in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*

ABSTRACT

The article reads *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* as a response to changes in the feminist movement. Less radical than their mothers' generation, second-wave feminists' daughters often abandoned the struggle for equality and focused on homemaking. Nevertheless, the 1990s saw a resurgence of the women's liberation movement known as the third wave. These feminism(s) significantly redefined the notion of womanhood and emphasised the diversity of the female. After 2010, critics argue, third-wave feminism entered the fourth wave. This analysis of *The Handmaid's Tale* focuses on Offred's relationship with her mother, which is representative of the wider phenomenon of the *Backlash*. It investigates how the mother and her generation influenced the maternal choices of the Handmaid and discusses the trauma of child removal suffered by Offred. The final section examines *The Testaments* through the lens of third-wave feminism and analyzes the plight of Offred's daughters, focusing on their attitudes towards womanhood and maternity.

Keywords: feminism; *The Handmaid's Tale*; *The Testaments*; Margaret Atwood

Matere, hčere, sestre: Medgeneracijski prenos ženskosti v romanih *Deklina zgodba* in *Testamenti* Margaret Atwood

POVZETEK

Članek obravnava romana *Deklina zgodba* in *Testamenti* kot odziv na spremembe v feminističnem gibanju. Hčere feministk drugega vala, ki so bile manj radikalne kot njihove matere, so pogosto opustile boj za enakost in se osredotočile na gospodinjstvo. Kljub temu smo bili v devetdesetih letih dvajsetega stoletja priča ponovni oživitvi ženskega osvobodilnega gibanja, ki ga imenujemo tretji val feminizma. Ti feminizmi so bistveno preoblikovali idejo ženskosti in poudarili raznovrstnost žensk. Kritiki trdijo, da je po letu 2010 tretji val feminizma vstopil v četrti val. Ta analiza romana *Deklina zgodba* se osredotoča na Offredin odnos s svojo materjo, ki je reprezentativen za širši pojav Nasprotovanja. Preiskuje, kako sta mati in njena generacija vplivali na odločitve o materinstvu Dekel in obravnava travmo premestitve otroka, ki jo je trpela Offred. Zadnji del preučuje roman *Testamenti* skozi prizmo tretjega vala feminizma in analizira težek položaj Offredinih hčera ter se osredotoča na njun odnos do ženskosti in materinstva.

Ključne besede: feminizem; *Deklina zgodba*; *Testamenti*; Margaret Atwood

1 Introduction

The novel which gained Atwood the status of literary icon is undoubtedly *The Handmaid's Tale*, published in 1985. Thanks to a successful TV series adaptation released in 2017, currently in its fourth season, *The Handmaid's Tale* has been enjoying a spectacular renaissance. Its mass popularity has resulted in the appropriation of the red outfits of the Handmaids, worn along with a white winged headdress, by female protesters worldwide in order to demonstrate the thin line that separates some current political states from the Republic of Gilead (Atwood 2019b). Atwood's quasi-Latin message *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum* (*Don't let the bastards grind you down*) was unknown to the general public a few years ago, but is now displayed on protest banners. That the novel resonates with so many readers and protesters across the globe is rather despondent news, for it testifies to the ongoing breaches of human rights and commodification of lives in the name of a higher religious order. *The Testaments* (2019) restores hope in humanity and the power of sisterhood.

Set fifteen years after the closing scene of *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Testaments* reveals the circumstances of Gilead's fall. The novel is an interspersed first-person narrative from three characters: Aunt Lydia, who turns out to be a spy cooperating with the Mayday resistance and Offred's two daughters: Agnes Jemima, born in the pre-Gilead world and taken from her mother at five, and Nicole, smuggled as an infant out of Gilead to Canada. All three, closely orchestrated by Aunt Lydia, succeed in smuggling evidence that exposes the corrupt nature of leading Commanders and eventually helps to overthrow the Gileadean regime. In my analysis of *The Handmaid's Tale* I focus on the relationship between Offred and her mother, which is representative of the wider phenomenon of the Backlash. I investigate how the mother and her generation influenced the maternal choices of the titular Handmaid and discuss the trauma of child removal suffered by Offred. In the final section of the study I examine *The Testaments* through the lens of third-wave feminism and analyze the plight of Offred's daughters, focusing on their attitudes towards womanhood and maternity.

2 Offred as a Daughter: The Mother-Daughter Conflict Set Against the Backlash Effect

The relationship between Offred and her mother is set against a wider socio-historical background involving conflict between second-wave feminists and their daughters. In support of this thesis, Shirley Neuman maintains that "Offred, in short, is a fictional product of 1970s feminism, and she finds herself in a situation that is a fictional realization of the backlash against women's rights that gathered force during the early 1980s" (2006, 858). That *The Handmaid's Tale* is a critique of second-wave feminism was also acknowledged by Coral Ann Howells in the 1996 edition of her *Margaret Atwood*: "Yet the novel exceeds definitions of political correctness and has provoked much unease in its critique of second wave North American feminism" (1996, 127).[1]

The name given to this new movement, which eventually came to be labelled *postfeminism*, posed problems due to the semantic ambiguity of the prefix "post," which may suggest either

[1] Interestingly, the sentence was deleted from the second edition of Howells' book (2005).

an end to second-wave feminism or its natural evolution into a new form, building on the achievements of the former movement (Gamble 2006, 37). The unclear status of postfeminism also stemmed from the fact that, while it recognized feminist gains in gender equality, which initially gave it a veneer of feminist thinking, it simultaneously claimed the redundancy of further struggle. Instead, it encouraged "women to embark on projects of individualized self-definition and privatized self-expression exemplified in the celebration of lifestyle and consumption choices" (Budgeon 2011b, 281). In their anthology *Third Wave Agenda* (1997), Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake strongly object to the labelling of third-wave feminism as postfeminism: "Let us be clear: 'postfeminist' characterizes a group of young, conservative feminists who explicitly define themselves against and criticize feminists of the second wave" (1997, 1). With time, most critics ultimately drew a clear distinction between postfeminism, understood as "a media-driven spectacle of anti-feminism," and third-wave feminism, which was considered "a natural progression of feminist thought towards a politics of diversity" (Tolan 2007, 47).[2] Thanks to the publication of Susan Faludi's *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (1991), which portrays postfeminism as a significant relapse in the development of the women's liberation movement, the widespread postfeminist propaganda came to be called the Backlash.

The Handmaid's Tale is not solely a critique of theocracy and the rising popularity of right-wing sentiments but also a response to a crisis in the feminist movement. Less radical than their mothers' generation, second-wave feminists' daughters veered to the right, aided by those media that declared a postfeminist era and whose cover stories consistently reiterated women's "failure to find husbands, get pregnant, or properly bond with their children" (Faludi 2006, 93–94). As Faludi observes, "the absence of real women in a news account that is allegedly about real women is a hallmark of '80s backlash journalism. The press delivered the backlash to the public through a series of 'trend stories,' articles that claimed to divine sweeping shifts in female social behavior while providing little in the way of evidence to support their generalizations" (2006, 93). Trend stories repeatedly showed professional women as torn between their career and children or plagued by an infertility epidemic.

Though highly manipulated, the claims such ubiquitous female narratives made about the impossibility of "having it all" were hard to refute, for even such an established feminist figure as Alice Rossi argued that feminism had gone too far in its neglect of inborn biological differences between sexes. Her article "A Biosocial Perspective on Parenting" (1977), which was pilloried by Nancy Chodorow (1999, 18–20), exalted the connection between female sexual gratification and birthing, while simultaneously pointing out the inadequacy of public child-care programs and arguing that "little has yet been done to disturb the idea that under the best of all circumstances, the best place for young children is in the home under the mother's care" (Rossi 1977, 22). Such findings gave ammunition to the New Right, which, "countering women's independence and autonomy, [...] called for the restoration of women's traditional roles and for the return of women to the home" (Bouson 1993, 135).

[2] Yet, some academics insist on rearticulating postfeminism as third-wave on the grounds that "definitions of and assumptions about both third-wave and postfeminism in fact often overlap in a variety of ways, highlighting a number of similarities and continuities between these two ostensibly different contemporary feminisms and challenging the very distinction Heywood and Drake insist on" (Braithwaite 2002, 342).

Televangelists who rose to fame and power at that time proclaimed that "feminists encourage women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism and become lesbians" (Neuman 2006, 860). Since media coverage often portrayed feminists primarily as single, man-hating and child-killing militants, it is hardly surprising that their daughters' generation could no longer identify with the movement. A new ideal for women arose, embodied by Phyllis Schlafly, author of *The Power of the Positive Woman* (1977).

Schlafly, who is now generally recognized as the face of anti-feminism,[3] exhorted women to embrace gender differences and make the most of them. She was the founder of the STOP ERA (The Equal Rights Amendment) movement, which strongly opposed the ratification of the amendment to guarantee equal legal rights for all American citizens regardless of sex. While supporters of the ERA, who were predominantly members of women's liberation movements, "sought the eradication of those gendered rules and norms that confined women to a life within the home," its antagonists claimed that "women were destined to be wives and mothers, and their domestic roles actually freed them from the drudgeries and dangers of the office, the factory, and the military, among other male-dominated venues" (Miller 2015, 279). In her public addresses as well as in her writing, Schlafly advocated the traditional role division of working husbands and stay-at-home wives, with single women mostly relegated to the posts of teachers and nurses, as "the schoolchild or the patient of any age provides an outlet for a woman to express her natural maternal need" (2003, 325). Schlafly declares that "The Positive Woman looks upon her femaleness and fertility as part of her purpose, her potential, and her power. She rejoices that she has a capability for creativity that men can never have" (2003, 324); Atwood, taking these presumptions to the extreme, constructs the world of *The Handmaid's Tale*, in which fertility is a rather dubious power.

At the heart of postfeminism lay the resentment that equal opportunities, the goal of second-wave feminism, meant more work, responsibilities and incessant frustration at not being able to reconcile childcare and career. Moreover, postfeminists accused their mothers of having been sacrificed at the altar of the feminist struggle, which Badinter sums up in the following words:

> In pursuit of your independence, you sacrificed me as well. You didn't give me enough love, enough care, enough time. You were always in a hurry and often tired; you thought the quality of the time you spent with me was more important than the quantity. The truth is, I was not your top priority and you were not a good mother. I won't do the same with my children. (2011, 108)

This approach, and simultaneously reproach, is evident in the relationship between Offred and her activist mother, who was always involved in some scheme, rushing to a rally or a meeting. One of the moments Offred recalls, lying in her bedroom at the Commander's house, is that of a promised walk in the park with her mother: "she said we were going to feed the ducks. But there were some women burning books, that's what she was really there

[3] Even in her eighties Phyllis Schlafly did not alter her harsh view of feminists and still saw them as "anti-family, anti-children, and pro-abortion", maintaining that "women's libbers view the home as a prison and the wife and mother as a slave" (Allit 2016).

for. To see her friends; she'd lied to me, Saturdays were supposed to be my day. I turned away from her, sulking, towards the ducks" (1985, 48). Always busy, fighting for the cause, Offred's mother obviously believed in the notion of quality time, making up for the rest of the week's inattention on Saturdays. However, even on those days she found it hard to resist the temptation of joining her friends in burning pornographic magazines.

Owing to her mother's active involvement in the feminist struggle, their life included constant change of apartments, granting Offred little stability. "I wanted from her a life more ceremonious, less subject to makeshift and decampment," the Handmaid confesses (1985, 190). Unlike their mothers, postfeminists believed that children needed a lot of care and attention as well as their mother's presence. Family and home were their priority, even if also pursuing careers. Home cooking was an expression of tender loving care that Offred seems to miss. The smell of home-made bread at the Commander's house evokes memories from her pre-Gilead past: "The kitchen smells of yeast, a nostalgic smell. It reminds me of other kitchens, kitchens that were mine. It smells of mothers; although my own mother did not make bread. It smells of me, in former times, when I was a mother" (1985, 57). This succinct, matter-of-fact comment summarizes the shift in an attitude towards motherhood that Offred must have consciously made herself. She refused to be like her mother and resolved to be a better parent to her daughter, bread-making thus being a metaphor for maternal love. Though she did not entirely discard her mother's ideals and her fight for gender equality, Offred had a different attitude towards men. While her mother dismissed men on principle, Offred believed in partnership and love. According to Offred's mother,

> there is something missing in them, even the nice ones. It's like they're permanently absent-minded, like they can't quite remember who they are. They look at the sky too much. They lose touch with their feet. They aren't a patch on a woman except they're better at fixing cars and playing football, just what we need for the better improvement of the human race, right? (1985, 131)

The attitude of her mother's more radical friends can be summarized in Ehrenreich's words: "[they] tended to see all of history as a male assault on women and, by proxy, on nature itself. Hence rape, hence acid rain, hence six-inch high heels, hence the arms race, hence (obviously) the scourge of pornography" (quoted in Bloom 2004, 78). This "female-only" ideology representative of some radical activists who wished to eradicate men from their lives gave ammunition to postfeminism, which sought to break with feminism on the grounds that it was both anti-male and anti-family. The extremity of these radical feminist views is derided by Commander Judd, who asks Aunt Lydia to help him "organize the separate sphere – the sphere for women" (*Testaments* 2019, 175). As Fiona Tolan (2005, 19) argues, the novel is an intentional revision of the feminist movement: "By juxtaposing flashbacks of 1970s feminist activism with current descriptions of Gilead's totalitarianism, each informs the other so that *The Handmaid's Tale* depicts a dystopian society that has unconsciously and paradoxically met certain feminist demands."

However, through reminiscences of Offred's past with Luke, Atwood demonstrates that a fulfilling partnership between a man and a woman is feasible. As Amin Malak aptly notes, "the book's feminism, despite condemning male misogynous mentality, upholds and cherishes

a man-woman axis; here, feminism functions inclusively rather than exclusively, poignantly rather than stridently, humanely rather than cynically" (1987, 15). Feminism, Atwood seems to be saying, is neither what second-wave radicals proclaimed nor what postfeminists declared it to be. Feminism is a belief in equality that must be based on the mutual respect of sexes, which rejects retaliation and exclusion of the opposite sex. "I'm defining my feminism as human equality and freedom of choice," Atwood states (quoted in Brans 2006, 81). Seeing that her mother's militant attitudes were partly responsible for her loneliness, to which she occasionally admitted, Offred does not want to perpetuate her parent's mistakes:

> I admired my mother in some ways, although things between us were never easy. She expected too much from me, I felt. She expected me to vindicate her life for her, and the choices she'd made. I didn't want to live my life on her terms. I didn't want to be a model offspring, the incarnation of her ideas. We used to fight about that. I am not your justification for existence, I said to her once. (1985, 132)

Maternal expectations of daughters, even if not overtly communicated, are inherent in a mother-daughter dyad (Alford and Harrigan 2019). In the case of Offred's mother's generation, the historical context of the equal rights movement made these even more prominent and intense. Having redefined the traditional notion of woman as wife and mother, second-wave feminists found the next generation's traditional choices exasperating. The next generation of women was supposed to continue the struggle against the still present gender bias rather than confine themselves anew to home and childbearing, an idea satirized through the women's confinement in the Republic of Gilead.

Unlike her mother, who chose motherhood against her generation's objections, Offred saw parenthood as a natural progression in a relationship. Along with Luke, she dreamt of buying a big house with a garden and swings for children. Together they awaited their daughter's birth, for which they most likely prepared, since they were familiar with the latest prenatal research: "Lying in bed, with Luke, his hand on my rounded belly. The three of us, in bed, she kicking, turning over within me. Thunderstorm outside the window, that's why she's awake, they can hear, they sleep, they can be startled, even there in the soothing of the heart, like waves on the shore around them" (1985, 113). In setting up a traditional family, parents plus child, Offred let her mother down. "You're just a backlash," Offred's mother would say to her, adding, "History will absolve me" (1985, 131). It needs to be reiterated that in the debate between second-wave feminists and their postfeminist daughters, Atwood does not take sides. What she seems to advocate is free choice. Motherhood should be a woman's choice, not subject to external pressure. No woman should be forced to become a mother or deprived of this possibility. In an interview with Jo Brans (2006, 81) conducted in 1982, three years before the publication of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood clarifies her point on pregnancy and motherhood in the following manner: "Remember that I'm old enough to remember the time when women were told they had to get pregnant and have babies in order to 'fulfill their femininity.' And I didn't like that either. Nor do I like women being told that they oughtn't to get pregnant, that it's anti-feminist to get pregnant. I don't like that either."[4]

[4] This assertion demonstrates how Atwood's attitude towards pregnancy overlaps with Cixous's (1976, 890) conviction: "Either you want a kid or you don't – *that's your business*."

Once rid of her maternal responsibilities by Offred's maturity, her mother led the life of a vagabond, chasing her feminist goals and ideals. Preoccupied with serious issues, she could not be bothered with the mundane details of everyday existence. Constantly between apartments, she frequently visited Offred and Luke to use their washer-dryer or borrow a pot. "She breezed in and out of my house as if I were the mother and she were the child" (1985, 264). Second-wave feminist mothers are frequently portrayed as unconcerned with their children's well-being, their portrayals reminiscent either of carefree, irresponsible hippies with the wind in their hair or militant guerrillas with stern faces.

Unsurprisingly, motherhood was a particularly difficult decision for second-wave feminists, as it was generally considered to be the main source of oppression in women's lives. Some activists went so far as to treat this choice in terms of betrayal of the movement. Furthermore, single parenthood, though no longer carrying the stigma of past days, was not a widespread phenomenon either. Offred's mother attests to that:

> I had you when I was thirty-seven, my mother said. It was a risk, you could have been deformed or something. You were a wanted child, all right, and I did get shit from some quarters! My oldest buddy Tricia Foreman accused me of being pronatalist, the bitch. […] And stuff about how hard it was to be a single parent. […] At the hospital they wrote down "Aged Primipara" on the chart, I caught them in the act. That's what they call you when it's your first baby over thirty, over *thirty* for godsake. (1985, 130)

Becoming a mother, a woman suddenly becomes "a national resource" (1985, 75), to use Offred's bitter expression. Doctors, psychologists, sociologists and politicians proclaim what is good and what is bad for a prospective mother, and at what age she should bear children. Later they determine how she should raise and feed the baby so that it grows up to be – depending on the current trend – a perfect or perfectly happy citizen. These are the very attitudes Offred's mother's generation of women combatted and were therefore deeply disappointed when their daughters decided to glorify motherhood and the feminine. Unlike second-wave feminists, who strongly accentuated the similarities between the sexes and urged gender equality, postfeminists took pride in the feminine and their biological uniqueness; a woman's body became the source of primeval power that manifested itself through menstruation, pregnancy, and childbirth (Badinter 2011, 57).

This glorification of motherhood and its biological aspects takes a caricature form in *The Handmaid's Tale*, in the scene of Janine's labour, which is a communal ritual performed by all the Handmaids, and which proceeds naturally without medical intervention. Obstetricians are kept at bay in an Emerge van parked outside the house, as "they are only allowed in if it can't be helped" (1985, 124). Through chanting and paced breathing, not only do Handmaids help Janine deliver her baby, but they also experience the birth themselves, a mechanism which is weirdly reminiscent of collective hysteria:

> It's coming, it's coming, like a bugle, a call to arms, like a wall falling, we can feel it like a heavy stone moving down pulled down inside us, we think we will burst. We grip each other's hands, we are no longer single. […] My breasts are painful, they're leaking a little. Fake milk, it happens this way with some of us. […] We ache. Each of us holds in her lap a phantom, a ghost baby. (1985, 135, 137)

The fully natural birth and subsequent breastfeeding became a must for the postfeminist movement, which in extreme cases turned into tyranny. Escaping the dictatorship of obstetricians and opposing the total medicalization of labour, postfeminists rejected the epidural and the milk bottle, attainments which made the physiological aspects of motherhood less painful and infant care more bearable for many. Even though already Pope Pius XII advocated pain-free labour, many thought that pain was inherent to childbearing, and that it guaranteed the proper formation of the mother-child bond, which was biological in nature. Surprisingly, some declared feminists espoused that view, too, among them, Helen Deutsch. A specialist in female psychology, Deutsch maintained that pain and suffering mark key stages in a woman's development, and without experiencing pain, the mother will not be capable of cuddling her newborn, and thus will be incapable of becoming a mother (Ducret 2016, 315). Freud's famous "Anatomy is destiny" seems to reverberate in Deutsch's reasoning to the same extent to which it permeates Gilead's doctrines.

The scene depicting Janine's natural birth clearly derides the vision of labour prescribed by postfeminists, as does Ofkyle's death in labour in *The Testaments.* Nevertheless, the turn towards natural birth was a reaction to the over-medicalization of labour that reduced the role of an active child-bearer to that of a passive patient expected to comply with her obstetrician's decrees. This often resulted in unnecessary medical interventions, such as C-sections, forceps intervention, routine epidurals and episiotomies (Wolf 2003, 17). A graphic, yet most likely realistic vision of the medicalized birth of former times is shown in a film broadcast to the Handmaids by Aunt Lydia to prove the superiority of a wholly natural birth:

> A pregnant woman, wired up to a machine, electrodes coming out of her every which way so that she looked like a broken robot, an intravenous drip feeding into her arm. Some man with a searchlight looking up between her legs, where she'd been shaved, a mere beardless girl, a trayful of bright sterilized knives, everyone with masks on. A co-operative patient. Once they drugged women, induced labor, cut them open, sewed them up. (1985, 124)

Naturally, no generation of women consciously espoused this vision of labour either, but compromise between these two versions is possible. Offred herself seems to have happy memories of her own labour, which was neither excessively medicalized nor completely natural. It was probably close to the labour most women in the western world experience nowadays, under the supervision of a midwife and/or obstetrician, and in the presence of a partner: "What I remember is Luke, with me in hospital, standing beside my head, holding my hand, in the green gown and white mask they gave him. Oh, he said, Oh Jesus, breath coming out in wonder. That night he couldn't go to sleep at all, he said, he was so high" (1985, 136).

Though the term "Bildungsroman" is not commonly used with reference to *The Handmaid's Tale*, it is a novel about the protagonist's self-development and increase in self-awareness. At the beginning of the narrative, and even more so in the pre-Gilead flashbacks, Offred appears ignorant and uninterested in the broader structures beyond her family circle. Her memories paint a picture of a complacent, unreflective professional woman who took for granted her career and her family. "How were we to know we were happy?" (1985, 61) she asks afterwards.

Not until she has been deprived of everything, including her daughter, can Offred commence the process of maturation. The things she progressively notes during her walks and scarce confidential talks with other Handmaids testify to her increased political awareness. Apart from the description of recent events, her narrative starts to offer a subversive commentary on current affairs. The novel transforms from an individual survivor narrative into a chronicle of political dissent, which Neuman confirms, saying that Offred's commentary "shows her as having gained political awareness and as reassessing her earlier more individualist positions. In her thoughts, for example, she engages in a rich dialogue with her mother, recollecting her earlier negative reactions to her mother's feminist activism but also learning to acknowledge some ways in which her mother was right" (2006, 861–62).

The above observation exemplifies how the daughter's self-identity is constantly shaped with reference to her mother. Offred's mother is most likely dead by now, yet their relationship continues. The memory of her late mother acts as an entity within the daughter's psyche that enables intergenerational transmission even posthumously. A specialist in bereavement, Christopher Hall (2011), acknowledges that

> after a death bonds with the deceased do not necessarily have to be severed, [...] there is a potentially healthy role for maintaining continuing bonds with the deceased. This idea represents recognition that death ends a life, not necessarily a relationship. Rather than 'saying goodbye' or seeking closure, there exists the possibility of the deceased being both present and absent. The development of this bond is conscious, dynamic and changing.

The discovery of new things in the process of maturation or revaluation of former stances may occur as a result of the ongoing relationship with the deceased. The memory of past conversations may uncover new layers of meaning that were hidden by the interlocutor's bias. Since all knowledge is situated, it will always be determined by one's circumstances. The pre-Gilead Offred is not the Offred from the main narrative, who ultimately comes to realize that neither she nor her mother had a monopoly on truth – her mother being blinded by her disdain for men and total negation of traditional values, and Offred blinded by "willed ignorance" (Neuman 2006, 862) and discarding female solidarity. "Before the Republic of Gilead's oppressive regime came to power, Offred lived a life of political complacency" and failed to acknowledge something that lay at the core of her mother's creed: the personal is political (Hogsette 1997, 275).

Though Offred is an adult and a mother by the onset of the novel, she has not completed her process of maturation, for she is still in the infantile phase of blaming the mother. In reminiscences of her parent, Offred initially enumerates situations in which her mother failed her as a parent, juxtaposing her mother's political involvement (portrayed as child neglect) with her own devotion to her daughter and partner. In consequence, she knowingly models her motherhood through the negation of her mother's choices. Not until she is deprived of her daughter and enslaved by the glorification of motherhood underpinning the Republic of Gilead does Offred begin to question the cultural ideology of motherhood. She painfully realizes that a woman has the right to exist outside the maternal role, and that a mother, too, has the right to function outside the mother-child dyad. Ultimately, she leaves her infantile

phase of mother-blaming and starts the process of maturation. Nancy Chodorow elucidates this development:

> For the infant, the mother is not someone with her own life, wants, needs, history, other social relationships, work. She is known only in her capacity as mother. Growing up means learning that she, like other people in one's life, has and wants a life of her own, and that loving her means recognizing her subjectivity and appreciating her separateness. But people have trouble doing this and continue, condoned and supported by the ideology about mothers they subsequently learn, to experience mothers solely as people who did or did not live up to their child's expectations. (1989, 90)

Despite their upheavals, Offred and her mother have managed to develop a secure attachment that allows for mistakes and disappointments. Though their relationship embodies the intergenerational conflict between second-wave feminists and their female offspring, it is also representative of the general dynamics between mothers and daughters that encompasses unmet expectations on both parts:

> You were a wanted child. […] She would say this a little regretfully, as though I hadn't turned out entirely as she'd expected. No mother is ever, completely, a child's idea of what a mother should be, and I suppose it works the other way around as well. But despite everything, we didn't do badly by one another, we did as well as most.
>
> I wish she was here, so I could tell her I finally know this. (1985, 190)

Offred's love for her mother, though never overtly expressed in the novel, is crucial to her identity. By initially rejecting her mother and her feminist ideals, Offred inadvertently succumbed to the rule of the father, represented here by the right-wing tendencies that led to the foundation of the Republic of Gilead and the enslavement of women. It is partly through the retrospective restoration and revaluation of their mother-daughter bond that Offred recovers her sense of self in the oppressive state of Gilead. As Luce Irigaray warns, "Neither little girl nor woman must give up love for their mother. Doing so uproots them from their identity, their subjectivity" (1991, 44). To discover her true Self, Offred must reconnect with her mother, even if it entails an internal monologue. The intergenerational transmission is sustained, or in Irigaray's terms, a genealogy of women is upheld.

3 Offred as a Mother: Child Removal

Unlike her mother, who had her at the age of thirty-seven, Offred gave birth to a daughter at the age of twenty-five. The main narrative is related by a thirty-three-year-old Offred, who has been separated from her eight-year-old daughter for three years and has no knowledge of her offspring's whereabouts. Thus, the protagonist's experience of motherhood can be divided into a five-year period of direct mothering and a three-year period of child deprivation. The reader does not learn that Offred is a mother until page forty-nine, when the memory of Offred's mother prompts the memory of having her daughter abducted. The juxtaposition of the reminiscences of her mother with those of her daughter is hardly coincidental and should

be read in terms of intergenerational transmission.[5] The mother and the daughter always serve as a woman's double – someone she once was and someone she might become. As Carl Jung notes, "every mother contains her daughter in herself and every daughter her mother, and . . . every woman extends backwards into her mother and forwards into her daughter" (1980, 188). However, in *The Handmaid's Tale* intergenerational transmission is disrupted, since Offred's daughter is appropriated by the system allegedly for her own good. "She's in good hands, they said. With people who are fit. You are unfit, but you want the best for her. Don't you?" (1985, 49).

Aware that any act of open rebellion would either lead to her immediate death or result in postponed death through banishment to the Colonies, Offred takes no risks. When shown the picture of her daughter, who "looked like an angel, solemn, compact, made of air" (1985, 49), she exclaims: "You've killed her" (1985, 49). Hence, she symbolically enacts the death of her daughter. From this moment. the daughter will function more as a ghost-like figure, an intrapsychic entity rather than an actual person.[6] "Maybe I do think of her as a ghost, the ghost of a dead girl, a little girl who died when she was five," Offred reflects (1985, 74).

The horror of the unknown and the perpetual deprivation seem to be replaced by the trauma of child loss and mourning. The symbolic death of her daughter is supposed to help Offred pre-empt the pain that drove Demeter insane because having a daughter abducted inevitably shatters the mother's world. Offred cannot let herself go mad with worry, let alone rage, because sanity is the only aspect of her life she can retain from her pre-Gilead past: "Sanity is a valuable possession; I hoard it the way people once hoarded money. I save it, so I will have enough, when the time comes" (1985, 119). To survive the atrocities inflicted by the Gileadean regime, Offred must forsake the memory of her daughter, but the repressed tends to reappear.

Though initially the protagonist may seem emotionally detached from her daughter, this reserved attitude is a defence mechanism, and does not amount to the absence of maternal love. The suppressed memories of her daughter repeatedly find their way to Offred's conscious mind, to be repressed anew. In the scene of bread-making, which reminds Offred of her own mothering, the smell of yeast poses a threat to the protagonist's faked integrity. It inadvertently evokes her old Self, whose integral part was motherhood: "It smells of me, in former times, when I was a mother. This is a treacherous smell, and I know I must shut it out" (1985, 57). If Offred is to survive, she must forsake her maternal role, both past and prospective. Even if she bears a child, she will never be allowed to mother it, for, as a Handmaid, she is reduced to a solely reproductive function. Oppressed because of her biological maternal potential, ironically, she will never be allowed to fulfill it on an emotional level. As an unfit, fallen woman, a Handmaid does not deserve to mother any child: "She'll be allowed to nurse the baby, for a few months, they believe in mother's milk. After that she'll be transferred, to

[5] The dream in which the memory of Offred's daughter running towards her to be hugged and cuddled, followed by the appearance of her mother with a tray as in the olden days, may be read as another metaphor of the intergenerational transmission of motherhood. The mother-daughter dyad is always mirrored in the daughter-granddaughter relation.

[6] A similar mechanism, which Atwood describes as the Third-Man Syndrome, is explored in *Hag-Seed*, in which the protagonist's dead daughter keeps him company as a result of unresolved inner conflict. In *The Handmaid's Tale* the daughter is still alive, but Offred does not have that knowledge or certainty until towards the end of the novel.

see if she can do it again, with someone else who needs a turn. But she'll never be sent to the Colonies, she'll never be declared Unwoman. That is her reward" (1985, 137). In the Republic of Gilead, only morally upright women are granted the privilege of mothering.

Despite Offred's willed repression, her daughter comes back to her in dreams, of which the worst is that of their capture and separation. The dream she fears the most is less of a dream in Freud's terms than an actual recollection of their attempted escape to Canada. At the onset it is a dynamic description of the turbulent chase, during which Offred is "running," "pulling" and "dragging" (1985, 84) her daughter along until she begins to cry. The terror of potential capture is so intense that, fearing for their life, Offred "angrily" (1985, 85) hushes her daughter. Shots are fired nearby, and the scene metamorphoses into a slow-motion picture brimming with tenderness. Offred pulls her daughter down and shelters her with her body. Unfortunately, they are discovered, captured and separated. The violent nature of their arrest is unexpectedly counterbalanced by Offred's description of a red autumn leaf, and trees turning bare early. Such an incongruent juxtaposition shows that in order to cope with the traumatic experience of the loss of a daughter, Offred unwittingly resorts to dissociation. She detaches herself from the harrowing experience (or its memory) to numb the pain.

Dissociation is a defence mechanism that occurs outside the person's conscious mind and in its extreme form results in amnesia. Offred, however, cannot let herself forget her daughter, the most precious person in her life. When she says about the leaf that "[i]t's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen" (1985, 85), it is evident that she is not thinking about botanical details at such a tragic moment. In order to survive the unimaginable, the protagonist diverts her attention from her daughter, who obviously is "the most beautiful thing" she has ever seen, and projects it onto the leaf. Thanks to this mechanism, she survives the separation trauma and retains the memory of the last encounter with her daughter.

The price she must pay for distancing herself from the memory of loss is the subsequent detachment from her body and suicidal ideation. "I feel calm and floating, as if I'm no longer in my body" (1985, 85), says Offred, remembering the moment the two of them lay in hiding. Of all the emotions, tranquility is not a natural reaction to the threat of being caught; hence, suppressed rage and fear will soon induce Offred's depression. The unnatural composure and suicidal thoughts will accompany the protagonist almost to the end of the narrative, when she regains her body and awakens her deadened senses. It is impossible to determine whether Offred experienced dissociation during the capture, or perhaps, and more likely, enacted it afterwards. The main events in the novel take place three years after their arrest, yet the memory of her daughter "holding out her arms to [her], being carried away" (1985, 85) retains a strong grip on Offred's mind.

The news of her daughter, delivered to her surreptitiously in the form of a Polaroid picture, opens old wounds. Though on the one hand she rejoices that her daughter is well, on the other, she finds the photograph overwhelming. The painful realization that she has been eliminated from her daughter's life and erased from her memory makes her want to take her own life. The newly inflicted suffering is such that she wishes she had never been given that photograph:

> Time has not stood still. It has washed over me, washed me away, as if I'm nothing more than a woman of sand, left by a careless child too near the water. I have been obliterated for her. I am only a shadow now, far back behind the glib shiny surface of this photograph. A shadow of a shadow, as dead mothers become. You can see it in her eyes: I am not there. (1985, 240)

The apprehension that her daughter does not remember her amounts to Offred's symbolic death. Forgotten by her daughter, she no longer participates in the intergenerational transmission even in the way dead mothers do. While her own mother acts as an entity within Offred's psyche, she herself is absent from her daughter's psyche and life. It is not until late in *The Testaments* that Offred is reunited with both her daughters outside Gilead. "She looked sad and happy, both at once" (2019, 399), observes Nicole upon their encounter. The eighteen- and fifteen-year-long separations from her daughters must have taken a toll on Offred's life. Although she knew that her offspring were safe, she still must have suffered the consequences of child removal. The happy ending is thus severely tinged with loss and regret on Offred's part.

4 Offred's Daughters: Two Tales

While a decade and a half separates Offred's narrative from that of her daughters, the time lapse between the publication of *The Handmaid's Tale* and its sequel is thirty-four years and encompasses significant shifts in the women's liberation movement. In 1985, postfeminism was gaining strength; the world since 2019 has already seen the transformation of 1990s third-wave feminism into its fourth wave (Chamberlain 2017; Rivers 2017). Although *The Testaments* may be viewed as a response to the global crisis in equal treatment of sexes that consolidated the emergence of fourth-wave feminism, it is difficult to read the sequel's characters as representative of this movement, since the movement relies heavily on popular culture, modern technology and social media (Rivers 2017, 5). Therefore, I invite the reading of *The Testaments* in a dialectic relationship to *The Handmaid's Tale* and, consequently, as a literary realization of the third-wave agenda of diversity and empowerment.

The shift in narration from the single voice of Offred into three parallel first-person narratives – Aunt Lydia, Agnes Jemima and Nicole/Jade – answers the third-wave feminists' urge to contest the essentialist understanding of womanhood. As Dicker and Piepmeier argue, "the third wave operates from the assumption that identity is multifaceted and layered. Since no monolithic version of 'woman' exists, we can no longer speak with confidence of 'women's issues'; instead we need to consider that such issues are as diverse as the many women who inhabit our planet" (2003, 10). Since the novel consists of the interspersed testimonies of three different women, their stories differ significantly in terms of life experience, language and narrative techniques, imitating successfully the way these characters see the surrounding world, and expanding the definition of female experience and womanhood. Despite running on different tracks, all are feminist narratives that manifest the complexity of feminist awakening and activism. In this respect, they echo Budgeon's observation about third-wave specificity: "the positive effect of opening out definitional boundaries is seen to be an increased awareness and recognition of the diffuse spaces within which feminist identities are now

being practised. It is argued that there are numerous ways in which one may be a feminist and that there is no one 'right' way of being one" (2011b, 282). To exemplify, Aunt Lydia resolves to use the power she has gained through collaboration with the Gileadean regime to overthrow it, thus positioning herself firmly on the women's side – to the astonishment of *The Handmaid's Tale*'s readers. Agnes Jemima forms her feminist identity first through the rejection of a Wife role, then by learning to read and subsequently studying books kept beyond reach of Gileadean women except Aunts. Hers, then, is the journey through knowledge. Nicole/Jade, on the other hand, is already a self-aware feminist at the beginning of *The Testaments*. Having grown up in quasi contemporary Canada, she is a self-empowered teenager who, thanks to her adoptive parents and the school she attended, knows she should always "stand up against injustice" (2019, 52). She understands that the personal is political, and actively participates in rallies against Gilead as well as environmental protests that echo current youth climate strikes.

The most astounding and confounding aspect of *The Testaments*, however, is the bold refashioning of the character of villainous Aunt Lydia from *The Handmaid's Tale* and casting her in the role of Gilead's nemesis. Through the rehabilitation of this character – which raises a multitude of ethical questions inherent in a narrative of involuntary collaboration – Atwood underscores the need for women's solidarity, the notion that was persistently addressed and found lacking in the lives of her characters up to the publication of the *Maddaddam* trilogy. The discovery of the statue dedicated to Becka, Agnes Jemima's best friend, who sacrificed her life so that Agnes and Nicole could escape Ardua Hall and expose the corrupt face of Gilead, is an unambiguous tribute to women's solidarity that seems to extend the fictional world. The inscription, "this memorial was erected by her sisters" (2019, 415) and "in recognition of the invaluable services provided by A.L.," that is Aunt Lydia, is a conspicuous assertion of the value of sisterhood, so much urged by the second wave.[7]

It is necessary again to draw a distinction between feminist solidarity and the postfeminist girlfriend culture that rose to prominence after the turn of the century and is epitomized by the American TV series *Sex and the City*. In her *Girlfriends and Postfeminist Sisterhood*, Alison Winch argues that "girlfriend culture revolves around homosocial forms of control where women bond through the bodies of other women"; the resulting friendships are insidious for being "marketed as solidarity" and "promoted as entitlement and strength" (2013, 5). In a postfeminist model of sisterhood, women support their carefully selected friends in a common struggle to attain the feminine ideal, predominantly understood as a desirable thin body.[8] The sisterhood Atwood seems to endorse derives from second-wave feminism but is informed by third-wave critique of the term as "fundamentally flawed, because it emerged

[7] The narrative frame of two statues, one of Aunt Lydia erected by Gilead in recognition of her services, described in the novel's opening, and one commissioned by Agnes and Nicole at the very end seem to question the validity of historiography's study of monuments as artefacts, warning the reader not to trust them implicitly. I see this frame, however, primarily as part of Atwood's dispute with Professor Pieixoto over history writing, which privileges grand narratives and hard data rather than witness testimonies.

[8] "As a replacement for feminist solidarity, young women are offered highly individualized but supposedly newly empowered subject positions, from which to engage in practices of self-invention offered by consumer culture and rewarded recognition by neoliberal discourses that attach labels of success to those who take up these forms of subjecthood" (Budgeon 2011a, 67).

from women liberationists who did not acknowledge the extent to which women oppress other women" (Evans 2015, 112). The character of Aunt Lydia further complicates this definition, since she "is happy to destroy women who have internalised the values of the patriarchal regime" (Enright 2019).

The novel's sisterhood, then, is no longer based on gender sameness but on feminist subjectivity and "stresses the commonality amongst and between a large and diverse group of activists committed to eradicating sexism" (Evans 2015, 113). Interestingly, the old-fashioned outfit of the Pearl Girl in which sculpted Becka is clad is reminiscent of suffragettes, whose goals were the right to vote and own property as well as access to education. Those fundamental gains attained by the first wave were the first rights to be denied to women by the Republic of Gilead, regressing society to the 19th century. The overlap of these seemingly disparate feminist waves in the world of Gilead poignantly captures the contemporary world, in which countries that have seen the emergence of fourth-wave feminism are taking a dangerously retrogressive step towards curbing women's autonomy, while in some societies, demanding access to education is still a radical feminist position.[9] Present day feminist solidarity, therefore, must allow for the plurality of feminisms and recognize that it is "a dynamic and responsive ideology that attempts to resist essentialism and universalizing, in order to adapt to women's ever-changing experiences and a continually shifting political landscape" (Rivers 2017, 3) and whose "aim is not to develop a feminism which makes representational claims on behalf of women but to advance a politics based upon *self-definition* and the need for women to define their personal relationship to feminism in ways that make sense to them as individuals" (Budgeon 2011b, 273).

This complexity of female experience is demonstrated through the life stories of Offred's daughters; for fifteen years their stories separate *The Handmaid's Tale* from its sequel, developing along two divergent paths. Agnes Jemima grows up in the Republic of Gilead as a Commander's daughter, whereas baby Nicole is brought up in Canada by a couple belonging to a resistance movement. In the main plotline of *The Testaments*, they are twenty-three and sixteen years old, respectively. The character of Nicole, alias Jade, resembles Atwood's characters such as Sabrina Chase from *The Blind Assassin* or Anne Marie from *Hag-seed*, who epitomize a new woman in town who is not in thrall to traditional gender roles. They know what they want and are confident enough to achieve it against people's expectations, let alone approval. Compared with Atwood's pre-*MaddAddam* female characters, they represent hope for a better future. After all, the fall of Gilead would not have occurred but for Nicole/Jade, whose undercover name means a precious green stone, signifying hope, "purity and serenity" as well as "wisdom gathered in tranquility." Jade "integrates the mind with the body," "promotes self-sufficiency" and "encourages you to become who you really are" (Hall 2003, 152). Thus, Atwood endows her youngest female character in the novel with a talisman to aid her identity formation in accordance with her body but on her own terms. Nicole knows that her anatomy does not determine her destiny, and therefore at the age of sixteen, unlike her sister who grew up in Gilead, she has not given prospective wifehood or motherhood much thought.

[9] See the Nobel Peace Prize Winner Lecture by Malala Yousafzai: https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2014/yousafzai/26074-malala-yousafzai-nobel-lecture-2014/.

Contrary to Nicole, Agnes Jemima is forced to contemplate and prepare for wifehood and subsequent motherhood from her early years. Her marriage is arranged when she turns thirteen, which is considered the optimal age to produce a subservient wife: "Thirteen is not too young. It all depends," says one of the Aunts, "It does wonders for them if we can find a proper match. They settle right down" (2019, 154). Unlike some of her friends, who look forward to getting married in order to rise in the world, Agnes and her best friend Becka fear the physical aspects of marital sex and the loss of self in a marital union. The former confesses: "my reaction had been more like disgust and loathing, and now seemed to me trivial in view of Becka's genuine horror. She really did believe that marriage would obliterate her. She would be crushed, she would be nullified, she would be melted like snow until nothing remained of her" (2019, 163). This grim view of the wife's role and fate, which stands in opposition to the officially glorified Wife status propagated by the state of Gilead, obviously stems from the gap between propaganda and reality. Both Agnes and Becka recognize that wives are not free either, and must forsake themselves in order to fulfill their roles obediently.

Incorporating the Bluebeard syndrome into her latest novel, embodied by Commander Judd, whose "Wives have a habit of dying" and who "is a great believer in the restorative powers of young women" (2019, 63), Atwood reiterates her long-standing warning against "societal acceptance of women's victim role" and "the actuality of sexual relationships as sites of confrontation and, all too often, of legitimate female fears" (Barzilai 2005, 251–52). In Gilead the ubiquity of sexist violence that encompasses all women regardless of their status is foregrounded by the sexual harassment both Agnes and Becka experience from the father of the latter. The severity of sexual abuse drives Becka towards suicide once she learns she is to be married off soon; the vision of marriage and sex annihilates her. Luckily, she is rescued and, thanks to Aunt Lydia, given a chance to become part of the Ardua Hall community. Similarly, Agnes, who is elected to become the new wife of Commander Judd, is spared the fate of her predecessors by rejecting marriage altogether and claiming to have a religious calling. Hence, both girls liberate themselves from their gendered roles of prospective Wives by electing the path of an educated, single Aunt. Their choice of knowledge, resentful of postfeminist ideology of domesticity, is the first step towards their feminist subjectivity and belies Aunt Lydia's assertion from *The Handmaid's Tale* that "For the ones who come after you, it will be easier. They will accept their duties with willing hearts" (1985, 127).

Notwithstanding the strong presence of Offred in *The Testaments*, although reliant on the reader's ability to unite narrative strands, her perspective in the sequel is obliterated. It is clearly no longer *The Handmaid's Tale*. The reader never finds out the emotional cost of separation from her daughters. Sadly, Offred was right to worry that her older daughter would forget her and she would sink into oblivion, for "very young children may be unable to recall adverse events that occurred during their earliest years, not because the experience was so traumatic that it has been blocked out of awareness but because next to nothing is remembered from these years anyway, thanks to childhood amnesia" (McNally 2005, 820). Agnes Jemima grows up "loved and cherished" (2019, 9) by her mother Tabitha, the Wife of Commander Kyle. Whether out of fear that the child might eventually recall the violent separation from her biological mother or for some other reason, Tabitha invents a fairy tale-cum-memory according to which she rescued the girl from evil child-kidnapping witches

that lived in an enchanted castle surrounded by the forest. Since Agnes was five when she was taken from her mother, and the circumstances of her removal overlapped with Tabitha's story, she incorporated this elaborate lie. "I did have a hazy memory of running through the forest with someone holding my hand. Had I hidden in a hollow tree? It seemed to me that I had hidden somewhere. So maybe it was true," she assumes (2019, 12).

While Offred held on to the memory of their violent separation, though attempting to detach herself from the painful feelings it roused, Tabitha's story superseded Agnes's actual reminiscence and erased the memory of her pre-Gilead mother. Yet, the moment her friends reveal the truth about her real mother being a Handmaid and their escape attempt, Agnes slowly starts to recall, or rather reconstruct, the circumstances of the chase. The retrieved memory becomes evidence of her mother's love and determination: "She must have loved me or she wouldn't have tried to take me with her when she was running away" (2019, 90). The reminiscence of the foiled escape from *The Handmaid's Tale*, which operates as a traumatic threshold between a felicitous pre-Gilead past and an oppressive Gilead present, encapsulating Offred's original loss and despair, is thus rewritten in *The Testaments* as a tale of the power of maternal feeling, foreshadowing the ultimate mother-daughter reunion.

In the proceedings from the Thirteenth Symposium on Gileadean Studies that conclude *The Testaments*, Professor Pieixoto takes the reader beyond the timeline of the Agnes and Nicole narratives. Building on other data he has found that corroborate the two witness testimonies, as if they were insufficient evidence per se, in a condescending manner reminiscent of *The Handmaid's Tale*, the professor concludes: "our two young messengers must indeed have lived not only to tell their tale but also to be reunited with their mother and their respective fathers, and to have children and grandchildren of their own" (2019, 415). In this view, both Agnes and Nicole eventually chose motherhood and inscribed themselves in the intergenerational transmission of motherhood. Out of the reach of Gilead and its oppressive gender norms, Agnes is thought to have discovered the feminist assertion that lies at the heart of both novels, namely, motherhood is not and should not be a must but a choice.

5 Conclusion

Tales of mothers and daughters are inevitably inscribed in the intergenerational pattern of transmission, assuming that the mother is a pivotal point of reference for the daughter's identity formation (Boyd 1989). While the notion of womanhood received by the daughter from her maternal parent is affected by personal experience and circumstances, it is also representative of the mother's generation of women. Such is the case for Offred and her radical feminist mother, whose tale demonstrates the conflict between second-wave feminists and their postfeminist daughters. *The Testaments*, thankfully, restores hope in the power of feminist movements, since all the primary characters – Offred, her daughters and, unexpectedly, Aunt Lydia – eventually develop feminist subjectivities. The reading of *The Testaments* as an embrace of a third-wave message does not preclude influence from and echoes of an emerging fourth wave, especially since the Handmaids' "red and white robes adopted as a symbol of female defiance from Ireland to Argentina, but most often in the US" have become a global landmark of this new wave (Atwood 2019b). The distinction

between the two latest surges of feminism nonetheless becomes less significant if we take under scrutiny the wave narrative of feminism as such. As Chamberlain observes, "One wave does not obliterate the other, and waves do not neatly end, with a coherent finishing point that inevitably leads to a renewed surge of activism years later" (2017, 30). What seems to be of utmost importance in a reading of *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* is the distinction between feminism(s) and postfeminism, which, though transformed and now masquerading as girlfriend culture, holds strong.

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Oana Celia Gheorghiu, Michaela Praisler
"Dunarea de Jos"
University of Galati, Romania

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Rewriting Politics, or the Emerging Fourth Wave of Feminism in Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments*

ABSTRACT

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) has recently returned to the spotlight with the success of its TV adaptation and with her decision to deliver a sequel. Speculative fiction invites speculative criticism; in this spirit, this paper investigates *The Testaments* (2019), tracing the rewriting of politics embedded in the narrative. Whilst the inspiration for *The Handmaid's Tale* came from the rise of Christian fundamentalism, it is obvious from Atwood's more recent statements that she considers the Trump era "a rollback of women's rights" (2018). The slogan of second-wave feminists, 'the personal is political,' is now as topical as it was in the 1960s, and *The Testaments* may well become a literary manifesto of a new (fourth) wave as part of the storm surge of feminism. Therefore, before turning to Atwood, an outline of the chronological clashes of feminism(s) and a discussion on women and language is presented. This is followed by an examination of the three main characters and representatives of ideas.

Keywords: feminism; women's writing; politics; *The Handmaid's Tale*; sequel; Margaret Atwood

Preoblikovanje politike oz. nastajajoč četrti val feminizma v delu *Testamenti* avtorice Margaret Atwood

POVZETEK

Roman *Deklina zgodba* (1985) avtorice Margaret Atwood se je zaradi uspeha televizijske priredbe in obljube po nadaljevanju romana pred kratkim znova znašel v središču pozornosti. Fantazijska proza prinaša tudi fantazijsko kritiko; v luči tega v prispevku analiziramo delo *Testamenti* (2019), ki sledi preoblikovanju politike, vpete v pripoved. Medtem ko navdih za roman *Deklina zgodba* izhaja iz krščanskega fundamentalizma, je iz dandanašnjih izjav Margaret Atwood jasno, da Trumpovo obdobje po njenem mnenju predstavlja »zmanjševanje pravic žensk« (2018). Slogan feministov drugega vala, »osebno je politično«, je zdaj ravno tako aktualen kot v 60. letih 20. stoletja, delo *Testamenti* pa bo morda postalo literarni manifest novega (četrtega) vala kot del nevihtnega pojava feminizma. Zaradi tega v prispevku najprej predstavljamo kronološki pregled feminizma ter razpravo o ženskah in jeziku. Sledi analiza treh glavnih junakinj in predstavnic idej.

Ključne besede: feminizem; ženska proza; politika; *Deklina zgodba*; nadaljevanje; Margaret Atwood

1 Feminism Coming Fo(u)rth

Women's disentanglement from patriarchy comes in surges, in 'streams of consciousness'[1] that tend to overflow when the personal departs too much from the political, or when femininity feels threatened by its 'significant other.' History, indebted to a certain extent to a masculine appetency for order, linearity and hierarchy, lists the feminist waves in a diachrony of aims and purposes, which are briefly mentioned here. The first wave (late 19th to early 20th centuries) focused on acquiring equal rights, including the right to vote, on the grounds that women have the same minds and interests as men. The second (the late 1960s and beyond) followed the post-war decades of women's being re-assigned the traditional domestic roles of (house) wives and mothers and emerged against a background of intellectual activists who protested politically, in writing as well as in the streets. The third wave (towards the 1990s and well into the noughties) acknowledged that equality had been accomplished and that new raisons d'être had therefore to be found. The predilection of academic gender studies for the *posts* of the time (postmodernism, poststructuralism and postcolonialism) highlighted difference and différance and, predictably, introduced postfeminism as a mark of the third wave.

In theorizing the third wave, scholars claim that it is not associated with the idea of a time after feminism, or the realization of feminist aims, but that it implies that feminism has undergone a radical transformation in relation to the values that postmodernism questions (Genz and Brabon 2009) and, in line with the postmodern, aims to disrupt grand narratives or interrupt dominant, imperialistic views of gender and inequality (Rivers 2017, 17). This disputes Faludi's seminal 1992 Backlash, where she claimed that postfeminism (as both a term and a trend) was actively employed in discrediting feminism as a relevant political movement, in outdating its usefulness. Judging by the preface she wrote for the 2006 edition of her book, Faludi remained sceptical of postfeminism, which, to her mind, turned self-determination into a "commodified self-improvement of physical appearance, self-esteem and the fool's errand of reclaiming one's youth" and public agency into publicity (2006, xv), with the only result of having "gilded our shackles instead of breaking them" (xvi). This calls for an intervention of the past, for a second-wave revivalist movement that would regain that which its daughters lost. Much of the third-wave theory is based on writings of daughters of second-wave feminists who contest their mothers' views and activism(s), their concern with the white, heterosexual, middle-class woman. Rebecca Walker, the coiner of the "third wave" term, is Alice Walker's daughter and Gloria Steinem's goddaughter; Katie Roiphe is Anne Roiphe's daughter, to give just two examples.[2] Another "bone of contention" (Atwood 2010, 313) is the older generation's take on motherhood, openly against the feminine mystique that Betty Friedan described in the 1960s as "a rush for the security of togetherness" in the "cozy walls of home" which had become "a pattern by which all women must […] live or deny their femininity" (2001, 37).

It is now the granddaughters' time, and they look back in anger at the kind of empowerment that their mothers advocated at the expense of their actual freedom and in admiration at

[1] This refers neither to the streams imagined by psychologist William James in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), nor to the Modernist narrative mode, but to a reprocessed and appropriated understanding of a collective deluge of ideas shared by individuals towards the emergence of philosophical, political and social movements.

[2] See Rivers 2017, 16–19 for an extensive discussion on this matter.

their grandmothers' struggle, which was left behind for having outlived its purposefulness. All this has brought to the fore women's objectification, sexual harassment and abuse for a generation that sees things differently from their mothers and grandmothers: "Generational specificity implies that waves emerge when a younger group of women come to the politics, looking to shape a social movement that is more accommodating of, and tailored to their identity" (Chamberlain 2017, 8). The fourth wave, which now seems to be settling in, is at the same time different from and similar to both the second and the third ones. Baumgardner claims that it is "an almost-return to some of the thinking of the second wave, with a greater emphasis on identity politics that were dismantled within the third wave" (2011, 72). Others juxtapose the feminist waves (with their theories conceptualised as stories):

> Despite each story's proclamations of difference from the other accounts, there are striking narrative similarities that link these stories and that facilitate discursive movement between them without apparent contradiction. […] All three stories divide the recent past into clear decades to provide a narrative of progress or loss, proliferation or homogenization. Stories of return are equally invested in these distinctions to argue for what it is that we need to return to in order to rescue Western feminist theory. (Hemmings 2011, 5)

These two approaches to contemporary feminism cannot be debunked as erroneous, nor embraced as definitively correct. Briefly, this is what has happened with feminisms in the *real* world, the world where things that many contemporary writers put in their books 'have already happened,' the world which gets to be translated into fiction by authors who weave texts made up of "multiple writings, issuing from several cultures and entering into dialogue with each other" (Barthes 1967), for the benefit of readers who can take whatever they want from the text. The writer is, however, not entirely dead, but silenced, muffled in the polyphony of voices belonging to those who access the world(s) of the text. At times, novelists rebel and try to take their worlds back. This usually happens when they explain their intentions behind the text, by endowing it with paratextual assessments, or when they write sequels or prequels, or find other forms of linking their current world outside the text to their past ones, which once gave birth to alternative textualised worlds that still raise questions.

A case in point is *The Testaments*, Margaret Atwood's recent follow-up to her famous *The Handmaid's Tale*, designed to match the realities of the late 2010s. Drawing a parallel between the history of feminism and the women's fate in the original novel and its sequel, one could place the many analepses in the former text into postfeminism / the third wave, although the terms were not yet in use at the time of the novel's publication. Many readers of *The Handmaid's Tale* have noted the implied critique of second-wave feminism – mainly in the relation between Offred and her militantly feminist mother, but also in its emphasis on the horrible things that women can do to each other once the male dictatorship forces them to act in their own interests, at the expense of their peers' wellbeing. If third-wavers manifest a "kind of twisted Electra complex within which daughters are committed to killing off mothers" (Halberstam 2012, 2), by contrast, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the protagonist's generation (women in their thirties or just under) no longer needs the activism of their mothers. They have careers, rights, sexual freedom, and freedom of speech; in a nutshell, they already have everything for which their predecessors fought, thus rendering the fight superfluous, until they no longer have anything, and it is too late to fight back.

Each ebb and flow of feminism seems to emerge from and simultaneously contest its immediate forerunner. This is true for all cultural movements, from the Enlightenment to postmodernism. Although the debate is in its early stages and an outline of the politics of the fourth wave remains to be determined, we favour Baumgardner's opinion quoted above, namely, that the fourth wave is a technologically improved second wave and a contestation of 1990s–2000s postfeminism rather than its continuation. And if we were to identify representations of the feminist waves in *The Handmaid's Tale* / *The Testaments* (disregarding, in a Barthesian manner, whether Atwood thought of that – after all, we, readers are as free to speculate as she is), we could consider the (Gileadean) women's liberation movement in *The Testaments* as having a counterpart in the (real) present-day / near future marked by the emergence of this fourth wave that is yet to have *a literature of its own* nor, what is more, *a theory of its own*. Thus, in the attempt to contextualise *The Testaments* within a newly-born feminist in*surge*nce against the patriarchal re*surge*nce of the Commanders Waterford and Judd of our time, we resort to the *sexual/textual theories* of the second wave, more specifically to women's empowerment through writing, as advocated by Hélène Cixous, among others.

2 *Voler et différance*

Woman is – customarily – on the side of passivity. As French feminist philosopher Hélène Cixous famously observed in her seminal essay "Sorties," especially in philosophy and literature: "Philosophy is constructed on the base of woman's abasement. Subordination of the feminine to the masculine order, which gives the condition for being the machinery's functioning." Her antidote is the notion of *écriture féminine*, which involves the concept of *voler* (as both stealing and flying – stealing language and its structure only to make it shift, fly away from its fixed paradigms). In an introduction to "Sorties," Katarzyna Marciniak points out that Cixous herself re-conceptualises the discourse of philosophy by stealing it and flying from it through her mixing of poetry and theory: "By writing a theoretical piece in a passionate, highly visual and poetic way, she risks the accusation of being emotional, and not rational" – which brings us back to patriarchal arguments regarding women's writing as being incapable of rendering anything other than emotions (usually in the form of a personal diary). However, this is exactly what she intends – "to demonstrate how writing lingers in the space of *différance* and how being discursively passionate and sensual does not have to signify irrationality" (1986).

Perhaps starting from Cixous's oppositions is bold, especially when discussing Atwood, an author who has constantly rebuffed her association with feminism (in fiction) – which, as is well-known, has happened often throughout her career. It has already been done, albeit in reference to Offred's testimony, which we (or the participants in the "Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies") access in the form of written text:

> [O]nly at the end do we discover that what we have been reading was actually a spoken narrative which has been transcribed from old cassette tapes and reconstructed for publication long after the narrator is dead. This complicated transmission process from private speech act to written text illustrates the historical problem of women's silencing which Cixous has highlighted, and also the potentially disruptive effects of women's writing. (Howells 2003, 165)

Our intention is to prove that Atwood, perhaps unconsciously, attempts, with her latest opus, to destabilize the contemporary hierarchies through these *disruptive effects of women's writing*, and even to actively participate in the rebirth of second-wave feminism, rebranded as the fourth wave. The famous feminine gibberish placed in Molly Bloom's mouth as the final pronouncement of Joyce's *Ulysses*, "and yes I said yes I will Yes" (2010: 682) can be reworked as female agency and self-empowerment in an era when President Trump makes a derogatory remark about women[3] every other day, when the *#MeToo* movement brings condemnation to dozens of powerful men in politics, business, entertainment and the news media, some of whom have been found guilty of sexual abuse and harassment. If *The Handmaid's Tale* was, in its day, a cautionary tale – it might happen and it has somehow happened elsewhere – *The Testaments* could be Atwood's contribution, overtly militant, to a women's 'march against patriarchal abuse' comparable to that which took place on January 21, 2017, one day after Trump's inauguration. As a parenthesis, as many as 4.6 million people attended it, in various places in the United States, making the Women's March perhaps the largest single-day demonstration in the country's history, according to *Time* (2017). The momentum carried forward to cover textual ground, significantly raising, once again, the interest in feminist writing. According to Nielsen Bookscan, the 2019 sequel *The Testaments* sold more than 100,000 copies in one week. Vintage claims that the title was their hardback of the year and, interestingly, that it also galvanised interest in *The Handmaid's Tale*, which came a close second in sales, 34 years after its publication. Numbers count, and so does the Booker Prize, awarded some three weeks after publication, even when breaking hypothetical political hierarchies is at stake and made explicit. In connection with the prize, Atwood noted that reader had been asking her about *The Handmaid's Tale* for years, arguing that "as time moved on, instead of moving further away from Gilead we moved towards it, particularly in the US" (quoted in Enright 2019).

Proof may lie in *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), which has enjoyed wide critical attention since its publication, having been inscribed in the category of the 20th-century's most accomplished dystopian works, alongside Huxley's *Brave New World*, Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, and Orwell's *1984*. The launch of a sequel, *The Testaments*, as well as the successful adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* into a TV series, have brought the novel back into the limelight. The former is supposed to resolve some of the questions left unanswered by not one but two open-endings, and raises an increased concern with what is currently going on in the United States in terms of state policies and the political stance assumed by the author in the media.

Margaret Atwood has been prompted to deliver a sequel to expand on Offred's progress beyond the days recorded in the transcript of her spoken diary. It is still arguable whether her undertaking is purely political, a result of her dissatisfaction with the scriptwriters' taking over the narrative from its confusing open-ending to the second and third series of the show, or whether it is determined by reasons of cultural commodification. Most probably, it is all the above. As Anne Enright, reviewing the book for *The Guardian*, remarks, "in writing The Testaments, she also reclaims its world from all the people who think they own it now: the writers of fan-fiction and the television producers (she told them they could not kill Lydia,

[3] See "61 things Donald Trump has said about women" *The Week*, 2018. https://theweek.com/articles/655770/61-things-donald-trump-said-about-women.

apparently). A story that feels universal is, actually, hers: she gets to decide." Atwood's demand that Lydia should not be killed or, in TV series jargon, written off, has been explained by the plot of *The Testaments*, in which the character plays a major role. In other words, in which she is a protagonist, narrator, propelling force, manipulator of power, etc.

> In *The Handmaid's Tale*, though oblique, the politics advanced by Atwood was clear, as was her criticism: history is practically his-story, overlooking hers. *Historical Notes on The Handmaid's Tale* brings literary art to cover political ground via Pieixoto's authenticating endeavour, which focuses on 'the commander' (Judd, Waterford – male characters based on real, documented people), not on Offred – female undocumented narrator, therefore unreal. (Praisler and Gheorghiu 2019, 182)

In *The Testaments*, on the other hand, although as clearly as in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the politics advanced by Atwood takes a road less travelled and more obviously feminist: against the almost unbearably graphic background of women's abasement in the early days of Gilead, *his-story* subversively becomes *her-story*. In Cixous's terms, authority and control are left in the hands of women who have been "subordinated to the masculine order, towards the functioning of [Gilead's] machinery" (1986). Some of the women of Gilead acquire that 'bisexuality' (i.e., emasculation) which is "the location within oneself of the presence of both sexes" (Cixous). They are forced into it by unimaginable means: starvation, solitary confinement, lack of hygiene, the obligation to witness and participate in public executions on either end of the barrel of a gun, etc. The extended descriptions in the analepses that make up large portions of Aunt Lydia's diaries are, in the Naturalist manner, abominable and nauseating, pointing to dehumanisation (or defeminisation):

> I frequently pictured a beautiful, clean white toilet. Oh, and a sink to go with it, with an ample flow of pure clear water. Naturally we began to stink. In addition to the ordeal by toilet, we'd been sleeping in our business attire, with no change of underwear. Some of us were past menopause, but others were not, so the smell of clotting blood was added to the sweat and tears and shit and puke. To breathe was to be nauseated. They were reducing us to animals – to penned-up animals – to our animal nature. (Atwood 2019, 143)

The choice given is simple: 'eat or be eaten'; side with the male power to become powerful yourself. Cast away your femininity and punish others for keeping theirs. Lydia, formerly a respected judge, chooses life over femininity and accepts to join the masculine ranks of the tormentors. But this bisexualization, or should we say bi-*gender*-ization, ricochets, as the acquired masculine traits completely, though ironically, take over the feminine ones.

If, in one sense, Derrida's *différance* points to difference, and the *chains of differential marks* engender binary oppositions, the overlapping of femininity and masculinity with which Atwood endows the Aunts comes at the end of *The Testaments*, secretly and subversively, to invert the opposition completely. Given male power, women take over. *Elles volent*, taking the power from a masculine order that has become too confident in its accomplishment of women's submission and has consequently started to be negligent and/or to (re)turn to man-as-brute's habits of sexual abuser (i.e., beyond the obvious abuse against the handmaids and

wives in *The Handmaid's Tale*). However, in Aunt Lydia's case, this empowered femininity – although the term is questionable – also leaves room for insecurity and disquiet with what it has turned into: "I've become swollen with power, true, but also nebulous, shape-shifting. I am everywhere and nowhere: even in the minds of the Commanders I cast an unsettling shadow. How can I regain myself? How to shrink back to my normal size, the size of the ordinary woman?" (Atwood 2019, 33). In this context, normalcy and ordinariness seem to be tongue-in-cheek qualifiers for womanhood, in the sense of women's lower, secondary position in relation to men, one that is apparently acknowledged and desired by this character burdened with power. If one were to look for literary analogies to women that became too empowered, one could cite the famous plea of Lady Macbeth: "unsex me here, / And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full / Of direst cruelty" (*Macbeth* I.5) – probably the most famous 'case' of emasculation in the history of literature.

Structurally, *The Testaments* is similar to *The Handmaid's Tale*, in that both are framed by 'Historical Notes' – advanced during the proceedings of The Thirteenth and Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies held in 2197 and 2195 as part of a series of International Historical Association Conventions (2019, 407–15 and 2010, 311–24). The role of the 'Notes' seems to be that of adding architectural depth to the embedded narratives, while relativizing historical time by looking back at our future from someone else's present. Furthermore, they may be considered instrumental for Atwood in her obvious pursuit of highlighting the fuzzy frontier between reality and fiction, and of questioning their related myths, which posit that the former equals truth and is therefore masculine, while the latter is un-truth, ergo easily associated with femininity. "'If I was to create an imaginary garden, I wanted the toads in it to be real,' she wrote in a recent introduction to *The Handmaid's Tale*. And this is 'absolutely' the case for *The Testaments*: shadows of Weinstein and Epstein, ISIS and the Trump administration can all be found in its murky waters" (*The Guardian,* 20 September 2019).

Inside their frames, the novels hide, only gradually revealing to the inquisitive reader, several tales or pieces of a puzzle to be solved. *The Handmaid's Tale* gives Offred a narrator's voice, and includes the protagonist's version of her life and that of her fellow handmaids in dystopian Gilead (arranged into fifteen alternating stories), while *The Testaments* brings together three narrative voices (Lydia's, Agnes Jemima's and Daisy's/Nicole's), each connected to *The Handmaid's Tale* and to Offred (although focusing on events happening fifteen years later), all convergent towards a rather unexpected happy-ending.

In what follows, we will refer to them in turn, starting with "the definitive account of [Aunt Lydia's] life and times, suitably footnoted" (Atwood 2019, 403). The evolution in *The Handmaid's Tale* of this emasculated character and her attempts at definitively inscribing history with her authoritative, ergo biased, standpoint make it complicated to even try to associate Aunt Lydia with feminism. Nevertheless, the meaning resulting from Derrida's linguistic contrivance, namely deferral, may help to 'excuse' her ruthless behaviour: she suspends her femininity and defers feminine solidarity until she feels that she can truly upset the status quo and overthrow male domination through feminine power.

This power lies in language, in subversive games of double meanings – as is the case with the Latin ending formula of graces – *Per Ardua cum Estrus*, "Through childbirth labour with the

female reproductive cycle" (Atwood 2019, 289) – apparently having to do with the desperate need of Gilead to increase the birth rate. It can also be read as (going through) hard times and adversity with frenzy – a frenzy specific to women, corresponding to the Victorian hysterics or to the mythical Bacchantes – which acquires an extremely violent form in the Particicutions: "men being literally ripped apart by handmaids" or "torn apart by a mob of frenzied women" (2019, 286; 322). More powerful than this gruesome act is, nonetheless, the power of reading and writing, which has been taken away from all Gileadean women except for the Aunts. "Women's minds were too weak for reading. We would crumble, we would fall apart under the contradictions, we would not be able to hold firm" (2019, 303). As for writing, the *écriture féminine* that will eventually overthrow men's power and help women *fly* away from the imposing patriarchal paradigm of the regime is, accordingly, Lydia's. If "woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies" in order to evade "the discourse that regulates the phallocentric system," as Cixous states in "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1976), then Atwood's option for the stereotypically feminine diary form may be interpreted as a transposition of this theory of destabilizing phallocentric hierarchies into practice. Aunt Lydia writes herself in diaries addressed, metafictionally, to an unknown reader; she writes *her-story*, which becomes the history of the totalitarian Gilead itself, and *brings women to writing* by creating an order of feminine power in its own right – one that would regain *language and power*, or the power of language, whichever comes first.

As mentioned above, in writing a 'political grammar of feminist theory,' Clare Hemmings (2011) has identified the many aspects of this theory with "stories of loss, progress, and return." If one were to continue with the analogy between the waves of feminism and the developments in *The Handmaid's Tale*, one could associate Offred's tale with a story of loss (of her family, child, rights, dignity and freedom) which follows all the gains of the second wave. In *The Testaments*, however, life goes on; only it is not Offred's, as she is only referred to in the metafictional addendum that replicates the one in the original novel. The reader infers, relatively quickly, from the pages of the *Transcripts of Witness Testimony 369A* and *369B* (i.e., the first-person narratives of the progress of two young women) that the two are her lost daughters. Agnes Jemima, who will, later in the novel, join Aunt Lydia's subversive army of women as Aunt Victoria, learns that she has been adopted by the Commander's family that raised her. She has distant and blurry memories of running through the woods, which easily match the flashbacks of Offred and Luke's failed attempt to escape Gilead (in *The Handmaid's Tale*).

It is mainly through Agnes Jemima's testimony that the reader is informed about the progress/regress of Gilead in the fifteen years that have passed since the inconclusive ending of Offred's narrative. Atwood constructs a Puritan-inspired theocracy that is more settled and less violent, but not less frightening than the one in her original novel. "The official line was that there were no corrupt Angels, and certainly no fleeing Handmaids; for why would one renounce God's kingdom to plunge into the flaming pit?" (2019, 278). In fact, women are stripped of all rights but that of being minimally educated (religion and crafts at first, and 'premarital preparatory' around the age of thirteen, when they reach puberty). Of course, they become wives of husbands whom they do not get to choose. They also 'happen' to conveniently die when the Commanders want a new, younger wife. Men in power abuse them sexually – it is their word against the women's, with the latter being too scared to speak up, since those

who did were punished instead of their molesters. Joining the Aunts' ranks also provides the possibility of becoming a Pearl Girl and going to Canada to carry out religious/political proselytism for Gilead. Consistent with her frequent borrowings from reality, Atwood portrays these missionaries so as to resemble both the Puritan women of early seventeenth-century America and the pairs of Jehovah's Witnesses who can be seen handing out leaflets all over the world: "two of them, in their silvery grey dresses with long skirts, their white collars, their white hats" (2019, 261). Also consistent with her penchant for intertextuality, she gives these girls the name of Hester Prynne's daughter (Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*). This route seems (and eventually turns out to be) an escape from a form of womanhood returned to the ages before the first wave. Given the gift of reading, Agnes Jemima / Aunt Victoria learns the inner workings of the women's resistance in Gilead. She is eventually reunited with her lost sister (the third narrator) and set on a course of destroying Gilead from within, alongside Mayday (the underground organization supporting potential fugitives), whose agent Aunt Lydia has been for a long time.

The third narrative is set in Canada, and its protagonist and narrator is Daisy, a fifteen-year-old girl (a strategy which, as an aside, gives Atwood the opportunity to successfully try her hand at the style and language of young adult fiction). Daisy too is adopted, and feels that she is overprotected. Her only apparent connection to Gilead seems to be her annoyance at the *Baby Nicole* propaganda on both sides. *Nicole* is the name of the baby that Offred gives birth to in the TV series, which Atwood retains in her sequel to make the lost child a symbol for both parties: Gilead has made her a national martyr, instituting prayers for her return to the bosom of her motherland (but not mother), repeatedly requesting her extradition from the Canadian authorities; at the same time, she is a symbol of freedom, a signpost of Mayday's success in escaping the horrors of the theocracy so vilely established south of Canada. The teenager expresses her boredom with the topic in a school essay which claims that the baby (who is, of course, no longer a baby by now) should be simply returned to Gilead, unaware that she is herself the baby in question. She will learn this after her adoptive parents, members of the resistance, are killed following her exposure in an anti-Gilead rally. Daisy/Nicole (Jade upon entrance into Gilead) is given the mission to overthrow the regime, which she does, in a fast-paced, story that leads her to Ardua Hall, Aunt Lydia and her step-sister, Agnes Jemima/Aunt Victoria, and then back to Canada. Reunited, the two young women succeed in becoming the 'fourth-wavers' who deliver Gilead (and the USA) from male abuse, thus completing the circle of the narratives of loss, progress and return.

Unlike the "*Historical Notes to the Handmaid's Tale*" and their 'authenticating' efforts which subvert all that has been read in the novel, the similar metafictional addendum at the end of *The Testaments* comes to substantiate, in Pieixoto's keynote during the Thirteenth Symposium on Gileadean Studies, the authenticity of the three women's writings. The arrogant, misogynistic Professor – who, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, cannot refrain from adding a Chaucerian tone to a woman's narrative efforts, mentioning "the archaic vulgar signification of the word tail; [or…] the bone, as it were, of contention, in that phase of Gileadean society" (Atwood 2010, 313) – acknowledges, in *The Testaments*, that "women are usurping leadership positions to such a terrifying extent" (Atwood 2019, 408), resuming the plot development as a result. Moreover, after having criticized the femininity (or 'unreliability') of Offred's recorded diaries in the 1985 novel, he ends by merging "the three batches of materials… in an order

that made approximate narrative sense" (2019, 414) and editing their content by adding sections, references and footnotes. In other words, he brings his story to the existing materials and makes metafictional corrections, hence conferring on them the historical authenticity required to deem them documents of the fall of the Gileadean system.

"You can take the historian out of the storyteller, but you can't take the storyteller out of the historian!" (2019, 414) concludes Atwood, manipulating Pieixoto, as the genuine storyteller of alternative history that she has been throughout her career. In so doing, at the surface level she wraps up Offred's tale with a historical account of the abusive male(volent) empire. The undercurrents of the feminist surge, however, converge and threaten the margins of the metafictional frame.

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Katarína Labudová
Catholic University in Ruzomberok, Slovakia

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Testimonies in *The Testaments* by Margaret Atwood: Images of Food in Gilead

ABSTRACT

In *The Testaments*, Margaret Atwood takes readers deeper into her dystopian world of Gilead, also through the imagery of food and eating. The oppressive patriarchal regime enforces its power through dietary restrictions, reducing women into edibles. *The Testaments* (2019), moreover, creates the impression of a highly individual and authentic narratorial perspective. Thus, Atwood's characters' daily lives in a nightmarish theocracy are illustrated with images of dystopian food that reflect the limitations, constant control, and abuse of human rights in the Republic of Gilead. This article explores how Atwood employs the literary form of testimony to create fragments of individual lives in a dystopia brought closer to us through food metaphors and metaphors of cooking, or rendered shocking through metaphors of cannibalism. Since food (and lack of food) has emotional as well as political significance, it pervades the testimonial literature of oppressive regimes.

Keywords: Margaret Atwood; *The Testaments*; *The Handmaid's Tale*; food; cannibalism; power politics; dystopia; testimony; witness literature; confessional writing

Pričevanja v romanu *Testamenti* Margaret Atwood: Podobe hrane v Gileadu

POVZETEK

Margaret Atwood v romanu *Testamenti* bralca popelje še globlje v distopični svet Gileada – tudi s pomočjo podobja hrane in prehranjevanja. Tiranski patriarhalni režim namreč uveljavlja svojo oblast s prehranskimi omejitvami, s čimer ženske degradira v hrano. Roman *Testamenti* (2019) poleg tega ustvari vtis močno individualizirane in avtentične pripovedne perspektive. Vsakdanja življenja romanesknih oseb v strašljivi teokraciji so tako prikazana s podobami distopične hrane, ki odseva omejitve, stalen nadzor in zlorabo človekovih pravic v Gileadu. Članek raziskuje, kako Margaret Atwood z uporabo literarne oblike pričevanja ustvari izseke individualnih življenj v distopični družbi, ki nam jih približa skozi metafore hrane in njene priprave oziroma nam jih prikaže kot strašljive skozi metafore kanibalizma. Hrana (in njeno pomanjkanje) ima čustven in političen pomen, zato je pogosto uporabljena v pričevanjski literaturi, ki govori o zatiralskih režimih.

Ključne besede: Margaret Atwood; *Testamenti; Deklina zgodba*; hrana; kanibalizem; politika moči; distopija; pričevanje; pričevanjska literatura; izpovedna literatura

1 Introduction

Food is one of the key thematic threads that readers can grasp through the labyrinthine hybrid genres in Atwood's speculative fiction novels, which move seamlessly from dystopian to confessional writing, testimony, and memoir. In *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and *The Testaments* (2019), food can be used as a means of subversion, giving individuals at least some power over lives and bodies that are owned and controlled by the state. In Gilead, a cruel power politics of "who is entitled to do what to whom with impunity; who profits by it; and who therefore eats what" is dramatically exaggerated (Atwood 1995, 19).

The Testaments adopts cooking metaphors and images of food to underline how women are deprived of their human rights and status by the dystopian Republic of Gilead, which views them as nothing but a tool for reproduction. Images of food, cooking, and eating vividly convey the dreariness and brutality of life under an oppressive political regime. Food- and eating-related memories in testimonies communicate the unspeakable experience of Gilead. As Carole Counihan argues, "[f]ood constitutes language accessible to all" (1999, 19). In *The Testaments*, testimonies of Gileadean life and food convey a great deal about Gilead, its dehumanizing sexual politics, gender relations, and the enslavement of its citizens. Gileadean testimonies show how the state portions and poisons women as well as food, despite its utopian promises. The underlying theme of hunger reflects the fragmentation and isolation of human beings.[1] This analysis of food in *The Testaments* builds on theoretical concepts of food presented in studies by Warren Belasco (2008), Deborah Lupton (1996) and Elspeth Probyn *Carnal* (2003).

In *Bite Me*: *Food and Popular Culture*, Fabio Parasecoli demonstrates that issues associated with food form a pervasive influence, and creative fields such as art, film, media, and literature draw on these as a source of significance.[2] Food has recently become a focus of interest in literary and cultural studies. The study of food in literature, gastrocriticism, examines how dietary choices define the self. As Maria Christou points out, the field tends to approach questions of identity through three categories: historical context, national and political affiliation, and gender. She argues that gastrocritical exploration is "the investigation of food in relation to wider contexts, which almost invariably leads to the exploration of certain historico-geographical, national, political, or gendered identities" (Christou 2017, 7). Food allusions help the author of dystopias illustrate a society's power, gender, and class struggles: What food is available, and for whom? Who produces and who serves the food? What are the typical food rituals, and how do food shortages illustrate the physical, sociological and/or psychological dysfunctions of the society?

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1 Food studies is a holistic, interdisciplinary field that uses anthropological, sociological, historical, and cultural approaches to food.

2 There are numerous books on food and literature, including Allison Caruth's *Global Appetites: American Power and the Literature of Food*, 2013; Sarah Sceats's *Food, Consumption, and the Body in Contemporary Women's Fiction*, 2000 with a special chapter on food in Atwood's novels (94–125); Tamar Heller and Patricia Moran's *Scenes of the Apple: Food and the Female Body in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Women's Writing*, 2003, which discusses food and feminine identity. Maria Christou's latest book, *Eating Otherwise*, discusses the philosophy of food in 20th-century literature. It includes a chapter on food in Atwood's dystopias.

As Counihan suggests, "food is a prism that absorbs and reflects a host of cultural phenomena. An examination of food ways–behaviours and beliefs surrounding the production, distribution, and consumption of food–reveals much about power relations" (1998, 6). In *The Testaments*, food allusions in the individual testimonies help the reader to see through the (seeming) plenitude of food in the oppressive regime. Food and lack of food often occur in testimonies: inedible food, and images related to food and hunger proliferate in Holocaust narratives.[3] Communist regime testimonies often feature food shortages, governmental regulation of consumption, and queuing for food supplies (Burrell 2003, 189). In a similar vein, food disorders and changes in eating (and sleeping) patterns often appear in rape and sexual trauma testimonies (Ross 2009, 211). Thus, witness narratives about food might lend a materiality to the impossible task of "the transmission of the untransmittable" (Radstone 2001, 61). This important link between food and testimony is examined here.

The main story line in Atwood's much-awaited sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) is a spy thriller about an infiltrator inside Gilead cooperating with the Mayday resistance to destroy the theocratic regime from the inside. Set in second-generation Gilead, fifteen years later, it leaves Offred behind: we hear only a couple of words from her. Atwood replaces her legendary voice with three other female voices. In "Why it took Margaret Atwood 30 years to find the right voice for a sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale*," Atwood explains that she knew she could not recreate Offred's voice: "It would have been a horrible mistake to have attempted it" (Ackew 2019). Instead, the story of *The Testaments* is narrated by three female voices: by baby Nicole, a.k.a. Daisy, now a teenager living in Canada. After learning her true identity, she decides to work with the Mayday resistance. Another perspective is given by Agnes Jemima, Offred's first daughter, who was taken away from Offred and her husband Luke after their traumatic attempt to escape to Canada. The girl has been living in Gilead with Commander Kyle and Tabitha, her foster parents. She is being brought up to become a Commander's wife. The third voice belongs to Aunt Lydia, the indoctrinator and cruel enforcer, who has collaborated with the Gileadean regime. Now, she is taking Gilead down.

2 Testimonies and Testaments

Despite the first Gilead novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, being titled as a "tale," a word suggestive of fiction, and the doubts expressed by Professor Pieixoto at the end, Offred's first person narration is meant to feel like a direct reproduction of everyday life under an oppressive dystopian regime. As Offred gets dressed, eats, walks from shop to shop, from Birth Day to Salvaging, from her room to the Commander's office and back to Cora and Rita's kitchen, the reader moves with her and hears her internal commentary. Her words have the weight of emotional truth. Offred's restricted vision captures many blatant abuses of power and much torture, violence and surveillance directed against women, though the novel points to even more being hidden behind the wings of her bonnet. *The Testaments* broadens the view of Gilead through another three individual testimonies. One of the narratives, the memoirs of Aunt Lydia, takes readers close to the apex of Gilead's monstrous power structure. Even so, as the name suggests, the genre is again that of witness literature or testimonial literature.

[3] For more on food and deprivation, see Susanne Luhmann, "Managing Perpetrator Affect: The Female Guard Exhibition at Ravensbrück" and Wilhelmine Haferkamp "Motherhood Times Ten and Food To Spare" (1995).

Atwood has described the Gilead novels' genre with reference to witnessing. In "Margaret Atwood on What *The Handmaid's Tale* Means in the Age of Trump," she highlights her use of the literary form of the literature of witness: "Offred records her story as best she can; then she hides it, trusting that it may be discovered later, by someone who is free to understand it and share it. This is an act of hope: Every recorded story implies a future reader" (Atwood 2017). Atwood refers to the accounts left by people bearing witness to the tragedies of history they have experienced. As Axel Gelfert argues: "although the act of bearing witness is usually an individual one, it contributes to what is sometimes called 'sensemaking' – the social activity of giving meaning to collective experiences" (Gelfert 2014, 17). Atwood's witnesses survive the nightmarish dystopia of Gilead and share their experience with us.

Witness literature or testimonial literature primarily deals with experiences such as the two World Wars, genocides, the Communist regimes, the Holocaust and an "unprecedented number of disastrous events on a mass scale that wreaked havoc" (Felman 1992, 2). However, it is not only the occurrence of terrible events that makes the present era a testimonial era; it is the specific mode of narrativization of those traumas. Writers of testimonies offer a counter-narrative to the dominant official narrative produced by their oppressors. The genre of testimonial literature thus cannot be clearly defined; it is implicitly a hybrid form because "[t]rauma invites distortion, disrupts genres or bounded areas, and threatens to collapse distinction" (LaCapra 2014, 96). Writing/narrating thus becomes an act of survival. Several critics argue against regulating testimonies and setting genre boundaries. According to Julian Wolfreys, "[t]estimony, in order to be such, cannot be calculated, for every testimony must respond to the singular specificity of the traumatic experience […] Testimony is irreducible to some concept or figure, some genre or species of narrative within historical narrative or literature" (2015, 130).

What makes testimony different from other forms of autobiographical writing? It is the tough core of the narrative. The content of testimony is centered around a traumatic event: as Lawrence L. Langer puts it: "the content of a written survivor memoir may be more harrowing and gruesome than most autobiographies" (1993, 41). However, most testimonies also follow a typical autobiographical chronology. Testimonies are inherently hybrid, participating in multiple genres that criticize, resist and oppose any regime that uses harsh categorization, intrusive policing and brutal repression to support a monological narrative.

We understand the Holocaust diary of Anne Frank and the oral histories collected by Svetlana Alexievich[4] as examples of witness literature: even young girls like Anne Frank, children in Alexievich's *Last Witnesses* or Atwood's Agnes can contribute to the truth of the historical record. Even the silent voices can scream their stories if there is someone who listens. Even if it is that rather pompous scholar, Professor Pieixoto, who gives the ironic epilogue to both *The*

[4] Svetlana Alexievich interviewed Russian and Belarussian women about their World War II experience (*War's Unwomanly Face*, 1985); She also collected first-hand accounts from the war in Afghanistan (*Boys in Zinc: Soviet Voices from the Afghanistan War*, 1991); and oral histories of men and women survivors or the Chernobyl nuclear catastrophe (*Chernobyl Prayer: A Chronicle of the Future*, 1997. Alexievich interviewed the generation who had experienced war as children: *Last Witnesses: Unchildlike Stories*, 1985. Food functions to trigger their memories. All the witnesses mention lack of food, hunger, and inedible food as traumatic.

Handmaid's Tale and *The Testaments.* In *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Dominick LaCapra argues that testimonies "provide something other than purely documentary knowledge," as they show us the emotional charge of the trauma on the witness. "Testimonies are significant in the attempt to understand experience and its aftermath, including the role of memory and its lapses, in coming to terms with – or denying and repressing – the past" (2014, 86–87).

One of the definitions of Gilead, according to the Bible dictionary, is "heap [of stones] of witness" (Genesis 31:47–48). In testifying to what they have witnessed, Offred, Lydia, Daisy, and Agnes speak against the monological story of the novel's oppressive regime. Although this regime silences women's voices, they are determined to record and tell their witness stories. In line with this, the title of the novel, *The Testaments*, points to several possible concepts. As Atwood explains in *Time*: "It has several different meanings: last will and testament, Old and New Testaments. And what does a witness give? A testimony, but also a testament […] So it's those three: the witness, the will and 'I'm telling you the truth'" (Feldman 2019). The Republic of Gilead follows the exterminatory practices of other totalitarian regimes such as the Nazis and Soviet Communists: erasure of data, burning of books and documents and executions of their opponents, all of which force later generations to rely more upon alternative sources for evidence of their totalitarian rule. Testimonial literature, by using multi-voiced, multi-perspectival, and in the case of Atwood, multi-generic texts, produces alternatives to the official history of Gilead that looms in the novels' background. Aunt Lydia acknowledges the process of totalitarian rewriting of history in her memoir: "The corrupt and blood-smeared fingerprints of the past must be wiped away to create a clean space for the morally pure generation that is surely about to arrive. Such is the theory" (Atwood 2019, 4). Against this, the credible testimonies undermining official totalitarian narratives are immensely valuable; it is an authentic human experience. As Gelfert points out, "Historically, testimony has been associated with the communication of knowledge based on the experiences of others" (2014, 24).

Atwood's oeuvre transgresses genre boundaries, and her blurring of the boundaries between testimony and other kinds of autobiographical writing produces a persuasive, hybrid writing. Discussing the generic specifics of *The Testaments*, we encounter a fundamental question affecting this type of autobiographical narrative – whether fictionalized or not. How much should we rely on a narrator to be telling the truth? Offred's testimony is challenged by subsequent historians of Gilead; moreover, we know that Offred strategically manipulates the reader, omits some displeasing truths and offers several possible versions of events. In *The Handmaid's Tale,* Offred tells us what her experiences in Gilead look like in her memory. Such testimony is not what an objective historian who possessed all the facts would write, but it can sometimes be the only means of access to the truth. Testimonial literature is narrated by a marginalized witness and draws attention to the complex interaction of memory and revision involved in the process. Atwood brings together elements of autobiographical genres: the diary, testimony, witness narrative, and survivor narrative. She produces a chorus of witnessing voices. *The Testaments* suggests that Gilead cannot impose a single, totalitarian vision, even when it bans all reading and writing and uses television for brainwashing.

In the case of *The Testaments*, where there are three narrators, the intersubjective process between the narrator(s) and the reader shifts from evaluating, proofreading, cross-checking

and verifying facts to sympathy, understanding, and, possibly, self-reflection. These stories authenticate each other and make a strong, immersive narrative that is compelling and emotive. In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (focusing primarily on Holocaust writing) make a difference between testimony and autobiography: "A 'life testimony' is not simply a testimony to a private life, but a point of conflation between text and life, a textual testimony which can penetrate us like an actual life" (1992, 2). Atwood's novel thus advocates the power of female testimony: the multiple perspectives overlay each other and create a palimpsest of (historical) memory of the cruelty and violent abuse of human rights by the Republic of Gilead. The palimpsest is a crucial term in describing Gilead, since the state rewrites its history and architecture, as well as the identities and human rights of its citizens. On the formal level, Atwood uses the hybrid genre of testimony to signal the complexity of her work as an open and multilayered palimpsest. If Offred's lone testimony seemed unreliable and was rewritten by Professor Pieixoto, now we can compare it against three other women's perspectives. Since there are three individual witnesses (four with Offred), their individual testimonies create a credible collective mosaic. In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, Felman and Laub argue that "[t]he testimony to the trauma thus includes its hearer, who is, so to speak, the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed" (1992, 57). Through the testimonies of Offred, Lydia, Daisy and Agnes, we empathize with their traumatic experiences and we can begin our own self-reflexive process.

Aunt Lydia's memoir and the transcripts of Witness Testimony 369A (Agnes) and 369B (Daisy) give us glimpses into everyday life in Gilead. The food they eat, their eating practices and food shortages illustrate the omnipresent control and power hierarchies of Gilead. These everyday accounts are what Gelfert calls mundane testimonies: "their name, their age, line of work or what they had for breakfast" (2014, 20). However, besides these mundane matters, the witnesses give us their specific knowledge based on their position in the society. The two teenage girls' voices are well-contrasted: Agnes's humble, God-fearing manners are juxtaposed with Daisy's foul-mouthed grunge-style speech patterns. *The Testaments* ends with the Thirteenth Symposium on Gileadean Studies in 2197, where we learn about the fall of Gilead, which may have been instigated by Offred's testimonial tapes, Aunt Lydia's testaments (although these are doubted by some Gilead Studies scholars), and the Mayday resistance. In the second novel, Atwood focusses less on specific cases of brutality by the oppressive regime and more on how the narrators' life experience and individual temperaments shape their characters, their reactions, and how they deal with their (traumatic) situations. Reading the three testimonies together and alongside Offred's gives readers insight into a theocratic regime in which individuals are melted into a uniform mass.

However, for Agnes and Daisy, the story is more about searching for their identities, families and roots than about recording the cruel crimes of Gilead: Daisy learns that her life as the daughter of the owners of a second-hand clothes shop is a sham, and Agnes uncovers the falsehood behind Gilead's narratives and that the Gileadean Bible has been heavily rewritten to serve the corrupt leaders. Her testimony is more a young girl's diary of her childhood, school and family life than an exposé of Gileadean misogynistic politics. As is familiar from Atwood's earlier fiction (*Cat's Eye*, for instance, girls must address their past before entering

their full adult roles). Since Daisy and Agnes are teenagers, their trickery, heroism and loyalty to each other constitute a victory not only over a patriarchal and misogynistic regime, but also over the mistrust, jealousy, and the other perverse ways women betray other women in *The Handmaid's Tale*. In *The Testaments*, Becka (Aunt Immortelle) commits suicide to buy time for Daisy and Agnes. Under Aunt Lydia's secret coaching, the girls bring down the monstrous system by relying on each other and some very old spying techniques (microdots, codes, and bribery): "We could have been swept out with the tide and ended up in South America, but more likely picked up by Gilead and strung up on the Wall. I'm so proud of Agnes – after that night she was really my sister" (Atwood 2019, 397). Atwood balances the treachery, jealousy and hatred shown in *The Handmaid's Tale* with values of female friendship and sisterhood.

Aunt Lydia writes another layer into the palimpsest of Gileadean witness narrative. She testifies to her actions, admitting that she has "buried a lot of bones, now [she's] inclined to dig them up again – if only for your edification, my unknown reader" (Atwood 20019, 4–5). She also defends her life choices in a banal poetic echo: "Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, and I took the one most travelled by. It was littered with corpses, as such roads are. But as you will have noticed, my own corpse is not among them" (Atwood 2019, 66). She tells us (and herself) that she had to lead to survive. Before Gilead, she was a family court judge, and an educated woman who contributed to charity. Then she is arrested, taken to a stadium that has become a detention center where she witnesses cruelty, executions, and the disappearance of other women lawyers. She is imprisoned in an isolation cell; hungry and beaten three times, she is released and given the choice to collaborate with the new regime:

> […] three men came into my cell without warning, shone a glaring light into my blinking purblind eyes, threw me onto the floor, and administered a precise kicking, and other attentions. The noises I emitted were familiar to me: I had heard them nearby. I won't go into any further details, except to say that Tasers were also involved. (Atwood 2019, 148)

Aunt Lydia puts on the brown uniform and chooses to wield a Taser rather than be tasered.

Aunt Lydia's testimony puts emphasis on the events and persons she has witnessed. She focuses on the historical importance of the political system of Gilead, and especially on its corrupt leaders. Where Offred could only doubt the official TV reports, Aunt Lydia testifies to Gilead's isolation, border controls, technology failures, and the bureaucratic labyrinths of a (barely) functioning state. Many references take us back to recent history–children ripped from their parents, a refugee crisis, inhuman detention centers, pedophile scandals–mirroring current TV news. There are, however, historical parallels for everything: history repeats itself, and Aunt Lydia knows it. Aunt Lydia knows that writing down the secrets of Gilead is dangerous, and yet she does it, though she cannot be sure her secrets are perfectly concealed:

> […] the stash of incriminating documents I've been hoarding for so many years will have featured not only at my own trial – should fate prove malicious, and should I live to feature at such a trial – but at the trials of many others. I've made it my business to know where the bodies are buried. (Atwood 2019, 61).

She collects all the sins of Gilead along with her own and writes a memoir. I argue that Aunt Lydia's memoir is also a testimony in the sense used by Roy Perret, that is, "a literary work" written to "make sense" of a life and well as a "construction of a self-identity" (1996, 36). Atwood helps make sense of a historical and personally traumatic event.

3 Putrid Breakfast, Undigested Porridge and Warm Milk

Since *The Testaments* consists of testimonies–transcripts of Agnes's testimonies that read almost like diary entries, Aunt Lydia's confessions (and accusations), and Daisy's witness narrative–we learn not only about the strategies of power and ideological architecture of Gilead, but also about the day-to-day lives of individuals in it, including their meals. In Atwood's dystopian Gilead, the characters have minimal control over their lives and, consequently, over their meals: they cannot choose what to eat, cannot buy it themselves, and cannot cook it as they like or control portions. The uniformity of Gilead is represented not only by the citizens' uniforms and robes but also by the uniform food, which is unappetizing and limited. Moreover, Atwood shows that the regime metaphorically consumes its own citizens and uses images of cannibalism to expose the power hierarchy of Gilead in three witness narratives. Susannah Radstone argues that "it is witnessing that enables testimony, though what is witnessed may be the sheer impossibility of representing that which struggles towards, but refuses, representation" (2001, 62). Images of food in testimonies, I argue, enable Atwood to represent the ineffable and indigestible trauma of Gilead.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the Handmaids' diet of eggs and white meat illustrates their precarious status as privileged slaves and breeding machines (Sceats 2000, 111). Bodies in Gilead, especially the bodies of Handmaids, are reduced to reproductive functions. Similarly, Karen Stein sees the system as "dehumanizing and cannibalizing the victims" (1996, 67). This is mirrored by the food the Handmaids are allowed to eat: constant references to eggs suggest a parallel with producing a life, as well as the female body: "an eggcup on it, that kind that looks like a woman's torso, in a skirt. Under the skirt is the second egg, being kept warm" (Atwood 1996, 110). We are shown how the Handmaid's body is cut down and fragmented to her reproductive and consumable parts.

The Commanders' diet of red meat suggests high power and masculinity. However, even the Commanders do not get meat very often, which reminds readers that the regime controls and restricts even its most senior officials. Not even the Commanders' Wives can freely choose their food: they can only eat what the Handmaids buy for them and the Marthas in their kitchen cook for them. Gilead rations their portions, their time to eat and their food.

In *Bite Me: Food in Popular Culture*, Parasecoli points out food's centrality in "production, distribution and consumption, and providing fundamental institutions and customs" (2008, 64). The testimonies inform readers about Gilead's control over similar aspects of food: shopping, (queuing in shops, shortages), cooking and eating. In this sense, Atwood's fictional testimonies show a dystopia for everyone: all citizens are controlled by the system; they are all eating scarce, poor quality food that they have not chosen.

Women in *The Handmaid's Tale* behave like enemies to one another, and the Marthas use what power they have to express their resentment: they serve undercooked or burnt food to the Handmaids, who must eat it. Kindness is rarely shown, although there are moments of (food-based) rebellion against the cold politics of Gilead. Atwood's ambiguous images of food function to ironize and subvert the ideology of the dystopian state. In *Food: The Key Concepts*, Belasco suggests, "food can obviously confine women to subservient roles, keeping them busy at home and 'quiet' in the public sphere" (2008, 44). Nevertheless, in Gilead the kitchen loses its significance as private space. The state controls (almost) every inch of its territory.

Atwood's dystopian novels show that food can be a means to communicate positive emotions of empathy, compassion, and support. Despite the stipulation of Gilead that Marthas "are not supposed to fraternize with [the Handmaids]" (Atwood 1996, 21), Rita, working in the kitchen, allows Offred to get an ice cube on a hot day, when she sees her in her warm red robe. The ice cube is not only a gesture of kindness but also a small act of rebellion against the ideology and strict dress-code of Gilead: "A shame, making you wear all them pillowcases on your head, in this weather" (Atwood 1996, 219). The kitchen and eating thus enable the characters to show (secretly) their humanity and human relationships.

This emerges again when the Marthas allow Agnes to help prepare food or show support for a pregnant handmaid or a sick wife in their house: "Marthas began fussing over [the Handmaid] and giving her bigger meals, and placing flowers in little vases on her breakfast trays" (Atwood 2019, 93). In *The Handmaid's Tale*, distrust and fear prevent women from bonding; however, in *The Testaments*, their friendships and sisterhood help destroy Gilead. Women show sympathy to each other by sharing food: "Becka would turn away, though she would slip me portions of her lunch when no one was looking" (Atwood 2019, 108). Gilead controls bonding between women but cannot eliminate it.

In Gilead, everything is political: bodies, intimate thoughts and food. Dystopian food is scarce and limited because of shortages. For Easter, Aunt Lydia allows eggs to be dyed baby pink and baby blue: "You have no idea what delight this brings […] Our diet is monotonous and a little variation is welcome, even if only a variation in colour" (Atwood 2019, 33). The Aunts eat a restricted, repetitive diet of eggs, sandwiches and indeterminate soups. Only when Daisy becomes one of the Pearl Girls and comes to Ardua Hall do we realize just how unappetizing their food is. The Gilead girls are used to it, so indoctrinated that they repeat learned phrases such as "Be thankful for what you are given" and "It's disrespectful not to finish" (Atwood 2019, 323). The outsider Daisy, however, can recognise leftovers and nauseating scraps, and she rebelliously names the dishes "mouldy dishwater" and "fish eyes in glue" (Atwood 2019, 323). Her testimony gives us a taste of bitter Gilead.

4 Eating Cakes and Girls

Citizens of Gilead, especially women and girls, are often portrayed as food to show that they are being consumed by their husbands and/or commanders. Agnes describes herself as a pastry: "I had a dough face, like the cookies […] with raisin eyes and pumpkin-seed teeth" (Atwood 2019, 11). Atwood uses metaphors of cooking and eating to underline the low position of women in the hierarchy. The regime manipulates individuals through discipline

regimes of deprivation and luxury, as in the case of Aunt Lydia, who is tempted by luxury food like fruit and salmon: "it was like a recipe for tough steak: hammer it with a mallet, then marinate and tenderize" (Atwood 2019, 170). To feel control, even a young girl like Agnes turns to metaphors of baking: "I would make a man out of dough, and they would bake it in the oven […] I always made dough men, I never made dough women, because after they were baked I would eat them, and that made me feel I had a secret power over men" (Atwood 2019, 20). It is not only girls who are depicted as food items; even people with some power, including Aunts, are presented as edibles: "She smiled. It was like an old turnip smiling: the dried-up kind our Marthas used to put in soup stock" (Atwood 2019, 247). Images of fragmented bodies and faces underline the fact that Gilead is a failed utopia for everyone.

However, on rare occasions, Gilead tolerates traditional party food, including cake and whipped cream. Daisy's birthday in Canada and a Gileadean Birth Day offer similar food: whipped cream and cake. But there is something you cannot get in Gilead: ice-cream. Aunt Beatrice, who takes Daisy to Gilead, wonders why there is no ice cream in Gilead: "I honestly don't see what's wrong with ice cream, as long as it has no chemicals" (Atwood 2019, 270).[5] Offred also recollects the ice cream of pre-Gileadean times. She nostalgically associates the past with the freedom to choose her own food, healthy or unhealthy. She could even treat herself and her daughter to indulgent food, like ice cream, which she recalls not by the name but by the colour. However, Gilead is not colourful; it is grey and unforgiving. In *Carnal Appetites*, Elspeth Probyn argues that "[i]n eating, pleasure offers itself to be problematised. As it brings our senses to life, it also forefronts the viscerality of life" (2000, 7). This might be why Gilead forbids ice cream; it brings pleasure but also brings up deep feelings that might be uncontrollable and subversive.

Alcohol has a similarly subversive potential, and it is thus a strictly controlled substance in oppressive Gilead. Lupton points out that the consumption of alcohol "signals escape from the civilized body into self-indulgence and physical and emotional release" (1996, 32). The tyrannical regime of Gilead gives the citizens measured and controlled moments of liberation. On special occasions, the privileged levels of Gileadean society–Commanders and their Wives–can drink alcohol, especially on a Birth Day. Aunt Lydia is also permitted to drink a teaspoon of rum in her coffee when she visits Commander Judd. Aunt Lydia is a double agent, appearing to serve Gilead while scheming to bring it down: "we lifted our mugs, clinked them together" (Atwood 2019, 282). This gesture reminds her of pre-Gileadean times, before coffee became "a valuable commodity that is increasingly difficult to obtain" (Atwood 2019, 173).

Even such senior women as Aunts Lydia, Vidala, Elizabeth, and Helena, the women responsible for inventing laws, uniforms, names, and hymns, can only drink coffee at their occasional meetings with Commander Judd. Traditionally, as Lupton argues, "coffee […] was represented as a stimulant, preparing individuals for the day ahead" (1996, 35–6); here it stimulates them to think about how they have betrayed their former education, values and lifestyles. Drinking coffee with Commander Judd is the epitome of this two-faced behaviour.

[5] Aunt Beatrice's line might contain the seeds of Atwood's ironic food joke: many a reader will be reminded that most ice cream we normally eat contains a great deal of chemicals.

Coffee is also a symbol of life outside Gilead. On their escape to freedom, Daisy and Agnes stop at a border store and buy two cups of coffee: "The coffee must have been sitting around all day because it was the worst I'd ever tasted" (Atwood 2019, 363). But coffee definitely tastes of freedom.[6]

Atwood associates certain foods with freedom.[7] Although officially Gilead provides food for everyone, and nobody is hungry, their food is unsatisfying because the people are hungry for freedom. This is illustrated by the terrible hunger pangs the girls experience on their way to Canada, when smuggling evidence against Gilead. On arrival, they are given their first taste of freedom: tea and sandwiches, which are described as "cheese, but it wasn't Gilead cheese, it was real cheese: goat cheese with chives" (Atwood 2019, 378). Just as Gilead itself is fake, rotten and corrupt, so is its cheese is artificial and sickening.

Because of (wartime) food shortages, Gilead feeds bad food and even food substitutes to its citizens as we find in the testimonies. Ersatz Gileadean cheese thus becomes the epitome of everything that is disgusting in the dystopian regime of fake food, fake relationships and fake religion.[8] Agnes cannot digest the truth about her mother being a Handmaid; she spits out a mouthful of ersatz cheese sandwich: "While telling me this story, Shunammite was continuing to chew. I watched her mouth, out of which my doom was emerging. There was orange cheese substitute between her teeth" (Atwood 2019, 85). On the other hand, Zilla (a Martha) helps her to accept this truth by giving her a hot biscuit with honey. Our emotions and tastes are connected. According to Emma Parker, the mouth is "the site of ingestion of both food and feelings" (1995, 359). A sweet taste helps Agnes to stomach her bitter feelings of disgust.

5 Food and Human Sacrifice

Since Gilead is a theocratic regime, religion plays an important role in the lives and politics of its citizens, *The Testaments* shows food as sacrifice and offering: "Blood was polluting, especially when it came out of girls, but God once liked having it spilled on his altars. Though he had given that up […] in favour of fruits, vegetables, silent sufferings, and good deeds" (Atwood 2019, 83). Women leave food items at the statue of Aunt Lydia, associating her with divine powers: "Votaries have taken to leaving offerings at my feet: eggs for fertility, oranges to suggest the fullness of pregnancy, croissants to reference to the moon" (Atwood 2019, 4). God has given up blood sacrifice, but Gilead has not: it sacrifices women's bodies for babies.

The woman's body bleeding on the table evokes the imagery of sacrifice: the state of Gilead sacrifices the Handmaids to give life. There is another association between a woman's body

[6] Atwood might have been inspired by Mormon church food regulations and the Mormons' prohibition of coffee and tea; this was not just because of caffeine but also because of a 19th-century fad about high food and drink temperatures affecting the moral disposition. See a recent article on this "'Always ask if there is coffee in it:' Mormon church stands by rule with new advice" by Edward Helmore (2019).

[7] As an example of a link between freedom and junk food, Lupton points to a junk food advertisement which ends in "a challenge to the reader to reject 'Big Brother' and seek independence" (Lupton 1996, 147). Gilead's restrictive puritanical politics is opposed to freedom to indulge and pleasure.

[8] Many of Atwood's food references are ironic. The average consumer in Canada and elsewhere in North America accepts a great deal of fake cheese and other synthetic foodstuffs. (In fact, many Canadian consumers prefer synthetic maple syrup to real maple syrup.)

and food (women not only prepare food but also produce 'food' during pregnancy and lactation). In *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, Caroline Walker Bynum argues "like body, food must be broken and spilled forth in order to give life. Macerated by teeth before it can be assimilated to sustain life, food mirrors and recapitulates both suffering and fertility" (1988, 30). In the same way, the bodies of the Handmaids are broken and degraded to be consumed. Their bodies are sacrificed to bring life to Gilead, to bring children. An extreme case is shown in *The Testaments*, when Ofkyle is sacrificed for the Commander's baby. She dies in childbirth, bleeding to death without medical attention because the doctor is called too late. Agnes shows deep sympathy: "I uncovered her face. It was flat white: she must have no blood left in her" (Atwood 2019, 103). In a typically Atwoodian scene, the Handmaid's gutted corpse is juxtaposed with the leftover party food of the Marthas, who eat cake and white-bread sandwiches with the crusts cut off. Agnes, deeply touched by Ofkyle's death (and recognizing her possible future and the monstrosity of Gileadean misogyny), cannot eat. The Marthas seem untroubled by Gilead's choice to save the child not the Handmaid.

On the other hand, *The Testaments* includes scenes of women helping each other, forming strong alliances to protect one another. Aunt Lydia, while appearing to be dedicated to the regime, orchestrates the most important act of women's solidarity when she plans the exfiltration of evidence of corruption and human rights abuses in Gilead. She also protects young girls from Commander Judd, a pedophile and murderous, Bluebeard figure, who has married a series of young girls and poisoned them in turn to get a new, possibly younger bride. Aunt Lydia discovers that he plans to use rat poison to get rid of his latest wife and arranges for the young woman to go on a retreat to the Calm and Balm Clinic. In Gilead, medical treatment is strictly controlled, and a woman needs permission from her husband to get it. Aunt Lydia saves the young bride; she helps the two girls to leave Gilead for Canada, smuggling the evidence of the regime's corruption.

Testimonies illustrate the relation between consumption and power, while simultaneously showing that women can regain the right to eat, cook their own food, or indulge in ice-cream and coffee. The Gileadean narratives show how the state portions and poisons women. By revealing how consumption is related to such power politics, Atwood's witnesses learn to recognize that the rules and restrictions under which they live are dystopian, unsatisfying and sickening, and then develop the skills to resist them. Seeing through the state ideology of (false) utopia is an important step.

6 Conclusion

Food choices, then, can show not only the characters' preferences and individual personalities but also their weaknesses. Even in a state that controls every bite its citizens eat, people still try to retain some control over their lives and deaths, as some women attempt to commit suicide by refusing to eat, or by eating something inedible, such as drain cleaner. Aunt Lydia, Agnes and Daisy include their eating habits in their testimonies because these illustrate the dystopian and hostile atmosphere of Gilead; this article has illuminated some of the important ways food is deployed throughout *The Testaments* to anchor the contrasting story-telling techniques

and individual perspectives layered in the transcripts of witness testimony. These testimonies depict food shortages, rationing and problems with the food distribution in an oppressive regime that would never admit any problems with food. The testimonies also feature images of disgusting and unsatisfying food, which function as literal and metaphorical depictions of the citizens' hunger for freedom and resistance to the restrictive state. Atwood uses specific images of food, associating these with women (eggs, chicken, white meat, biscuits) to show the gender hierarchy and dehumanizing sexual policy of Gilead.

Atwood's testimonies of dystopia in the two Gilead novels do not simply imitate witness narratives to make Gilead more believable. A polyvocal, multi-generic, multi-perspectival novel like *The Testaments* draws attention to the form of witness literature. Because of the implicitly hybrid form of testimony, the text cannot be a monological or mimetic representation of (fictional) traumatic events in oppressive regimes. Rather, it shows the paradoxes of narrating trauma, and questions what seems to be fixed and authoritative, whether the Gileadean version of religion, and gender roles, or hunger and what can and cannot be consumed. Atwood uses the genre of testimony to write beyond genre and beyond history.

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Rano Ringo, Jasmine Sharma
Indian Institute of Technology Ropar, India

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Reading a Feminist Epistemology in Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam*

ABSTRACT

This paper proposes an epistemological interpretation of Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* (2013). Set in a post-anthropocene world, Atwood's biopunk work indicates the rise of posthumanism after the "Waterless Flood" that proves apocalyptic. This interpretation is attempted through emphasis on the protagonist Toby's practice of epistemic writing and her art of storytelling. Divided into two major sections, the article illustrates a revival of an epistemological feminist subculture. The first section discusses the significance of a feminist standpoint in unravelling posthuman reality. It describes Toby's epistemological endeavor to enlighten the Crakers and enrich their bioengineered minds with the story of their creation. The second section builds upon the idea of bisexual writing and Toby as its prime progenerator and practitioner. The conclusion remarks on the relevance of feminist epistemology in integrating the two communities in the post-anthropocene.

Keywords: feminism; epistemology; standpoint; posthumanism; bisexual; Margaret Atwood

Feministična epistemologija v delu *MaddAddam* Margaret Atwood

POVZETEK

Prispevek predlaga epistemološko interpretacijo dela *MaddAddam* (2013) avtorice Margaret Atwood. Zgodba se odvija v postantropocenem svetu, kjer Atwoodin biopunk kaže na vzpon posthumanizma po »brezvodni apokalipsi«. To se izraža s poudarkom na epistemološkem pisanju in umetnosti pripovedovanja protagonistke Toby. Članek je razdeljen na dva dela, v katerih predstavi ponovno oživitev epistemološke feministične subkulture. Prvi del obravnava pomen feminističnega vidika pri razkrivanju posthumane resničnosti. Opisuje Tobyjino epistemološko prizadevanje za razsvetlitev Koscev in obogatitev njihovih bioinženirskih umov z zgodbo o njihovem stvarjenju. Drugi del je zgrajen na ideji biseksualnega pisanja, kjer je Toby njegova glavna začetnica in izvajalka. Zaključek komentira relevantnost feministične epistemologije za vključevanje dveh skupnosti v postantropocen.

Ključne besede: feminizem; epistemologija; stališče; posthumanizem; biseksualnost; Margaret Atwood

1 Introduction

Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* (2013) visualizes a hybrid future for a handful of humans struggling for life and for the biogenetically engineered species, the Crakers. The article discusses the role of feminist epistemology in the novel through an in-depth study of the character of Toby. Her epistemological facility leads to successful mediation between the posthuman Crakers and the surviving humans in a post-anthropocene world.

Unlike *MaddAddam*, the previous two novels in the trilogy project Toby as a victim of the corpocratic order. Her employment at SecretBurgers in *The Year of the Flood* (2009) indicates her subjugation to technocratic patriarchy. Her boss Blanco, previously a Painballer, is a misogynist psychopath who tortures her both physically and mentally. Blanco's sexist contempt can be observed in the tattoo of an upside-down naked woman, chained with her "head stuck in his ass" (Atwood, *Year* 2009, 36). This grotesque image epitomizes the devaluation of female sexuality and reveals a sense of masculine pride in conquest and regulation. However, *MaddAddam* is about elements of liberation as opposed to victimization. Surrounded by the surviving humans and the non-human Crakers, Toby escapes the clutches of the pre-pandemic world – that is, the world that is inflicted by the "Waterless Flood" from earlier in the trilogy. The final novel of the trilogy contains the essence of her emancipated selfhood, which is reflected in her keen observation powers, her effective storytelling, her teaching of a Cracker child and her keeping a daily diary to record the post-pandemic world. As shall be shown, using the work of Cixous, *MaddAddam* can be regarded as representing feminist epistemology and *bisexual* writing.

The novel foregrounds a post-apocalyptic future. The previous two works, *Oryx and Crake*, and *The Year of the Flood*, merge in the final novel of the trilogy. Both Oryx and Crake are dead by this time. While Jimmy recalls fragments of the pre-apocalyptic past, Toby, Ren, and Amanda move towards finding their lost human mates. During this search, the remaining characters come across the biogenetically engineered Crakers and accept the conditions of their mutual survival. The transition between the pre- and post-catastrophic worlds impels the remaining population to collect the pieces of their fragmented lives. This reassembling takes place within the dystopian ambit where the characters (especially Toby) face a disintegrated reality. However, this reality is not an entirely destructive scenario but offers some hope for the inevitable posthuman future. Therefore, the notion of dystopia, as employed in this paper, questions the classic connotations of the term by critically dissolving its denotation of "bad place" and redefining its etymological topography.

Dystopia, as defined by Lyman Tower Sargent, is "a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which the reader lived" (quoted in Grimbeek 2017, 9). Traditionally, dystopias are cautionary tales, giving the readers a pessimistic alternative to their present-day reality from a sharper, more vigilant perspective (Gheluwe 2015, 145). However, Atwood's novel contests the limits of this definition. This is because the narrative, unlike customary tales of a frightening future, provides the potential for amelioration. She terms this presence of hope in a dystopian setting *ustopia*. *MaddAddam* shows humans and bio-spliced organisms successfully coming to terms

with the reality of the new world. Together, they look forward to a viable future for the upcoming (post)humanity. Toby plays a pivotal role in this critical dimension of *ustopia*. Her epistemological perception endows her with the ability to aid in turning the post-apocalyptic situation into a scenario optimal for the survival of post(humanity). Toby engenders this *ustopian* sensibility with her polyphonic narrative and bisexual writing.

The art of storytelling dominates the narrative, with Toby as the principal mediator between Zeb and the Crakers. Atwood endows the strongest female survivor of the apocalypse, Toby, with the skill to engage the Craker community. She becomes the messiah who enlightens them with the story of Oryx and Crake and the birth of the new world. This dynamic exchange between Crakers and humans highlights the posthuman element in the novel. Shelley Boyd (quoting Joseph Caroll) regards this versatility of "story-telling and language […] as 'the chief medium for conveying information in non-genetic ways'" (Boyd 2015, 173). It is through this non-genetic transference that Toby enlightens the Craker child, Blackbeard, and encourages him to write. The act of a sterile Toby instructing a fond Blackbeard amounts almost to the adoption of a posthuman child by a human female, as they form a filial bond. In this case, feminist epistemology also has a maternal angle.

The Crakers inherit Toby's lens for visualising the past through the oral storytelling medium, as opposed to the genetic configuration of their bioengineered minds. Toby's imaginative flexibility and creative endeavor to tell stories daily, for the Craker become the foundation of the novel. In the face of apocalyptic crisis, she can efficiently narrate a fresh tale every night and humorously manipulate past human events. The beginning of the novel confirms this. It starts with "the story of the egg, and of Oryx and Crake, and how they made people and animals; and of chaos; and of Snowman-the-Jimmy; and of the smelly bone and the coming of the Two Bad Men" (Atwood 2013, 3).

These lines initiate the reader into the text, its extraordinary sequence of stories and the manner of their narration. Night after night, Toby, following the storytelling tradition, completes the residual threads of the past. Beginning from the story of Oryx and Crake and the birth of the Crakers, Toby ingeniously recites the story of Zeb and the Bear, Adam and Zeb, Zeb and Crake, and Pilar and Crake. The structure of each story involves a satirical deconstruction of the actual incidents prior to the Waterless Flood. The stories interweave the past with the present, so that "memories, dreams and flashbacks often […] create a type of psychological realism and the way in which the protagonist has arrived at the present, both psychologically and physically, is explored in minute detail" (Grimbeek 2017, 48).

Toby's performance as a committed storyteller advances the intimacy between the two species. It suggests her efficiency in understanding the Crakers' minds. The balance of this paper examines this knowledge function in detail. It aims at establishing the female side of the story and comprehending the interrelation between feminism and the episteme. The rest of this paper is subdivided into two major sections. The first explores the politics of knowledge from a feminist standpoint, while the second investigates the importance of speech, storytelling, and writing for women. Both sections suggest how the female imparts knowledge to the posthuman world of hybrid pigoons and genetically engineered Crakers. These further challenge the phallocentric ideals of knowledge creation and propagation.

2 Epistemological Feminism: Anticipating Storytelling and Feminist Speculative Fiction

Classical philosophy has often associated knowledge with the phallus. Thus, a 'masculine' outlook orchestrates epistemic perspectives and enslaves individuals in its hegemonic clasp. Both Platonic and Aristotelian conceptions regard truth and rationalism as products of male sensibility, and philosophy as an enterprise concerning powerful men. Plato's *Symposium* demeans women's physicality and devalues them as reproductive machines. Men, according to Plato, on the other hand, possess an innate quality that is the procreation of knowledge, an intrinsic phallic characteristic (Isikgil 2017, 399). The phallic knowledge coefficient perceives women as bodies that crave the contentment of the flesh and ignore logical thinking. Aristotle too, in his *Politics*, questions the deliberative abilities of women which, according to him, render them inefficient in exercising authority, as compared to men. He sees them as bereft of practical knowledge and political expertise, guaranteeing their inferiority in the patriarchal world (Karbowski 2013, 235). This ideological framing bestows on the male philosopher the right to appropriate woman's subject position and devalue her ability to know and perceive the world.

To summarize, classical philosophy creates a bias against women, denying them the right to epistemological practice. In the words of Lorraine Code, there is "no legitimate space for women to claim cognitive authority, credibility, or acknowledgment. The universal pretensions of the story of knowledge told by and about men mask its partiality in both senses of the word, thus rendering women's lives invisible" (2006, 147). Patriarchy perpetuates and shapes epistemic sensibilities. It empowers men to frame epistemic knowledge within the phallic order. Women, on the other hand, are compelled to accept the masculine standpoint and adhere to its normative patterns. This article constructs an argument against this androcentric prejudice. It destabilizes the oppressive masculine standpoint and proposes a feminist standpoint theory to elaborate the importance of knowledge in *MaddAddam*'s posthuman world. Moreover, this section studies "Situated Knowledge" and its veritable link with feminist epistemology. It conjugates *ustopia* and feminist speculative fiction while drawing a character sketch of Toby.

Feminist Epistemology aims to construct feasible models of knowing. Also known as Epistemological Feminism, it proposes varied methods to understand one's social reality. Kirsten Campbell writes:

> Feminism's most powerful epistemological insight is the recognition that legitimization of knowledge claims is intimately tied to networks of domination and exclusion…For this reason, it aims to reconstruct epistemic practice as a political practice. It links the production of knowledge to the transformative value of feminism and hence the production of new models of epistemic practice. (2004, 12)

Accordingly, the identity and situation of the feminist knower acquire immense importance. This feminist knower is committed to exercising epistemic responsibility. Campbell defines epistemic responsibility as "a responsible cognitive practice…one in which the knowing [female] subject acknowledges that it exists in relation to the other members of its epistemic

community and its knowledge has political effect for which its knower is responsible" (2004, 137–38). With 'political,' Campbell refers to how knowledge of the subject transforms the objects of knowledge. The term "epistemic community" captures how humans and Crakers share and transfigure knowledge to promote a posthuman continuity. In the present context, the objects of knowledge refer to the non-human epistemic communities (the Crakers in *MaddAddam*), and Toby plays the role of the feminist knower. While the feminist knower exercises power and responsibility to disperse the gift of knowledge among its objects, object communities also understand and circulate the knowledge gained from the subject. They do so by formulating their own gospel, based on articulation skills inherited from Toby, for future posthumans. In this way, the subject and the object function as equal partners within the ambit of epistemological dissemination. The woman's standpoint revolves around the entire epistemic community and authorizes her in facilitating epistemological transactions.

Feminist standpoint theory refers to the acknowledgment of the female perspective within the accepted and the standard order. It celebrates the counter-philosophical argument, and challenges masculinity as the basis of epistemological profusion of reality. Proposed by the feminist philosopher Sandra Harding, feminist standpoint theory interrogates the basis of feminist knowledge creation. "All knowledge is generated from a standpoint, i.e., from a particular, social and historically mediated perspective," summarizes Nancy McHugh (2011, 187). Feminist standpoint theory scrutinizes female oppression as opposed to the hegemonic male perspective. It situates women's oppression within the periphery of power, enabling it to voice its own feminist concerns. In "Feminist Politics and Epistemology: The Standpoint of Women," Alison M. Jaggar writes:

> The standpoint of the oppressed is not just different than that of the ruling class; it is also epistemologically advantageous. It provides the basis for a view of reality that is more impartial than that of the ruling class and also more comprehensive. It is more impartial because it comes closer to representing the interests of society as a whole; whereas the standpoint of the ruling class reflects the interest only of one section of the population, the standpoint of the oppressed represents the interests of the totality in that historical period. (2003, 57)

The ruling class, in the present context, constitutes the masculine knower, while the myriad of experiential women comprise the oppressed. However, to understand the truth behind women's oppression, one needs to consider the plurality of female experience. This is because different women undergo varied levels of oppression and, therefore, cannot be contained under a single rubric. Donna Haraway asserts "there is no single feminist standpoint because our maps require too many dimensions for [the Standpoint] metaphor to ground our vision" (quoted in Code 2006, 156). A Feminist Standpoint centralizes female experience as per the spatio-temporal dimensions of their specific location when inserted within a particular set of social relations.

Toby's position within this Feminist Standpoint opens a productive space for contestation and opposition, as her subject position in *MaddAddam* resists a defined bracket. The notion of ustopia sustains this space while emphasizing Toby's special situatedness within feminist speculative scholarship. Feminist Speculative Fiction, according to Barr, "acts as a microscope

in relation to patriarchal myths. [It] presents blueprints for social structures that allow women's words to counter patriarchal myths" (Barr 1993, 7). It views "womanists and feminists… as our time machines, test tubes and windows to the future. They present possibilities which can help us develop alternatives" (Barr 1987, 81–82). In the light of Barr's statements, Toby's standpoint entails a polyphonic sensibility tracing how "the control of the word shifts from male domination [from Jimmy in *Oryx and Crake*] through female mediation to the non-human Crakers" (Northover 2016, 84). In this way, her standpoint maps multiple versions of reality, where no single version commands a specific standpoint.

The storytelling activity demarcates the end of androcentric oppression and welcomes the beginning of a new post-apocalyptic age. It also indicates the advent of an anticipated anthropocene feminism unfixing the phallic quintessence in the narrative. In her article "Anthropocene Feminism, Companion Species, and the *MaddAddam Trilogy*," Jennings points out Richard Grusin's argument in *Anthropocene Feminism*, namely, that "many scientists and theorists of the Anthropocene tend to produce 'masculinist' narratives that take for granted the dominance of the human species" (Jennings 2019, 17). She goes on to discuss Atwood's trilogy as speculative anthropocene feminism, offering an insightful picture of a counter-apocalypse with a re-emergence of posthumanism and a renewed hope for life after the Waterless Flood. The term counter-apocalypse suggests "an enactment of hope, without or despite, totalitarian expectations, or absolute ends and new beginnings" (Hoogstraten 2020, 188). In the words of Catherine Keller:

> Wherever overtly apocalyptic hope has been literalized it has been proven literally wrong; the normative hope, however, cannot be falsified. It can be named: hope for mutual respect in proximate and in political relations, for justice and mercy upon the land and within the city, for transnational, trans-species, healing and renewal. This hope can only be verified, however, by being made true: spirit practiced, materialized, spun, performed (Keller 1996, 308).

We argue that epistemology plays a substantial role in establishing Toby's character as a metaphor for this counter-apocalyptic anthropocene feminism. It makes her the prime force for the posthuman renewal and replenishment and promotes cordiality between the remaining species. As an epitome of "Situated Knowledge," her spatio-temporality engenders a better understanding of the pre- and post-catastrophic environments. The concept of "Situated Knowledge," similar to feminist standpoint theory, contributes to the formation of Epistemological Feminism. Coined and interpreted by theorist Donna Haraway, the term refers to a feminist form of knowledge detached from the mimetic phallic discourse. "Situated Knowledge" redefines objectivity, where one's social location is responsible for shaping and upholding the process of knowing. In Haraway's view, a typical gender (female) dimension fosters a better purview of knowledge than that of the ones in power. She asserts that situated knowledge "is preferred because [it] seems to promise more adequate, sustained, objective and transforming accounts of the world" (1988, 584). Thus, from Haraway's perspective, "we are bound to seek perspectives from those points of view, which can never be known in advance, that promise something quite extraordinary, that is, knowledge potent for constructing worlds less organized by axes of domination" (Haraway 1988, 585).

Therefore, the marginalized subject position becomes essential in subverting the dynamics of power. It demonstrates how knowledge from the gender periphery illuminates the epistemic superstructure. This position privileges "contestation, destruction, passionate construction, webbed connections, and hope for transformations of systems of knowledge and ways of seeing" (Haraway 1988, 585). Toby emblematizes Haraway's "situated knowledge." She is placed at the threshold between the two species. Embodying classic cyborgian dimensions, she negotiates between her human and technological selves. Atwood's *The Year of the Flood* recalls Toby's cosmetic therapy that helped her to work as an undercover agent at the AnooYoo spa. Finally, after landing among the Crakers and replacing their guru Snowman-the-Jimmy, she becomes acquainted with many facets of knowledge because of her changing subject positions. This subjectivity enables her to add to the original story of Crake and his creation. "There is the story, then there is the real story, then there is the story how the story came to be told. Then there is what you leave out of the story. Which is part of the story too" (Atwood 2013, 56). Toby's poly-faceted and perpetually transforming subjectivity associates her "situated knowing" with shifting patterns of women's experience and the fluidity of their epistemic ideas.

Knowledge, according to feminist standpoint theory, is not universally confined. It is relational and discursive, varying according to women's experiences. There is no single feminist standpoint theory, just as there is no single definition of a woman. The term "woman" is a site of a potentially complex set of experiences, without a monolithic essence of the self. Toby's narrative widens the imaginative possibilities for exploring the same story in different voices. It also lays the foundation for the introduction of literacy among the Craker community, transcending the megalomaniac plans of Crake. In fact, the diffusion of knowledge among the Crakers leads to the empowerment of the non-human, which allows them to absorb learning and transmit it to their future progeny. Toby is astonished to see Blackbeard picking up the skill of writing, and, after intitially encouraging him, she comes to fear ruining the Crakers by introducing them to this art, asking, "What can of worms have I opened?" and "Have I ruined them?" (Atwood 2013, 204). Discernment of this knowledge transmission through the eyes of a feminist knower challenges the overly optimistic inventiveness of Crake.

According to Crake, the bio-spliced Crakers have been designed as an improved replacement for the human population. Devoid of detrimental values and human extrapolations, the new species is free from societal paradigms such as inheritance, family, marriage, money, God and icons. To implement his plan, Crake eliminated the skills of reading and writing from their neo-cortex. He detached them from the dogmas of gospel, history, doctrine, and religion during their bio-fabrication and erased the rigidity of the spoken word from their humanoid brains. This erasure of morphological rigidity introduces polyphony to *MaddAddam*, while Toby's voice adds a speculative feminist descant. Northover's argument on the polyphony of the novel is relevant here. According to this critic,

> The Crakers have come to expect Jimmy and then Toby to tell them stories. They especially enjoy the story of how Crake and Oryx created the world. They never seem to be tired of it, which means that the word of that narrative threatens to become the Word, a myth frozen into doctrine- their questions introduce a new doctrine to

> the polyphony of narratives, extending their imaginative explorations and preventing them from becoming monologues. (Northover 2016, 92)

I draw attention to Toby's speculative position amid the breakdown of phallogocentric ideals. Toby regulates the narrative through her feminist agency. Exercising her feminist standpoint, she "subverts the deep [phallic] structural principles of language" (Armitt 2012, 123) and replaces these with lingual fluidity. Her epistemic faculty enables her to connect the pre- and post-pandemic experiences. Rather than waiting for the demise of knowledge and language that Crake always wanted, she indulges in the active dissemination of knowledge among the Craker community. She does so through her art of weaving bedtime stories for the Crakers. Knowledge thus becomes diffused among the two species through constant cross-questioning and seeking of innovative responses. Atwood writes:

> Once Toby has made her way through the story, they urge her to tell it again, then again. They prompt, they interrupt, they fill in the parts she's missed. What they want from her is a seamless performance, as well as more information that she either knows or can invent. (2013, 45)

These remarks engender an optimal interaction between the two species. In the novel, though, Toby is the chief mediator between humans and the Crakers. However, I refrain from considering Toby the dominant voice, since "any Feminist Standpoint will necessarily be partial… None of us can speak for 'woman' because no such person exists" (Hekman 1997, 359). In that sense, Toby's position within the Feminist Standpoint argument emphasizes the inclusiveness of the posthuman world. Her voice not only speaks for the "woman" inside her but for the entire human and non-human species who survived the apocalypse. She becomes an active spokesperson for diverse communities, facilitating an active transmission of knowledge.

Toby's practice of networking with stories connects epistemology with psychological diligence. Night by night, the mimicked anecdotes produce a feverish effect on Toby's psyche. This leads her mind to automatically hatch stories and serve them to the Crakers. "The story tells itself inside Toby's head. She doesn't seem to be thinking about the story or directing it. She has no control over it; she just listens" (Atwood 2013, 256), asserts the narrative voice. It implies that Toby's activity of recitation allows her deep self-contemplatation. An abyss of thoughts characterizes her holistic personality, her ontological link with both her internal self and the world outside. Thus, her Standpoint position places her between an unpleasant past and an uncertain future.

In this way, *MaddAddam* illustrates Toby's polyphony in addition to her innovative storytelling in the tradition of feminist speculative fiction. She employs her knack for narration not only to enlighten the Crakers and hold their curiosity but also to realize her subjectivity. This further empowers her to connect past, present, and future under a single nucleus. The notion of "situated knowing" encourages her to associate her subjective epistemology with writing, an activity vindicating the link between knowledge, speech, and writing. The next section explores the impact of the written word on the oral and that written word's subsequent dissemination among the Craker community. It underlines the prolific aspects of women's writing and shows how this writing motivates the feminist episteme.

3 Women Writing/Writing Women: A Revival of Post Human Literacy

In *MaddAddam*, the relation between the oral and the written word epitomizes the representation of feminist epistemology. It depicts how writing stimulates women's experiences and opens a feasible pathway to connect with reality. The novel portrays writing as a means to memorize and preserve the remaining traces of the human footprint. It chronicles the dissociated threads and prepares the future for posthuman subsistence. Toby manages to catalogue the past by maintaining a daily journal. This allows her to record important events and keep the past intact. The narrative voice notes:

> Toby is at work on her journal. She doesn't really have the energy for it, but Zeb went to all that trouble to bring her the materials and he's bound to notice if she doesn't use them. She's writing in one of the cheap schooltime drugstore notebooks.
>
> […]
>
> *Moon: Waxing gibbous. Weather: Nothing unusual. Noteworthy occurrences: Group pig aggression displayed. Painballer evidence sighted by Zeb's expedition: piglet shot and partly butchered. Discovery of a tire tread sandal: possible clue to Adam. No definite sign of Adam and the Gardeners. Jimmy is conscious and improving. Crakers continue friendly.* (Atwood 2013, 201–2)

Toby's journal comprises day-to-day events that convey her liminal existence. Writing privileges her to evidence the present and commit towards its authentic documentation. The written word bestows meaning on her life. As a woman, she writes from changing subject positions and resists phallocentric fixity. The intricacies of the written word recognize the plurality and fluidity of women's sexuality. According to Cixous, women's writing flows from the body. It perpetuates the polyphony and multiplicity of women's experiences and their call for an end to oppression. Writing, what Cixous terms as "écriture feminine," emancipates them from the hierarchal and repressive authority of the phallus. "She structures *écriture feminine* in the context of *differance*, which stems from the influence of the philosopher Jacques Derrida" (Friestad 2013, 2). Derrida, through his theory of "différance," critiques the structuralist notion of binary oppositions, while highlighting the difficulty in assigning signification to language which is self-referential. It means that the meaning of a word is always deferred – that is "each sign in the system has meaning only by virtue of its difference from the others" (Eagleton 1996, 97). Cixous connects Derridean *différance* with *écriture feminine* and urges women not to follow the masculinist writing discourse but instead, through *differance*, to disrupt the androcentric hegemony of writing. In her essay, "The Laugh of the Medusa," Cixous asserts that:

> A feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive. It is volcanic; as it is written it brings about an upheaval of the old property crust, carrier of masculine investments; there is no other way. There is no room for her if she is not he. If she is a her-she, it's in order to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the "truth" with laughter. ("Laugh of the Medusa" 1976, 886)

Thus, *écriture feminine* refers to a uniquely feminine type of writing that defies the rules of the phallic order. Drawing on the theories of psychosexual and linguistic development as advanced by Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, *écriture feminine* constitutes the non-representational lack at the heart of women's writing. Cixous links this lack with Freud's idea of castration of the female child, while substantiating his theory of the Electra Complex (Eagleton 1996, 156). Cixous challenges this envy of castration and de-frames the notions of shame, inferiority, and punishment behind Freud's Electra Complex. Reacting against Lacan's argument that this lack of the phallus is nothing but a "desire" for the missing "other," Cixous writes, "Castration? Let others toy with it? What's a desire originating from a lack? A pretty meager desire" (1976, 891). By this, she means that the lack at the core of castration could be nourishing and optimal, as opposed to envious and shameful.

It is at the Lacanian Symbolic stage that Cixous draws her theory of *écriture feminine* and critiques androcentric writing. For Cixous, *écriture feminine* constitutes women's creative energy, which is located at the margins of the Symbolic Order and closely associated with the Real. After the anthropocene, Toby's writing engenders this creative energy enveloped within a non-representational lack. It comprises the intricacies of a "split" language that is the language of the "Other," unlike the "Self." Here, the "Self" refers to the Lacanian subject as marked by the linguistic phallus while the "Other" refers to the vehicle of *écriture feminine*, denoted with a "lack" or, in misogynist terms, a woman.

However, to see *écriture feminine* as a space for women only could be erroneous. According to Cixous, even the writings of male writers like James Joyce (for example, in his novel *Ulysses* (1922)) could be classified as *écriture feminine*. This is because the term denotes writing that transcends the rigid boundaries of phallic regulations. It is more focused on the writing style rather than the gender of the writer. In "Laugh of the Medusa," Cixous defends her concept of *écriture feminine* with the notion of bisexuality. In her essay, she gives two definitions of bisexuality, where the first definition refers to "each one's location in self of the presence-variously manifest and insistent according to each person- male or female- of both sexes, non-exclusion either of the difference of one sex," while the second definition concerns "with writing where writing is bisexual in the sense that it is neuter" (1976, 884).

Therefore, for Cixous, femininity and bisexuality go together in a combination that varies according to the individual, spreading the intensity of its force differently and (depending on the moment of their history) privileging one component or another ("Sorties" 1998, 583). Bisexuality in *écriture feminine* refers to the inclusive and non-linear elements in women's writing that are different from the masculine ones. It obliterates rigidity in writing and is open to multiple interpretations that subsequently evade the primacy of the phallus. In this way, Cixous revolutionizes women's writing and celebrates its plentitude.

Toby's journal manifests these characteristics of *écriture feminine*. After the apocalypse, she begins writing, an activity of the past. The word "past" emphasizes the absence of the written word from the Craker community. For Toby, writing a journal indicates her ontological plurality. The use of short sentences, colloquialism, and fragmented phrases makes her language flexible and versatile. The following lines exemplify this argument:

> [Toby] turns back to her journal. What else to write, besides the bare-facts daily chronicle she began? What kind of story – what kind of history will be of any use at all, to people she can't know will exist, in the future she can't foresee? *Zeb and the Bear*, she writes. *Zeb and MaddAddam*. *Zeb and Crake*. All of these Stories could be set down. But why, but for whom? Only for herself because it gives her a chance to dwell upon Zeb. *Zeb and Toby*, she writes. But surely, that will only be a footnote. (Atwood 2013, 203)

In addition to Toby's obsession with the future of humanity, the passage features disintegrated syntax and uneven use of punctuation. Comprising features of feminine/bisexual language, Toby's journal embodies elements of escapism (what Cixous terms as sortie) from hegemonic theorization and enclosure. Her writing reveals the peculiarities of exclusion and celebrates lingual torrents. Each word in the journal has the potential to challenge the existing logic and invent a new poetics of bisexuality. Both Cixous and Toby believe in the power of the written word. They acknowledge the significance of experience and their inclusion in the domain of writing. This novel thus offers an important exemplar supporting the bisexuality of women's writing, as Toby teaches writing to the Craker child, Blackbeard.

While engineering the Crakers, Crake excluded many elements of the human world from their neo-cortex. This is because he did not want the new species to develop any complicated cerebral functioning that might interfere in their eco-friendly development. Reading and writing were among the prohibited capacities. Although the stories of Snowman-the-Jimmy and Toby acquainted them with the oral word, they were still unfamiliar with written text. Through her journal, Toby familiarized Blackbeard with reading and writing. Skeptical at first, she introduced the Crakers to the forbidden activity. With this, she began the human education of the Crakers, a moment of anxiety for Toby:

> What comes next? Rules, dogmas, laws? The Testament of Crake? How soon before there are ancient texts they feel they have to obey but have forgotten how to interpret? Have I ruined them? (*MaddAddam* 2013, 204)

More than a question, the last sentence implies a psychological dilemma for Toby. She believes that education would lead them to adopt some of the human traits that Crake sought to eradicate. However, instead of reading this event as banal dissemination of knowledge, we interpret it as an instance portraying bisexual epistemic creation. Toby's act of sharing the artistry of writing with Blackbeard reflects both a posthuman and a bisexual interaction on her part. As suggested previously on the basis of Cixous, her journal expresses a bisexual writing style that is fluid and flexible. It encapsulates an open-ended and freestyle writing along the lines of the plurality of the posthuman world and its genetically fabricated creatures. Toby's endeavour to teach and Blackbeard's eagerness to learn indicate the bisexuality of language and its healthy conveyance between them. "Oh Toby, what have you been writing, says Blackbeard," to which Toby replies "I am writing the story…the story of you, and me, and pigoons, and everyone" (Atwood 2013, 374). This conversation draws attention to the posthuman bisexuality of writing.

In teaching Blackbeard orthography and the aspects of writing, Toby passes on the gift of *écriture feminine* to a posthuman man and eventually to his entire community, both

male and female. Rather than ruining the Crakers, writing liberates them and furnishes the transmission of knowledge. It gives them a voice to promulgate the gospel of (post) humankind. Blackbeard glows as he says, "telling the story is hard, and writing the story must be more hard. Oh Toby, when you are too tired to do it, next time, I will write the story. I will be your helper" (Atwood 2013, 375). This help subsequently blends the story of Toby and the story of Blackbeard. It endows Blackbeard with the capacity to acquire learning and channel it further. Writing truly becomes bisexual when Toby declares that "Blackbeard has his own journal now… I have given him his own pen and a pencil" (Atwood 2013, 378). In fact, this exemplar indicates Toby's adoption of Blackbeard, after she was subjected to accidental sterilisation in *The Year of the Flood*. And this transmission of the written word to Blackbeard suggests a transference of knowledge from a mother to her progeny. For Toby, making Blackbeard her heir is an act of a dialogic convergence that will percolate through the ages. The penultimate chapter of *MaddAddam* asserts this. It begins with Blackbeard's voice masking the voice of Toby beneath it:

> Now this is the book that Toby made when she lived among us. See, I am showing you. She made these words on a *page*, and a page is made of *paper*. She made the words with *writing*, that she marked down with a stick called a *pen*, with black fluid called *ink*, and she made the pages join together at one side, and that is called a *book*. (Atwood 2013, 385)

The book typifies Toby's cognitive labor that Blackbeard yearns to imitate. It not only presents the first written account of posthuman reality but also describes the meta-fictionality of the novel itself. It is writing about *writing*, how writing came into existence. The book charts Toby's words uttered through Blackbeard, merging the two voices into one. Blackbeard's voice embellishes the genre of writing by fusing itself with Toby's narrative. Ultimately, he inserts Toby into the story of his own, one that he undertakes to complete after Toby's death.

MaddAddam begins with the voice of Toby and ends with the voice of Blackbeard, integrating feminine and masculine, human, and posthuman entities into a unique dialogue. "This is the end of the story of Toby," says Blackbeard. "I have written it in this Book. And I have put my name here – Blackbeard – the way Toby first showed me when I was child. It says that I was the one who set down these words," he continues (Atwood 2013, 390). Blackbeard asserts his individuality in these lines. However, his statement carries the essence of Toby's teaching, a lesson that gave him knowledge worth sermonizing among the new audience. This learning becomes a progressive interface to connect with the surviving community and cultivates an optimal outlook on life. It develops an assured affinity among the living and invigorates them with the idea of a better tomorrow.

4 Conclusion

This article has attempted to substantiate the function of epistemology in oral and written cultures. It has elaborated on the diffusion of knowledge across generic borders and cataclysmic transformations. We have located Atwood's novel in the feminist speculative canon and interpreted Toby's polyphonic function in the narrative. This means that Toby's different versions of the same story allow no single Word or line of thought to take predominance over

the rest. The fluidity of *MaddAddam*'s narrative provides depth to the learning of the Crakers, in which Toby distils inchoate event into story, through a feminist knowledge praxis.

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Tjaša Mohar, Sara Orthaber, Tomaž Onič
University of Maribor, Slovenia

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"I exist in two places, here
and where you are"— Margaret Atwood

Machine Translated Atwood: Utopia or Dystopia?

ABSTRACT

Margaret Atwood's masterful linguistic creativity exceeds the limits of ordinary discourse. Her elliptical language contributes to interpretative gaps, while the ambiguity and openness of her texts intentionally deceive the reader. The translator of Atwood's texts therefore faces the challenge of identifying the rich interpretative potential of the original, as well as of preserving it in the target language. Witnessing the rise of artificial intelligence, a natural question arises whether a human translator could ever be replaced by a machine in translating such challenging texts. This article aims to contribute to the ongoing debate on literary machine translation by examining the translations of Atwood's "Life Stories" generated by two neural machine translation (NMT) systems and comparing them to those produced by translation students. We deliberately chose a literary text where the aesthetic value depends mostly on the author's personal style, and which we had presumed would be problematic to translate.

Keywords: literary machine translation; literary translation; neural machine translation (NMT); Margaret Atwood; short fiction

Margaret Atwood v strojnem prevodu: Utopija ali distopija?

POVZETEK

Jezikovna ustvarjalnost Margaret Atwood presega meje običajnega diskurza. Njen eliptičen jezik ustvarja interpretativne vrzeli, dvoumnost in odprtost njenih besedil pa včasih namerno zavajata bralca. Prevajalec njenih del je tako nedvomno postavljen pred izziv, kako prepoznati bogat interpretativni potencial originala in ga ohraniti v ciljnem jeziku. V času, ko smo priča vzponu umetne inteligence, se naravno postavlja vprašanje, ali obstaja upanje (oziroma strah), da bo prevajalca pri prevajanju besedil avtorjev, kot so Margaret Atwood, nekoč zamenjal prevajalnik. Članek prispeva k nadaljevanju razprave o strojnem prevajanju literature, s tem ko analizira slovenska prevoda kratke proze Margaret Atwood z naslovom »Life Stories«, dobljena z uporabo dveh nevronskih strojnih prevajalnikov (Google Translate in Translator.eu), in ju primerja s prevodi študentov prevajalskih študij. Za namene raziskave smo namenoma izbrali literarno besedilo, katerega estetska vrednost temelji predvsem na avtoričinem slogu in za katerega smo predvidevali, da bo predstavljal prevajalski izziv.

Ključne besede: strojno prevajanje književnih del; književno prevajanje; nevronsko strojno prevajanje; Margaret Atwood; kratka proza

1 Introduction

Margaret Atwood's literary works are known for their complex and recognizable style, which, owing to her masterful linguistic creativity, frequently exceeds the limits of ordinary discourse. Her elliptical language contributes to the interpretative gaps, ambiguity and openness of the text that sometimes lead to the intentional deception of the reader. As Gadpaille (2014, 172–75) points out, the complexity of Atwood's tone, particularly her "deep irony and black humour," can easily be misinterpreted. The translator of Atwood's texts undoubtedly faces the challenge of identifying the rich interpretive potential of the original, as well as of preserving it in the target language.

In a recent study, Borg (2016) examined how a literary translation comes into being by providing a rich description of the process, from the way the translators approach the task to the decisions and the choices they make. Among the invisible phases of the process, she explicitly lists one dedicated to polishing the style of the target language. Translators are, therefore, not simply concerned with transferring the propositional content of the source text; they also need to capture the different nuances of pragmatic meaning as well as the aesthetic value, which Schwartz & de Lange (2006, 18–19) refer to as a subjective, unique, and distinctive personal rendition of the original. A source text "is providing a certain way of knowing the world which the target text (TT), by the very act of translation […] is invited to diversify and supplement" (Scott 2018, 18). Given the unique style of literary texts, automated translation of them is thus considered a great challenge, and for a long time the idea of literary machine translation (MT) has been rejected. Rapid development of neural machine translation (NMT) systems has increased their use by professional translators and thus affected the process of translation. The possibility of post-editing pre-translated literary texts has recently been revisited. This article aims to contribute to the ongoing debate on literary machine translation for the English-Slovene language pair by examining the translations of a selected work by Margaret Atwood produced by students of translation studies and comparing these to the output of the neural MT systems Google Translate and Translator.eu (GT and T.eu, respectively).

Accordingly, the following section will briefly examine the relevant research implemented in the field of literary neural machine translation (NMT) and then present the methodologies and approaches to human and automated evaluations of MT outputs. We then move to the description of data and explain the analytical approach adopted in this study. In the analysis, we compare the students' translations with those generated by GT and T.eu in eight linguistic and stylistic categories.

2 The Rise of Literary Neural Machine Translation (NMT)

That NMT can yield promising results in literary translation was demonstrated in a recent experimental study by Toral and Way (2018), who found that technology was capable of translating twelve widely known novels from English into Catalan with a 25% flawless rate (meaning that in 25% of the translated text, no post-editing intervention at the sentence level was needed). These novels were Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, Joyce's *Ulysses*,

Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, Orwell's *1984* and Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. In their study, Toral and Way (2018, 285) conducted a human evaluation of translations for three of the books by manually ranking the translations produced by NMT and the human translations. For two out of three of these, native speakers perceived NMT translations to be of comparable quality to those of human translations in around one-third of the cases.

One reason for this relative success is NMT's use of deep learning, a technique that according to Bonner, "teaches a computer to filter inputs through layers to learn how to predict and classify information" (2019). The main resource for training machine translation systems comprises bilingual parallel texts. Put differently, the aim of NMT is to "understand the meaning behind words and phrases by predicting word order and applying context via deep learning" (Kravariti 2018). With the rapidly growing market share of e-books, i.e., original novels and their translations, MT systems have been built that are tailored to novels.

Considering the challenging text type, the study by Toral and Way has shown surprisingly promising performance in literary MT, possibly suggesting that literature may no longer be off-limits to technology. We have therefore chosen to test the performance of NMT on a work by Margaret Atwood ("Life Stories" from *The Tent*), where the aesthetic value of the text intrinsically relies not on content and plot, but rather on form and Atwood's individual style in the sense of Leech and Short, who define an author's style as "those aspects of linguistic choice which concern *alternative ways of rendering the same subject matter*" (2007, 31).

2.1 English to Slovene Combination

Studies of machine literary translation for the language combination English and Slovene, which is the language pair examined in this study, are still scarce.[1] According to Kuzman, Vintar and Arčan (2019), this is due to the lack of availability of resources such as translation corpora and parallel corpora of literary texts, and to the morphological complexity of the Slovene language[2] (see also Vintar 2013; 2018). In their study, Kuzman, Vintar and Arčan (2019) examined the productivity and output quality of literary machine translation by comparing neural literary translations for English-to-Slovene translations among different neural machine translation (NMT) models: (a) NMT Google Translate, a mixed-domain neural machine translation model trained on millions of examples, and (b) a model tailored to literature, but trained on a significantly smaller data set. Applying both automatic and human evaluation, their main objective was to explore whether such an approach could improve the performance of NMT systems. They found, however, that the mixed-domain NMT model GNMT performed better than the model tailored to literature.

[1] Computer-aided translation software that includes translation memories has mainly been developed for language pairs with substantial commercial interest, Slovene not being one of them. Most translations of literary works into Slovene are from English (62%), followed by French (41%) and Italian (18%). Translations into English, on the other hand, account for just 4% (Pregelj 2019). Moreover, English and Slovene belong to different language families, Germanic and Slavic, respectively.

[2] This observation is in line with the findings of the literary MT study for the language pair English-Russian by Matusov (2019), who found that although the quality was high enough to understand and enjoy the translated story, the NMT of German fiction into English was better than that of English into Russian.

In the aforementioned study, translation outputs were evaluated both automatically (using metrics such as BLEU or METEOR)[3] and by human evaluators, to compensate for their respective shortcomings.[4] In human evaluation, qualified translators typically check for errors in the MT output (also known as post-editing) and assess its fluency and adequacy (on detailed presentation of error classification and error typologies, see Popović 2018). One way to conduct the MT evaluation is for bilingual human evaluators to rate the MT output for meaning preservation (i.e., adequacy), grammaticality (i.e., fluency), and a combination of both (i.e., overall quality) from poor (1) to perfect (5). Evaluations also often include the temporal dimension of post-editing effort. Alternatively, for each output sentence, the evaluators choose a better version (A or B), without committing themselves to an absolute score (Popović 2018, 130).

When comparing the English-Slovene language pair, Kuzman, Vintar and Arčan found that for two out of three participants, the translation task was more time-consuming, yet they spent less time translating than post-editing, while the error analysis of literary MT identified "punctuation errors, wrong translations of prepositions and conjunctions, inappropriate shifts in verb mood, wrong noun forms and co-reference changes" (2019, 7). Translations also included semantic errors such as assigning the wrong gender to the main character, translating proper nouns as common nouns, mistranslation of idioms and ambiguous words, and other inconsistencies. Moreover, rare words were left untranslated and sometimes words were either added or omitted. Other errors included changing numbers, substituting imperial units for metric units without converting the values. As will be shown in the analytical part of this paper, our error analysis of the machine translations yielded very similar results.

3 Choice of Text: Margaret Atwood, "Life Stories"

Margaret Atwood's two-page "Life Stories," published in her 2006 collection *The Tent*, was chosen for this research for two main reasons: 1) Atwood is a world-famous author with a recognizable writing style that is a challenge to preserve in translation, mainly because of Atwood's penchant for ambiguity; 2) her style is well represented in this piece of short fiction, which eludes detailed categorization. Atwood's experimentation with the short fiction genre has been acknowledged by several critics (e.g., Nischik 2006; Slettedahl Macpherson 2010; Gadpaille 2018), and *The Tent* undoubtedly counts as such an experiment. Nischik points out that Atwood's short fiction often contains other genres, such as "mini essays, 'essay fictions', short dialogues, dramatic monologues, and reflections" (2006, 153), and Slettedahl Macpherson extends this even to poetry by placing it "between story, essay, and prose poem" (2010, 87). "Life Stories," indeed, reads like a mini essay; it could also be defined as a dramatic monologue or as reflections by its first-person narrator. Owing to the reflective mood of the piece, the narrator's voice could easily be mistaken for the author's; however, Slettedahl Macpherson argues that the pieces published in *The Tent* contain only "snippets

[3] BLEU stands for BiLingual Evaluation Understudy, and METEOR for Metric for Evaluation of Translation with Explicit ORdering.

[4] Human evaluation is perceived as slow, expensive and inconsistent, whereas automated evaluations are still used at the sentence level, are often subject to linguistic shortcomings of a specific MT system, and assume that there is a single correct translation (Way 2018).

of Atwoodian panache, masquerading as knowledge about the author," yet at the same time "slipping back from genuine revelation" (2010, 87). Gadpaille finds that in *The Tent* "Atwood was freed from genre restrictions, and thus able to play with concepts from psychology, philosophy and environmental science, while adapting familiar genre motifs and structures, with amoeba-like flexibility" (2018, 19). In "Life Stories" the narrator is "taking apart" her life story, and in doing so inevitably touches upon psychological and philosophical concepts. In combination with Atwood's writing style, these add to the considerable complexity of the literary work; therefore, the NMT systems and the students (trainee translators) are expected to encounter translation problems.

4 Methodology and Analytical Approach

Eight master's students in translation studies (English-Slovene) translated "Life Stories"[5] as a take-home assignment within their regular course work. Before translating it, they were given some basic information about Atwood and her work; prior to this task, they had translated three Atwood prose poems from her collection *The Door* (2007), and their translations were discussed in class. The students had no other previous experience with translating Atwood's works.

The same text was then translated by two NMT systems, Google Translate and Translator.eu, both freely available, multilingual, automated translation tools. GT was first launched in 2006; a decade later it switched to a neural machine translation engine GNMT. This means its architecture "consists of two recurrent neural networks, one to consume the input text sequence and one to generate translated output text" (Wu et al. 2016, 1). Currently, the service is available for 103 languages, including Slovene, and translates 5000 characters per request, which is impractical for longer texts, e.g., novels. Similarly, Translator.eu is a publicly available online translation tool that provides translation into 40+ languages. It currently translates 1000 characters per request.

At the first stage of the research analysis, the students' translations of "Life Stories" were checked and evaluated by the course leader, who is an experienced literary translator; a teacher of English and American literature with over fifteen years of experience in teaching literature as well as literary translation classes; and an English language instructor and practicing translator with ample experience in teaching translation courses. The evaluators first rated the student translations for meaning preservation, grammatical correctness and overall quality, focusing also on potential translation shifts and their nature. The student translations were then compared to the control version that consisted of translation solutions established by the evaluators as the most accurate in terms of semantics, grammar and style (in the example section referred to as Ctrl). In the following, the translations generated by the GT and T.eu translation tools were examined by the three evaluators according to the same criteria that were used for the student translations and compared to the control version. Based on the results, eight evaluation categories were established in order to identify the grammatical, semantic and/or stylistic shortcomings of the translation tools. Finally, the students' translations were compared to those offered by the translation tools and the control.

[5] The text has 498 words (2808 characters with spaces).

5 Contrastive Textual Analysis

In this section we present the results of our small-scale experiment. The errors and deficiencies identified in the translations of "Life Stories," provided by GT and T.eu, were manually classified into eight linguistic and stylistic categories.

5.1 Short, Non-Idiomatic Sentences, Simple Syntax

As examples [1–4] illustrate, from among the linguistic and stylistic categories dealt with in this study, both MT systems performed well in translating short, non-idiomatic sentences with simple syntax; these were translated semantically and grammatically correctly.

[1] Orig:[6] *It's mostly a question of editing.*
GT and Ctrl: *Večinoma gre za vprašanje urejanja.*
T.eu: *To je predvsem vprašanje urejanja.*

A translation similar to that by GT appears in six out of eight of the student translations and in the control translation. The T.eu version is also semantically acceptable.

[2] Orig: *It helps if there are photos.*
GT, T.eu and Ctrl: *Pomaga, če obstajajo fotografije.*

GT and T.eu translated the verb "to be" as "obstajati" ("to exist"), which is common in Slovene when translating the English phrase "there is/there are"; three out of eight students also opted for this solution. Two students kept the verb "biti" ("to be"), two used the verb "imeti" (BT:[7] "if we have photos"), and one simplified the sentence into "photos help." These solutions are not favoured; the first one lacks stylistic naturalness in Slovene, while the latter two unnecessarily change the original sentence and thus affect Atwood's writing style.

[3] Orig: *I spent my childhood*.
GT and T.eu: *Otroštvo sem preživel.*
Ctrl*: Otroštvo sem preživela.*

Here, both NMT systems took "I" as masculine, which is visible from the Slovene past participle, while all students as well as the control assume a female subject. The narrator's gender is, in fact, not revealed in the original text; however, owing to the autobiographical impression an average reader gets when reading "Life Stories," the female form seems more appropriate. Some students had problems translating this sentence: one changed the word order ("Preživela sem otroštvo"; BT: "I survived childhood"), which changes the original meaning, while four others mistranslated the verb "spend" as "zapraviti" (BT: "I wasted my childhood"), possibly owing to the complexity of the context in which the sentence appears.

[4] GT: *Ko začnete, je zabavno*.
T.eu: *Ko začneš, je zabavno*.
Ctrl: *Ko enkrat začneš, je zabavno*.

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6 Atwood's original.
7 Back-translation.

In GT's translation of [4], "you" is a plural pronoun, while in T.eu's version, it is singular. Since no formal difference exists between the two in English, the grammatical number must be deduced from the context. In [4], however, "you" is generic, so either form can be used in Slovene. All students as well as the control opted for the singular form. Additionally, five students added the adverb "enkrat" ("Ko enkrat začneš"), which roughly corresponds to the English adverb "once" in this context. This addition also appears in the control.

5.2 Unconventional or Elliptical Syntax

Atwood's unconventional use of language is well manifested in "Life Stories," which contains numerous sentences with unusual syntax or ellipsis, and these, even short ones, proved to be problematic for NMT; they also presented a challenge to the students.

[5] Orig: *I was born*, *I would have begun, once*.
GT: *Rodil sem se, nekoč bi začel.*
T.eu: *Rodil sem se, jaz bi začel, enkrat.*
Ctrl: Rodila sem se, *bi nekoč začela.*

It seems that both NMT systems translated the two clauses ("I was born," "I would have begun") separately, thus producing incongruent translations in Slovene. Since the first clause is direct speech and the second one a reporting sentence – the omitted quotation marks being Atwood's stylistic choice – the Slovene word order of the latter must be adapted. The adverb "once" needs to be included in the second clause in order to avoid ambiguity (see, also, Ctrl). Slovene uses the same form of conditional for the present and the past; without the adverb "nekoč" it is not clear that "bi začela" refers to the past. In this case, style needs to be sacrificed for the sake of clarity. GT did place the adverb "once" in the standard position but did not adapt the word order, while T.eu translated it as a separate item. Most students also failed to do justice to the original sentence; only three preserved the meaning. One student mistranslated the adverb "once" as "včasih" (BT: "sometimes"), while the other four translations contain additions or change the meaning. The difficulty probably stems from their (mis)reading of the original and consequent failure to make use of the main advantage they have over NMT, i.e., the ability to take into consideration Atwood's particular style.

[6] Orig: *Rip, crumple, up in flames, out the window*.
GT: *Odtrgajte, zdrobite, v plamenih, skozi okno*.
T.eu: *Rip, crumple, v plamenih, skozi okno*.
Ctrl: *Strgaj, zmečkaj, zažgi, vrzi skozi okno*.

The elliptical sentence in [6], also very Atwoodian, is mainly problematic for translation because of the ambiguity concerning verb moods as well as its combination with the ellipsis. Owing to their form, the verbs "rip" and "crumple" can be read as imperatives or infinitives in the original, while conscious choices must be made in the translation process. Moreover, the ambiguity of the subsequent elliptic phrases must also be carefully worded in Slovene for the interpretive potential to be preserved. T.eu left the words "rip" and "crumple" untranslated, while the GT's solutions produce a semantic shift ("odtrgajte" means to "rip (something)

off," "zdrobite" means "to crumble"). The elliptical and idiomatic clause "up in flames" is translated by both systems as "in the flames," while in the control version, the verb "zažgi" (BT: "burn") has been used, which sounds better than the more direct version "v ogenj;" it also preserves parallelism in the list of imperatives. For coherence and clarity, a verb has also been added to the ellipsis "out the window" (BT: "throw out of the window"). Six out of eight students translated "rip" and "crumple" as verbs: one in first-person singular and four in second-person singular (two as the imperative mood). One student translated the verbs as infinitives, which sounds awkward in Slovene; and two students changed them into adjectives ("ripped," "crumpled"), which creates a semantic shift.

In examples [7–9], non-standard syntax or ellipsis appears in long complex sentences, which proved to be even more problematic for NMT. Deficiencies were also identified in students' translations.

[7] Orig.: *They should have spotted the photographer in the bushes, they shouldn't have chewed with their mouths open, they shouldn't have worn the strapless top, they shouldn't have yawned, they shouldn't have laughed: so unattractive, the candid denture.*

GT: *Fotografa bi morali opaziti v grmovju, ne bi smeli žvečiti z odprtimi usti, ne bi smeli nositi vrha brez naramnic, ne bi smeli zehati, ne bi se smejali: tako neprivlačno, odkrito proteza.*

T.eu: *Morali bi opazil fotograf v grmovju, ki jih ne bi smeli žvečiti z odprtimi usti, ki jih ne bi smeli nositi brez naramnic vrhu, ne smejo imeti yawned, ne bi smeli smejati: tako neprivlačna, iskren Denture.*

Ctrl: *Morali bi opaziti fotografa v grmovju, ne bi smeli žvečiti z odprtimi usti, ne bi smeli nositi majice brez naramnic, ne bi smeli zehati, ne bi se smeli smejati: kako neprivlačno je, če se vidi zobna proteza.*

This sentence contains comma splices – that is, independent clauses joined by commas, the last one being an elliptical clause. The solution provided by Translator.eu does not make sense in Slovene, which proves that the complex sentence has not been translated as a unit. Google Translate's solution is better, yet still deficient. In the elliptical clause "so unattractive, the candid denture," the word order is unusual because of the post-modification, and the MT systems were unable to identify the relation between the words (the correct form of adjective would be "neprivlačna," since "denture" is feminine in Slovene). In addition, the elliptical clause is translated literally, and although the meaning of individual words is conveyed correctly, such syntax is not acceptable in Slovene. In the control version we therefore opted for an if-clause and did not preserve the ellipsis: "kako neprivlačno je, če se vidi zobna proteza" (BT: "it's so unattractive if the denture is showing").

Other elements of the sentence also proved to be problematic for NMT, for instance, the modal verb "should" in the past tense: GT translated the clauses containing "should" correctly except for the fifth one, where "shouldn't have laughed" is changed to "wouldn't laugh" (instead of modality in the past the present conditional is used). T.eu translated only one should-clause correctly, while two were translated as relative clauses, in one the wrong tense was used, and one is ungrammatical. Also, in both MT versions the noun "top" is

translated as "vrh," signifying the top of a tree or a mountain rather than a piece of clothing, as in the original. Additionally, T.eu left words untranslated, used the wrong case of the noun ("photographer"), and made pronoun resolution errors (in the ellipsis the first adjective is feminine and the second masculine, although both refer to the same noun).

While the students did not encounter translation problems in other parts of the sentence, the elliptic clause "so unattractive, the candid denture" proved to be problematic for most of them. Two students translated it as a full clause, of which one opted for an if-clause, as in the control version. The other students preserved the ellipsis. The adjective "candid" was translated by most of the students as: "razkrita" or "odkrita" (BT: "revealed," "disclosed"), which is one of the possible dictionary meanings, but does not collocate with the noun "proteza" ("denture").

[8] Orig: *But snip, snip, away go mother and father, white ribbons of paper blown by the wind, with grandparents tossed out for good measure.*

GT: *Toda ščipajte, ostrižite, mati in oče, bele trakove papirja, ki jih je pihal veter, in jih babice in dedki za dobro mero vrgli.*

T.eu: *Ampak snip, snip, proč Pojdi mati in oče, beli trakovi papirja prepihani z vetrom, s starimi starši vrgla ven za dober ukrep.*

Ctrl: *Ampak škrt, škrt, že odideta mama in oče, veter odnese bele trakove papirja, za povrh se znebiš še starih staršev.*

Both the above machine translations are grammatically and semantically problematic: in fact, they fail to make sense. Although the quality of the students' translations is much higher, some errors and deficiencies appear there as well. While both NMTs failed to acknowledge that "snip" is an onomatopoeic noun indicating the sound of snipping (cutting with scissors), rather than a verb (GT translated it as a verb, T.eu left it untranslated), all students correctly translated it as an onomatopoeic noun; three found a good solution in Slovene ("škrt, ck, resk"), the other solutions were inappropriate or stylistically marked ("rez, šip, štric").

In the case of the elliptical clause "white ribbons of paper blown by the wind," the Slovene language prefers a different word order in which "wind" would come first, as well as the active instead of the passive voice (Ctrl: "veter odnese bele trakove papirja"; BT: "the wind carries away white ribbons of paper"). While all students opted for the active form, five left the word order unchanged, leaving "white ribbons" at the beginning of the sentence, which shifts the emphasis to the wind.

In the phrase "with grandparents tossed out for good measure," Slovene also prefers the active voice (Ctrl: "za povrhu se znebiš še starih staršev"; BT: "for good measure you get rid of the grandparents"). Five students changed the passive form into active, one preserved it, while two opted for an adjective ("zavrženi stari starši," BT: "discarded grandparents"), which tweaks the meaning in Slovene. Additionally, two students omitted the phrase "for good measure."

[9] Orig: *Farewell crumbling turrets of historic interest, farewell icebergs and war monuments, all those young stone men with eyes upturned, and risky voyages teeming with germs, and dubious hotels, and doorways opening both in and out.*

GT: *Oprostitvene propadajoče kupole zgodovinskega zanimanja, poslovilne ledene gore in vojni spomeniki /…/*

T.eu: *Zbogom razpada turrets zgodovinskega pomena, zbogom ledenih gorah in vojnih spomenikov /…/*

Ctrl: *Zbogom razpadajoči stolpiči zgodovinskega interesa, zbogom ledeniki in vojni spomeniki /…/*

As in example [8], both MT systems failed to provide a sensible translation of this sentence, which corroborates recent findings by Tezcan, Daems and Macken (2019) that NMT performance decreases with sentence length and complexity. Among other things, GT translated "farewell" in both cases as an adjective (but as two synonyms) defining the subsequent noun, while T.eu translated it correctly but failed to match the words with the appropriate case suffixes. Also, it left the noun "turrets" untranslated. The students generally had no problems translating this sentence, which might suggest that for human translators, long sentences might be easier to translate than short ones, where we need to fill in the blanks.

5.3 Pronominal Anaphora Beyond the Sentence

The following cases demonstrate that both NMTs have problems with translation of pronouns that replace a referent in the previous sentence. This proves that they cannot consider the context beyond the sentence, which is true for MT in general. This communicative example shows a human translator's advantage over MT: while the latter focuses on one sentence at a time, the former, in principle, approaches each sentence with the knowledge and comprehension of the whole text.

[10] Orig: *I don't mean I'm putting it together; no, I'm taking it apart.*

GT: *Ne mislim, da ga sestavljam; ne, razločim ga*.

T.eu: *Ne mislim, da sem ga dal skupaj; ne, to bom vzel narazen*.

Ctrl*: S tem ne mislim, da jo sestavljam: ne, razstavljam jo.*

The pronoun "it" refers to "my own life story" from the previous sentence. The noun "story" ("zgodba") is feminine in Slovene, yet both NMTs missed this and used the masculine pronoun. Additionally, T.eu replaced the second person pronoun "it" with the demonstrative pronoun "this," which puts emphasis on the subject that does not exist in the original sentence. The translation of multiword verbs appearing in this sentence is analyzed in section 5.5.

[11] Orig: *Into the ground with you, my tender fur-brained cats and dogs, and horses and mice as well: I adored you, dozens of you, but what were your names?*

GT: *V zemljo s tabo, moje nežne mačke in psi s kožuhi, pa tudi konji in miši. Oboževal sem te, na desetine vas, ampak kako so bila vaša imena?*

Ctrl: *Pod zemljo z vami, moje ljube kosmatoglave mačke in psi, pa tudi konji in miši: oboževala sem vas, bilo vas je na ducate, ampak kako vam je že bilo ime?*

In this sentence, the pronoun "you" is part of an apostrophe in cataphoric use. Even within the sentence GT failed to offer the right pronoun: the first and the second "you" are incorrectly

translated as singular pronouns, while the last one is plural, probably owing to "dozens of," which the software recognized as a plural marker. The T.eu solution is even weaker and is therefore omitted here. The students have, of course, translated the pronouns correctly in both [10] and [11], but encountered problems with the phrase "dozens of you." All translated it literally ("na ducate vas"), which sounds awkward in Slovene and is thus stylistically marked. In the control, we opted for a verbal clause (BT: "there were dozens of you").

5.4 Present Participle

In the following examples the translation of the participle was identified as problematic for NMTs, owing to their inability to correctly identify the relation among parts of speech within or beyond the sentence.

[12] Orig: *What was it like to breathe so heavily, as if drugged, while rubbing up against strange leather coats in alleyways?*

GT: *Kako je bilo dihati tako močno, kot da bi se drogiral, medtem ko se v uličicah drgnil ob čudne usnjene plašče?*

Ctrl: *Kako je že bilo takrat, ko sem globoko dihala, kot bi bila omamljena, medtem ko sem se drgnila ob tuje usnjene plašče v stranskih ulicah?*

GT produced a meaningful translation of the first part of the sentence, while failing to do this in the part with the participle ("rubbing") – the system could not identify the referent to which it relates. Considering the ability of the English language to be ambiguous, combined with Atwood's careful wording of the question in sentence [12], this is not a surprise; it is, however, a serious translation challenge, since Slovene is an inflectional language, and the inflections frequently prevent ambiguity in the sense the latter can be implemented in English. While "rubbing" in GT is changed into a finite verb form, which is a common way to translate participles into Slovene (since they are less frequent than in English), the verb should be reflexive in this case ("drgniti se" instead of "drgniti"). T.eu's translation fails to meet the standards of coherence and meaningfulness and is therefore omitted here.

The problems the students encountered here were mostly stylistic in nature: six students translated the first part as "Kako je že bilo globoko/težko dihati …," which is stylistically awkward, since Slovene prefers subordinate clauses to infinitives in such cases. The other two students used a similar temporal clause as the control. The part "as if drugged" is also translated as a subordinate clause in the control version. Four students opted for the same solution, while the other four chose "kot na drogah" or "kot omamljena," which is closer to the original in structure but weaker in style.

In example [13], the participle connects the extended reporting clause to reported speech, and this proved a challenge to both software tools.

[13] Orig: *So that's what she looked like, we say, connecting the snapshot to the year of the torrid affair.*

GT: *Tako je izgledala, pravimo, da je posnetek povezoval z letom burne afere.*

T.eu: *Torej, to je tisto, kar je izgledala, smo rekli, povezuje posnetek v leto vroče afero.*

Ctrl*: Takšna je torej bila videti, rečemo in povežemo fotografijo z letom žgoče afere.*

Both machine translations are grammatically inaccurate, T.eu's product is even beneath the threshold of sensible syntax. GT's reported clause is acceptable, while T.eu wrongly put it in the past tense. Again, however, the software failed to figure out the relation between the clause containing reported speech and the reporting clause with the participle "connecting"; GT translated the latter as a subordinate clause (BT: "that he connected the snapshot with the …"), while T.eu translated it as a separate full clause with a missing subject (BT: "connects the snapshot with …"). Both tools obviously translated the sentence clause per clause and were unable to consider it as a unit. On the other hand, the students' solutions for this sentence are generally fine. As in the control, they all opted for turning the non-finite structure into a finite one (either a coordinated or a subordinated clause; both solutions are possible) and preserving the link to the previous clause. Two students, however, wrongly used the imperfect verb form "connect" ("povezovati") instead of the perfect one ("povezati").

5.5 Multiword Verbs

Multiword verbs are another category that proved to be more difficult for neural machine translation than for the students.

[14] Orig: *I'm working on my own life story.*

GT and T.eu: *Delam na svoji življenjski zgodbi.*

Ctrl: *Ukvarjam se z lastno življenjsko zgodbo.*

Both software tools produced semantically and grammatically correct translations of the multiword verb, but the formulation is not equivalent in terms of formality level. Surprisingly, all but one student provided the same translation of "to work on" as the MTs. While the meaning is not radically changed, the register is lowered in this solution. In the control, we therefore replaced "delati" with "ukvarjati se" ("deal with"), a solution that was also provided by one of the students. Additionally, we replaced the pronoun "svojo" ("my") with "lastno" ("own") for emphasis, which is closer to the original ("my own").

The pair of antithetic multiword verbs from the example [10] ("put together, take apart") was translated literally by T.eu: "put together*"* as "dati skupaj*"* and "take apart*"* as "vzeti narazen*,"* which is roughly correct in both cases but stylistically poor. GT found a better solution for "put together*"* ("sestavljati*"*), but the translation of "take apart" is semantically incorrect ("razločiti"). The students had no problems translating these two verbs.

5.6 Other Phraseological Units

Like multiword verbs above, idioms are "not predictable from the literal meaning of their parts" (Hladnik 2017, 25) and thus represent a similar obstacle for machine translation, as will be shown in the examples below.

[15] Orig: *Maybe we just want to be in charge, of the life, no matter who lived it.*
GT: *Mogoče bi radi samo vodili življenje, ne glede na to, kdo ga je živel.*
T.eu: *Mogoče bi samo rada bila glavna, življenja, ne glede na to, kdo je živel.*
Ctrl: *Morda preprosto želimo imeti nadzor nad življenjem, ne glede na to, kdo ga je živel.*

The GT version is grammatically accurate but contains a semantic shift. The idiom "to be in charge" can indeed be translated as "voditi" ("lead"), but not in this case, where it means "have control over," or in Slovene "imeti nadzor."[8] The T.eu's version ("biti glaven") is one of the possible translations of the idiom, yet not acceptable in this case. However, the T.eu's translation of the sentence as a whole is ungrammatical and meaningless. As for the students' translations, only one student chose the same solution as appears in the control version; the others provided different versions of "be in charge of," all of which are semantically correct but stylistically weak.

[16] Orig: *What was all the fuss about?*
GT: *Zakaj je bila vsa prepir?*
T.eu: *Kaj je bilo ves ta hrup?*
Crtl: *Čemú je bil ves ta cirkus?*

The situation is not very different for machine translation if the expression is colloquial, as is the case here. Not only did both MT engines experience problems finding the right meaning of "fuss" (GT translated it as "fight" or "argument," T.eu as "noise"), but the sentences are also ungrammatical. The students had no difficulties understanding this sentence but provided different translations of "fuss" (such as "pomp," "direndaj," "cirkus, "razburjanje"), all of which are semantically correct.

[17] Orig: *I'm coming unstuck from scrapbooks, from albums, from diaries and journals, from space, from time.*
GT*: Odhajam iz beležk, albumov, dnevnikov, dnevnikov, vesolja, časa.*
T.eu: *Prihajam odlijepio iz scrapbooks, od albumov, iz dnevnikov in revij, iz vesolja, od časa.*
Ctrl: *Osvobajam se spominskih knjig, albumov, dnevnikov in zapiskov, prostora, časa.*

Here both machine translations are semantically inaccurate (the one by T.eu is also ungrammatical), while the students understood correctly the phraseological unit "to come unstuck," although some of their solutions failed to meet the standards of stylistic appropriacy. Only two students provided an acceptable solution ("osvobajati se"; BT: "break free from"), which appears also in the control.

[8] The seemingly trivial idiom is often not easy to translate into Slovene, which proved the case when the same students translated Alice Munro's short story "Tricks" as a take-home assignment. The suggestions for the translation of the idiom in the original sentence – "He would not leave that brother in charge for very long." – varied from *odgovornega* (*responsible*), to *glavnega* (*in charge*) and "ne bi mu prepustil odgovornosti" (BT: he would not be left with the responsibility), which are semantically correct but stylistically marked in this context. Four students, however, chose the solution that appears in the published translation and seems the most appropriate, considering the context: "Brata ne bi pustil dolgo samega." (BT: He would not leave the brother alone for long).

5.7 Part of Speech Recognition

Recognizing the right part of speech proved to be problematic for MTs when this was not obvious from the suffix, i.e., when the form itself could fit more than one word class (and when syntax and/or context are the decisive factors).

[18] Orig: *No more choices for the people in them – pick this one, dump that one.*
GT: *Ni več izbire za ljudi, ki so v njih – izberi to, odloži tisto*.
T.eu: *Nič več izbire za ljudi v njih-pick ta, smetišče, da je eden.*
Ctrl: *Nič več izbire za ljudi na njih – vzemi to, zavrzi tisto.*

GT recognized that "dump" in [18] is a verb in imperative mode and translated it as "odloži," while T.eu identified it as a noun and translated it as "smetišče," which makes the translation nonsensical. Additionally, in the T.eu version the word "pick" is left untranslated, while "that one" is translated as "that it is one."

[19] Orig: *goodbye well-thumbed tears and scabby knees, and sadness worn at the edges*
GT: *[...] ter žalost, ki se je nosila na robovih*
T.eu: *[...] in žalosti nosili na robovih*
Ctrl: *[...] in na robovih oguljena žalost.*

In example [19], "worn" is an adjective, yet both MT engines translated it as the past tense of the verb "wear." Again, the GT translation is grammatically correct, while the T.eu one fails to make sense. The students had no problems with part of speech recognition.

5.8 Atwood's Neologisms and Personal Style

Atwood's linguistic creativity is, unsurprisingly, a considerable obstacle for human translators, let alone MTs (see, for example, Somacarrera 2013 on the challenges of translating Atwood into Spanish). Both tools used in this research failed in translating words coined by Atwood or used in her text in an unusual way, for instance, the adjective "well-thumbed tears," which could at least be classified as an epithet. While T.eu leaves "well-thumbed" untranslated, GT translates it as "dobro nabrekle solze" (BT: "well-swollen tears"), which changes the meaning of the adjective. Four students provided acceptable solutions, similar to that of the control ("obrabljene solze"), while four students provided semantically inaccurate translations. Another neologism can be found in example [20]:

[20] Orig: *The livers of the lives in question had their chances, most of which they blew.*
GT: *Jetrnice zadevnih življenj so imele svoje možnosti, med katerimi so večino raznesle.*
T.eu: *Jetra iz življenja so imeli svoje možnosti, večina jih je razneslo.*
Ctrl: *Tisti, ki so omenjena življenja živeli /.../*

In this context, "livers" is used in an original way: it is not the plural of "liver," an organ of the body, but rather means "people who live certain lives." T.eu opts for the organ ("jetra"), while GT translates it as "jetrnice" (plural of "jetrnica," a sausage stuffed with rice and liver),

which is – despite the polyptoton – a radical change of meaning. While the first part of GT's translation is at least grammatically correct ("jetrnice so imele svoje možnosti"), the one produced by T.eu is not: "Jetra … so imeli," instead of: "… so imela." Both software tools also failed to grasp the figurative meaning of the verb "to blow" in this sentence, which is "to fail"; T.eu translated it as "raznesti," meaning "to erupt" or "to explode," while GT used the verb "raznesti" in a rarer use, as in "raznesti možnosti" (BT: "to spread the possibilities"). The students provided the correct meaning of "livers" in Slovene; however, three of them used the literal translation "živeči," which is rarely used in Slovene in this sense. Slovene prefers subordinate clauses in such cases; that is why we opted for a relative clause in the control (BT: "those who lived the lives in question"). Five students also provided such a solution.

The ending of Atwood's "Life Stories" proved to be a major translation challenge, particularly because of its stylistic features. The sentence "I was born" is reduced by one word in each of the two subsequent steps, and what remains is a non-verbal clause, the personal pronoun "I," which is the shortest possible word in English, yet, paradoxically, the central and most crucial person in any life story – the life owner:

[21]	Orig:	*I was born.*	GT:	*Rodil sem se.*	T.eu:	*Rodil sem se.*	Ctrl:	*Jaz sem se rodila.*
		I was.		*Jaz sem bil.*		*bil sem.*		*Jaz sem bila.*
		I.		*JAZ.*		*I.*		*Jaz.*

Slovene allows several translation options for "I was born": "Jaz sem se rodila." (exposed pronoun, marked use, usually for emphasis; used by two students and the control version); "Rodila sem se." (stylistically the strongest option; used by one student and both NMTs, although the NMTs used the masculine form of the past participle); "Rojena sem bila." (passive form, stylistically marked; used by two students); "Jaz sem bila rojena" (exposed pronoun, passive form; used by two students); "Bila sem rojena" (passive form, stylistically the weakest solution; chosen by one student). Since Slovene as an inflectional language does not favour the exposed pronoun (the verb or past participle suffix reveals the grammatical person, number and gender), the inclination in neutral context would be preferable: "Rodila sem se. / Bila sem. / Jaz." However, this translation loses the aesthetically pleasing initial anaphora as well as the decreasing, possibly anticlimactic parallelism that on the textual level depicts the conclusion of one's life. Opting for the neutral translations without the exposed pronoun pushes the translator into an inevitable loss of one or more prominent stylistic features. As shown, the two translation tools were unable to approach these features as a unit; GT used a combination of the neutral version in the first sentence and the exposed pronoun version in the second, while T.eu used the neutral translation in both sentences but left the pronoun "I" untranslated. The two students who began the first sentence with "*Jaz* sem se rodila" were able to keep the anaphora in the second step and finish with the pronoun I: "*Jaz* sem bila. / *Jaz*." This is also the solution in the control version.

6 Concluding Remarks

The analysis of MTs' translations of Atwood's "Life Stories" has shown that their performance was satisfactory only in the case of short, non-idiomatic sentences with simple structure,

while their performance decreased with the length and complexity of the sentences. Atwood's personal style comprising the unconventional use of language (e.g., non-standard or elliptical syntax) and her neologisms proved to be a particularly insurmountable obstacle for machine translation; these were also a major challenge to the student translators. Overall, the NMTs manifested shortcomings previously identified in studies of literary MT such as accuracy and robustness (e.g., dealing with rare words like "snip" and "turret" by failing to translate them; switching between masculine and feminine gender; co-reference changes; mistranslation of phrasal verbs and idioms, disambiguation, etc.), while the problems identified in the student translations were mostly not grammatical or semantic but stylistic in nature. GT, however, performed better than T.eu in producing meaningful, coherent sentences.

NMT systems will undoubtedly continue to improve, owing to their ability to learn. However, the leading principle in NMT development, in the sense of "teaching" it to choose the more appropriate (i.e., the more frequently or widely used) lexical item when there are several, is intrinsically in conflict with the stylistic aspects of literature, where the more frequent or widely used lexical choices are not favoured, or where the most precious aspects of a text are not at the lexical level.

The extent to which NMT systems can be useful in translating literature is highly dependent on the complexity of the literary work. Atwood's unique personal style, which needs to be reproduced in translation, is particularly salient in her shorter works (mini fiction, prose poetry). It depends on avoiding the conventional use of language and sometimes on experimentation, which is different from books to which the readers are attracted either by the plot or by a writing favouring simple structures (e.g., Hemingway, J. K. Rowling). We can thus expect that despite further improvements in output quality, translating authors such as Atwood will continue to present a major challenge for machine translation; the same is true for inexperienced human translators, such as students.

The existing studies of NMT for the English-to-Slovene combination are scarce and merely quantitative. This study allows the reader to gain insight into individual cases and therefore contributes substantially to understanding the nature of machine translated output, rather than merely demonstrating the success rate of the machine translation. By providing a detailed translation analysis of the selected work by Atwood, we bring attention to the difficulty of literary translation in cases of stylistically challenging prose, and the bridging of language gaps between Atwood's text(s) and the Slovene reader(s).

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Nikola Tutek
University of Rijeka, Croatia

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Atwood in Numbers: A Numerical Approach Comparing the Illustrations in *Bones and Murder* and *The Tent*

ABSTRACT

This paper offers analyses of the semantic interrelations between illustrations and written text in short stories from two flash fiction collections by Margaret Atwood: *Bones and Murder* (1994) and *The Tent* (2006). The analyses are based on the technical, generic, and thematic features of the illustrations, on the influences traceable in both illustrations and texts, and on the set of defined multimodal interrelations. The results of the analyses are expressed numerically and comparatively.

Keywords: flash fiction; Margaret Atwood; illustrations; multimodality

Atwood v številkah: Numerični pristop k primerjavi ilustracij v *Bones and Murder* in *The Tent*

POVZETEK

Prispevek analizira semantične povezave med ilustracijami in pisanim besedilom v kratkih zgodbah iz dveh zbirk flash fikcije avtorice Margaret Atwood: *Bones and Murder* (1994) in *The Tent* (2006). Analize temeljijo na tehničnih, splošnih in tematskih značilnostih ilustracij, na vplivih, ki jih je mogoče zaznati tako pri ilustracijah kot tudi besedilih, in na vrsti definiranih multimodalnih medpovezav. Rezultati teh analiz so prikazani numerično in primerjalno.

Ključne besede: flash fikcija; Margaret Atwood; ilustracije; multimodalnost

1 Introduction

The two major flash fiction[1] collections by Margaret Atwood, *Bones and Murder* (1994)[2] and *The Tent* (2006), were published within a 12-to 23-year interval. However, they share a substantial number of similarities that can be roughly categorized into three main groups: 1. Generic determination. Both are multimodal collections of short stories, some of which contain illustrations, and both collections also contain generically hybridized (poetry) and shape texts.[3] 2. Both collections share stylistic similarities: short, brisk sentences are prevalent, a seemingly simple style provides a world of hidden meanings and connotations, and most of the stories, even paragraphs within stories, are semantically and stylistically framed by skilful and often humorous/ironic punchlines. 3. The collections are thematically closely related. The stories in both collections deal primarily with the lives of female characters, their relations with other people and, even more importantly, with themselves; furthermore, the stories in both collections discuss the themes of existence, consciousness and artistic creation (artistic creation being the pivotal theme in *The Tent*). The range and importance of the similarities between these two collections point towards the conclusion that *The Tent* could easily be regarded as a logical sequel to the earlier collection.

Atwood provided her own illustrations, and the drawings in both collections share an abundance of features that can be categorized as follows:

1. Technique; the illustrations in both collections are freehand, black ink drawings;

2. Positioning; the illustrations are inserted into texts without framing, occupying a whole printed page; in both collections, only a small number of the stories are illustrated;

3. Presentation; both collections feature an introductory illustration that in a way anticipates the textual and the visual content of each collection;

4. Authorship; all illustrations in both collections are created by Margaret Atwood;

5. Style and artistic influences; the illustrations in both collections share a remarkable number of stylistic features and reveal a set of mutual artistic influences, ranging from ancient and classical art to the art of Secession;

6. Content; the illustrations in both collections depict similar motifs, to mention only the three most striking shared features: female characters, faces in profile, human bodies hybridized with those of animals and plants;

7. Visual and verbal interrelations; in both collections illustrations and texts form similar semantic bonds, which then leads to production of new layers of meaning which I call *the third entity of meaning*.[4] This term is meant to define the meanings

[1] Though this term became popular after Margaret Atwood published *Bones and Murder*, it is fitting for her stories. See also Gadpaille (2018) on the classification of Atwood's short pieces as slipstream fiction.

[2] Some of the stories in *Bones and Murders* were first published in the collection *Murder in the Dark* in 1983; also, in some editions, the title is *Good Bones and Simple Murder*. For the sake of simplicity, this article will refer to *Good Bones*.

[3] For the most part, again for the sake of simplicity, I use "texts" to refer to the written text, and "illustrations" to refer to Atwood's drawings.

[4] As stated in my doctoral dissertation, "Visual and Verbal Interrelations in Canadian Short Fiction" (2018, 3).

> and potential interpretations of verbal and visual elements that are constructed by multimodal unity, rather than being dependent on the verbal or visual element alone.

Although the similarities between texts, illustrations, and their interrelations in both collections are numerous, there are important differences between the literary usage of the verbal and the visual in *Bones and Murder* and *The Tent*. These differences may point to a technical and thematic shift by Atwood that is essential for understanding these collections of flash fiction. In this paper I focus on the visual content in the collections by analysing, categorizing, and explaining differences between illustrations, their function in texts and multimodal interrelations between illustrations and texts.

2 Theory and Methodology

Little has been written about the interrelations between the verbal and visual in multimodal short fiction, especially in Canadian texts. In order to establish theoretical grounds for research in multimodal short prose, one must often rely on similar works written on multimodal novels. Hallet states:

> […] visual elements are not actually illustrations in the traditional sense, but part of the narrative world produced by the narrator and directly woven into the narrative discourse by the device of drawing upon them continuously in ekphrastic passages. (Hallet 2009, 133)

Here Hallet notes one essential feature of texts and illustrations in multimodal literature: when placed in multimodal interrelations, texts and illustrations redefine each other and transform their meanings. The result is a redistribution of meaning between and throughout the different modes. In that way, the visual becomes an important carrier of narrative meaning, while the verbal becomes semantically inseparable from the visual. In Hallet's functions of multimodality, the visual elements in such multimodal texts take an active role in constructing plots, creating characters and characters' world-making, in framing narration, in narrative bridging,[5] and in constructing 'possible worlds,' that is in the creation of derivative meanings based on the amalgam of meanings provided by both the verbal and the visual texts. Atwood's flash fiction constitutes a postmodern literature where clues provided to the reader for the understanding of the texts are scarce, and the semantics of each text is stretched almost to the point of breaking. There is also some semantic detachment between Atwood's illustrations and the verbal texts (a feature that Hallet could hardly note in a lengthy genre like a traditional novel), which leads to her text showing very few or no ekphrastic elements.

What Hallet describes as 'possible worlds' is of central importance for my research in multimodal short prose:

> It is neither the written verbal mode nor any of the other modes on its own that constitutes the story or builds the storyworld. Nor is it simply a matter of 'dialogue' between a verbal text and visual images. Rather, it is the complex interplay between

[5] These are instances when authors of texts deliberately give up textual narration and apply the persuasive power of illustrations to tell a part of the story instead of texts.

> different semiotic modes, generic forms, and ways of conceiving and making sense of the world that eventually constitutes novelistic narration. (Hallet 2009, 148)

Here Hallet notes another essential feature of texts and illustrations in multimodal literature: in a complex process of semantic transformations, different modes in multimodal literature inevitably produce new meanings and connotations which were not previously offered independently by either mode. However, this process goes beyond the production of novelistic (literary) narration, characters and settings; it modifies the semiotic basis of the verbal and the textual, and it provides almost endless possibilities for interpretation. Multimodal short prose modifies the meaning of the verbal and visual to the point where their original meanings becomes practically indistinguishable, and the bulk of interpretation relies on the third meaning, which is produced by the interrelation of the two modes but is not independently conveyed by either.[6] The term 'possible worlds' only partly conveys that complexity. For that reason, I propose the term the *third entity of meaning*. This term is useful in analyses when both the texts and illustrations are produced by the same author, which is the case in these two Atwood collections.

It is now necessary to define the types and features of those semantic interrelations in multimodal short prose which allow the production of the third entity of meaning. During my doctoral research, I devised the following typology of multimodal interrelations in illustrated short prose:

> 1. Complementation: meanings of a text and meanings (and devices expressing meanings) of illustrations complement each other in various aspects of narration (ideas, style/genre/form);
>
> 2. Reflection: meanings of a text and meanings (and devices expressing meanings) of illustrations reflect certain patterns or individual elements of narration (ideas, style/genre/form) across the border of the two media;
>
> 3. Focusing: meanings of a text and meanings (and devices expressing meanings) of illustrations focus on one or several patterns of narration, ideas, style/genre/form which they share across the borders of the two media;
>
> 4. Bridging: meanings of a text provide the basis for the understanding of certain features of an illustration which the illustration does not present, and, vice versa, meanings of illustrations bridge meanings indicated by but not directly present in the text;
>
> 5. Cohesion: an idea proposed by a visual multimodal element provides textual unity to the pertinent verbal text; this relation usually goes only one way: a picture does not necessarily need this type of unity because of what Sillars calls "the immediate experiential force of the illustration" (2004, 76–77);
>
> 6. Contrast: opposition/contrast between verbal and visual is formal or epochal, or the opposition/contrast is expressed through the verbal and visual narratives; this is often used to produce irony, and reinforce epiphany in short multimodal prose;

[6] In that sense, I would compare the semantic transformations in non-multimodal prose to creating a new sort of meaning using already related types of meaning; I compare the semantic transformations in multimodal prose to genetic modification of meaning, which might include hybridization with the elements of unrelated breeds of meaning but also with elements of different species of meaning.

7. Exclusion: the verbal and the visual acknowledge mutual existence by exclusion, producing absence where we would expect presence as the only source of multimodality.

Most texts in Atwood's illustrated flash fiction feature several types of multimodal interrelations. Here I will consider only the two most prominent multimodal interrelations evident in each text/illustration.

In considering Atwood's short prose, I will focus mostly on the illustrations, i.e. on the semantic, formal, and stylistic differences between illustrations in *Bones and Murder* and *The Tent*.

3 Illustrations in *Bones and Murder* and *The Tent*: A Comparison

Atwood's collection *Bones and Murder* consists of thirty-five short stories, ten of which are illustrated by Atwood. The formation of this collection of flash fiction took 11 years. Atwood first published *Murder in the Dark* in 1983, and some of the stories from that collection appeared in the 1992 collection *Good Bones*. Atwood, perhaps, saw this collection as an ongoing project (which extends to and includes the creation of *The Tent*); hence, *Good Bones* was republished in 1994 as *Good Bones and Simple Murders* (or just as *Bones and Murder*), a collection combining the stories from the 1983 and 1992 collections.

Bones and Murder features an introductory illustration, an image of a (detective) hat, which openly but deceitfully anticipates the thematic world of the collection – deceitfully, because no real crime is depicted in the stories (the only *crime* suggested being writing itself). The texts are semantic puzzles, and it is up to the reader to make sense of them. Consequently, the reader becomes the detective, and the detective hat is offered to him/her as guidance and encouragement in the tricky world of Atwood's multimodal prose.

The positioning of illustrations follows no discernible pattern; illustrated stories are randomly distributed throughout the collection. Within the texts, illustrations occupy one whole printing page with no visual framing to the drawings. All the illustrations are freehand drawings done in black ink.

The illustrations in *Bones and Murder* offer a relatively wide thematic range. They feature mostly female characters, animals, plants, and landscape, but placed in a variety of situations and interactions. There are two features in the depiction of human characters which stand out: all faces are drawn in profile, and human bodies and features are often hybridized with those of animals and plants. Special attention should be given to the analyses of Atwood's visual implementation of the letters of the alphabet, clothing, and mythology in her illustrations. It is exactly her usage of the letters of the alphabet which later became the prominent technique and a salient element in the crucial illustrations for *The Tent*.

Various artistic influences can be detected in Atwood's illustrations for *Bones and Murder*. Firstly, her drawing style shows clear features of children's art, which is not a surprise, considering her engagement in children's literature (such as her 1990 *For the Birds*, illustrated

by Shelly Tanaka, and her 1995 *Princess Prunella and the Purple Peanut*). The childlike playfulness of her illustrations, when adjusted for adult readers, unavoidably reflects some features of naïve art. The most prominent artistic influence in Atwood's illustrations (and in her intertextual fiction which can be classified as *writing back*) is the influence of classical antiquity. Her depictions of profiles with enlarged, almond-shaped eyes, unmistakably point towards Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Ancient Greek, and Persian Art. The hairstyles of Atwood's characters resemble those in Ancient Greek and Roman art. This is confirmed with her drawings of clothing. Atwood's illustrations are also rich in elements of classical mythology, symbolism (i.e. the use of ouroboros images), and beliefs. For 20th-century influences, there is a strong streak of Secession in Atwood's illustrations, and sparse elements of popular culture (i.e. gestalt figures[7]).

Besides these artistic influences, the illustrations to *Bones and Murder* show elements of non-aesthetic, that is, scientific illustration. The most prominent branches of science present in Atwood's illustrations in the collection are medicine and zoology.

In the following sections I will analyse each illustration in the collection based on the aforementioned elements and features.

The introductory image of the hat functions as the illustration to the first story in the collection, "Murder in the Dark":

> You can say: the murderer is the writer, the detective is the reader, the victim is the book. Or perhaps, the murderer is the writer, the detective is the critic, and the victim is the reader. In that case the book would be the total mise en scène, including the lamp that was accidentally tipped over and broken. But really it's more fun just to play the game. (Atwood 1995, 3)

Here Atwood ironically writes about the process of creation, consummation, and even appreciation of the literary work. As is common in Atwood's work, roles can change. They can be bestowed upon anyone involved; metaphorically speaking, anyone can become a detective, a killer or a victim. The ironic comment is contained in Atwood's advice not to think too much and to just play the game. The illustration of the hat embodies the dominant multimodal interrelations of complementation and focusing with "Murder in the Dark." It also provides cohesion to the other texts in the collection. An introductory image is featured not only in *Bones and Murders*, but also in *The Tent*.

The next illustration in the collection can be found in the story "The Little Red Hen Tells All." The illustration features a hybridized body of a hen with a female face, a round eye and a breast sitting on a large egg, much bigger than the hen itself. The overall impression of the illustration strongly points towards naïve art. In the yolk of the egg there are letters of the alphabet. There is a bold reference to writing and literary creation in both the illustration and

[7] Gestalt images, also known as figure-ground drawings, are images that depict repeated or reflected forms. They are often positioned in such a way as to provide a recognizable shape for their background. Form and background are often differentiated and opposed by white and black colouring. Gestalt images are an ancient method of illustration, but Margaret Atwood uses that method in a contemporary manner.

the verbal text. The illustration of the hen mainly embodies the multimodal interrelations of complementation and reflection with the texts that it illustrates.

Significantly, the letters of the alphabet in the hen illustration are trapped within the yolk of the egg, recalling the way letters appear in the shape of the tent in the introductory illustration to *The Tent*. All this reaffirms my argument that *The Te*nt is a logical and thematically/technically more focused sequel to *Bones and Murder*.

The next illustration in *Bones and Murder* appears in "Women's Novels." The illustration features a female character in a background landscape. The female body is hybridized, as her body and arms seem to be swirls of wind. Her body is also a remnant of a snake's body, but simultaneously of octopuses and spiders (both mentioned in the text in the description of the female character). Her face is in profile with an Atwoodian almond eye. As in the hen illustration, the female figure in this illustration features a salient human breast. In the background there is a black Moon (a symbol of both lunacy and women), and a hill with three black silhouettes of trees on the top. The silhouettes of the trees bear a strong resemblance to the *spiky brushes* used in the tails of the fox demons that guard the letters of the alphabet in the illustrations to *The Tent*. The story deals with the relations of women and men, their points of view, habits and decisions, and the illustration focuses only on the female character. However, what is expressed by the illustration shows that the dominant multimodal interrelations are those of complementation and reflection, while the interrelation of focusing would be the next most prominent feature.

The illustration to the story "Stump Hunting" stands out in comparison to others because it depicts a male character in an everyday situation. The face is shown in profile, and the character, wearing a baseball cap, is sitting in a boat on a lake, fishing. Behind him is a floating stump, above him two clouds. An important feature of this illustration is duality; the realistic world of the fishing man is divided with a line, which is also the surface of the water, from a surreal underwater world, which reveals that the stump is an ominous looking monster, which will most likely threaten either the fisherman or the fish under his boat. A realistic looking fish is preparing to take the bait, which adds to the irony. Both the story and the illustration deal with important issues of human existence: the need for domination, the duality of perception, and the ambiguity of reality. The story and the illustration do not follow each other literally, as they tell the story in a significantly different way, contrasting each other to emphasize the ironic effect. "Stump Hunting" thus contains two opposed but complementary jokes told in two different modes. The verbal and the visual in this story operate mostly through the multimodal interrelations of complementation and contrast.

Together with the illustration for "Women's Novels," the illustration accompanying the story "Let Us Now Praise Stupid Women" became the centrepiece of the collection, the iconic images of *Bones and Murder*. Indeed, there is a semantic and formal connection between these images. The illustration in "Let Us Now Praise Stupid Women" features a naked female figure with her face and an almond-shaped eye shown in profile. Again, the body is hybridized; the entire lower body, from the hips down, is a serpent. Numerous serpents also form the female character's hair, with clear reference to the myth of Medusa. In her right hand, the woman holds an apple, which is possibly a reference to the biblical story of Eve, and in her left hand

a letter *a*, the first letter of the alphabet, another reference to writing. The Medusa and Eve references point towards the title of the story. The fact that the word *paper* in the story can be connected with the image of *living in a paper tent or house* in *The Tent*, and that the letter *A* is featured both in this illustration and in "Impenetrable Forest" in *The Tent* suggests the direct semantic relation between the two collections of flash fiction. The verbal text and the illustration in "Let Us Now Praise Stupid Women" do not formally follow each other; rather, they reflect the main shared ideas. The second-most important multimodal interrelation between the text and the illustration is focusing, namely, on two main points of narration: the letter *a* (symbolizing writing, creation) and the apple (symbolizing the sin of creativity).

"The Female Body" features an ouroboros-like image of a large pumpkin (which is a reference to folk/naïve art) that contains a naked female body, which again features prominent breasts, with a face in profile, an almond-shaped eye, and distinctive hair. The woman's belly is shown opened in the manner of medical atlases, revealing the influence of medical illustration. The influence of science is traceable in the text as well, where a set of reflections on nature and the use of the female body is rendered in an ironic, quasi-scientific style. The extended position of her hands is similar to the illustration for "Let Us Now Praise Stupid Women" and echoes depictions of dance in classical antiquity. In the belly of the woman, we can see the image repeated: it is the same woman, just without a pumpkin. The belly of the smaller woman is also open for us to see, and it features a tiny pumpkin (which might suggest both continuation – ouroboros, or the ending of the cycle). This image suggests that the woman is pregnant with herself, a concept that features symbolically in the verbal text. Taking into consideration the importance of the fairy-tale pumpkin in the semantics and wording of the story, and that only the illustration focuses on the image of the pumpkin, I conclude that the predominant multimodal interrelations between the illustration and the text are cohesion and focusing.

Hybridised female figures appear again in the illustration to "Cold-Blooded". There are four female faces, only one en-face, the others in profile, with the usual almond-shaped eyes. The en-face figure making eye-contact with the observer is reminiscent of Medusa. Only the heads are human; their bodies belong to sea creatures. The sea floor is also featured, with the foot of the mollusc visible to the observer. The image shows a strong influence from illustrations in scientific books from the field of zoology. The hybridization of humans and animals in a quasi-scientific image achieves an ironic effect, and irony is the dominant feature of this story as well. However, the plot has little to do with the motifs in the illustration. The semantics of the illustration contrast with the verbal narrative and reflects only certain of its ideas. The dominant multimodal interrelations between the illustration and the text in this case are contrast and reflection.

As in other short pieces, "Alien Territory" offers no plot. It is, rather, a set of observations on the depersonalization of the human body. The illustration features a circle with strong sexual connotations (possibly one of the reproductive organs, which is then semantically connected to the pumpkin in "The Female Body"). Within the circle are two faces in profile, created as gestalt figures. The faces feature almond-shaped eyes and could be a female and a male kissing. The story mentions Bluebeard (an allusion not observable in the illustration), and

Freud's primal scene theory, which has, in a bold interpretation, influenced the illustration. The dominant multimodal interrelations between illustration and verbal text in this short story are reflection and cohesion.

"An Angel" contains an illustration extending the concept in the little red hen illustration: a female person sitting on an oval shape. In this case, the woman is adorned with angel wings and her face is hidden by a black circle. Her oval seat can be seen as either an egg, a female breast or an eye. Within the oval is the blurred figure of a skull. Beneath the oval there are flames similar to those in *The Tent*. The verbal text and the illustration show several similar semantic features and reflected meanings; hence, they mainly embody the multimodal interrelations of complementation and reflection.

"Death Scenes" stands out from other images in *Good Bones* because it features only a black flowering plant, without human characters. The whole body of the plant is shown, from the flower to the root (a possible trace of the influence of scientific illustration). The texture of the flower seems scaly, while the texture of the leaves is like that of flesh, suggestive of hybridisation. The root of the flower, in the form of a bulb, continues Atwood's preoccupation with the symbolism of the womb, egg, birth, and motherhood. Similar to "Let Us Now Praise Stupid Women," the verbal text and illustration in "Death Scenes" reflect shared ideas and meanings, but the illustration clearly focuses on the symbolism of one image from the text, in this case, the black flower. The words of this story and the illustration reflect the dominant multimodal interrelations of reflection and focusing.

The last story, "Good Bones," features a gestalt image of landscape – a night scene of islands and the sea. Both islands and the sky are human faces in profile; the white and the black moons are closed eyes. Parts of human bodies are incorporated into the inanimate landscape elements. The illustration and the verbal text do not coincide in form and content at all. The interrelations between the two modes can be analysed mostly through the absence of formal connections and through important ideas shown independently by each mode. The verbal text of this story and the illustration constitute the only example of the dominant multimodal interrelations being exclusion and reflection in this collection of flash fiction.

The following table summarizes multiple features of all 11 illustrations in the collection *Bones and Murder*:

Table 1. Features of illustrations in *Bones and Murder*.

Feature	**Occurrence x/11, (%)**
female figure(s)	8/11, 72%
profiles	8/11, 72%
almond eyes	5/11, 45%
landscape	3/11, 27%
hybridization	10/11, 91%
alphabet	2/11, 18%
children's art	3/11, 27%
classical antiquity	3/11, 27%

Secession	2/11, 18%
mythology	4/11, 36%
popular culture	3/11, 27%
non-artistic	2/11, 18%
multimodal interrelations	Primary interrelations : complementation 5/11, 45% reflection 3/11, 27% cohesion 1/11, 9% contrast 1/11, 9% exclusion 1/11, 9% Secondary interrelations: reflection 5/11, 45% focusing 4/11, 36% cohesion 1/11, 9% contrast 1/11, 9%

Turning to the second collection of flash fiction, we examine *The Tent* (2006), which contains 35 short stories divided into three sections. The illustrations are positioned symmetrically, two illustrations in each chapter. Moreover, *The Tent* contains an introductory image, making a total of 7 freehand illustrations in black ink, unframed and occupying one printing page. The genre of both verbal texts and illustrations in *Bones and Murder* and *The Tent* is similar: short stories and flash fiction (except for the two poems in *The Tent*). However, in *The Tent* Atwood turned more prominently towards classical art and mythology. The main themes of *The Tent* are writing/creation and the creator (along with existentialism, feminism and environmentalism, all of which are present in *Bones and Murder* as well), making the collection more self-referential but also slightly more thematically limited, or more focused than *Bones and Murder*. As a result, illustrations in *The Tent* seem to interact with their verbal texts in a slightly different manner.

The illustrations in *The Tent* feature mostly female characters with faces in profile. Atwood continues drawing almond-shaped eyes and hybridized bodies but in a slightly different way than in *Bones and Murder*. In the illustrations for *The Tent*, Atwood steps further away from naïve art and builds her images decisively on the influences of classical antiquity. Although the short stories in *The Tent* are replete with references to classical and biblical mythology, the illustrations never point directly to any of the mythical creatures or situations. Furthermore, the influence of Secession seems to be more prominent in *The Tent*, while the illustrations of Salome and the flagellant show visual elements of Victorian-era (or earlier) clothing, and medieval practices, respectively. One interesting feature of the illustrations in *The Tent* is the increased importance of clothing. The clothes are more detailed, more salient. They convey more symbolism that refers to the verbal text. Furthermore, the clothes do not disclose nudity, hence eliminating the elements of sexuality so prominent in *Bones and Murder*.

While the image of the hat in *Bones and Murder* is semantically inscrutable, ambiguous, and deceptive, the primary tent graphic is far clearer in its function and intention. The introductory illustration serves as a manifesto of the collection and prepares the reader for

understanding the coming texts. Moreover, on the cover of the 2007 paperback edition, this graphic appears in red and black. Given that red and black are typical of Secession design, and given that the patterns in "Voice" and "Eating the Birds" also show Secession influence, this addition of colour constitutes a significant extension of meaning.

The tent illustration features two black demons with blank eyes and tails resembling flames (or trees). Their bodies look like hybridized foxes and rats. They are standing on a tent-shaped pile of letters of the alphabet (or pyramid shaped; the first part of the Greek word pyramid is *pyre*, meaning *fire*, and that can be connected to the demons' flame-like tails; fire is usually a symbol of enlightenment, illumination, primal energy, the Creative Seed, and Divine Principle). Significantly, some letters in the pile form entire words. These legible words are *eat*, *food*, *blow*, *said*, *zero*, *upon*, *once*, *did*, *book*, *lived*, *that*, *bad*, *ther*e, *wa*s, *blood*, *wilderness*, *killed*, *mind*, and *time*. On closer inspection, we can group the words to form phrases and sentences, most notably "Once upon a time there was a…." The fact that the graphic tent includes words such as *bad*, *blood*, and *killed* is a direct thematic reference back to *Bones and Murder*. The demons seem to be choosing letters and words from the pile and gorging on them. In that way *The Tent* evokes Atwood's themes of eating,[8] more precisely, devouring, and the migration of life energy from the victim to the one who consumes the victim, which is another semantic link between the two collections of flash fiction. Over the tent and the demons is a black sun surrounded by three clouds (both the sun and clouds are cartoonish and show the influence of children's art). The most persuasive conclusion is that this shape is a paper tent, one comprising pages of books with letters printed on them. The illusory protection from the wilderness of reality that the tent offers is the only protection that a writer or reader can hope for. This can be concluded from the following lines in "The Tent":

> You are in the tent. It's vast and cold outside, very vast, very cold. It's a howling wilderness […]. Many things are howling out there, in the howling wilderness. Many people are howling. (Atwood 2006, 143)
>
> The trouble is, your tent is made of paper […] You know you must write on the walls, on the paper walls, on the inside of your tent. (Atwood 2006, 144)

The tent illustration embodies the multimodal interrelations of complementation and cohesion with the story "The Tent" and with the other texts in the collection. In contrast to the illustration of the hat in *Bones and Murder*, focusing is not the dominant feature because the tent is a symbolic representation of a theme approached differently by all the stories in the collection.

"Impenetrable Forest," the first illustrated story, features an illustration that is emblematic of the collection *The Tent* and is in many ways semantically and formally related to the illustration in "Let Us Now Praise Stupid Women" in *Bones and Murder*. The illustration features a female figure with her face in profile. Below the waist, her body forms the letter *A*, which is an example of hybridization of the human body with the inanimate. The texture of the letter A is reminiscent of tissue cells or scales. She is wearing a corset, and there is a

[8] Atwood readers will think first of her debut novel *The Edible Woman* (1969).

triple ring in the shape of a letter O over her head, which recalls a saint's halo. Her hairstyle and clothing indicate a modern young woman. In her right hand she holds a large number 1, which seems to radiate light from its top (in the story mentioned as the "light bulb"). The light is depicted by the letters Y, O, I, N, Z, and at the centre of the light is the now-familiar round shape. The halo in the shape of an O and the stick in the shape of 1 connote holiness and magic, both being Atwoodian leitmotifs in relation to women. Compared to *Bones and Murder*, an interesting shift is observable in the illustrations for *The Tent* in the depiction of female characters: breasts are no longer a salient motif in the illustrations, and the almond-shaped eyes are larger and much more pronounced. This female figure stands on a slope covered with sparse vegetation hybridized with the letters of the alphabet (in the story described as the "forest"). The letters on the left read YT, W, B, and O (possibly forming the words *two by*), and on the right, we can see P, E, N, (forming the word *pen*; read as the phrase: *two by pen*, or *two by a pen*, if we consider the female figure's legs). Although many of the verbal and visual elements are complementary, the bulk of meaning is concentrated in the opposition between the meanings and allusions conveyed by the graphic and the words. This coincides with the narrative features of the story, which provides the juxtaposed (and opposed) realities of two people. The verbal text and the illustration thus fulfil the dominant multimodal interrelations of complementation and contrast.

Another female figure introduces the story "Voice," where the whole body and face are shown in profile. The shape of her hair coincides with the curly linear shapes emanating from her open mouth, which represent her voice. Above the representation of her voice, there is a small black heart (reminiscent of the shape of Salome's head in the story "Salome Was a Dancer"). It might be argued that both the hair and the curly voice shapes are subtly hybridized with the shapes of plants or the circulation of wind. The shape of her hair is reminiscent of the hair in the illustration for "The Female Body," and the movement of the wind reminds us of the illustration for "Women's Novels" in *Bones and Murder*. The woman's eyes are large and almond shaped, which, together with the shape of her skirt and its pattern, strongly suggests the influence of classical antiquity. The woman is walking up the stairs, which implies movement and effort. The story and its illustration closely follow and reaffirm each other in content and form, thus embodying the dominant multimodal interrelations of complementation and reflection.

"Salome Was a Dancer" also features an illustration of a female character, presumably of Salome. This is the only character in *The Tent* visually presented en-face. With her remarkably realistic face, Salome makes eye contact with the observer/reader. She has long hair that forms the shape of a heart around her face, and there is a plant growing from the top of her head, being an example of hybridization. Salome wears a black gown, shown in detail, similar to 19th-century women's formal dress. Her left hand is lowered next to her body, but in her right hand Salome holds an offering: a tray with her own severed head. The head on the tray is nearly identical to the other head, and the tray resembles the O-shapes used in Atwood's previous illustrations. Leaves, flowers, and stars from the plant are dripping from the tray. There is an interesting duality here; the figure's head and the plant might be symbolic representations of thoughts and emotions, while for the severed head, the plant leaves symbolize blood and death. Furthermore, this illustration is semantically related to

the motif of *offering* in the illustrations from *Bones and Murder*: "Let Us Now Praise Stupid Women" and to "The Female Body." Offering (or opening up) could be regarded as the basis of every artistic creation. "Salome was a Dancer" and its illustration reflect each other semantically, but a more important aspect is their interrelation of contrast. The contrast is most evident in the triangular semantic relation between Salome the biblical myth, Salome from a Canadian town in the verbal text, and Salome in the illustration. The story and its illustration closely follow and reaffirm each other in content and form. Hence, they fulfil the dominant multimodal interrelations of contrast and reflection.

The verbal texts can be poetry, as in the case of "The Animals Reject Their Names and Things Return to Their Origins." The illustration features a kneeling, gender-neutral figure of a flagellant in a hooded, one-piece overall and with a whip in one hand. The whip is partially but clearly forming the hybridized silhouette of a bear. Above, there is a sun (or a moon) with an eye inscribed within it. The figure is depicted in profile, with the familiar almond-shaped eye. The narrator in the poem is a bear, a symbol of nature, which rejects humanity in general, including humanity's impact and dominance. This highly ironic and bluntly environmental text mentions many elements from the illustration, but the dominant feature of the illustration is the contorted, torturous nature of human existence, expressed through the ironic idea of a person whipping him/herself with nature. In that sense, the poem and the illustration stand in the dominant multimodal interrelations of focusing and reflection.

The next illustrated text, "Eating the Birds," features two kneeling female figures depicted in profile. They face each other with open mouths. Both have almond-shaped eyes and clothing reminiscent of ancient cultures. Their arms, one partially covered with a scaly pattern, and the other with plant designs, are lowered next to their bodies in a position that is unusually passive for a situation in which the characters are in tense interaction. They are kneeling on a surface covered with ellipsoid forms, some blank, others with solid fill. The most striking feature of this illustration is that each character has a bird on the top of her head. The birds resemble the hen in *Bones and Murder*, with a possible influence of folk/naïve art. They have round eyes and open beaks, suggesting that they too are in interaction. One bird has a dark patch on her chest (alluding to emotion), and the other around her legs (alluding to passion). The illustration suggests complex interrelations between the birds and the women, where birds seem to have the upper hand, while the title of the story suggests that the birds will become prey. The illustration and verbal text of "Eating the Birds" reflect each other's meanings and form, which is reaffirmed by focusing on the bird motif. However, the illustration brings a plethora of new meanings to the text and provides a supplement to the narration which is not apparently verbalized. Hence, the text and the illustration mainly fulfil the multimodal interrelations of reflection and bridging.

The last illustrated story in the collection, "Nightingale," features highly hybridized depictions of two women with bird heads. They are both depicted in profile with almond-shaped eyes. The figure on the left is unnaturally attached to a stylized tree high above the ground, adding some irony to the notion of her being a bird. The figure on the right stands on the ground, facing the other figure, and their open beaks imply communication. The two female figures are very similar; they have comparable body shape, hair, body position, and gowns. The

striking differences are the fact that the figure on the tree is considerably smaller and is wearing a white gown, while the larger figure on the ground wears a black gown. This duality implies that both figures represent the same person, and that the two figures are asymmetrical gestalt figures. Above the black figure there is a black moon, adding to the duality of the image. The interrelations between verbal and visual in "Nightingale" are similar to those in "Salome was a Dancer"; although the story offers an interaction between two mythical sisters, the bulk of the shared meaning is generated by the contrast between the mythological verbal narration and an illustration that appears to make minimal reference to the myth. Simultaneously, the meanings expressed by the story and the illustration closely follow and reaffirm each other in content and form. The verbal and visual in this example express the dominant multimodal interrelations of contrast and reflection.

The following table summarizes multiple features of all 7 illustrations in *The Tent*.

Table 2. Features of illustrations in *The Tent*.

Feature	**Occurrence x/7, (%)**
female figure(s)	5/7, 71%
profiles	6/7, 85%
almond eyes	7/7, 100%
landscape	3/7, 43%
hybridization	7/7, 100%
alphabet	2/7, 28%
children's art	1/7, 14%
classical antiquity	3/7, 43%
Secession	3/7, 43%
mythology	1/7, 14%
popular culture	0/7, 0%
non-artistic	0/7, 0%
multimodal interrelations	Primary interrelations: complementation 3/7, 43% contrast 2/7, 28% focusing 1/7, 14% reflection 1/7, 14% Secondary interrelations: reflection 4/7, 57% contrast 1/7, 14% cohesion 1/7, 14% bridging 1/7, 14%

4 Conclusion

In *The Tent*, female characters make up 71% of all characters, which is similar to *Bones and Murder*. But the visual depiction of females in *The Tent* is quite different: females are shown less physically, with no salient features of their femininity; their clothes are more detailed and

salient; their eyes are more obviously inspired by ancient art, body hybridity is omnipresent but expressed much more subtly than in *Bones and Murder*. Furthermore, the illustrated female characters possess a sinister quality that is not as obvious in *Bones and Murder*. All but one character are shown in profile (85%), and all the characters feature almond-shaped eyes. In contrast to *Bones and Murder*, the landscape features prominently in three illustrations in *The Tent* (43%), which could reflect Atwood's focus on space and spatiality in the stories and illustrations.

A complex dichotomy of relations between the inside (of the tent) as opposed to the outside world (the wilderness) is one of the pivotal semantic features of the collection and provides further proof that *The Tent* is more thematically focused. All the characters and/or shapes in *The Tent* are hybridized, which is similar to *Bones and Murder*, but the hybridization is formally very different. In *The Tent*, hybridization is observable only in subtle details such as the pattern on clothes and the shape of hair/plants. Only the nightingale illustration features hybridization seen in *Bones and Murder*. Letters of the alphabet are represented more prominently than in *Bones and Murder* (28%), but in this case, the statistics can be misleading. Letters are among the key features of the collection, and one of the narrative ideas/visual images that provide semantic cohesion for the entire collection. The letters in *The Tent* form not only words but entire sentences (yet another sign of the thematic focus on creative writing). While the influence of children's art is less than in *Bones and Murder* (14%), the observable influence of classical antiquity is considerably stronger (43%). This is due primarily to the more detailed depictions of characters' clothes and characters' uniformity (which points towards a higher level of semantic focus in the illustrations as well). The same could be said for the influence of the art of Secession (43%), with one important note: the book cover for *The Tent* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 2006) features the tent illustration in black, white and red, the colours emblematic of Secessionist design. In that sense, the art of Secession is an aesthetic manifesto of the collection.

The differences between *Bones and Murder* and *The Tent* are especially interesting in the comparison of the verbal and visual treatment of the mythological content. The stories in both collections, and especially those in *The Tent*, are replete with references to classical mythology and mythological characters and could be described as adaptations of or 'writing back' to mythological tales. But in *The Tent*, Atwood provides few illustration with unambiguous references to mythology: one of these is Salome, who, in an ironic twist, offers her own head on a tray instead of the head of John the Baptist. All the other illustrations are inspired by the ancient, mystical, and quasi-mythological, but cannot be brought into connection with any concrete mythological tale or character. The Salome illustration stands out as a relatively realistic illustration compared to others. Atwood has largely empowered her visual characters in *The Tent* to be independent of mainstream mythologies. Popular culture and the influence of non-aesthetic motifs are not present in *The Tent*. On the other hand, Salome's gown could be a ceremonial dress dating from the late medieval ages to the Victorian era, and the flagellant illustration provides us with a scene from the chambers of medieval castles.

The most prominent primary multimodal interrelation between the verbal and the visual in *The Tent* is complementation with 43% occurrences, followed by contrast (28%). This

strongly suggests that texts and illustrations in *The Tent* stand in looser semantic interrelation than in *Bones and Murder*. This is confirmed by the secondary multimodal interrelations, reflection (57%), and contrast (14%). Such a multimodal formation of meaning could be explained by the fact that *The Tent* is thematically more focused which, in turn, provided more semantic independence for the illustrations. It could also be why the introductory illustration of the tent provides more semantic cohesion to the entire collection, more than the hat in *Bones and Murder*. It functions as a graphic metatrope.

References in *The Tent* to the older collection of stories are numerous, making it highly intertextual. But *The Tent* is not only a continuation of the previous story; it is also the reformation and, arguably, enhancement of *Bones and Murder*. There is a significant shift in Atwood's approach observable in the comparative analysis. Firstly, *The Tent* is slightly more thematically focused and homogeneous, both in verbal and visual aspects. Secondly, that leads to a different quality of illustrations. The illustrations seem more concrete, more uniform, but simultaneously have a stronger impact on the reader/observer. And, thirdly, the loose multimodal interrelations in *The Tent* mirror the two previously stated claims. The illustrations and texts are mutually less complementary, and illustrations seem more semantically independent and artistically concrete.

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List of Contributors

LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

Bojana Aćamović
Institute for Literature and the Arts, Serbia
bojana.acamovic@gmail.com

Jason Blake
University of Ljubljana, Slovenia
jason.blake@ff.uni-lj.si

Ewelina Feldman Kołodziejuk
University of Białystok, Poland
e.feldman@uwb.edu.pl

Michelle Gadpaille
University of Maribor, Slovenia
michelle.gadpaille@um.si

Oana Celia Gheorghiu,
"Dunarea de Jos" University of Galati, Romania
oana.gheorghiu@ugal.ro

Coral Ann Howells
University of Reading / University of London, United Kingdom
c.a.howells@reading.ac.uk

Beatrix Kiss
University of Debrecen, Hungary
kissbella10@gmail.com

Katarína Labudová
Catholic University in Ruzomberok, Slovakia
katarina.labudova@ku.sk

Tjaša Mohar
University of Maribor, Slovenia
tjasa.mohar@um.si

Tomaž Onič
University of Maribor, Slovenia
tomaz.onic@um.si

Sara Orthaber
University of Maribor, Slovenia
sara.orthaber@um.si

Michaela Praisler
"Dunarea de Jos" University of Galati, Romania
michaela.praisler@ugal.ro

Rano Ringo
Indian Institute of Technology Ropar, India
ranoringo@iitrpr.ac.in

Jasmine Sharma
Indian Institute of Technology Ropar, India
2017hsz0002@iitrpr.ac.in

Nikola Tutek
University of Rijeka, Croatia
ntutek@ffri.hr

Aleksandra Vukelić
University of Belgrade, Serbia
aleksandra_vukelic@yahoo.com

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