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## The Individual Resisting the Collective through Faith, Hope, and Love

The dystopian genre is an ideal literary perspective for analyzing the cultural eradication of the individual. The recurring themes for dystopian novels give an effective prescription for a story that challenges readers' views of society and the controls placed on people. A dystopian society is the opposite of a utopian society; it is a society where things are supposed to be ideal, but things have gone terribly wrong. Most dystopian novels are placed in the future, and the focus of the story is on the psychological and emotional effects of drastic cultural change on the individual. Typically, the cultural change is some current issue, belief, or action that the author escalates to an extreme state in order to create a society controlled through power and fear. The individual loses all independent rights, and the culture of the society becomes like an enormous machine where each person is only a piece of the larger workings. The spirit of the individual is suppressed along with the spiritual values of faith, hope, and love. Yet, in the dystopian novel, there is always at least one ordinary character who denies the pressures to turn off all emotions in order to become a machine ruled by fear. The character who does this accomplishes the goal of maintaining individualism by refusing to let go of the human spirit that is essential for delineating oneself from others. In a dystopian society, breaking the spirit of its members is the most effective way of maintaining control. In contrast, the most effective way of preserving

one's spirit is by keeping alive one's faith, hope, and love.

Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel The Handmaid's Tale corresponds with these general aspects of dystopian literature, as does another of her novels dealing with the search for hope in dark times, Oryx and Crake. The Handmaid's Tale is placed in the future society of Gilead, a society that has grown out of the right wing fundamentalist takeover of the United States. In an article published in Science-Fiction Studies, author David Ketterer writes, "Many of the features of Gilead are familiar to the reader of dystopian fiction: the lack of freedom, the constant surveillance, the routine, the failed escape attempt (in this case by Offred's friend, identified by her real name, Moira), and an underground movement (called Mayday)" (211). The novel focuses on many broad issues plaguing the United States today such as infertility, abortion, divorce, disposal of nuclear waste, separation of church and state, women's rights, availability of resources, and the hierarchy of social classes. Yet, Atwood does not make these issues the central focus of the novel. Instead, she looks at the society through the recorded diary of Offred, one citizen, and her struggle to maintain her grasp on faith, hope, and love in a society continually attempting to consume her spirit.

Margaret Atwood provides an effective portrayal of a woman with the ability to maintain her individual identity in a society where worth is placed on the collective whole. The society Atwood creates is filled with reasons for removing this individuality, and Offred works to reject their pressures and preserve her spirit through the hardships she must face. She does this by refusing to let go of her spiritual values of faith, hope, and love. She succeeds, but not without facing many difficult diversions during the process.

Critics of Atwood have analyzed The Handmaid's Tale, in order to understand Gilead's



means of control and Offred's means of maintaining individuality. In 1994, Keith Booker went through a long list of dystopian novels and gave short critiques of each. In his critique of The Handmaid's Tale, he gives a brief summary of the tools Gilead uses to control the Handmaids. First, is the threat of being exiled as an Unwoman, an infertile woman who is unable to serve a purpose within society and is sent outside the society to do unappealing work cleaning up radioactive material. The possibility of suffering a life of hard labor and radiation poisoning is enough to keep many Handmaids in check. Second, is the removal of any individuality, even names. By eradicating individual names for each Handmaid, the women are placed into a role that continually reminds them of their position. Offred is continually reminded that she is not her own person, but rather she is the property of Fred, her Commander. Third, is the impersonal nature of the sexual act between the Commander and the Handmaid. Love is forbidden in Gilead because of the power it possesses, so to eliminate the possibility of love developing between the Commander and his Handmaid, the sexual act is performed as a duty and no pleasure is received or given. Fourth, women are not allowed to read. Gilead realizes the power of words, and by keeping women from reading, the society eliminates another tool that women could use to maintain power. The last means of oppression and power mentioned by Booker is the effacement of memories of the liberated existence experienced by women in the recent past. If Gilead can successfully erase positive memories of freedom from the minds of the people, there will be fewer objections to the society because nobody will know any different life or believe a better, different life is possible.

Yet, even through the many tools Gilead implements to control its women, Booker finds hope in the end of the novel. The "Historical Notes," the final section of the novel, show that

Offred succeeds in escaping. Booker does not go into any detail about hope offered within the text, but he does find hope in the “Historical Notes.” He states that the “optimistic ending tempers the effectiveness of Atwood’s dark dystopian vision as a cautionary tale” (82). Booker interprets the ending as telling the reader that history is cyclical and things get better; he finds the “Historical Notes” hopeful.

Dominick M. Grace in an article in a collection of modern critical interpretations of The Handmaids Tale, argues that the “Historical Notes” do not offer hope, as Booker suggests. Grace points out that there is no clear reassurance that Offred has escaped the society. She is able to record her story, but nothing is known of her beyond that point. Not only is Offred’s unknown fate reason for a lack of hope, but the status of the society 200 years after Offred’s tale is not much better than it was as Gilead. The misogynistic attitudes of Gilead carried into this later society. Pieixoto, the male keynote speaker, is extremely sexist. In addition, Pieixoto is displeased with Offred’s account. “He wants history, but Offred gives him only her story, and he is hesitant to accept its validity” (165). He is detached and more concerned with finding the “facts” than understanding personal experience.

Another critic, Erika Gottlieb, published a book focusing on dystopia in relation to justice, dictators, revolution, and terror. In a chapter entitled “Dictatorship without a Mask,” Gottlieb discusses The Handmaid’s Tale in relation to the trends of dictatorship, but she also points out the means of control used by Gilead. This dystopian society does not develop over night. Instead, women are deprived of their rights through a gradual process that slowly takes individual rights away. It begins with taking away their jobs, then their banking accounts, then their families, and finally their names and all sense of individuality. Gottlieb points out that the



society uses women to oppress other women. Gilead uses control and power in order to maintain a strict social hierarchy where the elite get privileged positions, and some women are won over by this status. In order to maintain this hierarchy and to control the Handmaids, some women are given the position of Aunt. It is their duty to reeducate the fallen women (those who had children out of wedlock, were divorced, had an abortion, or married a divorced man) to become women the society can use as vessels to bear children. Using women to control other women is a successful way to maintain control and further the hierarchy, and since the Aunts are controlled by the men (called Commanders), there isn't a need to fear that the Aunts will attempt to gain more power than they are allowed.

In an article addressing the paradoxes of power within The Handmaid's Tale, Glenn Deer explores the question "who really possesses the power?" (110). He first acknowledges that in Gilead sexual control is what one in power has to achieve. Yet, it is unclear who owns this sexual power. Most of the men (with the exception of the Commanders while visiting prostitutes at Jezebel's) are not allowed to and do not have sex freely. Passionate and intimate experiences are taboo, especially love relationships. Gilead sees sex as a tool to create offspring. Pleasure is not to come from sex. Men's sexuality is also controlled in that they can no longer rape women, have affairs, look at pornography, or even enjoy sex. It seems then that the men do not hold all the power. Obviously, the women are controlled just as much. The Handmaids are not allowed to make visual contact. The winged head coverings they must wear act as blinders so that they are not allowed to look at others freely and others cannot look at them. Other women such as the Wives, Econowives, Marthas, or Aunts experience different kinds of freedoms, but all of them have certain boundaries that cannot be crossed. If the men and the women are both being

controlled, who is exerting this power? Deer seems to think that one gender does not hold the power. He realizes that power as a whole is ambiguous, and instead of there being one oppressor that can be singled out, the whole society can be compared to a game where everyone manipulates everyone else for personal gain.

Amin Malak supports Deer's argument by writing that "not all the female characters in Atwood's novel are sympathetic, nor all the male ones demonic" (6). It is important to realize that Gilead is not just a society where men are given freedom and women are oppressed. Everyone suffers to some degree.

The suffering of the whole, however, is contradictory to the stated purpose for Gilead. The Aunts teach the Handmaids that they have been given "freedom from." This freedom is viewed as a positive thing—women no longer have to worry about things like rape or divorce. Gilead has placed controls on men in order to give women "freedom from," but this does not mean that anyone has achieved freedom to love, enjoy sex, or even abstain from sex, for example. In her feminist critique of The Handmaid's Tale, Fiona Tolan writes, "In restricting male liberty, the women have not achieved liberation" (24). Tolan argues that freedom has become a cloudy term in Gilead. For example, the women at Jezebel's seem to have freedom of choice (since they are not forced to be Handmaids), but their only other alternative to being a prostitute is being an Unwoman. Again, freedom and power are ambiguous.

These articles show ways in which Gilead implements power over the Handmaids, but they do not go nearly as in-depth as needed. In the remaining portion of this paper, I will show why and how Gilead breaks the individual spirit and use specific examples from the text with the goal of analyzing ways in which Offred uses faith, hope, and love to hold onto her individual



identity.

Gilead has a set of complex reasons for creating the dystopian society by removing individuality. Before looking at how Gilead removes individuality, it is important to discover what drives the society to feel the need for such drastic eradication. The main reason for the creation of Gilead is that the old society's democratic ideal of individual freedom of choice resulted in bad environmental decisions, drastically declining birthrates, an increasingly liberal society, crimes against women, and seemingly unethical action: "Women took medicines, pills, men sprayed trees, cows ate grass, all that souped-up piss flowed into the rivers. Not to mention the exploding power plants, along the San Andreas Fault, nobody's fault, during the earthquakes, and the mutant strain of syphilis no mold could touch. Some did it to themselves, had themselves tied shut with catgut or scarred with chemicals" (Atwood 112). The right wing fundamentalists saw especially the declining birthrate and felt the duty to act because the United States was no longer fulfilling God's command to fill the earth. "The birthrate per thousand, for years and years [was] a slippery slope, down past the zero line of replacement, and down and down" (113). There wasn't a way to convince women to have more children. "Some women saw the declining health of the environment and "believed there would be no future, they thought the world would explode" (113).

Other women were grounded in their feminist ideals and rejected any possibility of having children. They protected their right not to have children by using birth control and having abortions, but the rise of the feminist movement was a result of an increase in crimes against women. Rape and murder were more prevalent than ever, and women felt a need to take back their bodies. They had some control by using contraceptives, but those contraceptives weren't

stopping crimes from being committed. Something had to be done, but what?

The women banded into a group to battle male oppression, but as a result, willingly gave up their individual identity in order to be part of a collective whole. The process of eradicating individuality had already begun long before the right wing fundamentalists took over the country.

People, men and women, started to turn off their emotions. Offred discusses this with the Commander and he states, "The problem wasn't only with the women, he says. The main problem was with the men, there was nothing for them anymore. The sex was too easy. Anyone could just buy it. There was nothing to work for, nothing to fight for. We have the stats from that time. You know what they were complaining about the most? Inability to feel" (210). Without emotions, without feelings, individuality was already waning.

With men turned off by sex and women controlling their pregnancies, there wasn't a lot of hope for reproductive success, but that wasn't the only thing stopping an increasing population. Offred explains, "The chances are one in four [of giving birth to a healthy baby], we learned that at the Center. The air got too full, once, of chemicals, rays, radiation, the water swarmed with toxic molecules, all that takes years to clean up, and meanwhile they creep into your body, camp out in your fatty cells" (112). The marginal population of women that did get pregnant and did not have an abortion would not have been able to repopulate the United States. With no other foreseeable options, right wing fundamentalists took it into their hands to ensure that every woman with viable ovaries would bear a child, even without consent.

Gilead claims to be looking out for the good of all: "We've given them more than we've taken away, said the Commander. Think of the trouble they had before. Don't you remember the singles' bars, the indignity of high school blind dates? The meat market. Think of the human



misery” (219). But it is quite obvious that those with power want it both ways. Access to prostitutes, sexual stores, pornography, and sexual ads in the newspaper are removed in order to give women “freedom from” the sexual oppression of men. Yet, these things are still available to those of high power, which we see during Offred’s visit to Jezebel’s and her knowledge of the black market. Gilead may have come up with a way to solve the problem of the decreasing population, but it does not find a way to deal with the underlying issues plaguing the pre-Gileadean society.

There are many tactics used to maintain control of the Handmaids: turning subjects into objects, using women to spy on and train other women, reinforcing the hierarchy between the different sects of women, and posing the punishment of a life of hard labor in a deadly environment. All of these tactics are a means of crushing the spirit. In an interview with Mervyn Rothstein, Margaret Atwood reveals: “The book is an examination of character under certain circumstances, among other things. It’s not a matter of men against women. That happens to be in the book because I think if it were going to happen in the United States, that’s the form it would take. But it’s the study of power, and how it operates and how it deforms or shapes the people who are living within that kind of regime.” The society pushes faith as a means of maintaining power over a complacent society, but it tries to eliminate hope and love. Faith is one of the spiritual qualities that can be used in the collective, but hope and love cannot. 1 Corinthians 13:13 states, “So faith, hope, love; abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.” As a result of this verse, Gilead removes any possibility of love. The Handmaids are told “Love is not the point” (220) during their reprogramming, and the others in the society recognize that as well.

Gilead turns the Handmaids into objects by removing individual names, creating a universal dress code, eliminating eye contact, offering vast amounts of blank space, and prohibiting reading. Without normal human activities or individual attributes, the Handmaids have status as an object. Offred realizes, "I am a natural resource" (65). She also recognizes that like a dried up oil well, she will be eliminated when she is no longer able to produce the desired product. "We are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (136).

The names the Handmaids receive are daily reminders of their position in society. Offred is of Fred; she is the property of someone else. The society does not recognize anything individual about her; she is just one in a long line of women who will be used as a "sacred vessel" to repopulate the United States. One Handmaid can substitute for another, just as one can be mistaken for another because of the identical clothing they must all wear. The blinders the Handmaids wear to cover their faces also serve to create the illusion of an object; with faces hidden, nothing can be differentiated between one Handmaid and another. Without any differences, individuality is taken away, and the feeling of value diminishes because the Handmaids realize they can be easily replaced.

To ensure the Handmaids will remain in their objective position, the women must suffer through endless hours of blank space and time without any means of entertainment like reading or writing. "This is one of the things I wasn't prepared for- the amount of unfilled time, the long parentheses of nothing" (69). The songs and books that used to fill time are now prohibited: "Such songs are not sung anymore in public, especially the ones that use words like free. They are considered too dangerous" (54). Gilead fears that by allowing women, and specifically the Handmaids, to read, they will gain independence and form a revolution to free themselves from



such undesirable living conditions. Words are power. As a result, these women are prohibited from any kind of activity that might separate them from the collective whole. Society accepts this treatment of the Handmaids, because stripped of individual identity, anything that must be done to them is for the good of the whole. Offred states, "That is what you have to do before you kill. You have to create an it, where none was before. You do that first, in your head, and then you make it real" (193).

Eliminating individuality to maintain control works in another way for Gilead. Not only does it control the Handmaids, it controls the whole country. "That was when they suspended the Constitution. They said it would be temporary. There wasn't even any rioting in the streets. People stayed home at night, watching television, looking for some direction. There wasn't even an enemy you could put your finger on" (174). Without a unique spokesperson like a President or a Prime Minister, there isn't one person to criticize or fear. When the US government was overthrown, no one person was responsible for the revolution. The people waited in wonder to see what would unfold, but there was nothing they could do because there was no one to oppose. This tactic worked well for right wing fundamentalists. Once an individual group was revealed as responsible, the society was already too advanced, too ingrained, to change back.

Eliminating individuality by treating the Handmaids as objects is a very effective way to maintain control, but some measures must be intact to ensure the Handmaids continue to be controlled. Gilead does this by using women to keep other women in check. Two methods are used: Handmaids spy on one another and must report any questionable actions or words seen or heard from other Handmaids, and the Aunts spend many months with the Handmaids to cement in them their duty and position in society.

Offred walks every day with Ofglen, another Handmaid who belongs to a Commander named Glen. They go through the normal salutations and appropriate conversation topics as they get their groceries and take their small walk. "The truth is that she is my spy, as I am hers. If either of us slips through the net because of something that happens on one of our daily walks, the other will be accountable" (19). They are not placed in twos to keep one another company or ensure safety, but to ensure the other will not attempt to gain some freedom on those daily walks.

In the "Historical Notes," James Pieixoto states that "The best and most cost-effective way to control women for reproductive and other purposes [is] through women themselves. No empire imposed by force or otherwise has ever been without this feature: control of the indigenous by members of their own group" (308). He is absolutely correct. In addition to the Handmaids spying on one another, the main tool of indoctrination within Gilead are the Aunts, older women who have been given a little bit of power in order to train the fallen women of pre-Gileadean society to be submissive Handmaids. The Aunts have many successful tactics for breaking the spirits of these women and teaching them to behave.

The Aunts instill fear into the Handmaids with their position power, "Aunt Sara and Aunt Elizabeth patrolled; they had electric cattle prods slung on thongs from their leather belts. They were objects of fear to us" (4). With one goal in mind: the repopulation of the United States, the Aunts use extreme measures to break women who have been found "guilty" of divorce, homosexuality, marriage to a divorced man, pregnancy out of wedlock, or abortion.

In the Red Center, where reprogramming takes place, the Aunts use humiliation to break the spirits of the women. They place blame on the women for the crimes committed against them. Janine, one of the women in the Red Center, was gang raped, became pregnant, and had



an abortion in pre-Gileadean society. Now she is paying for her sins. She is placed in front of the other Handmaids with tears and snot running down her red face while the aunts ask the others, “Whose Fault was [the rape]? Who led [the men] on? Why did God allow such a terrible thing to happen?” and the Handmaids reply “Her fault, her fault, her fault. She did. She did. She did. Teach her a lesson. Teach her a lesson. Teach her a lesson. Crybaby. Crybaby. Crybaby” (72). The intense humiliation of being turned on by women who are supposed to be her ally breaks Janine’s spirit. “That was last week. This week Janine doesn’t wait for us to jeer at her. It was my fault, she says. It was my own fault. I led them on. I deserved the pain” (72).

For another kind of reprogramming, Aunt Lydia frequently shows grotesque and violent pornographic films to remove any kind of nostalgia for the past by recreating a terrible image of what the past was like. “Once we had to watch a woman being slowly cut into pieces, her fingers and breasts snipped off with garden shears, her stomach slit open and her intestines pulled out. Consider the alternatives, said Aunt Lydia. You see what things used to be like? That was what they thought of women, then” (118). The film’s shock value is effective, because the minds of the women become clouded and they start to remember the past as it is reprised in those films. Amplifying the atrocities done to women makes the women want to band together to create a “better” world.

Aunt Lydia encourages this bond and states, “For the generations that come after, it will be so much better. The women will live in harmony together, all in one family; you will be like daughters to them. There can bonds of real affection, she said, blinking at us ingratiatingly, under such conditions. Women united for a common end” (162). She feeds them false hopes, because now that their past has been rewritten and appears so bleak, they need some kind of hope

for the future.

The Aunts promise a future world of united women, but when the Handmaids enter their first assignment, it is obvious that it will not be the hopeful future described in the Red Center. Offred describes her entrance into Serena Joy's house (the Commander's Wife): "She didn't step aside to let me in, she just stood there in the doorway, blocking the entrance. She wanted me to feel that I could not come into the house unless she said so" (13). Instead of a world where women live in harmony, Gilead is a society plagued by a strict hierarchy among women, great suspicion, and resentment.

While higher in status, the Wives fear and hate the Handmaids for their fertility. The Handmaids' presence is a constant reminder of the Wife's inability to reproduce, and this daily reminder causes the Wives to resent the Handmaids and treat them poorly. This hierarchy is shown most clearly through the large gatherings of women like the Salvaging, the Prayvaganza, and the Birth Days. Offred describes the seating at the Salvaging, a public hanging of men and women who have broken the laws of Gilead: "We take our places in the standard order: Wives and daughters on the folding wooden chairs placed towards the back, Econowives and Marthas around the edges and on the library steps, and Handmaids at the front, where everyone can keep an eye on us. We don't sit on chairs, but kneel" (273). It is obvious through this seating arrangement that the Wives, the women from the old society with power and wealth, are respected the most, while the Handmaids, the fallen women, are shown to be respected the least because of their submissive position at the front. Offred also comments on the seating at the Prayvaganza, a large gathering with a group marriage ceremony: "Ranks of folding chairs have been placed along the right side, for the Wives and daughters of high-ranking officials or



officers, there's not that much difference. The galleries above, with their concrete railings, are for the lower-ranking women" (213). In a society where difference is supposed to be banished, it is significant that some women get individual chairs while others are forced to sit on long cement benches or the floor. During the Birthing ceremony, a gathering of all the Handmaids and Wives to assist with and celebrate a birth, Offred describes the position of the Wife in relation to Janine, the Handmaid giving birth: "She scrambles onto the Birthing Stool, sits on the seat behind and above Janine, so that Janine is framed by her: her skinny legs come down on either side, like arms of an eccentric chair" (125). Again, the Wife is above the Handmaid, and it is her day to celebrate the birth of her child, not the birth mother's.

The Wives are not the only women who dislike or place themselves above the Handmaids. There is a group of women rarely mentioned in the novel, the Econowives. These are the most similar to the women of our current day society. They are married to a man of low stature and do not receive the assistance of a Handmaid or Martha, instead, they are responsible for everything: cooking, cleaning, shopping, conceiving, bearing children, and raising children. Although they must suffer through much hard work, they place themselves above the Handmaids. Offred and Ofglen pass a group of grieving Econowives and are shunned: "We put our hands over our hearts to show these stranger women that we fell with them in their loss. Beneath her veil the first one scowls at us. One of the others turns aside, spits on the sidewalk. The Econowives do not like us" (44). Even women they have little to no contact with hate them.

Another group of women who dislike the Handmaids are the Marthas, women who do all of the cooking and cleaning for the Commander's household. Offred overhears Rita and Cora, the Marthas in her Commander's house, discussing her position as a Handmaid. Rita can be a bit

harsh, but Cora is actually a kind woman who seems to like Offred. Rita thinks it would have been better for the Handmaids to choose to be Unwomen and go to the colonies. She sees their position of sexual object and birth mother as immoral and shameful. Offred explains, "It's the red dress she disapproves of, and what it stands for. She thinks I may be catching, like a disease or any form of bad luck" (10). The Handmaids are treated like lepers, an undesirable part of society, but the contradiction is that this society needs Handmaids, while lepers are not needed. Repopulation and survival of Gilead depends on these women, but they are treated with little respect, Gilead's way of killing the spirit.

The last form of control I will discuss is the lack of options. Fallen women can choose between being a Handmaid, an Unwoman, or a Jezebel—not much of a choice. Being a Handmaid means constant reminders that you are nothing but an object used for repopulation, and the lack of any kind of intimacy, but there is also the hope of bearing a child for Gilead and living a peaceful life after giving birth: "She'll never be sent to the Colonies, she'll never be declared Unwoman. That is her reward" (127). Being an Unwoman, however, means living a short life doing the dangerous and dirty work of the society like cleaning up the toxic waste that has been poisoning food and water supplies. Unwomen can have intimate relationships with other women, and they have relative freedom within their confined society, but they die quickly of toxic poisoning. Being a Jezebel means the life of a prostitute; after a few years of close relationships with women, lots of sex, and all the alcohol and drugs imagined, Jezebels usually die of disease. They are confined into their own little prison of a hotel and do not experience real freedom: "Nobody gets out of here except in a black van" (243). Handmaids are the only women with hope of growing old, but all three choices are hopeless. None of these women get to



live the life they imagined. None of them get to experience freedom. Their individuality is taken away and any hope of one day regaining it is crushed. All of them suffer the consequences of a society that has crossed the threshold of human behavior.

Offred won't let go of the kind of power that can never be taken away from a woman. After swaying her hips suggestively while walking away from the Angels, men keeping watch at the gate, she states, "I enjoy the power; power of a dog bone, passive but there. I hope they get hard at the sight of us and have to rub themselves against the painted barriers, surreptitiously. They will suffer, later, at night, in their regimented beds. They have no outlets now except themselves, and that's a sacrilege" (22). She knows the impact her movement makes; she embraces the fact that her femaleness can not be taken away. In this way, she maintains a slight grasp on power, at least she perceives it as so. Yet, is this a kind of power she wants? She has the power to make men lust after her, but isn't that also giving power to the men: they have the power to look at her and imagine such things. She can withhold herself from them, but by offering the slightest hint, she degrades herself and puts herself at a level where she receives power that is not positive.

At the Red Center, the Handmaids are taught anti-male propaganda: "Men are sex machines and not much more. They only want one thing. You must learn to manipulate them, for your own good. Lead them around by the nose" (144). Aunt Lydia points out the power women still have over men, but again, is this the kind of power they want to possess? It isn't the kind of power that allows them to respect themselves. If it doesn't get them respect, then what is the point? In a society where so few people have power, people take hold of whatever kind of power they can find. There is another way Offred gains power, this time over the Commander.

After visiting him in his office and learning of his secret stash of magazines, books, alcohol, and word games, and after complying to his request to kiss him like she means it, she realizes that “Things have changed. I have something on him, now” (188). She now has some power because she knows a secret about him, but also because he has made her commit a crime, he owes her. She is in potential danger for breaking the laws by reading, playing games, and spending secret time with her commander. He now has a responsibility to keep her safe, but also to give her whatever she desires in exchange for her cooperation and silence. Again, she holds some power, but it’s completely ambiguous because in order to have it she has to subject herself to the will of another.

The power offered in these situations does not allow Offred to maintain her individuality; rather, it is another type of control used by Gilead. She is tempted with the power, but in order to have it, she must become a sexual object and fantasy for the men of society. Offred must find alternate ways to keep her individuality, and she does this by grounding her spirit in faith, hope, and love.

Offred attempts to maintain her individuality in the midst of so much oppression by holding onto the qualities that build her spirit: faith, hope, and love. Offred holds onto faith by continuing to believe that there is an Underground resistance in Gilead, and she can be saved. She grasps hope by doing small things like recording her story, for a future audience to hear, moisturizing her face with butter, and continuing to desire. Her hope is also strengthened when she breaks the rules of Gilead. It makes her feel strong and gives her the will to hold on because there might just be a future. She continues to believe in love because she refuses to let the memories of her husband and child fade away, but also because of her blossoming relationship



with Nick, and her friend Moira's reappearance in her life. She continually relives her memories and is able to keep love alive. Hanging on to her faith, hope, and love allows Offred to keep some sense of her individuality and gives her the strength to go on living in an oppressive society.

Atwood inserts the importance of faith in Gilead by describing a pillow left in Offred's room: "I can spend minutes, tens of minutes, running my eyes over the print: FAITH. It's the only thing they've given me to read" (57). Offred's most significant source of faith is her belief in the resistance: "I believe in the resistance as I believe there can be no light without shadow" (105). Her faith in the resistance allows her to cope with the tactics used by Gilead to remove her individuality and her spirit. She believes that there is something or someone out there to end the oppressive society. Even before she discovers that Ofglen is part of the Underground, a network of men and women resisting Gilead, she has faith that she will be saved. She states, "I must be telling it to someone. You don't tell a story only to yourself. There's always someone else" (40). She has faith that something will change and others will be able to listen to her story and know what it was like for a Handmaid in Gilead. Just as she continues to read that embroidered word over and over, she continues to maintain her spirit by having faith that one day she will be free to be herself again.

Without hope, it would be very difficult for Offred to have any faith. Desire for something to change must exist before she can actually believe that it will. At times Offred's hope wanes, but overall she is able to continually hope for a better future.

Moira's resistance is a source of hope for Offred. She is a connection to Offred's past, and when Moira arrives at the Red Center, Offred is able to move out of her depression and

begins to believe that her world can change. Moira is one of the only characters who maintains her real name in the mind of Offred. Offred reflects on Moira's courage, strength, and ability to enact change, and this gives her hope that individuals who refuse to conform can make a difference. "Moira was our fantasy. We hugged her to us, she was with us in secret, a giggle; she was the lava beneath the crust of daily life. Because of Moira, the Aunts were less fearsome and more absurd. Their power had a flaw to it" (133). When Moira escapes the Red Center through her impeccable wit and inventive plan, all of the Handmaids begin to hope. The knowledge that one person is able to escape, that the society is not so perfect as to prevent such an occurrence, gives the Handmaids hope as they prepare to embark on their journey serving under a Commander. This is important, because the Red Center cannot completely prepare them for the struggles they will face in Gilead's society; the hope they hold gives them courage to face the challenges ahead.

After Offred leaves the Red Center, it is more difficult for her to find hope. She doesn't have anyone to confide in. She's stuck in a world dominated by people who use her as an object. Yet, she is able to maintain hope through the smallest actions. When she is given butter for her breakfast, she smears it on her face: "As long as we do this, butter our skin to keep it soft, we can believe that we will some day get out, that we will be touched again, in love or desire" (97). That small action shows that she is able to hope for the future even in horrid situations.

Offred's hope is renewed when Ofglen reveals that she is part of the Underground: "I can't believe it; hope is rising up in me, like sap in a tree. Blood in a wound. We have made an opening" (169). This revelation means that there are others, many others, who resist Gilead and want things to change. There is now hope for a revolution and the possibility that she can return



to her old life: "Every night when I go to bed I think, In the morning I will wake up in my own house and things will be back to the way they were" (199). She has hope that her family can be reunited, and she begins to think of her daughter more and more. When Ofglen tells her, "We could get you out. We can get people out if we really have to, if they're in danger. Immediate danger" (271), she realizes the strength of the Underground movement. Being part of such a powerful movement helps her deal with the present and maintain her spirit for the future.

Offred desires to break the rules. Eye contact, ownership of a forbidden object, and a relationship with Nick, which breaks all the rules, give her hope. On her first day out with Ofglen, Offred breaks the rules by making eye contact with a Guardian, a younger man who has not been issued a wife and serves as a guard: "The one with the peach-colored mustache bends his head to try to get a look at my face. I raise my head a little, to help him, and he sees my eyes and I see his, and he blushes" (21). She taunts him with her glance, and then walks away seductively. Making him want more gives her a sense of power: "I move my hips a little, feeling the full red skirt sway around me. It's like thumbing your nose from behind a fence or teasing a dog with a bone out of reach" (22). The Guardian looking back shows her that he is willing to break the rules as well. Offred needs to feel that others hate Gilead the way she does.

Offred frequently mentions wanting to steal something: a flower, a match, or a knife. She states, "I would like to steal something from this room. It would make me feel like I have power" (80-81). Offred uses stealing as a means of achieving hope, because if she is successful, she has something over those who oppress her. She does whatever she can to give herself hope. Another way is by writing. She doesn't write a lot, but the words she spells while playing Scrabble with the Commander give her faith and hope: "*Larynx*, I spell. *Valance*. *Quince*.

*Zygote*. I hold the glossy counters with their smooth edges, finger the letters. The feeling is voluptuous. This is freedom, an eyeblink of it. *Limp*, I spell. *Gorge*. What a luxury" (139). Margaret Atwood asserts, "Writing...is an act of faith: I believe it's also an act of hope, the hope that things can get better than they are." The stimulation Offred receives during Scrabble raises her spirit.

Offred's greatest transgression within Gilead is her relationship with Nick, her Commander's chauffeur and her secret lover. The first time Offred goes to Nick, it is at the request of Serena Joy. Serena Joy hopes Nick will make Offred pregnant since the Commander has not been successful, because once Offred has had a child, Serena Joy will no longer have to deal with Handmaids in her household. After fulfilling Serena Joy's request, Offred continues to visit Nick secretly: "I hunger to touch something, other than cloth or wood. I hunger to commit the act of touch" (11). She breaks the rules in order to fulfill her desire, but her relationship with Nick is more than just another way to break the rules. His presence in her life serves many purposes. He is a relief from the monotony of her daily life, a way to resist Gilead, a presence who gives her hope, a presence who causes her to lose hope, and a means of self destruction. Her life is intensely boring, and she needs to do something to make it more interesting: "I want anything that breaks the monotony, subverts the perceived respectable order of things" (231). She does this by continually visiting Nick, who turns into more than a diversion.

Offred begins to fall in love with him. "I went back to Nick. Time after time, on my own, without Serena knowing. It wasn't called for, there was no excuse. I did not do it for him, but for myself entirely" (268). At first she goes back to him to satisfy her physical desires, but in time, she starts to feel more for him. While her emotions for him are flowering, she stops



worrying about the world around her and begins focusing completely on him and the time they spend together. Because she is distracted by him, she begins to forget all the hope she once had to escape. He relieves her boredom, but their continued relationship is self-destructive. She is unsure how Nick feels. He seems very distant. He doesn't make the effort to see her; she is the one who approaches him night after night asking for entrance into his room. She becomes careless because she is consumed by him, but in the end this is to her benefit. There is the possibility that she is pregnant, and this once again restores her hope. She begins to believe that there might be a future.

Ultimately, it is Offred's love for her husband and daughter that give her the most incentive to go on. Her account is peppered with reflections on her past with them. Those memories help her keep a grasp on who she is. She has hope that someday she will be reunited with Luke and their daughter, and that hope allows her to continue loving them even though she has no knowledge of their well being. Hope for her husband floods through her as she and Ofglen observe the men who have been hanged for crimes, "What I feel is relief, because none of these men is Luke" (33). Feeling love for anyone, her daughter, Luke, or Nick, gives her courage and strength because it is something she is not supposed to feel: "Love, said Aunt Lydia with distaste. Don't let me catch you at it. No mooning and June-ing around here, girls. Wagging her finger at us. Love is not the point" (220). Forbidding love, the greatest of the three spiritual forces, is another of Gilead's tactics for control, so by continuing to love, Offred denies her oppression.

When Moira reappears in Offred's life, the love they shared returns. They had a very close friendship in college, and Moira's actions not only maintain Offred's hope, but also help

her remember what it feels like to love. Moira reappears twice: first when she enters the Red Center and second when Offred is brought to Jezebel's. She loses hope when she realizes, "It's lack of love we die from. There's nobody here I can love, all the people I could love are dead or elsewhere" (103). These moments of Moira's return help Offred's spirit because she knows she is not alone in the world; she knows there is someone who is still alive whom she loves.

Offred works to continue her grasp on faith, hope, and love to give her spirit the strength to carry on, but she does not succeed continually through the novel. If she was continually able to embrace her spirit, she would be seen as a hero within such an oppressive society, but Atwood states, "I did not want the central character to be a hero. It was O.K. for Moira to be a hero, but for the central character to be a hero would have made it into a different story" (Toronto Council of Teachers). Offred often falls into depression, and it seems at times that she may never emerge. Her spirit breaks easily, but it heals easily as well. There are times when she gives up on maintaining a grasp of her self. "Fatigue is here, in my body, in my legs and eyes. That is what gets you in the end. Faith is only a word, embroidered" (Atwood 292). Even things that should make her happy break her spirit. When Serena Joy brings Offred a picture of her daughter, Offred reacts with sadness because she is no longer part of her child's life: "But she exists, in her white dress. She grows and lives. Isn't that a good thing? A blessing? Still, I can't bear it, to have been erased like that. Better she'd brought me nothing" (228).

At the beginning of her account, Offred's spirit has a firmer grasp on faith, hope, and love. She hasn't been immersed in Gilead long enough for her spirit to be broken. Towards the end of her experience, however, her spirit wanes. She starts to acknowledge some of the risks she has taken and becomes fearful for her life: "I've been stupid, again. More than stupid. It



hasn't occurred to me before, but now I see: if Ofglen's been caught, Ofglen may talk, about me among others. She will talk. She won't be able to help it. They know where my child is. What if they bring her, threaten something to her, in front of me? Or do it. I can't bear to think what they might do" (285). She finally realizes that her actions have consequences, and her rule breaking might catch up with her. She is careless with her relationship with Nick, and her love for him begins to consume her, even to the point where she is willing to subject herself to the will of Gilead: "I want to keep on living, in any form. I resign my body freely, to the use of others. They can do what they like with me. I am abject. I feel, for the first time, their true power" (286).

Towards the end of her account, it seems that she may have given up. When the Eyes, a secretive group of men whose purpose is to spy on dissenters and bring them in for punishment, come for her and take her away, there is a the small glimmer of hope. Instead of the typical experience of being taken by the Eyes, that she has witnessed before, "Right in front of us the van pulls up. Two Eyes, in grey suits, leap from the opening double doors at the back. They grab a man who is walking along, slam him back against the black side of the van; then one of the Eyes moves in on him, does something sharp and brutal that doubles him over, into a limp cloth bundle" (169-170), Offred experiences a less frightening ordeal. Before the Eyes reach her bedroom, Nick reveals that the Eyes are part of the Underground and that she will be safe if she goes with them. This gives the reader hope that Offred may be able to escape.

The "Historical Notes" reveal that the novel is Offred's verbal account of her life in Gilead. She most likely made the cassette tapes after being rescued and hidden by the Underground. Our knowledge that she has taken the time to tell her story shows that she is able

to maintain a grasp on her individuality, on her individual story. She creates this verbal masterpiece, this artwork which reflects her individuality. Telling her own story shows that she succeeded in resisting the oppression of Gilead, even though she faltered on the way.

Without the "Historical Notes," the reader would not understand where the material for the book came from. Reading the novel without the "Historical Notes" makes it seem like Offred wrote the book while she was still under the control of Gilead in the Commander's house. The story is told in present tense, and only a few times does she reference the fact that the book is a recreation after the fact. The "Historical Notes" provide more solid evidence that the Eyes who came to get her in the end were actually part of the Underground. The reader doesn't find out Offred's ultimate outcome, but he or she at least knows Offred escaped long enough to make a verbal account of her life as a Handmaid.

The notes recount an academic conference of historians analyzing Offred's tapes. Two individuals speak at this conference: Professor James Darcy Piexoto and Professor Maryann Crescent Moon. Without the hope provided in the "Historical Notes" by Offred's potential escape, the words of Professor James Darcy Piexoto would give the novel a hopeless tone. He doesn't have real sympathy for Offred's story and is disappointed that she does not give more accurate details and documentation. He wants, instead, a transcript of one of the Commanders or those in charge, not the intimate details recorded by a woman: "Many gaps remain. Some of them could have been filled by our anonymous author, had she had a different turn of mind. She could have told us much about the workings of the Gileadean empire, had she had the instincts of a reporter or a spy. What would we not give, now, for even twenty pages or so of print-out from Waterford's private computer" (310). She only gives him emotions, relationships, and fears.



Even after reading of the horrendous things she suffers, he states “Our job is not to censure but to understand” (302). He takes the stance of an objective anthropologist by observing what is and refraining from feeling sorry for the people who had to suffer. While this distance is good for historical interpretation, it furthers the distance between people. Piexioto’s need to distance himself from Offred shows that human interactions have not completely healed after Gileadean society.

Piexioto makes comments that give offense to the female gender. He calls the Underground railroad “The underground frailroad” (301), and the audience laughs. The academics analyzing Gilead don’t have sensitivity for what happened, and this is evident through their sarcastic treatment of such an oppressive time. He also pokes fun at the level of education achievable by women: “she appears to have been an educated woman, insofar as a graduate of any North American college of the time may be said to have been educated” (305). Again, the audience laughs at his comment, so it seems that it is a fairly wide perception that women before Gilead were not very intellectual. The “Historical Notes” serve as a means for Atwood to poke fun at academics and their petty snobbery.

In spite of these negative comments, there is still hope. The “Historical Notes” give a glimpse into the future 200 years after Offred’s journal is recorded. Professor Maryann Crescent Moon is a professor at the University of Denay, Nunavit. This is hopeful because once again women are allowed jobs, and not only a job, but a position of authority. It is also encouraging to know that Gilead falls. It is obvious through Offred’s documentation that the society would not be able to hold up much longer. Its methods of control were waning, and the resistance of the Underground was growing.

Offred is presented as just an ordinary woman in a dystopian society trying to maintain her spirit by holding onto faith, hope, and love. Gilead is just one fictional dystopian society that rules its people through tactics utilizing control, power, and fear. Yet, a lot can be inferred about this fictional society and its impact on the lives of its readers. As previously stated, Booker suggests that The Handmaid's Tale is a cautionary tale. In a collection of critical prose, Margaret Atwood claims, "Maybe the writer expresses; but evocation, calling up, is what writing does for the reader. Writing is also a kind of sooth-saying, a truth-telling. It is a naming of the world, a reverse incarnation: the flesh becoming word. It's also a witnessing. Come with me, the writer is saying to the reader. There is a story I have to tell you, there is something you need to know. The writer is both an eye-witness and an I-witness, the one to whom personal experience happens and the one who makes experience personal for others. The writer bears witness" (Second Words 348). Atwood shows that the purpose of The Handmaid's Tale is not to show the emotions of Offred, but rather to offer a cautionary tale about the potential for future disaster. Margaret Atwood further asserts, "Fiction is one of the few forms left through which we may examine our society not in its particular but in its typical aspects; through which we can see ourselves and the ways in which we behave towards each other, through which we can see others and judge them and ourselves" (346). The fictional account of Offred's ability to keep her spirit shows us the importance of faith, hope, and love in maintaining individuality. It allows us to see ourselves and consider how we would react if placed in a similar situation. The Handmaid's Tale is not just a dystopian novel; it is a means of analyzing ourselves and our interactions with society.



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