

**Gender and Madness in Selected Novels of Margaret
Atwood**

By

Sandi Guthrie

0105681/N

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Declaration

I declare that this dissertation is my own work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts by Dissertation at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa and has not been submitted for any other degree or examination at any other university.

Sandi Guthrie
0105681/N
5th of December, 2007

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood's literature, both in the form of poetry and prose, is significant to an understanding of 'female experiences', more broadly speaking, though, Atwood attempts to explore questions of identity. She thus attempts to achieve the creation of a space and time in which readers can think critically about the world and their place in it. This self-reflexive form of analysis is significant in a modern and postcolonial world in which issues of gender have become increasingly critical, as it allows readers both a way of imagining and a way of criticising ourselves and our own culture and that of others we perceive around us. Her stories are acute depictions of men and women, and are therefore interested in human curiosity but also in control and power.

Owing to its popularity, much of Atwood's fiction has been written and debated about in literary circles. While this fact will assist me in my research, the question is still whether I will purely be reflecting on work that has already been done or whether I will find something new and interesting to explore? I believe I will be looking at Atwood's work from a new and fascinating perspective. Most of the literature about Atwood focuses on either her so-called 'feminist' representations of women, I say so-called as she sees herself as a sympathiser with the feminist movement, as she herself has said, "part of the history we've had recently is the history of the women's movement, and the women's movement has influenced how people read, and therefore what you can get away with, in art. Some of this influence

has been beneficial.”¹ However, she is not necessarily an active participant in it (the feminist literary movement) at a political level, but rather a commentator of its ideology and realisation within society. The literature also seems to focus on Atwood’s fiction in relation to Canada and Canadian fiction as a whole. While I will be looking at these factors in her fiction, I will be focusing on two areas which are mostly ignored or purely glossed over. The first of these being Atwood’s treatment of her male characters as well as that of her female characters, which I feel is significant as Atwood does not merely describe the lives of women, in fact in one of her most recent novels, *Oryx and Crake*, her narrator is male. Her portrayals of men, though they can be uncomfortably acute, have been welcomed, as is shown by the number of letters she has received from male fans complimenting her on her insight. She thus creates a counterpoint between her male and female characters through her description of an oppositional and reciprocal relationship between the two genders which forces the reader to adjust his or her understanding of the connection between the text, the context and the subtext. The second area I intend to look at is broader than the exploration of Atwood’s representation of gender, and that is how this representation is related to psychology – and specifically to madness. Atwood’s depiction of both men and women is best stated by Phillip Howard in his introduction to *Conversations* as he writes that Atwood’s fiction is “very far” from the normal fiction which has surrounded her, such as that by American authors, and as such she has “shattered our dear old conventions” with regard to gender and power relations.² As she “gets into the skull beneath the skin of men, whom she likes and pities, and of

¹ Atwood, M. “Spotty-Handed Villainesses, Problems of Female Bad Behaviour in the Creation of Literature”, 1994. *O.W. Toad.com, The Margaret Atwood Reference Site*. 23rd of June, 2006. <<http://www.web.net/owtoad/vlness.html>>

² Howard, P. “Introduction”. In *Margaret Atwood, Conversations*. Ingersol, E. G. (ed). London: Virago, 1992. p. viii

course of women, who are more interesting and sophisticated creatures.”³ She creates a space which is open to the exploration of the psychology behind the actions of both of the genders. The significance of psychology in an understanding of behaviour adds, in its turn, to an exploration of the concept of madness as Atwood explores the concept of madness and how it manifests in both men and in women and also how it is perceived by society in relation to gender and also to freedom.

Atwood’s novels display a collapse of the boundaries between the ‘real’ and the ‘imaginary’ world of fiction (thus exploring the ‘life’ versus ‘art’ dilemma) in a world under the impact of the media which on its own accord mediates and suffocates the experiences of individuals. All discourses in Atwood’s fiction are therefore seen as unstable and constructed. Extending from this and visible in both *Alias Grace* and *The Handmaid’s Tale* is Atwood’s personal exploration of the crisis in certainty about the legitimacy or authority of the ‘writer’ or author, and subsequently, the predicament apparent in the representation of the ‘real’ world in fiction. Atwood offers an exploration of “powerlessness in an effort to understand the past and its effects” while re-evaluating “familiar relationships, both that of marriage and sexual connection and that between parent and child” in a “search for symbols expressive of authentic present reality” which can be used to “build a new structure of beliefs that will match contemporary human needs and show us the way to a liveable future.”⁴ She explicitly links the concept of ‘powerlessness’ to madness; madness can be seen (by Foucault and other members of the antipsychiatric tradition) as being essentially constructed and controlled by the intellectual and cultural forces that operate within society, connecting one who is ‘powerless’ to one who is ‘mad’.

³ *Ibid.*, p. viii

⁴ Janeway, E. “Women’s Literature” in Hoffman, D. (ed) *The Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing*. Massachusetts: The Belknap Press, 1982. p. 376

While Atwood's fiction is, to a point, about women's search for identity, this is not the sole purpose of her writing. She looks "at the data of ordinary life" and uses "the occupations of women, overlooked by high culture as trustworthy evidence in which some kind of significance can be sought."⁵ Her "writings are grounded in acute observations of the physical world" by her sensitive descriptions of commonplace events and objects, even if the reader is intentionally disorientated within this apparently ordinary world, as in *The Handmaid's Tale*⁶. Along with this she seems to attempt to abandon "a structure of values that was formed elsewhere, by others, and matched to other needs" in order to "cling to felt reality, even if this reality can be described as mad, under the old system."⁷ This will be discussed in Chapter 2 as the situation of the characters alters the perception of madness in this society which has clearly defined societal roles which are so different to our own.

If one is concerned with the concepts of madness and sanity, then Sigmund Freud's theories – with all their limitations – are bound to come into play. I therefore intend to use Freudian psychoanalysis and critiques thereof to a limited degree as "Freud may have radically shifted consciousness from the centre of humanist endeavour, but in practice, Freudian theories have been used to recuperate that subjectivity into a way of sustaining the social order, integrating the once "sick" patient (usually female) back into bourgeois society."⁸ This is an area which Atwood problematises as she does not attempt to either maintain the social order or integrate

⁵ Janeway, E. "Women's Literature" in Hoffman, D. (ed) *The Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing*. Massachusetts: The Belknap Press, 1982. p. 376

⁶ Reynolds, M. and Noakes, J. *Margaret Atwood, The Essential Guide*. London: Vintage, 2002. p. 7

⁷ Janeway, E. "Women's Literature" in Hoffman, D. (ed) *The Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing*. Massachusetts: The Belknap Press, 1982. p. 376

⁸ Hutcheon, L. *A Poetics of Postmodernism. History, Theory, Fiction*. London: Routledge, 1992. p. 175

the “sick” patient into society in her texts. This aspect could offer some interesting insights into the most significant elements of Atwood’s fiction as

Psychoanalysis, as clinical practice or theoretical model, is an interpretative strategy, concentrating particularly on the language which tries to render the body’s experiences, the role of sexuality in defining the self, and the construction of subjectivity and gender.⁹

As such psychoanalytic theory in relation to Atwood’s fiction is significant because it brings out the “unconscious aspect of utterance through its concentration on the relationship between sexuality and social role.”¹⁰

Writers such as Marie Balmary, Nancy Chodorow, Hannah Lerman, Jeffrey Masson, Paul Vitz and, perhaps most notably Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (in their text, *Anti-Oedipus*), have criticised Freud for adopting a male-orientated theory and for allowing many of his personal biases to influence his theories. Feminist critiques of Freud, such as those of Chodorow and Julia Kristeva, suggest that women are psychologically oppressed, however this oppression is grounded in socialization practices and imposed values and is therefore not truly unconscious. As such the social and political organization of gender (externally created roles) cannot be separated from the internal process of gendered identity. This is significant to Atwood as she writes about a search for identity in her characters as well as attempting to analyse how external social practices are internalised and problematised within her characters.

While Freud’s theories exhibit, to at least some degree, sexism, it is important to keep in mind that Freud had an enormous effect on both lay and professional

⁹ Vice, S. (ed). *Psychoanalytic Criticism: A Reader*. Cambridge: Polity, 1996. p. 1

¹⁰ Wright, E. *Psychoanalytic Criticism: Theory in Practice*. London and New York: Methuen and Co., Ltd, 1984. p. 5

concepts of social and emotional development. Many of his assumptions are shared by today's researchers despite their rejection of many of his conclusions. Freud brought several assumptions to the foreground: that early life experiences before the age of six can have an enormous effect on the rest of an individual's life; that unconscious processes are the most important determinants of behaviour; and that the child's social environment was as important to development as its genetic endowment. Perhaps this is why Atwood's characters prefer rural to urban landscapes and why the issue of socialised 'gender' is one which Atwood finds problematic. It is also possible that this is one of the reasons why Atwood focuses much of her attention on the early childhood of her characters as a way of explaining their unusual behaviour as adults, to the reader. Again, however, this study does not aim to follow from critics such as Marie Bonaparte who believe that the work of art (novel, poem, and so on) is the "secret embodiment of its creator's unconscious desire" because I feel it would be reductive in this attempt to understand the characters within the texts and the ideas which they represent, rather than to understand the psyche of the author¹¹.

While Freudian theories and Freudian psychoanalytic readings of texts often attempt to analyse the text's author or its characters, perhaps more helpful would be the theories, or applications of theories, developed by Jacques Lacan and by Melanie Klein. Perhaps also, Kleinian theory might be more valuable in this instance as Kleinian object-relations theory (similar to Freudian theory) "is concerned with analysis of such issues as the origins of political idealism in individuals, or even the motivations of wider political groupings"¹² and therefore if one believes, along the

¹¹ Wright, E. *Psychoanalytic Criticism: Theory in Practice*. London and New York: Methuen and Co., Ltd, 1984. p. 33

¹² Vice, S. (ed). *Psychoanalytic Criticism: A Reader*. Cambridge: Polity, 1996. p. 13

lines of Kleinian theory, that the infant world persists through adult life, then the representations of the early months of life will have naturally unavoidable repercussions for one's view of group processes such as family life, political identifications and social organisation.

As I intend to focus on Kleinian theory and object relations, perhaps a degree of explanation of said theory is required in order to introduce the ideas that will be looked at in relation to Atwood's fiction. Klein based her theories on a model of intra-psychic functioning, thus postulating that the infant's psychological life provides the stimulus for primitive cognitive or mental functioning. She therefore prioritises the stimulation of the body, that is, the instincts, as does Freud. She differs from Freud's conception of a drive model of conflicting instinctual urges, however, in that she postulates a relational model of psychic functioning. Klein's focus is on the content of the intra-psychic world as she postulates that this content is made up of phantasy (by which she means the mental equivalent of instincts) relations that mirror or reflect the physiological state of the infant. The concept of phantasy does not include what we would describe as fantasy or day dreams and it is also not concerned with the reality principle. It is postulated to be the reservoir of innate, unconscious images and knowledge, which has been built up as a result of phylogenetic inheritance. Phantasy denotes the first mental activity and it is therefore the psychic or mental representation of the instincts (or of bodily experience). Phantasy occurs concomitantly with instinctual life and forms the psychic or mental content of the instinct, therefore Kleinian concepts of phantasy offer a deviation from Freud as the psychic motivation is moved from Freud's drive model and is located into a relational model of psychic functioning – as such it is our relational needs that inform our

psychic functioning rather than our instinctual urges. Phantasy is seen as a primary mental activity and therefore as the primary content of all thought as no impulse or instinctual urge exists that is not also experienced as unconscious phantasy. This concept underlies the psychoanalytic understanding that every action and thought has significance.

Where Freud's theories focus on Oedipal issues, namely a triadic conflict model of understanding intra-psychic functioning and thus focus on the importance of psychosexual drives in the development of the personality and of neurosis, Kleinian object-relations theory focuses on the first two years of development where the infant is primarily involved in a two-person or dyadic relationship. Object relations theory therefore focuses on the early primitive mental operations which are seen as largely biological in origin. These early primitive mental operations have a fundamental impact on the development of the quality and nature of a person's intra-psychic relational object phantasies and therefore on a person's interpersonal perceptions of the world and others. The quality of our intra-psychic object relations will thus provide us with a lens through which we are able to see and interact in the world and with others and ourselves¹³.

For Klein the attainment of selfhood or personhood is a developmental achievement and not a biological given. Therefore some individuals never achieve a stable selfhood and are left feeling that their existence is dependent on certain conditions for survival because selfhood emerges gradually out of the infant's initial state of total dependence on the mother. Early experiences of the child are therefore

¹³ Ratele, K., Duncan, N., and Hook, D. (Eds.). *Self, Community & Psychology*. Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 2004

postulated as being characterised by the qualities of primary narcissism and omnipotence – as such the infant's initial experience is that it is both the centre of the world (omnipotence) and the world itself (primary narcissism)¹⁴. Due to the fact that the infant does not have the cognitive ability for a sense of person, place or time, and also no sense of people and events separate from itself, it sees events as happening as an extension of itself. Therefore the infant initially lives through the experiencing of his or her body in a fundamentally unconscious way. Psychological birth is thus the journey whereby the infant moves from an unconscious solipsist state (a state in which the infant believes that the self is all there is to know) to an engagement with outside realities.

Atwood seems to explore the notions of mothering in both the novels that are to be discussed in this paper and so it is important to understand that Klein's theories on the relationship between mother and child, not entirely unlike those of Freud, place much emphasis on the early development of the child in relation to adult emotional development. Unlike Freud, however, a specific emphasis is placed on the relationship between the mother and the child and the impact that this relationship has on the individual's ability to achieve selfhood and thus a sense of identity. Klein's theory of object relations is therefore a means of understanding the search for identity as portrayed by Atwood and I will show that this theory is also significant to understanding the psychology of the postcolonial psyche.

Klein was also greatly influenced by Freud's concepts of the life and death instincts. She saw these instincts as being the prime motivators for the anxieties that

¹⁴ Weiten, W. *Psychology, Themes and Variations*, 5th Edition. United States of America: Thompson Learning, Inc., 2001

characterise internal object relations. She also saw aggression as a fundamental human potential, in the same way that she saw love. The level of normality and stability of psychic structure is dependent on the child's innate capacity for aggression and love, therefore the infant has a genetic potential for greater or lesser capacities for both. This means that love and hate are the basis for our motivational life, thus our psychic motivation is relational. Our need to live (a relational need) is co-existent and in continual tension with our need to die. The death instinct is operational from birth thus the infant suffers paranoid anxieties and attempts to deal with these anxieties through schizoid mechanisms such as splitting and projection.

Behind all psychic motivation is an element of aggression which means that psychoanalysis is not complete until the aggressive components of the psyche have been analysed. This has resonances in Atwood's fiction in relation to both of the female protagonists in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Alias Grace* and their attempts to analyse their own aggressive tendencies. For Offred, this involves her relation to the question of possible suicide, and for Grace, this involves her ability to have possibly committed the murders for which she has been charged and sentenced. These conceptualisations have facilitated a way of understanding some of the anomalies of human behaviour, for example an individual who is in reality talented, attractive and admired but whose internal phantasy object relations are suffused with aggressive impulses, leaving them feeling worthless, unattractive and empty.

Envy is significant to Klein, as she sees it as a particularly malignant form of aggression¹⁵. In all other forms of hatred, aggression is directed towards the bad object which is hated because it is seen as persecutory and or withholding, but envy is seen as persecutory largely because it contains the projections of one's own sadism. When we hate someone it is because we have projected a part of ourselves that we hate, which is not to say that he or she may not be an objectionable person, but it is through the mechanism of projection that we invest emotionally in that person. The hated person is invested with aspects of our own split-off hated parts; if the aspect were not a split-off aspect of one's self, one probably would not have strong feelings towards the hated person, therefore once you have come to terms with the split-off or denied factors in your own psyche, there is no energy or need to hate the other person. Envy is different to hatred because it is directed towards the good object, therefore it hates the goodness that is possessed by the good object and wishes to destroy the very goodness that it envied. In greed, the destruction of the object is a consequence, not a motive; in jealousy the destruction is aimed at a third person because that person has the goodness of a special other (is therefore a part of a triad); but in envy the destruction of the good is the motive thus creating a dyadic relationship where one wishes to destroy the goodness of the other. The Kleinian conceptualisation of envy is one which will be significant in both the Atwood novels as the destructive elements of envy are explored in both texts, but in different ways. In *The Handmaid's Tale* envy is apparent in the relationship between Offred and Serena Joy – as will be explored in Chapter 2. The concept of envy in *Alias Grace* is more complicated than it appears to be in *The Handmaid's Tale*, as Atwood explores the destructive elements in a much more intricate manner, by including the possibility of amnesia and splitting within the

¹⁵ Weiten, W. *Psychology, Themes and Variations*, 5th Edition. United States of America: Thompson Learning Inc., 2001

psyche of Grace in order for her to escape the persecutory feelings she might have had after committing the murders (although Atwood problematises this issue as the reader is never told whether or not Grace committed the crimes).

One of the most significant elements of Kleinian theory is what she has called 'positions'. She conceptualises positions rather than the stages postulated by Freud, thereby emphasising that there is a process that persists throughout life. She suggested that there are two positions experienced during life, namely the paranoid-schizoid position of early life and the depressive position of later life. The depressive position never fully supersedes or overcomes the paranoid-schizoid position and throughout life we may oscillate between the two. The positions provide phantasy with the object relational dynamics that constitute the matrix through which we will negotiate our intra-psycho and interpersonal relations with the world.

The paranoid schizoid position, as mentioned above, is the earliest hypothesized position. In this position the infant experiences pleasure (or satisfaction) and unpleasure (frustration) as either good or bad bodily experiences with grey areas of experience. The sensations are experienced as objects or things in themselves because there is no cognitive ability to conceptualise experience (what Klein calls 'part object experiencing'), for example, hunger is purely an experience as the infant does not realise that it is his or her own hunger or that it even is hunger. Also, the mother's breast is experienced as a part object; either it is a good object because it has brought pleasure and good milk, or it is a bad object because it has been withheld or been an absent breast – the infant cannot cognitively know that one breast is both the good and bad breast. Unpleasure [sic] is experienced as persecutory due to the

operation of the death instinct. In the early omnipotent state frustration is experienced as an attacking object such that, for example, the pain in a hungry infant's stomach is an attacking concrete object which must be defended against. The defence against the bad object is achieved through the defence mechanisms of projection and splitting. However, projection increases persecutory anxiety due to the increasing fear of the return of the bad object through reintjection (the reincorporation into the infant's inner world of the bad object). The frustration of splitting (or separating the good from the bad) allows the good to be protected from the aggressive attack by splitting it off to safety.

The paranoid schizoid position is characterised by paranoid anxieties and by the primitive mechanisms of splitting, projection and denial. Splitting has two functions, the first being a defence mechanism which keeps good and bad separate, and the second being a normal mechanism of development. It is through successful splitting (keeping the good safe from the attack of the bad) that the infant can accumulate 'good' experiences and this accumulation allows the infant to develop a psychic structure that is stable, with a coherent ego, able to progressively survive attack and acquire continuity through time. The operation of envy undermines the development of the child's selfhood, with serious consequences. Splitting is itself a necessary and healthy aspect of development but due to the operation of envy the good object is no longer safe from attack; the good object may be attacked in phantasy in an attempt to destroy the envied good. Splitting is therefore no longer an effective method for protecting the good object and, as a consequence, persecutory anxiety increases because there can no longer be any good, only bad. Envy destroys

hope because the goodness inherent in hope is destroyed; therefore envious people are also paranoid people who find little good in the world.

The infant's awareness that the good and the bad breast are one begins with cognitive development and therefore begins the process of whole object relating. When whole objects start dominating, the nature of the anxieties change to depressive anxieties – anxieties which cluster around the guilt over the damage done to the good object. This guilt leads to attempts at reparation for the damage done. This is the essence of the depressive position: to tolerate ambivalent feelings towards one and the same object, in other words to love and hate the same object and to allay guilt through attempts at reparation. Where reparation is successful, healthy development occurs as the individual negotiates various developmental stages through the matrix of the depressive position. Throughout life we will continue to negotiate our ambivalence and the fact that we both love and hate those closest to us. Under times of stress and trauma we will revert to the more primitive means of functioning of the paranoid schizoid position and the paranoid anxieties will come to the fore again. This element of Kleinian theory is one which needs to be explored in relation to both texts as they both offer the protagonists situations of extreme stress and trauma, yet it also applies to the postcolonial psyche in general as the postcolonial subject must negotiate between native and colonial cultural norms. It would therefore be beneficial to analyse whether the characters revert to the paranoid schizoid position in these situations and what effect this has on their thoughts and actions.

Successful negotiation of the depressive position does not mean that one must be depressed, or have had a depression. Klein's formulation allows that in order to be

a healthy individual, what is needed is that the dynamic components of 'loss' (by which Klein means the loss of the good object) and the capacity to mourn (or to feel guilt and concern for the other) and the desire to make reparation (or to love another) are all integrated into the personality in order to create a healthy individual.

Integration is never complete and the individual may oscillate between the two positions depending upon the particular context of his or her own life. Unsuccessful integration results from unsuccessful reparative attempts and the child is left with the phantasy that the damage done to the good object was too bad to repair. The despair in this awareness leads to two possible alternatives. The first of these is that there will be a retreat to the paranoid schizoid position or level of functioning with an increase in paranoid anxieties. The second possibility is that there may be a retreat to what Klein termed 'the manic defence', which involves omnipotent denial of the damage done and therefore a denial of anxiety. For Klein a manic defence is what is commonly seen in everyday life where people cope by denying the seriousness of situations – this defence is also what Klein believes underlies the structure of manic depressive states. Klein therefore postulated that unsuccessful reparative attempts have serious implications for the development of a pathological personality disorder. For Klein, all psychopathology originates from a failure to achieve reparation and from the subsequent retreat to more pathological or infantile internal object relations.

Kleinian object relations' relation to literary theory is that while Freud saw any form of art, including writing, as a privileged means of achieving instinctual pleasure, object-relations aesthetics sees art as a privileged means of relating to an object. As such artist and audience or reader are profoundly implicated in the processes of attrition and contrition. Contrary to Freudian psychoanalysis, in object-

relations theory guilt is assuaged rather than circumvented through the process of art because “aesthetic pleasure resides in the creating and perceiving of an object whose integrity has been fought for.”¹⁶ The medium for the artist, the writing act itself, becomes a representation of the mother’s body, therefore the “separating out of the bodily self from the primal object [the mother] is the central mode of the experience.”¹⁷ This separation can take place within the context of either the paranoid – schizoid or the depressive positions, according to which of the positions the artist, or writer, is experiencing at the time of the creation of the work – therefore objects in the work or text can either be experienced as fragmented or integrated because the artist or writer will “invest the medium with the [ph]antasy appropriate to his [or her] continuing stage in desire.”¹⁸ In relation to Atwood, this concept suggests that as a writer she creates situations which she understands and, should she describe characters or events that she does not understand, she does so in an attempt at understanding through the process involved in writing.

Along with the use of Klein’s theories, I intend to use Foucault’s ideas of madness as well as gender, and those of subsequent feminist followers and critics of Foucault, in relation to Atwood’s fiction. I have chosen Foucault because he himself believed, as do I, that the discourses of madness and gender are particularly powerful. In his preface to *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault defines madness as the realm that constitutes the limits of Western culture¹⁹. As such, it is the departure that is necessary

¹⁶ Wright, E. *Psychoanalytic Criticism: Theory in Practice*. London and New York: Methuen and Co., Ltd, 1984. p. 84

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 84

¹⁸ Wright, E. *Psychoanalytic Criticism: Theory in Practice*. London and New York: Methuen and Co., Ltd, 1984. p. 84

¹⁹ Foucault, M. *Madness and Civilization, A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. New York: Vintage Books, 1988. p. xiii

to define the norm of reason on which modern Western civilization is founded. If we assume masculinity as being the gender principle underlying the norm of reason in patriarchy, the construction of gender thus implies a correlation between femininity and madness.

Foucault describes the historical transition from focusing on the movement of spirits through the space of the body, to focusing on a moral judgment of the sensibility or emotional state of the subject. In Foucault's theories, outside influences on the body become significant in the labelling of "madness". Rather than an imbalance in the subject's interior parts of the body, Foucault hypothesised that hysteria and hypochondria were diseases resulting from lifestyle. The fact that they had a clear external cause was important in the labelling of these conditions as mental disease. This aspect of Foucault's theories is significant to Atwood as I believe she is attempting to suggest the social and political factors in the labelling of both 'madness' and gender, as well as allowing for the possibility that both of these constructions and the implications thereof could evolve from a lack of identity, or a confused identity, extending from the postcolony.

According to Foucault, hysterical people were blinded by experiencing *too much*. This blindness left the way open for madness. In Kleinian terms, Foucault seems to suggest that the mind is unable to adequately negotiate part-objects because there are too many, thus resulting in a return to a more primitive level of cognitive functioning and consequent pathological behaviour. The development of certain ideas about the relationship between mental disease and lifestyle was the beginning of many interesting speculations. This is vital because, according to Foucault, disease was

created by lifestyle and the institution of medicine can, as a consequence, disapprove of that way of life. When that disease becomes associated with madness, madness can be seen as something of which to disapprove. Morality could thus be seen as having power over madness, which became a punishment for a "bad" lifestyle. Psychiatry, which Foucault views with some suspicion, rests upon this idea of applying morality to madness, irrespective of gender. The morality of madness which Foucault explores also has significance to Atwood in that it allows a space in which external cultural judgement can be seen to have a large influence in describing someone as 'mad'. While this is Foucault's notion of madness, his notion of sexuality and gender is also interesting as Foucault interprets sexuality as a social construction that has largely been used to bring the human body under tighter political control.

Foucault's theories can thus have a large bearing on Atwood's work in that he considers the connection between politics, gender, culture and madness; however this analysis is not intended to examine the relationship between psychoanalysis and Foucault's theories. Therefore, the focus of the analysis will swing towards object-relations theory rather than Foucault. However, Foucault's concepts and ideologies will be helpful in elucidating some of the concepts in the texts, specifically in *Alias Grace*, where Dr. Jordan seems to be more inclined to the anti-psychiatric movement. Perhaps the most significant element that Foucault's theories add to Klein's is the social and political aspects that Klein and other psychological theorists seem to mostly ignore.

Feminist theories of madness in relation to patriarchy are also significant to the understanding of Atwood's representation of madness. These theorists include

Shoshana Felman, Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva. Also, such theories offer an elucidation of the limits of Klein and Foucault's theories, as well as suggesting possible solutions to such limitations in theory. The most interesting point that these feminist theories put forward is the clarification of Klein's critique of Western family normativity in relation to the family normativity posited by Freud. According to Freud, the male or father is necessary to the triadic relationship in the Oedipus complex. Freud claims that "complete object-love of the attachment type is, properly speaking, characteristic of the male."²⁰ Thus for the child to develop beyond the state of Oedipal bisexuality and psychological stress, the father must be present – both for the male child and the female child – as he stresses the valorisation of the penis. Klein however, valorises the breast, "showing its impact in respect of the child's earliest desires and frustrations."²¹ As such,

a father's behaviour and family role, and a girl's relationship to him are crucial to the development of heterosexual orientation in her. But fathers are comparatively unavailable physically and emotionally. They are not present as much and are not primary caretakers, and their own training for masculinity may have led them to deny emotionality. Because of the father's lack of availability to the daughter, and because of the intensity of the mother-daughter relationship in which she participates, girls tend not to make a total transfer of affection to their fathers but to remain also involved with their mothers, and to oscillate emotionally between mother and father.²²

For Klein, then, the role of the family is to create and develop children that are gendered, heterosexual, and ready to marry and produce and raise their own children. The problem, however, lies in the fact that families that are organised around "women's mothering and male dominance create incompatibilities in women's and men's relational needs."²³ Relationships to men are not likely to provide the satisfaction of the relational needs that mothering by women and the social

²⁰ Saguro, S. (ed) *Psychoanalysis and Woman, A Reader*. New York: New York University Press, 2000. p. 118

²¹ *Ibid*, p. 93

²² *Ibid*, p. 110

²³ *Ibid*, p. 115

organisation of gender have created for a woman – thus creating the need for a woman to turn a marriage into a family and for her to be more involved with her children than with her spouse. According to feminist theorists, such as Nancy Chodorow, the dyadic relationship between mother and child that Klein prioritises is more significant to the development of the individual psyche than the triadic Oedipal relationship suggested by Freud. The dyadic relationship between mother and daughter is significant to the male dominated societies which Atwood describes in both the novels, while “[t]he sexual and familial division of labour in which women mother creates a sexual division of psychic organisation and orientation” that Atwood’s texts describe “produces socially gendered women and men who enter into asymmetrical heterosexual relationships.”²⁴

For Foucault the problem of identity relates not only to gender, but to class and race as well and how these factors in society are inevitably “articulated into hierarchies of inequality.”²⁵ More specifically,

Foucault’s work oscillates between privileging a particularist perspective, in its stress on the individual’s freedom of action, and retaining a more general political perspective committed to overcoming the government of individualisation in the name of the individual’s right to autonomy.²⁶

However, Foucault is disinclined to develop the fundamental normative assumptions that lie beneath his political objectives. He therefore differs from the theories of Klein in that he places his focus on the political factors in behaviour, rather than on the psychological elements. As a consequence of his political bent, Foucault’s focus lies in the power relations between individuals and cultures and their effects, rather than on the psychological reasons for these power relations.

²⁴ Saguaro, S. (ed) *Psychoanalysis and Woman, A Reader*. New York: New York University Press, 2000. p. 123

²⁵ McNay, L. *Foucault and Feminism*. Oxford: Polity Press, 1992. p. 154

²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 155

Power relations are most notably described by postcolonial theory in the Humanities, particularly within literary criticism; as such theories can be seen to emerge at the intersection of imperialism, capitalism, and modernity. Postcolonial criticism is concerned with the effects of unequal power relations between different geopolitical locations on the globe: it focuses primarily on a (Eurocentric) colonial past and studies how subaltern practices (those subordinated by hegemony and thus excluded from any meaningful role in a regime of power) and productions in the non-Western peripheries respond to Western domination. Canadian critic Stephen Slemon has been, and is still, influential in the classification of Canada as a postcolony and in the question of 'postcolonial fiction' itself. He has written many essays which are essential in a study of postcolonial and Canadian fiction. I therefore intend to apply Slemon's own work, as well as his work with Helen Tiffin which argues that postcolonial works have in and of themselves the power to interpret which is normally only granted to the literary critic by the dominant theoretical practice. Such works on postcolonial theory and criticism are significant in order to discuss postcolonial fiction and to qualify Canada as postcolony as well as to examine whether Atwood's work is consistent with other Canadian and postcolonial fiction. Also significant to this section of the exploration is Atwood's own criticism in texts such as *Strange Things*, *The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature*, published in 1995²⁷. Atwood's fiction falls into the category of post-colonial writing as it "raises issues of representation, cultural value and the capacity of language to convey meaning or reflect experience."²⁸ In both *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Alias Grace* Atwood raises the problem of how specific 'colonised' voices have been silenced in that their voices

²⁷ Atwood, M. *Strange Things, The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995

²⁸ O'Reilly, *Post-Colonial Literature*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. p. 103

or stories are either absent or presented in such a way as to make them appear worthless or, on the other hand, have been presented in such a way as to proliferate negative stereotypes. In both novels the voice of the protagonist is set within a power structure which makes their stories seem implausible and unbelievable, while the voices of the male characters are always taken, by the society in which they reside, as being valid and significant. Thus in these two novels Atwood explores how so-called ‘knowledge’ about the women in question has been “entwined with a sense of authority over them and this, in turn, [has] justified the need for control [over them].”²⁹

In Atwood’s texts postcolonial concepts of hybridisation, power politics and the search for identity can be applied to Canada as a postcolonial country and to women’s role in society as subaltern figures. Feminist literary criticism itself has come to have a particular relevance in the postcolonial context. This is true as both colonialism and patriarchy have been closely connected or entwined in history; the end of formal empire has not necessarily meant the end of the oppression of women. The question in the subaltern and the significance of the sign are analysed by Gayatri Spivak in her discussions on the deconstruction of the symbolic order. Spivak’s elucidation of the power of the sign is worth mentioning in relation to Atwood’s focus on the use of language among women, even though Spivak problematises the issue of describing the female in the role of the subaltern. However, Atwood and Spivak make the same point in essence as they both describe women (or the Handmaids, in Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*) as falling within the role of subaltern – although Atwood does problematise the positioning of the Handmaids in this role.

²⁹ O’Reilly, *Post-Colonial Literature*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. p. 104

In order to make the theories of Foucault and Klein useful in my analysis of Atwood's texts, I will need to make use of such intermediary texts as the influential *The Madwoman in the Attic* by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar³⁰, particularly on issues such as the pen as phallus in both novels as well as the question of author and authority. Gilbert and Gubar have constructed a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' in which they see authors such as Charlotte Brontë struggling in an "anxiety of authorship."³¹ As such, they posit the search for a truth which they believe is buried beneath multiple layers of social and historical residue. They therefore suggest that the text should be examined, not only in terms of the author's own individual experience, but also as a part of an historical process, in such a way as to bring the text's integrity into question. Postcolonial writers, such as Atwood, can be said to "write with the awareness that stories influence events, that 'texts' bring with them moral, social and political questions which must be faced."³²

The relationship between gender and madness relates to the issues, of identity, power and powerlessness and these issues in turn, relate to the postcolonial elements of Atwood's fiction. While the political and economic factors in postcolonial fiction have been analysed and studied, the notion of 'postcolonial psychology' remains vague, at best. Fanon and Lyotard and a new school of psychology – called critical psychology – have touched on issues of language and thought, but no one has adequately, in my opinion, delved into the realm of the psychology of postcolonialism. 'Psychology' as a practice is itself associated with colonialism and

³⁰ Gilbert, S. M. and Gubar, S. *The Madwoman in the Attic, The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979

³¹ *Ibid*

³² Newman, J. *The Ballistic Bard, Postcolonial Fictions*. London: Arnold, 1995. p. 219

with (mostly male) Western thought (specifically Freudian), which creates a problem for a postcolonial search for identity as the postcolonial subject (specifically a female postcolonial subject) has mainly (male) colonial modes for understanding thought and concepts such as sanity and insanity. However, to qualify the previous statement, there are pre-modern indigenous traditions that help such postcolonial subjects in such psychological understandings. While I do not see myself attempting to create an entire postcolonial psychology on my own in this dissertation, what I would like to do is to make suggestions towards this line of questioning and also to suggest that this line of questioning is one which could be viable and even valuable, in the search for postcolonial identity and which would therefore be significant in postcolonial theory as a whole.

CHAPTER 2

“Something other than breakfast.”³³

THE HANDMAID’S TALE

Atwood wrote her sixth novel, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, while spending time in both West Berlin and Alabama, in the United States, in the mid-1980s. The novel, which was published in 1986, quickly became a best-seller, selling millions of copies world wide. The text itself falls squarely within the Twentieth Century tradition of anti-utopian or “dystopian” novels, which are exemplified by novels such as Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* and George Orwell’s classic but controversial novel, *1984*. Novels in this genre present imagined worlds and societies that are not ideals, but instead are terrifying or restrictive in nature. Atwood’s novel offers a strongly feminist vision of dystopia. The novel is one which explores an alternate reality, which allows Atwood the space to explore issues of humanity while still remaining removed and keeping a broader perspective in relation to the current reality.

She wrote this novel shortly after the elections of Ronald Reagan in the United States, in January 1981, and Margaret Thatcher in Great Britain, and therefore during a period of conservative revival, confrontational attitudes and hard-line rhetoric in the West, partly fuelled by a strong, well-organized movement of religious conservatives who criticized what they perceived as the excesses of the ‘sexual revolution’ in the 1960s and 1970s³⁴. The Reagan administration was defined by its conservative, anti-

³³ Atwood, M. “Spotty-Handed Villainesses, Problems of Female Bad Behaviour in the Creation of Literature”, 1994. *O.W. Toad.com, The Margaret Atwood Reference Site*. 23rd of June, 2006. <<http://www.web.net/owtoad/vlness.html>>

³⁴ Judge, E. H. and Langdon, J. W. *A Hard and Bitter Peace, A Global History of the Cold War*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1996

communist standpoint and by Reagan's willingness to use force to protect what he saw as the goodness of American interests³⁵. Under Reagan the American people also saw a return to traditional values as he introduced cuts in the federal funding of abortions thereby placing emphasis on a strong family unit (or nuclear family) while developing family-oriented public policy. He himself states that,

The fight against parental notification [of providing advice and birth control drugs and devices to underage girls] is really only one example of many attempts to water down traditional values and even abrogate the original terms of American democracy. Freedom prospers when religion is vibrant and the rule of law under God is acknowledged.³⁶

Educational leaders were encouraged by the Reagan administration to work to sustain moral values and to re-establish a clear understanding of 'right' and 'wrong' (or what appeared to be so in the opinion of the conservative government). The need for values in the school curriculum can therefore be said to have been trumpeted by the Reagan administration, as he continues in his "Evil Empire" speech,

Last year, I sent the Congress a constitutional amendment to restore prayer to public schools. Already this session, there's growing bipartisan support for the amendment, and I am calling on the Congress to act speedily to pass it and to let our children pray.

Perhaps some of you read recently about the Lubbock school case, where a judge actually ruled that it was unconstitutional for a school district to give equal treatment to religious and nonreligious student groups, even when the group meetings were being held during the students' own time. The first amendment never intended to require government to discriminate against religious speech.³⁷

The growing power of this 'religious right' heightened feminist fears that the gains women had made in previous decades would be reversed. A national campaign by the National Organization of Women began on the 2nd of March 1984, demanding that the US Justice Department investigate anti-abortion terrorism. It is under these

³⁵ Judge, E. H. and Langdon, J. W. *A Hard and Bitter Peace, A Global History of the Cold War*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1996

³⁶ Reagan, R. "Remarks at the Annual Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals" Orlando, Florida, March, 1983. *Ronald Reagan.com, The Official Site*, 23rd September, 2005 <http://www.ronaldreagan.com/sp_6.html> p. 3

³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 3

circumstances of a return to a strict societal definition of gender roles that Atwood created *The Handmaid's Tale* and the fictional Gilead, allowing her to reflect upon the present by presenting a dystopian alternative, while at the same time implicitly challenging the reader to create new styles of living that are, in fact, serious and feasible³⁸.

The novel cannot, strictly speaking, be described as being 'science fiction' in the way novels such as *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* by Philip K. Dick or (the feminist dystopia) *The Female Man* by Joanna Russ have been – however the novel did win the Arthur C. Clark Award for Science Fiction. A more appropriate definition then would be that of speculative fiction, a term which includes all genres of fiction which speculate about possible worlds which are unlike the world which we call 'real' in various – and often very significant – ways. The term itself is commonly attributed to Robert A. Heinlein, who first used the term in his 1948 essay, "On the Writing of Speculative Fiction", as a synonym for science fiction³⁹. The basic premise of speculative fiction is very similar to that of what we understand to be science fiction and as such focuses on stories which depend (at least in some way) upon some change in the world (as we know it) and on an extrapolation from possible events in such a world.

More significant than a pure definition of speculative fiction is an understanding of the reasons for the use of such a genre itself. The change from what

³⁸ Janeway, E. "Women's Literature" in Hoffman, D. (ed) *The Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing*. Massachusetts: The Belknap Press, 1982. p. 387

³⁹ Harris-Fain, D. *Understanding Contemporary American Science Fiction: The Age Of Maturity, 1970-2000 (Understanding Contemporary American Literature)*. South Carolina: The University of South Carolina Press, 2005

we understand to be the ‘real’ world to some speculated ‘other’ world (in the case of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the change from real world America to the fictional Gilead) allows Atwood’s narrative to enable the reader to perceive and understand everyday reality at a reflective distance – an effect termed ‘cognitive estrangement’ by Darko Suvin in 1979⁴⁰. A basic understanding of Atwood’s use of an ‘unreal’ but possible society, which Suvin calls the ‘novum’, in which to set her narrative is, then, to explore her characters and her ‘real’ world in a way which allows the reader to distance the environment from the characters⁴¹. The reflective distance or cognitive estrangement created by the novum allows a writer like Atwood to “confront the current normative system with an “estranged” vision implying a new set of norms.”⁴²

Through her use of satire right from the beginning of the novel, Atwood immediately offers the reader a set of expectations that are challenged by the contents of the sections. In the first section entitled “Night” the scene is set with the words “We slept”⁴³ followed by the location, “in what had once been the old gymnasium”⁴⁴ and although the gymnasium itself is a familiar location, Atwood defamiliarises it by describing it as a room in which the women sleep (an unusual activity for a gymnasium) while also contrasting words of comfort, such as “snow of light”, “flannelette sheets, “whisper” and “touch” with shocking and threatening words such as “taint”, “pungent” and “forlorn.”⁴⁵ She immediately creates a tone of fear and of loneliness that is prison-like but which still bears the afterimage of past happiness and

⁴⁰ Suvin, D. *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*. Yale: Yale University Press, 1979

⁴¹ *Ibid*

⁴² Slusser, G. “Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre, A Review” in *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, Vol. 35, No. 1, June, 1980. p. 74

⁴³ Atwood, M. *The Handmaid’s Tale*. London: Virago, 1990. p. 13

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p. 13

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p. 13 – 14

normality. The narrative voice is in the first person, which emphasises the personal but which at the same time offers the reader an element of doubt such that Atwood questions whether it is possible to express a simple objective representation of reality. The protagonist and narrator, Offred, equates the gymnasium she describes with a palimpsest or a parchment that has either been erased and written on again or one that is layered with multiple writings. In this gym palimpsest, Offred herself sees multiple layers of history which all appear to be interlinked through her memories: high school girls going to basketball games and dances wearing miniskirts, then pants, then green hair. Perhaps more significantly, Offred's likening of the gym to a palimpsest suggests that the society she now inhabits has been superimposed over a previous society, and traces of the old still linger beneath the new. Time can be seen to be fluid in this representation, as the past becomes superimposed upon the present, and the problem of the subjectivity of history is emphasised, as Atwood attempts to show what has not been shown by the traditional, patriarchal 'history' thus emphasising the 'his' in the concept of 'history' itself. Atwood therefore suggests to the reader that both imperialism and patriarchy, with their phallogentric, supremacist ideologies which subjugate and dominate their subjects should be denied⁴⁶. In this sense she links the concepts of postcolonialism and feminism as many have done before her, in that her postcolonial perspective reacts to colonialism in the political and economic sense, while her feminist perspective reacts to colonialism in the sexual sense as will be discussed more fully below⁴⁷.

The idea that postcolonial criticism and feminist criticism overlap and inform each other has become increasingly significant as writers such as Atwood "have all

⁴⁶ Caslin, S. "Feminism and Post-Colonialism" in *The Imperial Archive, Key Concepts in Postcolonial Studies*. 23rd of April, 2006. <<http://www.qub.ac.uk/schools/SchoolofEnglish/imperial/imperial.htm>>

⁴⁷ *Ibid*

drawn an analogy between the relationships of men and women and those of imperial power and the colony.”⁴⁸ As such:

Women in many societies have been relegated to the position of ‘Other’, marginalized and, in a metaphorical sense, ‘colonized’, forced to pursue guerrilla warfare against imperial domination from positions deeply imbedded in, yet fundamentally alienated from, that *imperium* (Spivak 1987). They share with colonized races and peoples an intimate experience of the politics of oppression and repression, and like them they have been forced to articulate their experiences in the language of their oppressors. Women, like post-colonial peoples, have had to construct a language of their own when their only available ‘tools’ are those of the ‘colonizer’.⁴⁹

In *The Handmaid’s Tale* Atwood can therefore be said to be suggesting the alterity of women by hypothesising a space in which the situation as she sees it has been amplified to unrealistic proportions. The situation created is therefore both familiar and unfamiliar.

The reader is allowed only enough time to become familiar with the unfamiliar surroundings of the protagonist before Atwood again changes the description of place to the description of the “Aunts” patrolling the old gymnasium, now called the “Rachel and Leah Centre”, with their cattle prods thus creating an unexpected feeling of threat. The reader is made uncomfortable and disorientated by the change in tone as positive possibilities are firmly denied by the description of the “chain-link fence topped by barbed wire.”⁵⁰ The silence that was initially comforting is made to feel forced and the reader is therefore made to understand that the women sleeping in the old gymnasium are not there by choice. The words used are familiar and yet unfamiliar at the same time. Atwood’s use of defamiliarisation accents the idea that anyone other than the Western male can be regarded as a threat to the established

⁴⁸ Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G. and Tiffin, H. *The Empire Writes Back, Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. London and New York: Routledge, 1991. p. 33 – 34

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, p. 174

⁵⁰ Atwood, M. *The Handmaid’s Tale*. London: Virago. 1990. p. 14

order and must therefore be treated with caution. The terms “Aunts”, “Angels”, “Commanders” and “Handmaids” are not what they seem, and are only to be explained as the novel itself progresses, thereby adding to the defamiliarisation created by the scene itself. This flashback introduces the world of the novel: a world which is shown to be populated by different rules and expectations from that with which the reader would feel comfortable. This strange new environment is the new country called “Gilead”, which is superimposed upon the country that the reader knows as America. In this sense Atwood “makes fresh, new, strange, different what is familiar and known.”⁵¹ She thereby follows postcolonial aesthetics in attempting to “alter the structuring conventions of literature and consciousness (reading) so as to alter the way reality is perceived, and hence perhaps influence reality itself.”⁵² This defamiliarisation also suggests an attempt towards hybridity within the new regime. The new uses for words and the Biblical references, such as the naming of domestic workers as “Marthas” as a reference to a woman in the New Testament, suggested by the new usages indicates that the coloniser, in this case the new government of Gilead, has borrowed words from the colonised, or the society it has replaced, however the words have taken on new meanings within the new societal structures. As the novel progresses, however, with the relationship between Offred and her Commander, Atwood asks the question of whether such hybridity is positive or negative in that she suggests a level of mutuality in the process of hybridisation. The Commander himself is impacted on by Offred as she is by him and the new regime, a point which will be discussed later on in the chapter.

⁵¹ Cuddon, J. A. *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory, Third Edition*. London: Penguin Books ,Ltd., 1992. p. 226

⁵² Gaylard, G. *After Colonialism, African Postmodernism and Magical Realism*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2005. p. 72

In the novel's nightmare, in Offred's opinion, world of Gilead, a group of conservative religious extremists has taken power and turned the sexual revolution of the previous decades upside down. Atwood thus explores the consequences of a complete reversal of women's rights. Feminists in the previous decades fought for liberation from traditional gender roles, but Gilead is a society founded on precisely a return to such traditional values and gender roles and on the subjugation of women by men – perhaps a nightmarish manifestation of the return to moral, 'Christian' values which were predominant under the Reagan administration. What feminists considered the great triumphs of the 1970's—namely, widespread access to contraception, the legalization of abortion, and the increasing political influence of female voters – have all been completely undone as is evident in the character of Offred's mother who was once an active participant in the feminist protests and who is, under the new regime, banished to the Colonies as an Unwoman. Women in Gilead are not only forbidden to vote, they are forbidden to read or write. While these changes are hard to accept, the novel also paints a picture of a world undone by pollution and infertility, reflecting 1980s fears about declining birth rates, the dangers of nuclear power, and environmental degradation in the United States – all of which seem plausible. Atwood is possibly demonstrating, by writing about the United States in such a way, a consciousness of Canadian identity that has been fuelled by a desire not to be absorbed culturally by the United States. Canada's proximity to the United States has often suggested to readers outside of North America, that Canadian and American ideologies are the same, thus equating Canadian identity with American identity.

The fictional world of Gilead is understood by the reader, from the very beginning of the novel, to be rather different from the real-world America on which

the fictional world is based. The word 'Gilead' itself, meaning 'rugged', has been described as a highland region east of the River Jordan that extended approximately from the southern end of the Sea of Galilee to the northern end of the Salt Sea, with the Jabbok River roughly marking its mid-point. From its mountains it was known as "the mount, or hill country, of Gilead" (Genesis 31:25), but was also called "the land of Gilead" (Numbers 32:1), or simply "Gilead" (Genesis 37:25). After the possession and division of the Promised Land, as commanded by God, among the tribes of Israel, it was held by Gad and Reuben and was therefore a part of Manasseh (Deuteronomy 3:13-15, Numbers 32:40) - a territory today outside of Israel's national borders, occupied by the Kingdom of Jordan. Gilead was a very prominent place in the Bible and in Bible history. The judges Jair and Jephthah, King Jehu of Israel, and the prophet Elijah were all from Gilead. Many well-known events of the Bible happened in Gilead. One of the most significant references to Gilead in the Bible is found in Jeremiah 8:22: "Is there no balm in Gilead?" Here the prophet Jeremiah asks the question of whether a society can ever heal itself from within. The biblical references that Atwood makes in the re-naming of America to Gilead alert the reader that the doctrines followed by the new leadership of Gilead are theocratic in nature as the leaders have used Christian ideas and morals in order to introduce a new regime. The basic premise of the regime in Gilead is, then, that gender roles are grounded in biblical principles, and are not ultimately flexible but subject to biblical law and societal pressures⁵³.

⁵³ Cook, K. and Lee, L. *Man and Woman, Alone and Together, Gender Roles, Identity and Intimacy in a Changing Culture*. United States of America: BridgePoint, 1992.

The protagonist of the novel, Offred, is an interesting character as she is not always dealt with in a manner which is entirely sympathetic, but rather in a way which is critical and yet empathetic to her humanness. She cannot be defined as a 'heroine' in any sense of the word, as she does not effect the course of history in the novel in any significant way. Her resistance to the new regime is mostly inward, as she displays outward capitulation to the rules which have been imposed upon her. Offred's life prior to her current situation is told to the reader only through her constant flashbacks which the reader is able to assimilate. She is the daughter of a woman's rights activist and an unknown sperm donor, and grew up in a single-parent household. She married a man by the name of Luke, with their relationship beginning as an illicit affair since he was married. After their marriage they conceived a child, a daughter who remains unnamed throughout the text, although she plays a significant role in Offred's numerous flashbacks, and is used as a bargaining tool by Serena Joy towards the end of the novel. She and Luke took their daughter and attempted to cross the border into Canada when the change of government occurred but were intercepted and captured. She also describes how, in the time before the change to Gilead, paper money had been replaced by what were called "Compucards", which are understood to be similar to the credit or debit cards which we use today, that allowed for direct access to bank accounts.

The first hint that Offred receives that change is apparent is when her Compucard is declared invalid by the new cashier at her local store. Atwood therefore suggests that technological advances in society could be the route of possible change, and that the possible changes created by such developments in technology are not necessarily for the better of society. Also, Offred shows her ignorance in relation to

events, as her best friend Moira points out to her that the changes in government had been planned for many years and that the changes in technology were developed with the new government in mind, as she remembers,

Look out, said Moira to me, over the phone. Here it comes.
Here what comes? I said.
You wait, she said. They've been building up to this. It's you and me up against the wall, baby. She was quoting an expression of my mother's, but she wasn't intending to be funny.⁵⁴

She remembers, in hindsight that the change from paper money to Compucards must have been significant as she says,

I guess that's how they were able to do it, in the way they did, all at once, without anyone knowing beforehand. If there had still been portable money, it would have been more difficult.⁵⁵

Offred's seemingly docile acceptance of the new situation is one which appears to have been mirrored by most of the women involved in the change of government. There appears to have been little visible resistance to the new regime even after the change had disenfranchised women as well as stripping them of their ability to work. Atwood is possibly condemning the apparent complacency of ordinary citizens in times of change or crisis, most significantly the passivity of Western society in relation to itself and also to the rest of the world at the time in which the novel was written – the 1980's. Offred herself loses her job and her money – or her access to her own money – she too can no longer buy or own property, however when her doubts and fears are mentioned to Luke he fails to understand the significance of the situation in which she has been placed. Up until this point in the novel the reader is lead to believe that he is a good and understanding man, if an adulterous one, and yet he fails to adequately support his wife when she most needs

⁵⁴ Atwood, M. *The Handmaid's Tale*. London: Virago, 1990. p. 183

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p. 182

his assistance. Instead he tells her that it would be futile to actively resist the changes and that her place in the situation is to think of their family and the well-being of their daughter, as she remembers,

I didn't go on any of the marches. Luke said it would be futile and I had to think about them, my family, him and her. I did think about my family. I started doing more housework, more baking. I tried not to cry at mealtimes. By this time I'd started to cry, without warning, and to sit beside the bedroom window, staring out. I didn't know many of the neighbours, and when we met, outside on the street, we were careful to exchange nothing more than the ordinary greetings. Nobody wanted to be reported, for disloyalty.⁵⁶

Her return to a level of social conformity, as exemplified by her interaction – or lack thereof – with her neighbours, and the level of fear that she experienced, is a reasonable explanation for her allusion to crying, although she does not state whether she is crying because of a lack of understanding of what will come in the future or because of her loss of independence. Her level of anxiety over the unknown changes is understandable, as “anxiety is a signal of vital danger” according to Marie Bonaparte⁵⁷. Her depression is not shared by Luke, and it appears that she does not discuss the situation with him to any significant degree. While the reader is not told directly that she does not share her feelings with Luke because she feels he will not understand, her future actions suggest that she feared a lack of understanding on his part towards her feelings. Offred seems to be feeling instinctual anxiety as her feelings have “an entirely objective or social basis if we regard [them] as a reaction to the danger of giving way to crime, with punishment as a corollary.”⁵⁸ The solitude which she expresses after the change of government is something which the reader is lead to understand as being her situation in future. The start of her life of loneliness suggests her future as a Handmaid, a liminal figure never finding a position in the

⁵⁶ Atwood, M. *The Handmaid's Tale*. London: Virago, 1990. p. 189

⁵⁷ Bonaparte, M. *Female Sexuality*. New York: International University Press, Inc., 1973. p. 186

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, p. 186

centre of society, with her wishes and feelings ignored and her only position in society being an objectified one. The reader is reminded, however, that her description of the time before and during the change of government is done in hindsight, thus these descriptions must all be coloured by the events which occurred thereafter.

It is not only her day to day life that changes after she loses her job and her money, her relationship with Luke also suffers. She describes herself as feeling numb towards him,

That night, after I'd lost my job, Luke wanted me to make love. Why didn't I want to? Desperation alone should have driven me. But I still felt numbed. I could hardly even feel his hands on me.⁵⁹

Her aversion to sex and her apparent numbness could have been the result of her feelings of anxiety and stress brought on by the events which have led up to the moment. They could also be a reaction to Luke's inability to understand her feelings of loss and bewilderment, and also her resentment towards him, as she continues:

What's the matter? He said.
I don't know, I said.
We still have ... he said. But he didn't go on to say what we still had. It occurred to me that he shouldn't be saying *we*, since nothing that I knew of had been taken away from him.
We still have each other, I said. It was true. Then why did I sound, even to myself, so indifferent?⁶⁰

While Offred herself does not seem to understand her sudden aversion to having sex with Luke, the reason why the relationship dynamic has changed is because the power structures within the relationship have changed, or have been changed, because of her

⁵⁹ Atwood, M. *The Handmaid's Tale*. London: Virago, 1990. p. 191

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, p. 191

inability to work and gain material independence. This change is made more obvious as she continues,

He kissed me then, as if now I'd said that, things could get back to normal. But something had shifted, some balance. I felt shrunken, so that when he put his arms around me, gathering me up, I was small as a doll. I felt love going forward without me. He doesn't mind this, I thought. He doesn't mind it at all. Maybe he even likes it. We are not each other's, any more. Instead, I am his.⁶¹

It is interesting that in this interaction between Offred and Luke, Luke takes on a position of power in his actions. He kisses her, and then she feels shrunken when his arms surround her, "gathering her up". One can reinterpret "non-verbal behaviour popularly associated with intimacy, such as seeking proximity, gazing directly into someone's eyes and touching, from a power perspective."⁶² In this model, the behaviour of men towards women parallels the behaviour of "higher status persons to lower status persons and vice versa."⁶³ Luke's non-verbal actions towards Offred can therefore be said to be a display of his power over her, an interpretation which could explain Offred's feelings towards him at this point. Although she does question her own feelings, and her reaction to him, as she resumes her thoughts thus,

Unworthy, unjust, untrue. But that is what happened.
So Luke: what I want to ask you now, what I need to know is, Was I right?
Because we never talked about it. By the time I could have done that, I was afraid to. I couldn't afford to lose you.⁶⁴

Her doubt of her own interpretation of his behaviour is also significant in relation to the power struggles in her marriage. In adult life, the notions we understand as being purely good or bad begin to blur as we understand that people, actions and things are not necessarily good or bad to the exclusion of all else, in much the same way as

⁶¹ *Ibid*, p. 191

⁶² Meyer, J. "Power and Love: Conflicting Conceptual Schemata" in *The Gender of Power*. Leijenaar, M. and Oldersma, J. (eds). London: Sage Publications, 1991. p. 27

⁶³ *Ibid*, p. 27

⁶⁴ Atwood, M. *The Handmaid's Tale*. London: Virago, 1990. p. 192

Klein postulates the movement from part-object experiencing to the experience of objects as whole. However, “in times of great emotional stress and crisis, we tend to revert to archaic and simplistic modes of managing our experience.”⁶⁵ As such, in times of crisis or stress, “many women (and men) tend to make, as in a fairy tale, an all-powerful, all-evil figure of the person who was most likely enveloped in almost mythical goodness at another time.”⁶⁶ In her question, Offred appears to realise that she might have fallen into the trap of making Luke into an all-evil character, and she attempts to make reparation for this in attempting to ask Luke how he felt, and admitting that she did not do so at the time because of her own fear. The movement between hatred and repentance relates to Klein’s hypothesised positions, as Offred oscillates between the paranoid schizoid position and the depressive position. At the time of the change of government, Offred can be said to be within the paranoid schizoid position, the position most often related to situations of high stress and fear. She therefore expresses paranoid anxieties – such as the fear of confiding in the neighbours because of the possibility of being considered to be a traitor to the new government. The defence mechanism of splitting comes to the fore as she describes this period of change, as she attempts to keep good and bad objects separate from one another in order to keep a sense of security in a period which was, for her specifically, incredibly insecure. The problems that she has with Luke, and her inability to interact meaningfully with him, arise from the intervention of envy, as she hates the goodness that is possessed by the good object (in this case, the freedom possessed by Luke) and she therefore wishes to destroy the very goodness that is envied. The experience of envy is superseded by Offred’s present state within the depressive position as she expresses her feelings of guilt at not having been able to interact with Luke in a

⁶⁵ Meyer, J. “Power and Love: Conflicting Conceptual Schemata” in *The Gender of Power*. Leijenaar, M. and Oldersma, J. (eds). London: Sage Publications, 1991. p. 26

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, p. 26

meaningful manner. The complexities of the two different positions expressed within her reliving of the experience, and the ambivalence that Offred appears to feel towards her actions and emotions, involve the Kleinian notions of reparation and guilt as Klein understood to be characteristic of the depressive position. Offred's comments about the situation show her attempts to tolerate ambivalent feelings towards Luke and his position of power over her, in other words she attempts to reconcile the love and hate she feels for Luke, while attempting to allay her guilt through attempts at reparation.

The power relations within the relationship have, therefore, been made more complex by each party's different interests as is described by Hélène Cixous, "[o]rganisation by hierarchy makes all conceptual organisation subject to man. Male privilege, shown in the opposition between *activity* and *passivity*, which he uses to sustain himself."⁶⁷ This relationship between active and passive is one which Offred herself explores, as she discusses the difference between the words *lie* and *lay* in Chapter 7. She says,

The difference between *lie* and *lay*. Lay is always passive. Even men used to say, I'd like to get laid. Though sometimes said, I'd like to lay her. All this is pure speculation.⁶⁸

She decides at this point to be active in her resistance to patriarchal oppression, as she continues,

I lie then, inside the room, under the plaster eye in the ceiling, behind the white curtains, between the sheets, neatly as they, and step sideways out of my own time. Out of time. Though this is time, nor am I out of it.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Cixous, H. "Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays" in *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism*. Belsey, C. and Moore, J. (eds.). Houndsmills, Basingstoke and Hampshire: Macmillan, 1997. p. 2

⁶⁸ Atwood, M. *The Handmaid's Tale*. London: Virago, 1990. p. 47

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* p. 47

Unfortunately for Offred, the questions she has asked of Luke will never be answered. While it appears that Luke is the guilty party in this encounter, Atwood does not allow Offred to be without fault, as she does not confront him – also, while Luke does not resist the changes in government, neither does she.

This questioning of her own feelings and the feelings of others is not merely in her recollection of the past. In the section entitled “Shopping”, Offred describes the room in which she lives,

A window, two white curtains. Under the window, a window seat with a little cushion. When the window is partly open – it only opens partly – the air can come in and make the curtains move. I can sit in the chair, or on the window seat, hands folded, and watch this. Sunlight comes in through the window too, and falls on the floor, which is made of wood, in narrow strips, highly polished. I can smell the polish. There’s a rug on the floor, oval, of braided rags. This is the kind of touch they like: folk art, archaic, made by women, in their spare time, from things that have no further use. A return to traditional values. Waste not want not. I am not being wasted. Why do I want?⁷⁰

Through her satirical use of cliché, Offred shows her discontent, while at the same time leaving her speculation unanswered in the form of a rhetorical question. Perhaps she has asked herself the wrong question, not “why do I want?” but, rather, she should be asking, “what do I want?” While she cannot be described as a ‘heroine’ per se, the reader cannot deny Offred’s intelligence or perceptiveness. As the body of the novel is told by Offred herself, the reader comes to appreciate her awareness of irony as well as her dark sense of humour. The appeal of her character is that she is an ordinary woman, not unlike a ‘real’ world ordinary woman, who has been thrown – against her will – into an extraordinary situation. She cannot be described as a ‘feminist’, as she remembers being uncomfortable and even embarrassed by her own

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, p. 17

mother's feminist activism and the subsequent unusual childhood she experienced, as she remembers:

I went into my bedroom, to be out of their way. They were talking too much, and too loudly. They ignored me, and I resented them. My mother and her rowdy friends. I didn't see why she had to dress that way, in overalls, as if she were young; or to swear so much.

You're such a prude, she would say to me, in a tone of voice that was on the whole pleased. She liked being more outrageous than I was, more rebellious. Adolescents are always such prudes.

Part of my disapproval was that, I'm sure: perfunctory, routine. But also I wanted from her a life more ceremonious, less subject to makeshift and decampment.⁷¹

She also cannot be described as a very moral character as she began her relationship with her husband under the mantle of an illicit affair which has led to her becoming a Handmaid under the new regime. Her ordinariness and her sense of humour are what make her appealing as a character, and the fact that she took her freedoms for granted are a warning offered by Atwood to the reader that change is not always for the good.

The return to "traditional values" that Offred suggests the new regime covets is a suggestion to the reader, by Atwood, that the ideologies of Gilead are not necessarily new – they are, in fact, a return to the putative "archaic" ideologies of a bygone, Puritanical and Christian fundamentalist era which holds the ideals of the Old Testament above all else. Gilead is thus a theocracy, in other words, a government in which there is no separation between state and religion. It is not surprising then that the official vocabulary of Gilead incorporates much religious terminology and includes many biblical references, other than the name of the state itself. Gileadean theocracy is based on Old Testament Christianity and therefore all religions other than

⁷¹ *Ibid*, p. 190

the official state religion have been suppressed. In fundamentalist Gilead, “reigning in women was essential to maintaining social cohesion.”⁷² The result is the firm enforcement of the “authority of the nuclear, patriarchal family” where “children are to be obedient to their parents, wives [and other females in the household] to their husbands [or Commanders], and husbands [or Commanders] to their God.”⁷³ The leadership of Gilead, at its heart, placed the “control [of] women and the expression of sexuality” at the forefront⁷⁴. This extends from the notion that “from a position of power it is attractive and easy to assume that others will go along with your preferences” and it is “precisely this tendency [which] has functioned [in order] to justify actions which harm women’s interests.”⁷⁵ As such, both men and women have been reduced to their stereotypes within this new society, thus denying them identity within the system which has entrapped them.

Offred describes the creation of the state of Gilead half way through the novel: “It was after the catastrophe, when they shot the President and machine-gunned the Congress and the army declared a state of emergency. They blamed it on the Islamic fanatics, at the time.”⁷⁶ An aspect of the novel which is relevant to the present state of affairs in America, England and in the Middle East, in relation to the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York and the subsequent “War on Terror” which is constantly discussed in the media – an unintentional element as Atwood herself could more than likely not have predicted these events that have taken place in

⁷² Howland, C. (ed). *Religious Fundamentalisms and the Human Rights of Women*. New York: Palgrave Publishers Ltd., 2001. p. 10

⁷³ *Ibid*, p. 11

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p. 9

⁷⁵ Meyer, J. “Power and Love: Conflicting Conceptual Schemata” in *The Gender of Power*. Leijenaar, M. and Oldersma, J. (eds). London: Sage Publications, 1991. p. 32

⁷⁶ Atwood, M. *The Handmaid’s Tale*. London: Virago, 1990. p. 183

the new millennium, although there were many signs that these events were pending. After the state of emergency was called, the new leadership abandoned the American Constitution, thus allowing them to create a new state based on new ideology, based on a strict Christian fundamentalist philosophy. Those who do not conform to the ideologies of the new regime are banished to what are called the “Colonies” – regions that have reached toxic levels of pollution – or they are publicly executed and displayed for all to see on “Walls” within the cities. The new government of Gilead is not, strictly speaking, a colonial government as the events which took place can more accurately be described as a coup d’état – the events which took place were from within the state, and not from forceful occupation from without as would be the case in colonialism. While the connection between the two cannot be taken for granted, the political situation within Gilead is such as to be “a sudden seizure of power.”⁷⁷ The power structures set up within the new Gilead mimic those of a colonial seizure of power in that they do not represent the best interests of the population, only of a small fraction of the population. The overthrow of the government and the creation of Gilead is therefore not necessarily a classical example of colonialism, but could rather be defined as intellectual colonialism in a neo-colonialist sense, as the development of the economic and social structures of the new government have disempowered those not considered worthy of empowerment.

The friction within Gilead which has been created by the discourse of the new regime offers the reader interesting insight into the psyches of the characters that

⁷⁷ Wells, A. “The Coup d’Etat in Theory and Practice: Independent Black Africa in the 1960s” in *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 79, No. 4., Jan., 1974. p. 872

Atwood has created. The new is seen as terrifying while Atwood, emphasising the significance of time, favours the past through Offred's continual use of flashbacks. The change to Gilead is not uncontested, however, as the constant references to war in the novel suggest guerrilla resistance by those who favour the old ideology. The reader is first introduced to the violent resistance on page 92,

First, the front lines. They are not lines, really: the war seems to be going on in many places at once. Wooded hills, seen from above, the trees a sickly yellow. I wish she'd fix the colour. The Appalachian Highlands, says the voice-over, where the Angels of the Apocalypse, Fourth Division, are smoking out a pocket of Baptist guerrillas, with air support from the Twenty-first Battalion of the Angels of Light. We are shown two helicopters, black ones with silver wings painted on the sides. Below them, a clump of trees explodes.

We are also told of other resistance, the first suggestion of an underground struggle to smuggle people out of Gilead into Canada and beyond much like the movement into Canada of conscientious objectors to the American war in Vietnam, as the news broadcast continues.

Now he's telling us that an underground espionage ring has been cracked by a team of Eyes, working with an inside informant. The ring has been smuggling precious national resources across the border into Canada. "Five members of the heretical sect of Quakers have been arrested," he says, smiling blandly, "and more arrests are anticipated." Two of the Quakers appear on screen, a man and a woman. They look terrified, but they're trying to preserve some dignity in front of the camera. The man has a huge dark mark on his forehead; the woman's veil has been torn off, and her hair falls in strands over her face. Both of them are about fifty.⁷⁸

The reader is warned, however, prior to this description of the news that the media is not to be believed without question. Offred suggests that citizens of Gilead are only told what the leaders of the new regime would like them to believe. The "Eyes" she refers to being the Eyes of God – Gilead's secret police.

Serena always lets us watch the news.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, p. 93

Such as it is: who knows if any of it is true? It could be old clips, it could be faked. But I watch it anyway, hoping to be able to read beneath it. Any news, now, is better than none.⁷⁹

Atwood suggests the subjectivity of the media, showing again her postmodern analysis. Offred's distrust of the truth of the news suggests to the reader that discourses are unstable or constructed – in this case, for political motives. Offred continues to suggest:

What he's telling us, his level smile implies, is for our own good. Everything will be all right soon. I promise. There will be peace. You must trust. You must go to sleep, like good children.
He tells us what we long to believe. He's very convincing.
I struggle against him. He's like an old movie star, I tell myself, with false teeth and a face job. At the same time I stray towards him, like one hypnotised. If only it were true. If only I could believe.⁸⁰

Atwood's meaning is clear, there is more than one way to understand or read a situation. Meaning is open, rather than closed; as such the true meaning of an event or description of an event is not actually apparent as it is meant to make for thought rather than to provide simple answers. This aspect brought to the fore by Atwood's use of Serena Joy as a conduit for the above information. Like many of her other gestures, her allowing the 'staff' of her household to watch the news suggests that she is simultaneously subversive of and subservient to the regime. Hence Atwood uses Serena Joy, at this point in the novel, to accentuate the notion of multiple readings, not only of a situation, but also of character.

While the reality, or appearance thereof in the text, seems to be acceptable, Atwood does attempt to subvert male-dominated forms of writing. Her narrative is non-realist and, as the reader discovers as the novel progresses, questions linear narrative by switching between the past and present tense forms by her use of

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, p. 93

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, p. 93

Offred's flashbacks. The narrative itself can therefore be seen as being an attack on the symbolic order that arises from modern patriarchy as colonial and patriarchal ideology itself favours linear realism. The conventions of linear realism rest on the "structures of consent and containment" as they shut out "various forms of indeterminacy, instability and social fragmentation."⁸¹ Through the mode of linear realism, or verticality as Irigaray defines it, "female genealogy must be suppressed, in favour of the relation son-Father, of the idealisation of the father and the husband as patriarchs."⁸² Atwood leaves the novel itself open-ended, through her use of an unusual inclusion of an epilogue which she has termed "Historical Notes". The novel therefore shows a rejection of an authoritarian and definitive resolution of the issues which have been raised by the text itself, thus inviting multiple interpretations. In the view of feminist critics such as Rosemary Jackson, non-realist forms of literature such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, can assist women writers to "disturb what is commonly perceived as being 'real', 'natural', or 'inevitable'."⁸³ The non-realist aspect of the text is an interesting one, as Offred's descriptions of the places, events and people whom she encounters are often described in realist detail, thus heightening the reader's understanding that the novel and its subject matter are fictional but still possible. As such the novel itself is an imaginative account of other possibilities thus problematising the notion of 'meaning' and the process of making meaning.

While the reader understands that since he or she is reading Offred's account of her life in Gilead that the story itself has been told, however she, Offred, questions whom the audience of her story shall be. She even doubts whether she is telling a

⁸¹ Hirsch, M. *The Mother/Daughter Plot. Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989. p. 14

⁸² As translated by Hirsch, M. *The Mother/Daughter Plot. Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989. p. 43

⁸³ Eagleton, M. *Feminist Literary Theory, A Reader*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, Ltd., 1986. p. 90

story at all. The narrative doubt that Atwood creates through Offred shows a postmodern, Lyotardian, incredulity towards metanarratives, and a consequent lack of authority. Offred states in section three, entitled 'Night' that:

I would like to believe this is a story I'm telling. I need to believe it. I must believe it. Those who can believe that such stories are only stories have a better chance.

If it's a story I'm telling, then I have control over the ending. There will be an ending, to the story, and real life will come after it. I can pick up where I left off.

It isn't a story I'm telling.

It is also a story I'm telling, in my head, as I go along.

Tell, rather than write, because I have nothing to write with and writing is in any case forbidden. But if it's a story, even in my head, I must be telling it to someone. You don't tell a story only to yourself. There's always someone else.

Even when there is no one.

A story is like a letter. *Dear You*, I'll say. Just *you*, without a name. Attaching a name attaches *you* to the world of fact, which is riskier, more hazardous: who knows what the chances are out there, of survival, yours? I will say *you, you*, like an old love song. *You* can mean more than one.

You can mean thousands.

I'm not in any immediate danger, I'll say to you.

I'll pretend you can hear me.

But it's no good, because I know you can't.⁸⁴

Atwood, through Offred, is here showing that the significance in the act of writing lies with the reader or audience for the tale. Offred's retelling of her 'story' is the only way that she is able to endure her situation. She also asserts the notion that if her tale is, in fact, fictional then there will be an end to it and all things 'real' will return and those she has lost – her husband and her daughter – will be returned to her. Offred shows that she is on the brink of madness and she is keeping herself sane through the act of storytelling; however the terror that she faces creates a doubt in her ability to express exactly what it is that she is experiencing and, more significantly, she shows a sincere doubt that anyone is listening to her. Through Offred's expression of narrative doubt, Atwood expresses uncertainty about the Other: that its voice will be heard.

⁸⁴ Atwood, M. *The Handmaid's Tale*. London: Virago, 1990. p. 49 – 51

Atwood therefore suggests that an understanding of the voice of the Other is reliant on the self and so one uses one's own substrata of experience in the process of making meaning, which in turn creates a complex relationship between narrative and reality. The fact that Offred fears that she will not be heard and the inability of the Handmaids to read and write suggests Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's conceptualisation of the subaltern as she discusses the double subjection of the colonised woman, as well as the "silencing of the muted native subject, in the form of the 'subaltern' woman" while testifying to the fact that "there is no space from where the subaltern (sexed) subject can speak."⁸⁵ This is significant to the role of the Handmaids in the novel, yet these women – Offred in particular – were once allowed a voice and are therefore subaltern women with a difference.

In this essay, Spivak's main concern seems to be about whether "the subaltern can speak for herself in her own voice or whether she is doomed only to be represented and spoken for by the intellectual"⁸⁶. According to Spivak the subaltern is portrayed as being a "helpless, 'voiceless' victim of [the] 'epistemic violence', with no recourse to any form of agency, her voice only to be mediated by the intellectual."⁸⁷ Spivak's conceptualisation of the subaltern then, is a term belonging to those who have no voice, although she differentiates between those for whom the hegemonic dominant discourse offers no support and no understanding in the sense that the voice of the subaltern never really enters the stage of dialogic utterance where there is any aspect of good faith hearing. The subaltern's body is set apart from the

⁸⁵ Spivak, G. C. "Can The Subaltern Speak? Speculations on Widow Sacrifice" (1985) *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. in Nelson, C. and Grossberg, L. (eds). London: McMillan, 1988.

⁸⁶ Rhode, A. C. "The Subaltern 'Speaks': Agency in Neshani Andrea's *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu*" Master's Dissertation for the University of South Africa, 2003. p. 5

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, p. 5

collective in terms of the fight for political independence. In this specific novel, that the Handmaids are not even allowed to be the mothers of their own children makes them more like bonded prostitutes, which in turn creates a family environment “where the family, the machine for the socialisation of the female body through affective coding, has itself been broken.”⁸⁸ As such, the position of the subaltern is not one of “agency, subjectivity or sexuality, or citizenship, as these terms are commonly understood.”⁸⁹ While not all women, according to Spivak, can be considered to be placed in the role of subaltern, “she remains clear on the matter of women’s systematic silencing.”⁹⁰ This aspect is significant for Offred and the women in the novel as a whole, as Spivak argues that while women can always talk, they cannot ‘speak’ “insofar as the act of speaking requires a listener.”⁹¹ While the reader understands that Offred’s story does, in fact, have a reader or a listener, said reader/listener is mediated by the male voice in the concluding “Historical Notes”, Professor James Darcy Pieixoto. As such, she does not actually have a true voice, as her entire story is moderated by the final statements of the male (patriarchal) colonial power. This “dominant masculine text is the site of the plot detail, history and tradition” while Offred’s narrative occupies “a much more tenuous, marginal place.”⁹² The reader is then forced, at the end of the novel, to realise that Offred’s identity, and those of the other characters described in the text, is a function of the way in which official others, namely the reader and Professor Pieixoto, have constructed her. When

⁸⁸ Spivak, G. S. “Women in Difference: Mahasweta Devi’s Douloti the Bountiful” in *Nationalisms and Sexualities*, Parker, A. et. al. (eds), London: Routledge, 1992. p. 101

⁸⁹ Senft, T. “Gayatri Spivak and the Dark Continent of E’criture Feminine” in *Women and Performance*, Vol. 7, No. 2, Issue 14 -15, Spring, 1995. p. 2

⁹⁰ Thapa, M. “Spivak and the Subaltern Woman” in *The Kathmandu Post Review of Books*, Vol. 3, No. 13, October, 1998. p. 2

⁹¹ *Ibid*, p. 2

⁹² Mahoney, E. “Writing So To Speak: The Feminist Dystopia”, in *Image and Power, Women in Fiction in the Twentieth Century*, Sceats, S. and Cunningham, G. Essex: Longman Group Limited, 1996. p. 33

Offred says, in the above quotation, “I’ll pretend you can hear me. But it’s no good, because I know you can’t,” she supports Spivak’s notion that the subaltern cannot speak, not because she has no voice, but because there is no one to hear her, while Atwood points out to the reader that women’s own narratives are silenced, not because they have no recognised voice but because there is no one to listen to them in good faith.

In the new societal structure of Gileadean society, the roles of women and men alike have strict definitions that are in some ways similar, but in most ways different to the society which it has replaced. The different roles, in fact almost a caste system, become more apparent as the novel progresses, but from the beginning the reader is led to understand the roles of the most significant elements of the society. The first of these to which the reader is introduced, and the most significant in relation to the text itself, is that of the Handmaids. These are women of child-bearing age whose lives before the change to Gilead were not considered, by the new government, to be moral – for example women who have been divorced, had abortions or were lesbians. The Handmaids are made to wear red ‘habits’ in order for their role in the society to be evident.

I get up out of the chair, advance my feet into the sunlight, in their red shoes, flat-heeled to save the spine and not for dancing. The red gloves are lying on the bed. I pick them up, pull them onto my hands, finger by finger. Everything except the wings around my face is red: the colour of blood, which defines us.⁹³

The red which the Handmaids wear is not only symbolic of blood which we understand to mean menstrual blood, but also of the scarlet in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*. In this novel the main character, Hester Prynne, who bears an

⁹³ Atwood, M. *The Handmaid’s Tale*. London: Virago, 1990. p. 18

illegitimate child, is made to wear the scarlet letter *A* on her dress as punishment for her adultery. As has been mentioned above, the Handmaids are women who are not considered to be morally irreproachable by the new order and therefore the red of their dresses suggests prior indiscretions under the previous government. This fact is highlighted by Rita's disapproval of Offred.

Rita sees me and nods, whether in greeting or in simple acknowledgement of my presence it's hard to say, and wipes her floury hands on her apron and rummages in the kitchen drawer for the token book. Frowning, she tears out three tokens and hands them to me. Her face might be kindly if she would smile. But the frown isn't personal: it's the red dress she disapproves of, and what it stands for.⁹⁴

It is not merely the red of the dress that is significant, but also its similarity to a nun's habit from the time before. The Handmaids are therefore shown as being 'fallen women' who need to do penance for their sins. They are "Sister[s], dipped in blood."⁹⁵ Offred fits this stereotype as her relationship with her husband, Luke, began as an illicit affair as Luke was married at the time.

Due to toxic pollution many of the men and women living in Gilead are infertile, thus Atwood explores the ramifications of a problem of under-population – perhaps something which readers in the present day would find unusual. The Handmaids have been created in order to allow those of the upper-classes, the Wives, who wear blue, and Commanders, who wear black, that are infertile, to bear children. As could be expected in such a male-dominated society, although it is possible that the men may be the cause of the infertility, it is fundamental to the Gileadean power structures that men be held beyond reproach and therefore the blame for infertility

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 19

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 19

falls squarely onto the shoulders of the Wives and Handmaids. Handmaids who cannot conceive after their third placement with a Commander are deemed to be barren, and are sent to the 'colonies' with all the other so-called "Unwomen" - resulting in many genuinely fertile Handmaids seeking to impregnate themselves using alternative methods, such as with another fertile male like, for instance, a doctor. The penalty for such actions is death, thus creating an atmosphere of dread of the discovery of such 'infidelity' thus adding to the sense of inequality that Atwood intends to create.

The fear of being found out, and being punished as a consequence is one which is interesting in this novel. Pamela Cooper, in her article entitled "Sexual Surveillance and Medical Authority in Two Versions of *The Handmaid's Tale*" explores this subject in great detail. According to Cooper, the position of the medical doctors within Gileadean society enables them great power over the women they examine. She places the Guardians, Gilead's regular police force, as the most obvious "manifestation of surveillance as a politically-charged security system."⁹⁶ However, she places the character of the Doctor encountered by Offred in Chapter 11 as a more significant, in her opinion, to the Foucaultian concepts of panopticism, surveillance and voyeurism. Foucault, his book *Discipline and Punish, The Birth of The Prison*, analyses Jeremy Bentham's "Panopticon", which he describes as a building with a tower at its centre, with a building containing cells surrounding the central tower. He writes of this structure:

⁹⁶ Cooper, P. "Sexual Surveillance and Medical Authority in Two Versions of *The Handmaid's Tale*" in *Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 28, Issue. 4, Spring, 1995. p. 1

At the periphery, an annular building; at the centre, a tower; this tower is pierced with wide windows that open onto the inner side of the ring; the periphic building is divided into cells, each of which extends the whole width of the building; they have two windows, one on the inside, corresponding to the windows of the tower; the other on the outside, allows the light to cross the cell from one end to the other.⁹⁷

This “machine” represents, for Foucault, the way in which both discipline and punishment work in modern society, with

The major effect of the Panopticon [being]: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers. To achieve this, it is at once too much and too little that the prisoner should be constantly observed by an inspector: too little, for what matters is that he knows himself to be observed; too much, because he has no need in fact of being so. In view of this, Bentham laid down the principle that power should be visible and unverifiable.⁹⁸

In this regard, Foucault suggests that the disciplinary society is one in which the state controls all methods of coercion and at the same time operates throughout the entire society. Cooper positions the doctor at the centre of the “Panopticon” of Gileadean society, and having read her argument, I must agree with her positioning him thus. However, the notion of surveillance throughout Gileadean society is one which I find more interesting in relation to the ideas of both gender and of madness.

According to the ideas of Foucault, within a system of surveillance there is “no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints.”⁹⁹ All that is required is “a

⁹⁷ Foucault, M. *Discipline and Punish, The Birth of The Prison*, translated by Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage Books, 1995. p. 200

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 201

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 201

gaze.”¹⁰⁰ It is the concept of “eyes” and surveillance which Atwood uses to great effect. In her characterisation of the Gileadean secret police, The Eyes, she makes Foucault’s notion of “an inspecting gaze” come to life. The fear of constant surveillance by all members of Gileadean society has its effects through what Foucault terms “interiorisation” of the fear of being found out to be doing something which the society could judge to be wrong. Just as each member of this society has a function, so too do they all have rules which govern their behaviour. The Commander himself fears being found out, as does Serena Joy when she suggests to Offred that a clandestine affair with the Commander’s aide, Nick, could produce a child; Offred herself also fears being “seen” by the Eyes when she moves through the house to Nick’s bedroom above the garage in order for her to regain an element of her own individuality. Cooper argues that the sexual practices defined by Gileadean law

Forcibly transform intimate private acts into public rituals where the fertility and sexuality of women are turned into performance and spectacle. In this way the constant monitoring, at once puritanical and lascivious, that shapes gender inequality in Gilead ironically generates its own pornography: a sadistic drama of the female body dehumanised through social rituals and representations which inscribe it – through and through, inside out – as public property.¹⁰¹

The ending of the novel, the “Historical Notes” does suggest, however, that “the punitive mechanisms of surveillance represented in the novel can be evaded – that there are places safely unreachable by the Cerberian Eyes of Gilead.”¹⁰² It is interesting how new laws in America, such as the Patriot Act of 2003, have been passed since the events of September 11th that allow the American government to monitor the movements and behaviour of its citizens. While the surveillance and voyeurism critiqued by Atwood in this novel would have been unrealistic and

¹⁰⁰ Foucault, M. “The Eye of Power” In *Power/Knowledge and selected interviews and other writings 1972–1977* by Michel Foucault. New York: Pantheon Books 1980

¹⁰¹ Cooper, P. “Sexual Surveillance and Medical Authority in Two Versions of *The Handmaid’s Tale*” in *Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 28, Issue. 4, Spring, 1995. p. 7

¹⁰² *Ibid*, p. 10

shocking to readers in the 1980's, present-day readers would find this idea less unbelievable than would those who read the novel twenty years ago.

The basic premise of the social function of the Handmaids is based on the Biblical story of “Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel” (Ruth, 4:11) as is found in the book of Genesis in the following chapters and verses: 29:31–35; 30:1–24. According to the Bible, Jacob (who received the blessing of his father through deception) was deceived by his father in law when he received Leah in marriage, as he had worked for his father in law, Laban, in order to marry Rachel – Leah’s younger sister. Laban, however, said to Jacob, “It is not our custom here to give the younger daughter in marriage before the older one. Finish this daughter’s bridal week and then we will give you the younger one also, in return for another seven years of work” (Genesis 29: 26). While Jacob worked as Laban requested, God realized that Leah was not loved and therefore opened her womb, but in the process made Rachel barren. As Leah became a mother to three sons, Rachel became jealous and therefore offered Jacob Bilhah, her maidservant, as a surrogate, saying, “Here is Bilhah, my maidservant. Sleep with her so that she can bear children for me and that through her I too can build a family” (Genesis 30: 3). Therefore through the surrogate, Rachel bore Jacob two sons who, amongst Rachel and Leah’s other sons, formed the twelve tribes of Israel which became divided into two: those who served God at the altar and those served God only in public.

The role of the Handmaid is thus like that of Bilhah, Rachel's maidservant, to copulate with the Commander in a ceremony that is as long as it is complicated, in order to conceive a child for the Wife.

The Commander knocks at the door. The knock is prescribed: the sitting room is supposed to be Serena Joy's territory, he's supposed to ask permission to enter it. She likes to keep him waiting. It's a little thing, but in this household little things mean a lot. Tonight, however, she doesn't even get that, because before Serena Joy can speak he steps forward into the room anyway. Maybe he's forgotten the protocol, but maybe it's deliberate.¹⁰³

Offred makes sure to inform the reader, once again, that power is something which is to be valued within the limits of Gileadean society. Serena Joy has power only within her own home, and over her husband she wields little power; however she makes sure to assume every small crumb of that power which is available to her as she does not know when such power will be taken away. Offred then returns to a realist mode of narrative in her description of the Commander as he enters the parlor:

The Commander has on his black uniform, in which he looks like a museum guard. A semi-retired man, genial but wary, killing time. But only at first glance. After that he looks like a midwestern bank president, with his straight neatly brushed silver hair, his sober posture, shoulders a little stooped. And after that there is his moustache, silver also, and after that his chin, which really you can't miss. When you get down as far as the chin he looks like a vodka ad, in a glossy magazine, of times gone by.¹⁰⁴

Offred renders her subject in such a way as to give the reader, or 'listener', the illusion of an actual and ordinary experience. The familiarity of the description makes the sexual aspect of the Ceremony which is to follow seem more unrealistic and unfamiliar to the reader even while the description of it suggests that, to Offred, the Ceremonial sex is entirely familiar and normal.

¹⁰³ Atwood, M. *The Handmaid's Tale*. London: Virago, 1990. p. 97

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, p. 97

The ceremony goes as usual.

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

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

My arms are raised; she holds my hands, each of mine in each of hers. This is supposed to signify that we are one flesh, one being. What it really means is that she is in control, of the process and thus of the product. If any. The rings on her left hand cut into my fingers. It may or may not be revenge.¹⁰⁵

Offred describes the ceremony as something to which she has already become accustomed. Thus the reader is lead to understand that this action has taken place many times since she was made a Handmaid. Once again the animosity between Serena Joy, a Wife, and her Handmaid is patently clear and can be seen as a result of the competitiveness fostered by modernity and patriarchy. The leaders of Gilead and the creation of the Ceremony, do not merely justify the act on the grounds of the low fertility rate, but they claim it as a Biblically sanctioned tradition – thus Atwood suggests to the reader that no element of Gileadean society is new or entirely different from that in which we live at present; what Atwood achieves, then is a taking of elements of our present world and making a new, oppressive one out of them.

The Ceremony itself is obviously not an experience with which Serena Joy feels comfortable, however, she remains in a position of power which she, as a Wife, accepts with not a small amount of revenge – or so Offred seems to assume.

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

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, p. 104

for. There wasn't a lot of choice but there was some, and this is what I chose.¹⁰⁶

The tone of Offred's description becomes resigned to the situation, and tends towards the ironic, and even the humorous. Atwood therefore creates a world that, much like Foucault describes in his theory of the body, shows how a woman's "sexual body is both the principle instrument and effect [of] disciplinary power."¹⁰⁷ Thus Atwood creates a vivid example – through the Ceremony – of "how the various strategies of oppression around the female body – from ideological representations of femininity to concrete procedures of confinement and bodily control – [are] central to the maintenance of hierarchical social relations."¹⁰⁸

In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault suggests that the will to knowledge is linked to social constructions of sexuality, as access to truth and power are set up in relation to the socialization of gender. According to Spivak, the prescribed use of the Handmaid's bodies makes them into bonded prostitutes. This is significant for the position of the Handmaids in relation to the society as, "unlike the bonded labourer, the bonded prostitute does not sell labour, but rather, she sells her own body" and it is in this way that "she is twice alienated from capital [in the Marxist sense]."¹⁰⁹ Her first level of alienation "strips her of her right to be considered a worker" which is perhaps why other characters in the novel, such as Rita, interact with Offred in a way that is condescending¹¹⁰. While the second alienation she experiences is the stripping "of her right to be a human subject, since for her the value of her sexuality (her

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, p. 104 – 105

¹⁰⁷ McNay, *Foucault and Feminism*. Oxford: Polity Press, 1992. p. 31

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*, p. 31

¹⁰⁹ Senft, T. "Gayatri Spivak and the Dark Continent of E'criture Feminine" in *Women and Performance*, Vol. 7, No. 2, Issue 14 -15, Spring, 1995. p. 1

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*

subjectivity) is precisely that which has been determined for her by others.”¹¹¹ It is precisely this “alienation of the bonded prostitute from her own body” which is cause for Spivak to argue that although both “women and men are collectively connected to this regulative logic of loans, the woman’s body is apart, it is elsewhere.”¹¹²

The notion that the woman’s body is “elsewhere” suggests that it is not necessarily the description of the sex act itself that is disturbing to the reader. It is, rather, the descriptive details of the room in which the ceremony takes place that is interesting. In the midst of her description of this section of the ceremony, Offred takes the time to describe the room:

What I could see, if I were to open my eyes, would be the large white canopy of Serena Joy’s outsized colonial-style four-poster bed, suspended like a sagging cloud above us, a cloud sprigged with tiny drops of silver rain, which, if you looked at them closely, would turn out to be four-petalled flowers. I would not see the carpet, which is white, or the sprigged curtains and skirted dressing table with its silver-backed brush and mirror set; only the canopy, which manages to suggest at one and the same time, by the gauziness of its fabric and its heavy downward curve, both ethereality and matter. Or the sail of a ship. Big-bellied sails, they used to say in poems. Bellying. Propelled forward by a swollen belly.¹¹³

Offred’s metaphoric description of the bed and the room is interesting considering the event that is taking place. The testimony which Offred presents to her audience is one that is ever-changing, allowing her to be detached from the situation. However, she does return to the reason for the Ceremony in her description of the swollen-bellied sails, as she herself can only progress within her society should she conceive a child. Her attempt towards detachment from the unpleasant situation is continued as her description progresses as she states,

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 2

¹¹² *Ibid*, p. 2

¹¹³ Atwood, M. *The Handmaid’s Tale*. London: Virago, 1990. p. 104

Therefore I lie still and picture the unseen canopy over my head. I remember Queen Victoria's advice to her daughter. *Close your eyes and think of England*. But this is not England. I wish he would hurry up. Maybe I'm crazy and this is some new kind of therapy. I wish it were true; then I could get better and this would go away.¹¹⁴

The movement away from a metaphoric detachment towards irony and humor is evident in Offred's comment about Queen Victoria, and yet the horror of the situation and her exasperation at it is also evident in her wish that the situation were not real, and that she herself were elsewhere. She uses humor and irony to make the situation more bearable and to allow her to maintain a sense of detachment. The situation in which Offred finds herself is in many ways similar to that suggested by McNay in response to Foucault:

how, in the nineteenth century, the female body was controlled through a process of hysterization. By representing the female body as saturated with sex and inherently pathological, a certain knowledge was established which allowed for the regulation of desire and sexual relations with the ultimate aim of discipline and control of family populations. The female body is placed 'in organic communication with the social body (whose regulated fecundity it was supposed to ensure), the family space (of which it had to be a substantial and functional element), and the life of children'.¹¹⁵

This novel can therefore be said to be set in a situation which is familiar because of its Biblical references, its relationship to the practices of the nineteenth century, and because of its relationship to the popular culture of the 1980's, and yet it is relatively unfamiliar to the reader. The fictional country of Gilead is obsessed with gender roles, power and the subjugation of women, while for this reader the idea is dystopian, the idea might be ideal for some. Atwood does not deny this possibility, however the context and the events in the novel suggest that she intends for Gilead to

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 105

¹¹⁵ McNay, L. *Foucault and Feminism*. Oxford: Polity Press, 1992. p. 31

be a place which is far from ideal. In such a male dominated society, according to Terry Eagleton, “man is the founding principle and woman the excluded opposite of this; and as long as such a distinction is tightly held in place the whole system can function effectively.”¹¹⁶ While Atwood does not deny this, she attempts to deconstruct it, as she attempts to describe an environment in which “man needs this other even though he spurns it, [he] is constrained to give a positive identity to what he regards as no-thing.”¹¹⁷

Atwood explores this point with the Commander – Serena Joy needs Offred in order to bear a child, as does the Commander. The act of the Ceremony is not one which appears to be enjoyed by the Commander. As Offred describes:

Serena Joy grips my hands as if it is not she, not I, who’s being fucked, as if she finds it either pleasurable or painful, and the Commander fucks, with a regular two-four marching stroke, on and on like a tap dripping. He is preoccupied, like a man humming to himself in the shower without knowing he’s humming; like a man who has other things on his mind. It’s as if he’s somewhere else, waiting for himself to come, drumming his fingers on the table while he waits. There’s an impatience in his rhythm now. But isn’t this everyone’s wet dream, two women at once? They used to say that. Exciting, they used to say.

What’s going on in this room, under Serena Joy’s silvery canopy, is not exciting. It has nothing to do with passion or love or romance or any of those notions we used to titillate ourselves with.¹¹⁸

The mechanical nature of the act adds to the humour of the scene that Offred creates, with a hint of sadness added through the use of the past tense “used” suggesting a better past. The act is scripted, formal and also anonymous and therefore none of the participants take any pleasure in it; thus highlighting the fact that sex has become simply a means to an end, one which – should circumstances allow – can be entirely

¹¹⁶ Eagleton, T. *Literary Theory, An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996. p. 132

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 133

¹¹⁸ Atwood, M. *The Handmaid’s Tale*. London: Virago, 1990. p. 105

done away with. All love and romance has been removed from the situation and thus the definition of power as being completely separate from love can be seen as a “way to delete love from the agenda, in keeping with viricentric cultural traditions.”¹¹⁹ Sexual pleasure in women is therefore depicted by Gileadean law as being perverse and unnecessary, with the idea being that men are allowed pleasure in the sexual act with many women, denying the monogamy suggested by love. Most significant in regards to the situation of the Commander’s role in this act is that, “This is not recreation, even for the Commander. This is serious business. The Commander, too, is doing his duty.”¹²⁰ Thus Atwood shows the reader that it is not only the women of Gilead that are duty-bound, but also the men who have a role to play in the development of the new regime. This role is not one that is pleasurable, it would seem, thus creating a situation in which, men and women alike, detach themselves from reality – each in his or her own way.

The Commander is himself an unusual character. He is described as being a significant figure in the creation of Gilead and its rules, and yet he takes much pleasure in breaking the rules he himself has had a hand in creating. Offred admits to not understanding the Commander’s actions. Her first meeting with the Commander in private terrifies and perplexes her:

I follow the downstairs corridor back, past the door that leads into the kitchen, along to the next door, his. I stand outside it, feeling like a child who’s been summoned, at school, to the principal’s office. What have I done wrong? My presence here is illegal. It’s forbidden for us to be alone with the Commanders. We are for breeding purposes: we aren’t concubines, geisha girls, courtesans. On the contrary: everything possible has been done to remove us from that category. There is supposed to be nothing entertaining

¹¹⁹ Meyer, J. “Power and Love: Conflicting Conceptual Schemata” in *The Gender of Power*. Leijenaar, M. and Oldersma, J. (eds). London: Sage Publications, 1991. p. 33

¹²⁰ Atwood, M. *The Handmaid’s Tale*. London: Virago, 1990. p. 105

about us, no room is to be permitted for the flowering of secret lusts; no special favours are to be wheedled, by them or us, there are to be no toeholds for love. We are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices.

So why does he want to see me, at night, alone?¹²¹

The situation in Gilead is highlighted by Offred's fears. She fears persecution by Serena Joy, and she fears being discovered by the Eyes. Yet, she fears the Commander himself above all else.

If I'm caught, it's to Serena's tender mercies I'll be delivered. He isn't supposed to meddle in such household discipline, that's women's business. After that, reclassification. I could become an Unwoman. But to refuse to see him could be worse. There's no doubt about who holds the real power.¹²²

The power structures of Gilead are finally obvious to the reader. Serena Joy may have power over Offred, but the patriarch, the Commander, holds the true power in the household. At this point in the novel his character is unknown to the reader, as all that is understood is that he has a power provided for him purely because he is a man and the head of the household. Yet Offred continues to suggest that he is not as powerful as he may seem at first glance,

But there must be something he wants, from me. To want is to have a weakness. It's this weakness, whatever it is, that entices me. It's a small crack in the wall, before now impenetrable. If I press my eye to it, this weakness of his, I may be able to see my way clear. I want to know what he wants.¹²³

Again it is curiosity which could be Offred's downfall. However, more significant than her curiosity is her ability to realise that the Commander has a weakness. As a man, he is fallible because of this weakness – like Adam, it is possible for him to fall from grace and be removed from his Edenic Gilead. What his weakness is exactly is only revealed as the chapter progresses, as Offred enters his study:

¹²¹ *Ibid*, p. 146

¹²² *Ibid*, p. 146

¹²³ *Ibid*, p. 146

What is on the other side is normal life. I should say: what is on the other side looks like normal life. There is a desk, of course, with a Computalk on it, and a black leather chair behind it. There's a potted plant on the desk, a pen-holder set, papers. There's an oriental rug on the floor, a fireplace without a fire in it. There's a small sofa, covered in brown plush, a television set, an end table, a couple of chairs.¹²⁴

However, it is not this appearance of normality that fascinates Offred, as she continues to describe the room:

But all around the walls there are bookcases. They're filled with books. Books and books and books, right out in plain view, no locks, no boxes. No wonder we can't come in here. It's an oasis of the forbidden. I try not to stare.¹²⁵

As has been briefly mentioned above, all women of Gilead – with the exception of the Aunts – are forbidden from reading. In this novel Atwood explores the notion of language as a tool of power. As suggested by Lacan, the women of Gilead are limited in their ability to conceptualise and experience the world in which they find themselves because they are not allowed to read. As is suggested by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus, Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, “[w]e owe to Jacques Lacan the discovery of this fertile domain of a code of the unconscious, incorporating the entire chain – or several chains – of meaning.”¹²⁶ Lacan himself hypothesises that the unconscious is like a language since it is through language that we are able to be aware and conceptualise. It is not only the new regime's banning of reading in women that suggests the relationship between language and power, however, as the new regime also warps reality through language in order to serve the needs of the new government.

¹²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 147

¹²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 147

¹²⁶ Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. *Anti-Oedipus, Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992. p. 38

Elaine Showalter describes language as being a “system that structures and shapes our perception and understanding of reality. Furthermore, it is seen as a male-constructed classification system into which women must force their experience.”¹²⁷ Atwood extends this problem in her creation of the governmental system in Gilead, such as the system of titles which has been introduced to define all members of the society, much in the same way as they are defined by their mode of dress, specifically the colours which they are instructed to wear. More than this is the stripping of names within this society. All the Handmaids are stripped of their original names. Offred herself often regrets the loss of her name as to her it represents the loss of her previous self through her forced change in personality. The loss of their names serves to dehumanise those who are seen as insignificant in the community. This shows the position of women in society as living in a “relatively inarticulate position; they constitute a ‘muted group’ whose reality does not get represented.”¹²⁸ While this quotation based on Showalter’s writings expresses what feminist theorists believe to be happening in current society, Atwood chooses to highlight this problem by making the issue a central one in this novel.

It is not merely the books that stand before her that interest both Offred and the reader. The other interesting individual present in the room is the Commander himself, a character that is familiar in that he represents the symbolic order present in the Gileadean government:

The Commander is standing in front of the fireless fireplace, back to it, one elbow on the carved wooden overmantle, other hand in his pocket. It’s such a studied pose, something of the country squire, some old come-on from a

¹²⁷ Spaul, S. “Gynocriticism” in *Feminist Readings/Feminists Reading*, Mills, S., Pearce, L., Spaul, S. and Millard, E. (eds). New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989. p. 90

¹²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 92

glossy men's mag. He probably decided ahead of time that he'd be standing like that when I came in. When I knocked he probably rushed over to the fireplace and propped himself up. He should have a black patch, over one eye, a cravat with horseshoes on it.¹²⁹

The satirical image of pre-Gileadean 'gallantry', as Offred describes him as appearing like a "country squire" posed from a glossy men's magazine, is contradictory to the image the reader has expected. This is not a representation of a man in the height of his power. His intentions are, as yet, unclear, as Offred admits to her fear in his presence and thus she suggests that his intentions are sinister. Yet, his "smile is not sinister or predatory."¹³⁰ What is it, then, that he desires from her? Offred, in her curious and dramatic manner, heightens the tension of the scene she describes by focusing on the Commander's hesitation:

"I want..." he says.

I try not to lean forward. Yes? Yes, yes? What, then? What does he want? But I won't give it away, this eagerness of mine. It's a bargaining session, things are about to be exchanged. She who does not hesitate is lost. I'm not giving anything away: selling only.

"I would like -" he says. "This will sound silly." And he does look embarrassed, *sheepish* was the word, the way men used to look once. He's old enough to remember how to look that way, and to remember also how appealing women once found it. The young ones don't know these tricks. They've never had to use them.¹³¹

The impression of him that we are given is one which is surprising. The reader is lead to expect him to be cruel, and yet his nervousness, his "sheepishness", is endearing. He appears to be reasonable and polite, thus leading both Offred and the reader into a false sense of security, as is only revealed as he takes Offred to "Jezebel's" later on in the narrative. He does shock Offred during this encounter between them, however, as he reveals his intentions for asking her to join him in his private study:

¹²⁹ Atwood, M. *The Handmaid's Tale*. London: Virago, 1990. p. 147

¹³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 148

¹³¹ *Ibid*, p. 148

“I’d like you to play a game of Scrabble with me,” he says.
I hold myself absolutely rigid. I keep my face unmoving. So that’s what’s in the forbidden room! Scrabble! I want to laugh, shriek with laughter, fall off my chair. This was once the game of old women, old men, in the summers or in retirement villas, to be played when there was nothing good on television.¹³²

The innocence of the game is no longer what it was as Offred reminisces. The change of governments has created the defamiliarisation of even such common objects:

Now of course it’s something different. Now it’s forbidden, for us. Now it’s dangerous. Now it’s indecent. Now it’s something he can’t do with his Wife. Now it’s desirable. Now he’s compromised himself. It’s as if he’s offered me drugs.¹³³

Atwood has made something that would, in the real world which is inhabited by the reader, seem completely ordinary become something “desirable” by its now being forbidden. While this is an obvious use of defamiliarisation, there is more than merely defamiliarisation at work here for the reader, as she emphasises the fact that the self is not stable but is moulded by social and personal circumstances. Atwood suggests that in this totalitarian state, Offred and the Commander (as representations of oppressed individuals, Offred more so than the Commander) endure their situation almost willingly as they are allowed small freedoms and limited amounts of power. While the reader does not understand Offred’s inability to openly resist the situation in which she finds herself (as she is an intelligent and outspoken character in relation to her narrative) her reasons for capitulation begin to clarify themselves as she allows herself to be lulled into submission by small triumphs over those who have forced her into a situation with which she does not feel comfortable. As she is not given options, Offred has to either create or seize them which explains why she agrees to the Commander’s request. Atwood therefore renders her characters interestingly

¹³² *Ibid*, p. 148

¹³³ *Ibid*, p. 149

ambiguous and ambivalent to the totalitarian system, and it is through these details that Atwood's narrative is lifted out of the simplicities of a political tract.

The pleasure Offred takes in playing Scrabble with the Commander is such that she almost seems to forget that her situation remains, in essence, unchanged:

We play two games. *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. The counters are like candies, made of peppermint, cool like that. Humbugs, those were called. I would like to put them into my mouth. They would taste also of lime. The letter C. Crisp, slightly acid on the tongue, delicious.¹³⁴

The Commander's character is still not clear in this description of the game. Offred is still unsure of what exactly is required of her, as she says, "I still haven't discovered what the terms are, what I will be able to ask for, in exchange."¹³⁵ The uncertainty in which she has lived in her recent past has made her weary of small acts of kindness and complicity. As their evening together comes to an end, his intentions become clearer to Offred.

This is like being on a date. This is like sneaking in the dorm after hours. This is conspiracy.
"Thank you," he says. "For the game." Then he says, "I want you to kiss me."¹³⁶

This request sparks a more active resistance in Offred, as she comes to the conclusion that she will be made to pay for her small freedom with sex. She begins to contemplate murder:

¹³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 149

¹³⁵ *Ibid*, p. 149

¹³⁶ *Ibid*, p. 149

I think about how I could take the back of the toilet apart, the toilet in my own bathroom, on a bath night, quickly and quietly, so Cora outside on the chair would not hear me. I could get the sharp lever out and hide it in my sleeve, and smuggle it into the Commander's study, the next time, because after a request like that there's always a next time, whether you say yes or no. I think about how I could approach the Commander, to kiss him, here alone, and take off his jacket, as if to allow or invite something further, some approach to true love, and put my arms around him and slip the lever out from the sleeve and drive the sharp end into him suddenly, between his ribs. I think about the blood coming out of him, hot as soup, sexual, over my hands.¹³⁷

The sexuality of the act is interesting, as Offred sees the Commander's blood as being sexual, and yet her desire to murder him extends from his perceived sexual advances.

In this instance, as in many others in the text itself, "the preferences of the more-powerful party have been projected onto the less powerful, denying them a right to their own wishes, preferences and goals."¹³⁸ All the possibilities associated with her imagining his murder are, however, irrelevant, as she continues to state:

In fact, I don't think about anything of the kind. I put it in only afterwards. Maybe I should have thought about that, at the time, but I didn't. As I said, this is a reconstruction.¹³⁹

The constructedness of the text is once again highlighted, as Atwood questions the authority of the author – in this case the fictional author. Atwood's reflexivity suggests the life/art question in that she questions the possibility of providing "a coherent and rational picture of anything so complex as life and reality."¹⁴⁰

The relationship between Offred and the Commander is most significant; however, in an understanding of the creation of Gilead as he explains to her why

¹³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 149 – 150

¹³⁸ Meyer, J. "Power and Love: Conflicting Conceptual Schemata" in *The Gender of Power*, Davis, K., Leijenaar, M. and Oldersma, J. (eds). London: Sage Publications, 1991. p. 32

¹³⁹ Atwood, M. *The Handmaid's Tale*. London: Virago, 1990. p. 150

¹⁴⁰ Cuddon, J. A. *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory, Third Edition*. London: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1992. p. 780

exactly the change was – in his opinion – necessary for the furthering of society. In this regard Offred remembers:

The problem wasn't only with the women, he says. The main problem was with the men. There was nothing for them anymore.

Nothing? I say. But they had ...

There was nothing for them to do, he says.

They could make money, I say, a little nastily. Right now I'm not afraid of him. It's hard to be afraid of a man who is sitting there watching you put on hand lotion. This lack of fear is dangerous.

It's not enough, he says. It's too abstract. I mean there was nothing for them to do with women.

What do you mean? I say. What about all the Pornycorners, it was all over the place, they even had it motorized.

I'm not talking about sex, he says. That was part of it, 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. Men were turning off on sex, even. They were turning off on marriage.

Do they feel now? I say.

Yes, he says, looking at me. They do. He stands up, comes around the desk to the chair where I'm sitting. He puts his hands on my shoulders, from behind. I can't see him.

I like to know what you think, his voice says, from behind me.

I don't think a lot, I say lightly. What he wants is intimacy, but I can't give him that.

There's hardly any point in my thinking, is there? I say. What I think doesn't matter.

Which is the only reason he can tell me things.

Come now, he says, pressing a little with his hands. I'm interested in your opinion. You're intelligent enough, you must have an opinion.

About what? I say.

What we've done, he says. How things have worked out.

I hold myself very still. I try to empty my mind. I think about the sky, at night, when there's no moon. I have no opinion, I say.

He sighs, relaxes his hands, but leaves them on my shoulders. He knows what I think, all right.

You can't make an omelette without breaking any eggs, is what he says. We thought we could do better.

Better? I say in a small voice. How can he think this is better?

Better never means better for everyone, he says. It always means worse, for some.¹⁴¹

¹⁴¹ Atwood, M. *The Handmaid's Tale*. London: Virago, 1990. p. 222

The inclusion of this entire section is important for an understanding of the situation of society within Gilead, both from an 'inside' and 'outside' perspective. This scene relates to Foucault's view of this type of power in relation to discipline, as he writes:

A 'political anatomy', which is also a 'mechanics of power', was being born; it defined how one may have a hold over others' bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed and the efficiency that one determines. Thus discipline produces subjected and practised bodies, 'docile' bodies. Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience).¹⁴²

While the Commander suggests that this level of control is the norm, Offred's silent yet understood disapproval of the system suggests that there is an alternative. Atwood suggests the postcolonial concept of hybridity within this interaction, in the sense of that described by Homi Bhabha, as the relationship between Offred and the Commander suggests "the process by which the colonial governing authority [in this case, the Commander and the rest of the new government of Gilead] undertakes to translate the identity of the colonised (the *Other*) [in this case, Offred and the other men and women of Gilead who have been forced to live within new societal roles] within a singular universal framework, but then fails, producing something familiar but new."¹⁴³ In this aspect, Atwood implies that the idea that a single culture or identity can be completely pure or essential is questionable. What is created in the interactions between the Commander, as coloniser, and Offred, as colonised, is what Bhabha calls the 'third space', the "liminal or in-between space, where the 'cutting edge of translation and negotiation' occurs."¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² Foucault, M. *Discipline and Punish, The Birth of The Prison*, translated by Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage Books, 1995. p. 138

¹⁴³ Meredith, P. "Hybridity in the Third Space: Re-thinking Bi-cultural Politics in Aotearoa/New Zealand", unpublished paper presented to Te Oru Maori Research and Development Conference, 7 -9 July, 1998, Massey University. p. 2

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p. 2

The significance of this third space, created between these two characters is that it allows the restrictive boundaries created by the society in which they find themselves to be blurred, which in turn causes the “established categorisations of culture and identity” to be questioned¹⁴⁵. As such there is no “primordial unity or fixity” of cultural meaning and representation within this ambivalent space¹⁴⁶. This space, both Atwood and Bhabha contend, is the location of a space of empowerment as it creates a space for both understanding and resistance within which the “other” itself becomes a “site of desire as well as repudiation.”¹⁴⁷ In this respect, the Commander desires Offred’s opinion and she desires his need for her opinion. The relationship is therefore necessary both for Offred’s (passive) resistance to the governing order but also for the Commander’s “resistance to [his] own act of polarization via the trace of the other [Offred] which [he] cannot erase from [himself].”¹⁴⁸ This relationship is necessary for the Commander, as is emphasised by the phrase “*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*” which translates roughly to “don’t let the bastards grind you down”, the only connection Offred has to the previous Handmaid posted to this Commander, which implies that the previous Handmaid had had a similar relationship with the Commander to the one Offred currently enjoys. Even though this relationship ended poorly, the Commander, in his need for communication with the ‘other’ has begun another relationship in the same mould as the first, as this type of interaction is notably absent from his relationship with his Wife, Serena Joy.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p. 3

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p. 3

¹⁴⁷ Rajan. B. “*The Location of Culture*”. (Book Review) in *Modern Philology* Vol. 95, No. 4, 1998. p. 491

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p. 491

The third space then, is a space in which representation as integrated, open and expanding is challenged. As such the third space itself highlights the disjunctions between the realities of the participants. Both Offred and the Commander have realised a loss of freedom to some extent, thus allowing them to come together in order to find themselves through communication with others and a denial of strict polarities. The reason for the interaction between the Commander and the Handmaid is thus one of catharsis, as for both participants the relationship is self-validating. For the Commander, it is a space in which to assuage his guilt and for Offred it is a space to return to the comforts of the past. The creation of a space of emotional release breaks down the stereotypes that have been created by the Gileadean system, thus making the free interaction within a strict hierarchy surprising to the reader. This space allows both the Commander and Offred to reconcile the ambivalence of the situation in which they find themselves, thus allowing them to remain relatively sane.

The character of Serena Joy, the Wife in whose control Offred is placed, offers an interesting perspective of the role of women in Gileadean society. The reader is never told her real name, as is noted in the “Historical Notes” section of the novel. Offred refers to her only as “Serena Joy”. The meeting of the two women is interesting as it offers the reader an immediate insight into Serena Joy’s feelings towards the Handmaids in general and Offred in particular:

I was expecting a Martha, but it was her instead, in her long powder-blue robe, unmistakeable.
So, you’re the new one, she said. 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. There is push and shove, these days, over such toeholds.¹⁴⁹

This introduction to a Wife under the new government is interesting in many ways. Firstly, and most significant to an understanding of Atwood's intention as regards the text, the power-struggles that take place under the new rules is underlined – the uncertainty which faces the different role-players in such an unusual society is described as being political and constantly changing. This aspect is highlighted by Offred's comment that "[t]he threshold of a new house is a lonely place"¹⁵⁰ by which she could also mean that the threshold of a new *life* is a lonely place. More interesting, though, is Offred's description of Serena Joy's appearance:

She waited until the car started up and pulled away. I wasn't looking at her face, but at the part of her I could see with my head lowered: her blue waist, thickened, her left hand on the ivory head of her cane, the large diamonds on the ring finger, which must once have been fine and was still finely kept, the fingernail at the end of the knuckly finger filed to a gentle curving point. It was like an ironic smile, on that finger; like something mocking her.¹⁵¹

Offred's description of the "ironic smile" which mocks Serena Joy suggests that the relationship between the two women is not a simple one. This relationship is, in fact, incredibly complicated as Serena Joy's insecurity in her position of power leads her to feel envy towards the Handmaids that have been stationed in her home – Offred in particular. Offred draws attention to this problem as she comments:

I didn't say anything to her. Aunt Lydia said it was best not to speak unless they asked you a direct question. Try to think of it from their point of view, she said, her hands clasped and wrung together, her nervous pleading smile. It isn't easy for them.¹⁵²

This statement is ironic, possibly more so as it relates to Serena Joy, because a large portion of the Wives were involved in the creation of the rules of the new regime. The

¹⁴⁹ Atwood, M. *The Handmaid's Tale*. London: Virago, 1990. p. 23

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid*, p. 24

¹⁵¹ *Ibid*, p. 24

¹⁵² *Ibid*, p. 24

idea that it might not be easy for them to adjust to the changes shows the truth behind the idea that one must be careful lest one achieve that which one desires.

Offred appears to be fascinated by Serena Joy, as she describes her appearance in great detail, likely because Serena Joy is familiar to her and thus reminds her of the time before the change to Gilead:

Now her face was on a level with mine. I thought I recognised her; or at least there was something familiar about her. A little of her hair was showing, from under her veil. It was still blonde. I thought then that maybe she bleached it, that hair dye was something else that she could get through the black market, but I know now that it really is blonde. Her eyebrows were plucked into thin arched lines, which gave her a permanent look of surprise, or outrage, or inquisitiveness, such as you might see on a startled child, but below them her eyelids were tired-looking. Not so her eyes, which were the flat hostile blue of a midsummer sky in bright sunlight, a blue that shuts you out. Her nose must once have been what was once called cute but now was too small for her face. Her face was not fat but it was large. Two lines led downwards from the corners of her mouth; between them was her chin, clenched like a fist.¹⁵³

Offred's motives for such a detailed description of Serena Joy can be said to include her inquisitiveness, attentiveness and her sharp perception, however as she describes her retrospectively, the reader can assume this description is ironic and also suggestive of the relationship to be experienced between the two women – most notably the animosity that Serena Joy shows towards her at the conclusion of the novel. While Offred is aware of the fact that her position as a Handmaid entitles her to a degree of respect in her posting, she still realises that the rules dictating her behaviour have forced her to become a puppet in the role she is forced to play,

They used to have dolls, for little girls, that would talk if you pulled a string at the back; I thought I was sounding like that, voice of a monotone, voice of a doll.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³ *Ibid*, p. 25

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. 26

As a character Serena Joy presents an example of envy, as described by Melanie Klein. Klein focuses on envy as a malignant form of aggression because the persecutory nature of envy comes about through the fact that it is directed toward the good elements of the envied person. Serena Joy's envy towards Offred is because a Handmaid is "a reproach to her; and a necessity."¹⁵⁵ Serena Joy needs Offred in order to have a family but she wishes to destroy the possibility of a family by revealing Offred's secret relationship with the Commander to the Eyes. The significance of the envious relationship is that it involves a dyad – including only the person who envies and the person who is envied – much like the relationship between mother and child. The confrontation between Serena Joy and Offred is significant:

"Well?" she asks. "Nothing to say for yourself?"
 I look up at her. "About what?" I manage to stammer. As soon as it's out it sounds impudent.
 "Look," she says. She brings her free hand from behind her back. It's her cloak she's holding, the winter one. "There was lipstick on it," she says. "How could you be so vulgar? I *told* him..." She drops the cloak, she's holding something else, her hand all bone. She throws that down as well. The purple sequins fall, slithering down over the step like snakeskin, glittering in the sunlight. "Behind my back," she says. "You could have left me something." Does she love him, after all? She raises her cane. I think she's going to hit me, but she doesn't. "Pick up that disgusting thing and get to your room. Just like the other one. A slut. You'll end up the same."¹⁵⁶

Serena's envy has destroyed her hope that Offred will be the one to produce a child for her. Her envy of the Handmaids as a group of women, and Offred in particular, is what has made her into a paranoid character who finds very little good in the world. Serena Joy can therefore be said to revert to the paranoid schizoid position in times of stress or trauma, for her unpleasure [sic] is thus experienced as persecutory and frustrating. Serena Joy's feelings, including her need to control Offred, her triumph over Offred and her contempt for Offred, all characterise the manic relation, or triad

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p. 23

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p. 299

of feelings, that counteract possible feelings of loss and guilt over the relationship¹⁵⁷. Offred's actions are interpreted as persecutory and must therefore be defended against – which allows Serena Joy to reveal Offred's actions to the Eyes.

Serena Joy's actions are, however, not unexpected as early in the novel Aunt Lydia suggests the possibility of conflict between Wives and Handmaids:

It's not the husbands you have to watch out for, said Aunt Lydia, it's the Wives. You should always try to imagine what they must be feeling. Of course they will resent you. It is only natural. Try to feel for them. Aunt Lydia thought she was very good at feeling for other people. Try to pity them. Forgive them, for they know not what they do. Again the tremulous smile, of a beggar, the weak-eyed blinking, the gaze upwards, through the round steel-rimmed glasses, towards the back of the classroom, as if the green-painted plaster ceiling were opening and God on a cloud of Pink Pearl face powder were coming down through the wires and sprinkler plumbing. You must realise that they are defeated women. They have been unable...¹⁵⁸

Through her comically satirical description of Aunt Lydia – using references to the Bible – and her detailed description of her facial expressions, Offred foreshadows the disintegration of her relationship with Serena Joy whose failure to produce children is one which defines her as a woman in this society and it is this failure that causes her to become “something gone sour, like old milk.”¹⁵⁹ The reference to sour milk is significant to Klein, in regards to object relations theory. Serena Joy's milk has gone sour in that she is not able to bear children, possibly because of her age, as Offred suggests that Serena Joy is much older than herself. Her breasts can therefore be seen as bad part objects as they do not deliver good milk to an infant, once again emphasising that she remains in the paranoid schizoid position as her frustration is experienced as a bodily experience thus not allowing her to experience the guilt associated with the depressive position. Her expression of triumph when she reports

¹⁵⁷ Segal, H. *Introduction to the Work of Melanie Klein*. London: Karnac Books and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1988

¹⁵⁸ Atwood, M. *The Handmaid's Tale*. London: Virago, 1990. p. 56

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid*, p. 56

Offred to the Eyes is an open denial of the “depressive feelings of valuing and caring” as an object of contempt “is not worthy of guilt” thus allowing Serena Joy to deny all positive feelings towards Offred¹⁶⁰. Due to the nature of the relationship between the Wives and the Handmaids, Serena Joy’s use of manic defences assist her as they act as a defence against the experience of loss and guilt¹⁶¹.

Another character that reverts to the more primitive paranoid schizoid position in times of stress is Janine, another of the Handmaids that Offred meets at the Rachel and Leah Centre. Janine’s behaviour and mental state deteriorate visibly through the course of the novel, as she moves from a state of acceptance to a state of complete psychosis. She is a minor character in the narrative, but her character is significant to the motives of this analysis. The reader is first introduced to Janine towards the start of the novel as Offred tells us,

We learned to whisper almost without sound. In the semi-darkness we could stretch out our arms, when the Aunts weren’t looking, and touch each other’s hands across space. We learned to lip-read, our heads flat on the beds, turned sideways, watching each other’s mouths. In this way we exchanged names, from bed to bed:

Alma. *Janine*. Dolores. Moira. June.¹⁶²

The second time Janine is mentioned we are told that she, as a Handmaid, is pregnant:

As I pass she looks full at me, into my eyes, and I know who she is. She was at the Red Centre with me, one of Aunt Lydia’s pets. I never liked her. Her name, in the time before, was Janine.

Janine looks at me, then, and around the corner of her mouth there is the trace of a smirk. She glances down to where my own belly lies flat under my red robe, and the wings cover her face. I can see only a little of her forehead, and the pinkish tip of her nose.¹⁶³

¹⁶⁰ Segal, H. *Introduction to the Work of Melanie Klein*. London: Karnac Books and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1988. p. 83

¹⁶¹ *Ibid*, p. 82

¹⁶² Italics my own. Atwood, M. *The Handmaid’s Tale*. London: Virago, 1990. p. 14

¹⁶³ *Ibid*, p. 37

Janine is therefore described as being fickle and suggestible from the start of the narrative. She shows off her pregnancy to the other Handmaids in order to make them jealous of her fertility, but she is also described as “one of Aunt Lydia’s pets” suggesting that she is one of the characters that have accepted the new regime without question. For Offred, this capitulation has made Janine an object of disdain – unlike Moira, Offred’s best friend from the time before, who openly rejects the new regime and who struggles violently for her freedom.

Janine’s fickle personality is further expanded upon as Offred continues to remember her time at the Rachel and Leah Centre:

It’s Janine, telling about how she was gang-raped at fourteen and had an abortion. She told the same story last week. She seemed almost proud of it, while she was telling. It may not even be true. At Testifying, it’s safer to make things up than to say you have nothing to reveal. But since it’s Janine, it’s probably more or less true.
But *whose* fault was it? Aunt Helena says, holding up one plump finger.
Her fault, *her* fault, *her* fault, we chant in unison.
Who led them on? Aunt Helena beams, pleased with us.
She did. *She* did. *She* did.
Why did God allow such a terrible thing to happen?
Teach her a *lesson*. Teach her a *lesson*. Teach her a *lesson*.¹⁶⁴

This description of one of the ‘lessons’ taught at the Rachel and Leah Centre suggests that perhaps Janine has achieved the depressive position as she feels guilt over the damage that she has done, however not in a positive sense. Her expression of her past experiences should be a positive expression of her trauma, but the teachings of the Aunts make it into a negative experience. Offred continues to describe the event:

Last week Janine burst into tears. Aunt Helena made her kneel at the front of the classroom, hands behind her back, where we could all see her, her red face and dripping nose. Her hair dull blonde, her eyelashes so light they seemed not there, the lost eyelashes of someone who’s been in a fire. Burned eyes. She looked disgusting: weak, squirmy, blotchy, pink, like a newborn mouse. None

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid*, p. 82

of us wanted to look like that, ever. For a moment, even though we knew what was being done to her, we despised her.
Crybaby. Crybaby. Crybaby.
We meant it, which is the bad part.¹⁶⁵

The fact that Offred describes Janine as a looking like a newborn mouse suggests the significance of early experiences to future development. That Janine bursts into tears shows her capacity to mourn and feel concern for that which has been lost – her innocence in this case – and her expression of her trauma suggests her desire to integrate her trauma into her personality. Offred sees Janine’s demonstration as something to be sneered at, however, on closer inspection Janine’s actions can be seen as an attempt to achieve integration of the love-hate emotions into her psyche.

Janine’s attempts do not result in a cohesive personality; as the narrative progresses and the reader is reintroduced to her, a disintegration of her character is visible; after the Salvaging she descends into what Klein termed the ‘manic release’:

“You will find your partners and re-form your line,” Aunt Lydia says into the mike. Few pay attention to her. A woman comes towards us, walking as if she’s feeling her way with her feet, in the dark: Janine. There’s a smear of blood across her cheek, and more of it on her white headdress. She’s smiling, a bright diminutive smile. Her eyes have become loose.
“Hi there,” she says. “How are you doing?” She’s holding something, tightly, in her right hand. It’s a clump of blond hair. She gives a small giggle.
“Janine,” I say. But she’s let go, totally now, she’s in free fall, she’s in withdrawal.
“You have a nice day,” she says, and walks past us towards the gate.¹⁶⁶

Janine has detached herself completely from the situation in which she finds herself by denying the seriousness of the situation – reverting to a more infantile state of psychic functioning. According to Klein, this denial is what underlies the structure of what we understand to be manic depressive states. As such, Janine’s unsuccessful attempts at reparation have created in her a pathological personality disorder, in other

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid*, p. 82

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid*, p. 292

words she has retreated to more pathological or infantile internal object relations. The disintegration of her ego is the psyche's final, desperate, attempt to remove anxiety and guilt and is therefore "the manifestation of a breakdown in adult functioning."¹⁶⁷

This so-called retreat is shunned by Offred, as she says,

I look after her. Easy out, is what I think. I don't even feel sorry for her, although I should. I feel angry. I'm not proud of myself for this, or for any of it. But then, that's the point.¹⁶⁸

Offred, in her anger at Janine's disintegration, shows the societal and patriarchal disdain for psychological weaknesses. This is ironic, as Offred has herself exhibited psychological weakness. Atwood's depiction of Janine and Offred's reaction to her psychosis offers the reader an interesting portrayal of Otherness. Offred herself can be described as Other in the Gileadean society as she is a woman and an immoral woman in the eyes of the new government, and yet she views Janine as Other in relation to Western civilisation's systems of signification. This double-Othering suggests the significance of madness in the novel itself because the idea of "madness" relates strongly to the debate surrounding alternate perceptions of reality. The relationship between Janine and Offred can be compared to the relationship between Bertha Rochester and Jane Eyre as described in Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* as they describe Bertha as Jane's "hunger, rebellion and rage."¹⁶⁹ Offred is angered by Janine and yet one could say that Janine's breakdown allows Offred the freedom to continue being 'sane'. Much like Bertha Rochester, Janine's madness "epitomises her difference from [the society in which she lives], and

¹⁶⁷ Likierman, M. *Melanie Klein: Her Work in Context*. London and New York: Continuum, 2001. p. 164

¹⁶⁸ Atwood, M. *The Handmaid's Tale*. London: Virago, 1990. p. 292 – 293

¹⁶⁹ Gilbert, S. M. and Gubar, S. *The Madwoman in the Attic, The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979. p. 370

her refusal to accept [society's] perception and values as the norm."¹⁷⁰ Yet Offred herself refuses these norms, although she does it in a different way.

As mentioned above, Atwood rejects the Utopian spirit expressed by many feminist writers such as Gertrude Stein, Joyce Carol Oates and Maya Angelou, thus exhibiting a post-modern radical uncertainty. One of the more interesting elements of her novel is that it is ambiguous "in that Atwood's near-future America of patriarchal repression casts women just as much the enemy of women as are men" such as her representation of the Aunts and the Wives¹⁷¹. Atwood therefore chooses to create a feminist dystopia because it "offers a potentially radical space in which women can unravel and re-imagine existing power relations."¹⁷²

It is through the characters of Serena Joy and Janine that Klein's theories can be related to postcolonialism and power, as the colonial and patriarchal are built on the creation and maintenance of order, while Janine's disintegration and Serena Joy's envy represent disorder or chaos. The altering of power and the questioning of Western, patriarchal normativity within postcolonial thought is highlighted by the reactions of these women to the situation in which they find themselves and in the way they are treated within the system. Klein's theories deviate from Freud in their emphasis on the relationship between mother and child thus deemphasising the position of the male in the family and centring the mother-child attachment:

¹⁷⁰ Spaul, S. "Gynocriticism" in *Feminist Readings/Feminists Reading*, Mills, S., Pearce, L., Spaul, S. and Millard, E. (eds). New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989. p. 95

¹⁷¹ Widmer, K. *Counterings, Utopian Dialectics in Contemporary Contexts*. London: U.M.I. Research Press, 1988. p.75

¹⁷² Mahoney, E. "Writing So To Speak: The Feminist Dystopia", in *Image and Power, Women in Fiction in the Twentieth Century*, Sceats, S. and Cunningham, G. Essex: Longman Group Limited, 1996. p. 29

Although Klein's narrative is not specifically gendered, it revolves, for children of both sexes, around the figure of the mother. The father merely allows the girl to repeat her earlier interaction with her mother and thus to deal with it more effectively. The mother remains an important psychic presence throughout life, motivating even the production of art and culture.¹⁷³

With the emphasis on the significance of the mother in the psychic functioning of the child, Klein denies the patriarchal insistence that childhood development is sparked by the father. In Klein's model the father can be absent, and yet the mother cannot, suggesting that the power in the sphere of the home has shifted, in much the same way as Serena Joy maintains the power within the sphere of her home, and Janine's use of a surrogate male as father to her child suggests the infertility of the male within the space of the home. In a similar way to the way in which Klein's theories of the relationship between mother and infant arise from the inability of Freud's theories to deal with the position of the mother, "the idea of 'post-colonial literary theory' emerges from the inability of European theory to deal adequately with the complexities and varied cultural provenance of post-colonial writing."¹⁷⁴ Atwood therefore uses both her female and male characters to problematise the overarching ideas expressed by society.

The Handmaid's Tale offers both author and reader an image of a possible society consisting of a social order and values that are partially at odds with what the reader understands to be the present or 'real' society. The fact that the setting of the novel is not realistic, and not necessarily even practically possible in its Christian fundamentalist dogma, is exactly the point of the dystopia as it, as a form, shows the

¹⁷³ Hirsch, M. *The Mother/Daughter Plot, Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989. p. 100

¹⁷⁴ Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G. and Tiffin, H. *The Empire Writes Back, Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. London and New York: Routledge, 1991. p. 11

reader possible ways of thinking and relating that our present 'real' society disregards and discredits. The heroine of the novel, referred to by the possessively patronymic "Offred" (extending from the addition of the prefix "of" to the name of the Commander to whom she belongs, in this case Fred), tells her own story – Atwood uses the autobiographical form in order to encourage an identification between the reader, the character and the author, while highlighting the fictive nature of writing itself, as well as reading and the process of understanding the text. Offred's story then is an attempt at representing a woman's experience from a woman's perspective and is therefore critical of patriarchy. The purpose of such a story is to counteract the stereotyping and marginalising of women by the process of writing by men, thus attempting to represent and respond to the process of articulation. Atwood's intention with this novel can be said to attempt to emphasise the individuality of the subject, namely Offred, through the process of problematising the universalist and normative ideology of society, while also calling attention to possibilities for resistance to the dictatorial external forces of oppression and subjugation.

CHAPTER THREE

Alias Grace

“When the fit is going off, the patient mostly cries bitterly, sometimes knowing all, and at other times nothing, of what has taken place”¹⁷⁵

Alias Grace is Atwood’s ninth published novel and, unlike *The Handmaid’s Tale* it tells the story of an actual woman, Grace Marks, and her life in the early to mid Nineteenth Century. This novel is a turnaround from her previous novels as it represents historically real people with real stories, but it is also reminiscent of her previous novels as it responds to the past while commenting on situations that were present at the time of the writing, in this case 1996. Also like *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *Surfacing* and *Cat’s Eye*, *Alias Grace* focuses on the relationship between self and society and the search for identity that is central to an understanding of the role of the individual within society. This novel, unlike *The Handmaid’s Tale*, is set in Canada itself, which allows Atwood to focus on issues of Canadian identity as well as allowing her to focus on the Canadian landscape as she suggests issues of emigration as well as the problems related to colonialism and displacement.

The eponymous protagonist, Grace Marks, the so-called “celebrated murderess” is sentenced to life imprisonment in the Kingston Penitentiary on the 13th of November, 1843, along with her supposed accomplice, James McDermot. The two were convicted for the murders of Thomas Kinnear and his mistress, Nancy Montgomery, in their home in Richmond Hill near Toronto. While Atwood follows the true tale of Grace’s life up until her pardon and move to America in the late

¹⁷⁵ Beeton, I. *Beeton’s Book of Household Management*, 1859-61. Reprinted by Chancellor Press, 1994. First published in 1859 – 61.

1800's, she does allow room for her own imagination to fill in the missing pieces of the puzzle of Grace's story. Atwood's use of her imagination to complete the story is due to her disappointment in the "facts" portrayed by Susanna Moodie. Atwood defends her use of her imagination by writing that she "was often deeply frustrated as well, not by what those past recorders had written down, but by what they'd left out."¹⁷⁶ Her distrust of Moodie's historical biases led her to try to recreate events in response to the discrepancies she found in the literature. While this element of postcolonial historical revisionism is significant to the novel, Atwood's main focus is broader in scope and more fascinating in terms of the modern reader's understanding of gender as she attempts to focus on the constructedness of gender and of the discourses surrounding societal concepts of sanity and insanity in relation to gender. The main focus of the novel is therefore not the truth or fiction found in the story of Grace Marks' life, but rather it is the constructedness of history and of madness. The focus of this analysis is therefore not on whether or not Atwood's account of Marks' life is historically accurate, but rather on the strategy Atwood uses to discuss the problems associated with the classification of madness within a society that relies on subjective analysis.

Atwood's interest in Grace's story began when she read Susanna Moodie's recounting of the case and her meetings with Grace in her 1853 book, *Life in the Clearings*. Atwood's fascination with the story, and her consternation with the largely unknown details of the events which led to Marks' incarceration and pardon, led in turn to her recreation of the life of one of the most notorious convicted murderesses of the time. As she herself states in the "Author's Afterward" to the novel,

¹⁷⁶ Atwood, M. *Curious Pursuits Occasional Writing*. Great Britain: Virago Press, 2005. p. 225

I have not changed any known facts, although the written accounts are so contradictory that few facts emerge and are unequivocally 'known'. When in doubt, I have tried to choose the most likely possibility, while accommodating all possibilities wherever feasible. Where mere hints and outright gaps exist in the records, I have felt free to invent.¹⁷⁷

The events in the novel are portrayed through narrative (that of Grace and that of Dr. Jordan) as well as through letters which allows the reader access to more personal forms of interaction, while also problematising the notion of objectivity present in most Victorian fiction. The novel-as-quilt, or the mosaic-like qualities of the text itself, as well as Atwood's construction of the character of Grace, suggest the multifaceted nature of history, on both a personal and socio-cultural level suggesting that elements of the history, and the story, have been excluded in order to represent the ideology of the person telling it. It is therefore a Victorian novel written in the Twentieth Century. This postcolonial historical revisionism allows Atwood to explore a classic feminist problem: the attempt to regain lost voices. Atwood herself is germane about the limitations of the project of rediscovering Grace's voice as she foregrounds the fictional elements of the text while questioning the authenticity of the narrative she herself has written.

The constructedness of the novel is highlighted by Atwood's use of metafiction. This element is foregrounded by the "Author's Afterword" in much the same way that Offred's narrative is qualified by Professor Piexoto's concluding remarks in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Both novels interpret themselves as the metafictional elements of the novels assume the role of the reader, therefore forcing the reader to look at and acknowledge the reflexivity and artifice of the texts themselves. As a fantastical recreation of Grace Mark's life, Atwood uses

¹⁷⁷ Atwood, M. *Alias Grace*. London: Virago, 1997. p. 560

intertextuality as a postmodern element, by using a notorious historical figure in order to question the accuracy of the historical accounts of the events of Marks' life which, as the novel progresses, the reader understands to be more complicated than was originally documented. Through her inclusion of extracts from other sources Atwood forces the reader to realise that there are different ways in which history can be interpreted or read. Atwood can therefore be said to raise questions about meaning, perception and reality through the self-referential element of the "Author's Afterword". The mixture of genres, narrative voices and modes of representation within *Alias Grace* problematises the idea of the 'novel' as a whole as it is a fragmented text which contains internal intertextuality which stresses the indeterminacy of meaning through the rewriting of historical knowledge. This is essential in Atwood's exploration of gender and insanity as it forces the reader to realise that just as history is subjective, so is the definition of madness.

From the beginning it is clear that the novel, much like Grace's life, is labyrinthine and multi-vocal as the plot itself is full of twists, dead-ends and surprises. Atwood constantly qualifies and revises the plot, creating a dialogue between history and fiction, thereby highlighting the relationship between past and present reality. The historical factors in the text, while framed in the form of epitaphs by the historical accounts of Mrs. Moodie among others, are focused on accurate portrayals of domestic life. The focus on the minutiae of everyday life is evident in Atwood's fiction as a whole and can be seen to play a major role in *The Handmaid's Tale* as well as in *Alias Grace* as she suggests the poetic elements of domesticity. The centring of the domestic within both novels serves an important role as it foregrounds the roles of both men and women within society, as well as highlighting the

significance of class distinctions. The novel takes place within the centre of Victorian society, a society that can be defined as smug, self-regarding, narrow and stratified in terms of class and gender. Atwood thus recreates a society that is closed and that fears the open, the outside and the challenging.

The novel begins with a quotation from Moodie's *Life in the Clearings*, which reads:

At the time of my visit, there were only forty women in the Penitentiary. This speaks much for the superior moral training of the feebler sex. My chief object in visiting their department was to look at the celebrated murderess, Grace Marks, of whom I had heard a great deal, not only from the public papers, but from the gentleman who defended her upon her trial, and whose pleading saved her from the gallows, on which her wretched accomplice closed his guilty career.¹⁷⁸

The reader is immediately thrown into the setting of the state Penitentiary in which Grace is incarcerated while being led to vaguely understand the reason for her being there. Slight mention is made of her “wretched accomplice”, although the character of James McDermott is developed as the novel progresses. Atwood's intention is therefore clear: the novel is to be about Grace and her situation. The only difficulty with this passage is that it does not suggest any small token of Grace's actual character, and it is precisely this fact which intrigues the reader, therefore making the novel mysterious from the first, suggesting that the mystery of Grace's life might not be answered by the text principally because Grace herself could not account for the events. While the reader may be aware of this indeterminacy of the novel from the start, the problem of the unanswered mystery becomes clearer as the novel progresses.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid*, p. 4

The inclusion of the famous writings of Mrs. Moodie are significant in that they frame Atwood's account of the retelling of Grace's story in such a way that they emphasise the postcolonial factors in the text itself. Atwood's fictionalisation of what Moodie claimed to be truth can be seen as a postcolonial 'writing back' to the Eurocentric (Moodie) text. Atwood attempts a broader, non-Eurocentric reconception of what was understood at the time to be 'Truth'. Atwood therefore follows the Canadian postcolonial tradition in that she asserts the "Canadian difference from canonical British" literature¹⁷⁹. In order to adequately explain how the 'Canadian' Moodie can be considered 'British' some details on Moodie's own life and history are necessary. Born Susanna Strickland in 1803, Moodie grew up in Suffolk. After her marriage to John Moodie in 1832, she and her husband immigrated to Canada, following her sister, Catharine and her husband Thomas Traill.¹⁸⁰ While much of Moodie's writing was about Canada, her main audience appears to have been British. Also, as a native of England in an English colony, one can understand how her interpretations of the situation in Canada are coloured by her understanding of 'life in the colonies', as can be seen through her publication of several patriotic poems in response to the rebellions taking place in Canada which were published in the *Palladium of British America*. Moodie's situation in Canada can thus be described as 'settler', as

in settler societies, European capitalist expansion saw movement not only of European capital, but also of European settlers and other types of migrants into non-European territories with pre-existing 'indigenous' societies. The process of establishing settler societies was accompanied by varying levels of physical and cultural genocide, alienation of indigenous land, disruption of

¹⁷⁹ Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G. and Tiffin, H. *The Empire Writes Back, Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. London and New York: Routledge, 1991. p. 36

¹⁸⁰ Unknown Author, "Susanna Moodie and Catharine Parr Traill", 2001. *Library and Archives, Canada*. Retrieved September, 2005. < <http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/moodie-traill/index-e.html>>

indigenous societies, economies and governance, and movements of indigenous resistance.¹⁸¹

Like Moodie, many of the historical characters that Atwood creates or recreates were mostly British-born and thus it could be argued that they are as influenced by imperial norms as Moodie was. However, Moodie appears to be a settler in that she attempts “to maintain unity within the dominant or settler population”¹⁸² while at the same time maintaining strong ties with her country of birth. While some of the characters treat their relationship with Britain as a margin to centre relationship, Moodie appears to have seen herself as firmly within the centre of British society even though she had moved to a colony. Moodie therefore represents colonial mindset that European systems and values are inherently superior to indigenous ones, while other characters in the novel represent the nationalism of emerging individual colonial states¹⁸³.

Moodie’s representations of Grace are therefore incomplete as they do not take all aspects of the situation into account. An example of her bias is her unquestioned belief in the version of events described to her by Grace’s lawyer. Atwood’s attempt to draw attention away from the events as described by the lawyer again suggests that she, as a postcolonial writer, is “caught in the conflict between destruction” of the facts represented by Moodie, “and creativity” in her re-presentation of the possible events that saw Grace and McDermott convicted for murder¹⁸⁴. Moodie and her work therefore represents the English colonial cultural

¹⁸¹ Stasiulis, D. K. and Yuval-Davis, N. *Unsettling Settler Societies: Articulations of Gender, Race, Ethnicity and Class*. Europe: Sage Publications, Inc., 1995. p. 7

¹⁸² *Ibid*, p. 7

¹⁸³ Humm, Maggie. *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1999.

¹⁸⁴ Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G. and Tiffin, H. *The Empire Writes Back, Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. London and New York: Routledge, 1991. p. 80

norm, a “universal norm” in which “the weight of antiquity continues to dominate cultural production in much of the postcolonial world.”¹⁸⁵

The novel moves forward into Grace’s narrative:

Out of the gravel there are peonies growing. They come up through the loose grey pebbles, their buds testing the air like snail’s eyes, then swelling and opening, huge dark-red flowers all shining and glossy like satin. Then they burst and fall to the ground.¹⁸⁶

The description of the flowers is interesting as it is interpreted by Moodie: she describes Grace as being haunted by large red eyes which follow her around the room, while Grace tells Dr. Jordan that Mrs. Moodie misheard her when she said large red *peonies*, not eyes. The colour red is again, as in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, significant. In this case, as in the Handmaid’s red habits, the red symbolises blood, but here it represents the blood of death and not menstrual blood – or the blood of life – as it does in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. More interesting though is the next paragraph in which Grace remembers her arrival at the Kinnear residence:

In the one instant before they come apart, they are like the peonies in the front garden at Mr. Kinnear’s, that first day, only those were white. Nancy was cutting them. She wore a pale dress with pink rosebuds and a triple-flounced skirt, and a straw bonnet that hid her face. She carried a flat basket, to put the flowers in; she bent from the hips like a lady, holding her waist straight. When she heard us and turned to look, she put her hand up to her throat as if startled.¹⁸⁷

Her memory and description of her arrival at the house in Richmond Hill is realistic in detail, much like the descriptions made by Offred about her arrival at the house of the Commander. The undertone of Grace’s portrayal of Nancy is more sinister than that of Offred, though, as she is one of the supposed victims of whose murder Grace was convicted. Atwood uses this memory, and the contrast between the red peonies that

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid*, p. 7

¹⁸⁶ Atwood, M. *Alias Grace*. London: Virago, 1997. p. 5

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid*, p. 5

Grace sees in prison with the white, pure and innocent ones that she remembers Nancy picking, to foreshadow Grace's retelling of her experiences to Dr. Jordan. This passage also highlights Grace's ability to remember the events that preceded the murder in exquisite detail, thus opening many possibilities as to the cause of her inability to remember the actual murders.

Grace's narrative then continues with more concrete details of her imprisonment:

It's 1851. I'll be twenty-four years old next birthday. I've been shut up in here since the age of sixteen. I am a model prisoner, and give no trouble. That's what the Governor's wife says.¹⁸⁸

Her youth and her apparent innocence at the time of her conviction add another level to her character, and to the possibility that she might possibly be innocent. Yet, as she continues to describe how Nancy looked at the time of her death, the tone changes once again:

Then up ahead I see Nancy, on her knees, with her hair fallen over and the blood running down into her eyes. Around her neck is a white cotton kerchief printed with blue flowers, love-in-a-mist, it's mine. She's lifting up her face, she's holding out her hands to me for mercy; in her ears are the little gold earrings I used to envy, but I no longer begrudge them. Nancy can keep them, because this time it will all be different, this time I will run to help, I will lift her up and wipe away the blood with my skirt, I will tear a bandage from my petticoat and none of it will have happened.¹⁸⁹

Grace's account of the dying Nancy implies a sense of both innocence and guilt. Her only true expression of guilt in this passage though is that she did not do anything to assist the dying woman. This aspect of the novel is interesting as Atwood suggests each time that Grace summons the memories of the events of her own volition, she hopes that she might undo what has happened and be free again in her own mind.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid*, p. 5

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid*, p. 6

Also interesting in this passage is the description of Nancy's hair as being "fallen" just as she is a fallen woman, and as Atwood mentions, in the lecture *Ophelia Has a Lot to Answer For*, "loosened female hair [is] a danger sign ... When women let their hair down, it means either sexiness or craziness or death, the three by Victorian times having become virtually synonymous."¹⁹⁰ Another image that Grace presents is one which appears regularly throughout the text, and that is the image of the kerchief tied around Nancy's neck, which Grace describes as "a white cotton kerchief printed with blue flowers, love-in-a-mist"; in the same essay mentioned above, Atwood comments on the "floral motif" in the death of Ophelia as "de rigeur for nineteenth-century literary madwomen."¹⁹¹ The Victorians placed much emphasis on the symbolic nature of flowers, what they called floriography. Atwood reinforces this belief in the symbolic nature of flowers, as the Victorians believed that through the use of flowers much could be 'said' that could not be spoken of. The peonies described by Grace throughout the novel, as well as the love-in-a-mist that is printed on the white handkerchief that is used to murder Nancy, represent Grace's shame and confusion at her inability to remember the murders.

Prior to her incarceration at the Penitentiary, Grace is considered by those in authority to be mad, and is therefore placed in an asylum, under the care of Nineteenth Century psychiatrists. It is here where Moodie first encountered her, in her state of 'madness'. That Atwood does not introduce the reader to Grace as a lunatic in an asylum suggests that she understands the subjectivity of the definition of 'madness'. She says in the lecture mentioned above:

¹⁹⁰ Atwood, M. "Spotty-Handed Villainesses, Problems of Female Bad Behaviour in the Creation of Literature", 1994. *O.W. Toad.com, The Margaret Atwood Reference Site*. 23rd of June, 2006. <<http://www.web.net/owtoad/vlness.html>>

¹⁹¹ *Ibid*

That the field of mental illness has always been debatable ground. Who is sane, who isn't, and who is qualified to judge? Standards have fluctuated wildly, and abuses have been numerous. In the last century, in the United States, a wife could be committed to an asylum on the say-so of her husband and two easily-paid-off doctors alone, and there are cases on record of wives who were "put away" for holding theological opinions that differed from those of the husband, or for refusing to have as much sex as he would like. That old standby of melodrama, the rich uncle shoved into the bin so the greedy relatives could get their hands on his estate, had a sound basis in fact. The Victorians cleaned up the straw and the chains of the Bedlam-like institutions of the eighteenth century, but they didn't always clean up the practices. Patients were drugged, starved, drained of vast quantities of blood, beaten up, swung from ropes, immersed in cold water and whirled around in the air upside-down, all in the belief that it would improve their mental states. Ask yourself whether this is likely to have been true.¹⁹²

One can thus understand *Alias Grace* to be an investigation into the life of an assumed 'madwoman' by Atwood, not in order to prove whether or not she was in fact 'mad', but to understand the possible reasons why Grace could have been assumed to be so. This novel and its treatment of Grace suggests a kinship to notions that Shoshana Felman suggests as she writes that:

'Mental illness' is a *request for help*, a manifestation both of cultural impotence and political castration. This socially defined help-needing and help-seeking behaviour is itself part of female conditioning, ideologically inherent in the behavioural pattern and in the dependent and helpless role assigned to the woman as such.¹⁹³

Atwood's fictional recreation of Grace is sympathetic to Grace's inability to help herself – in fact to even speak for herself – when she came to be tried for the murders. In the opening pages of the novel the fictional Grace shows a large degree of remorse not for her actions (as she cannot accurately recall what happened) but for her inability to search for help as she tries to imagine how different things could have been had she been able to "run for help" and save Nancy. Perhaps it was her sense of helplessness in the situation and after it, as she and McDermott crossed the border

¹⁹² *Ibid*

¹⁹³ Felman, S. "Women and Madness: the Critical Phallacy" (1975) in *Feminisms, An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, Warhol, R. R. and Herndl, D. P. (eds). Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1997. p. 119

into America that put her into the position of the ‘madwoman’ witnessed and described by Moodie.

The second section of the novel continues with a popular song, of unnamed author, which describes what were considered to be the events which occurred on the day of the murders and days which followed. The reader is finally able to gain some degree of understanding of the events leading to Grace’s description of both Nancy’s death and the prison. This neo-historicist multitextuality emphasises the different styles or discourses present within the novel, while suggesting that the different discourses can be read in different ways and yet are in dialogue with one another. Atwood begins the novel with what one would expect to be the ending: with historical details of the murders. She therefore plays with the Victorian idea of the cliff-hanger by offering multiple opinions and inviting multiple interpretations by leaving the novel open-ended.

The song describes the events of the murders and trials in much the same manner as that of Moodie’s account in *Life in the Clearings*. Grace is described as being the instigator of the murders because of her passion for her employer, Thomas Kinnear. According to both of these texts, Grace’s sullen beauty and intelligence were the causes of both murders, while McDermott was purely tricked into committing the actual crimes. The song describes the trials of both, specifically noting that Grace appeared in the dock “wearing Nancy’s dress,/And Nancy’s bonnet as well!”¹⁹⁴ While McDermott is hanged, Grace’s sentence – because of her youth and her gender – is commuted to life in prison. This conviction is verified by the operational records of

¹⁹⁴ Atwood, M. *Alias Grace*. London: Virago, 1997. p. 15

the Kingston Penitentiary as these records state that Grace Marks was convicted and sentenced to life in prison on the 13th of November, 1843. The song and the introductory paragraphs from Moodie's account frame the historical facts linked to the events of the novel and while Atwood does not deny the plausibility of these accounts, she also suggests other possibilities and scenarios. She writes:

I am not one of those who believes there is no truth to be known; but I have to conclude that, although there undoubtedly was a truth – somebody did kill Nancy Montgomery – truth is sometimes unknowable, at least by us.¹⁹⁵

This novel, then, is not about finding the Truth (with a capital "T"), but about the possibilities for differences apparent in accounts of "history" because of human nature and the ideology of the dominant group within society.

The next section of the novel is also framed by an account of Grace by Moodie and a section of a poem by Emily Brontë entitled "The Prisoner". The focus of this section is, however, on Grace. Atwood provides a date, 1859, at the start of the section thus locating the reader in relation to Grace's age and the context in which she is living. She is described as sitting "on the purple velvet settee in the Governor's parlour"¹⁹⁶ waiting for a doctor. While Grace is waiting she reveals "her strong motives to narrate."¹⁹⁷ Atwood's choice of narrators in this novel is not arbitrary, and is used as a "key means by which to explore the problems of how our perceptions of reality are shaped or limited by our senses, our personalities, and our particular social, racial and historical contexts."¹⁹⁸ The choice of Grace herself as narrator adds an element of authority to the novel thus allowing Atwood to question what is real with the contrast of the historical elements of the story to Grace's subjective observations.

¹⁹⁵ Atwood, M. *Curious Pursuits Occasional Writing*. London: Virago, 2005. p. 228

¹⁹⁶ Atwood, M. *Alias Grace*. London: Virago, 1997. p. 21

¹⁹⁷ Atwood, M. *Curious Pursuits Occasional Writing*. London: Virago, 2005. p. 227

¹⁹⁸ Wymer, T. L. *Intersections: The Elements Of Fiction In Science Fiction*. Bowling Green: Popular, 1978. p. 66

Through her questioning of authenticity and realism, Atwood represents the world in the mode of magical realism, in as much as the term itself:

is an oxymoron, one that suggests a binary opposition between the representational code of realism and that, roughly, of fantasy. In the language of narration in a magical realist text, a battle between two oppositional systems takes place, each working toward the creation of a different kind of fictional world from the other. Since the ground rules of these two worlds are incompatible, neither one can fully come into being, and each remains suspended, locked in a continuous dialectic with the “other”, a situation which creates disjunction within each of the separate discursive systems, rending them with gaps, absences, and silences.¹⁹⁹

Through the inclusion of the epigraphs and the references to historically verifiable events Atwood creates a work that could, at the start, be seen as being within the boundaries defined by realism, yet as the novel progresses towards the “Author’s Afterword” the reader becomes increasingly aware that large portions of the text are fantastical in that they cannot be historically verified. These two discursive modes, namely realism and fantasy (specifically through the narrative of the fictional Dr. Jordan), play out what Slemon suggests as being one of the methods of magical realism in that they never truly arrange themselves into any form of hierarchy. As such the reader is never entirely sure which factors in the novel are factual and which are entirely fictitious, thus neither discourse manages to subordinate or contain the other. The fixity of the historical epigraphs comes into conflict with the fictional recounting of Grace’s life thus foregrounding Atwood’s allusion to the gaps and silences within history. The magical realist mode of narration highlights, for Slemon, the relationship between postcolonialism and history as he argues that:

This focus on the problem of history is shared by that body of criticism in postcolonial cultural studies which argues that people in postcolonial cultures engage in a special “dialogue with history.”²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁹ Slemon, S. “Magical Realism as Postcolonial Discourse” in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, Zamora, L. P. and Faris, W. B. (eds). Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995. p. 409

²⁰⁰ *Ibid*, p. 414

This mode of narration therefore offers Atwood a means of critiquing the processes of colonialism through historical revisionism. While this allows her the space in which to explore the classical feminist attempt to regain the lost voices, it can also be seen as a means of creating Slemon's "dialogue with history".

Grace describes the parlour in which she finds herself in great detail, in much the same way as Offred uses detail in order to locate the reader. The scene itself is rather disconcerting though, as one would not expect a convicted murderess to be sitting in the Governor's parlour, patiently waiting. She goes on to describe how she has been in this room many times in order to clean it and to wait on the Governor's wife and her female visitors. Grace's situation slowly becomes clearer, as the reader realises that she is a servant in this household and that the "Governor" to whom she has referred is the governor of the prison. She describes how she has become an object of great interest to the Governor's wife and her visitors, as she conveys the visits and her position in the household as "although an object of fear, like a spider, and of charity as well, I am also one of the accomplishments"²⁰¹ which she subsequently qualifies:

The reason they want to see me is that I am a celebrated murderess. Or that is what has been written down. When I first saw it I was surprised, because they say Celebrated Singer and Celebrated Poetess and Celebrated Spiritualist and Celebrated Actress, but what is there to celebrate about murder? All the same *Murderess* is a strong word to have attached to you. It has a smell to it, that word – musky and oppressive, like dead flowers in a vase. Sometimes at night I whisper it to myself: *Murderess, Murderess*. It rustles, like a taffeta skirt across the floor.

Murderer is merely brutal. It's like a hammer, or a lump of metal. I would rather be a murderess than a murderer, if those are the only choices.²⁰²

²⁰¹ Atwood, M. *Alias Grace*. London: Virago, 1997. p. 22

²⁰² *Ibid*, p. 23

Atwood's reference to Moodie's text is vivid in Grace's analysis of her situation. She has become an object of admiration and contempt, of fear and interest. Her description of the other women that are "Celebrated" and the connection between their careers and entertainment suggests that she sees herself as an object of amusement and diversion for the wealthy. According to Roxanne Rimstead through her notoriety, Grace has achieved a higher position of social standing. Rimstead argues that Grace's description of how the label of 'celebrated murderess' "rustles, like a taffeta skirt across the floor" represents Grace as "appropriating the class icon [of the metonymic lady's silk dress] to indicate her heightened status."²⁰³ Also alluded to in this passage is a vase full of dead flowers, thus Atwood again returns to flower imagery although in this case the type and colour of the flowers is not mentioned. The fact that they are dead emphasises the position of a "murderess" within society as for her the 'flowers' of innocence and beauty are dead, in opposition to those women (or hot-house flowers) who wear the taffeta skirts and stays who are in the full bloom of youth and life as defined by their roles within society.

Atwood continues the introduction of her version of Grace by Grace's gazing into the mirror:

I think of all the things that have been written about me – that I am an inhuman female demon, that I am an innocent victim of a blackguard forced against my will and in danger of my own life, that I was too ignorant to know how to act and that to hang me would be judicial murder, that I am fond of animals, that I am very handsome with a brilliant complexion, that I have blue eyes, that I have green eyes, that I have auburn and also brown hair, that I am tall and also not above the average height, that I am well and decently dressed, that I robbed a dead woman to appear so, that I am brisk and smart about my work, that I am of a sullen disposition with a quarrelsome temper, that I have the appearance of a person rather above my humble station, that I am a good girl with a pliable nature and no harm is told of me, that I am cunning and

²⁰³ Rimstead, R. "Working-Class Intruders: Female Domesticity in *Kamouraska* and *Alias Grace*" in *Canadian Literature*, Vol. 175, Winter, 2002. p. 57

devious, that I am soft in the head and little better than an idiot. And I wonder, how can I be all of these different things at once?²⁰⁴

That she looks into a mirror and thinks is significant as, according to Sherril E. Grace “mirror images form an important loci of meaning through which Atwood explores not so much a positive duplicity, but polarity, adversary positions, or power politics.”²⁰⁵ The relationship between power structures and identity is therefore highlighted not only by Grace’s thoughts on what has been said about her, but also by the image of the mirror as the reader is reminded of “the alienating space between perceiving eye and object seen.”²⁰⁶ This description of Grace and the different accounts of her personality and appearance seem to come from Atwood’s research into the apparently ‘factual’ accounts of her life, as Atwood herself states that on “the matter of the central figure [Grace]... opinion was very divided indeed”, thus suggesting the fallibility of historical accounts²⁰⁷. Grace herself is said by Atwood to have produced her own different versions both of herself and of events, making the situation even more complex. Atwood notes also that:

For each story, there was a teller, but – as is true of all stories – there was also an audience; both were influenced by received climates of opinion, about politics, but also about criminality and its proper treatment, about the nature of women – their weakness and seductive qualities, for instance – and about insanity; in fact about everything that had a bearing on the case.²⁰⁸

It was, however, Grace’s lawyer who created many of the stories about Grace in order to protect her from execution. Grace continues:

It was my own lawyer, Mr. Kenneth MacKenzie, Esq., who told them I was next door to an idiot. I was angry with him over that, but he said it was by far my best chance and that I should not appear to be too intelligent. He said he would plead my case to the best of his ability, because whatever the truth of

²⁰⁴ Atwood, M. *Alias Grace*. London: Virago, 1997. p. 23

²⁰⁵ Grace, S. E. “Margaret Atwood and The Poetics of Duplicity” in Davidson, A. E. and Davidson, C. N. (eds) *The Art of Margaret Atwood, Essays in Criticism*. Toronto: Anansi Press Limited, 1981. p. 59

²⁰⁶ *Ibid*, p. 59

²⁰⁷ Atwood, M. *Curious Pursuits Occasional Writing*. London: Virago, 2005. p. 226

²⁰⁸ *Ibid*, p. 227

the matter I was little more than a child at the time, and he supposed it came down to free will and whether or not one held with it.²⁰⁹

The divided opinions of Grace's character are a product of Victorian social stereotypes as well as the changing political situation of Canada at the time. The location of the concept of 'madness' as falling within the sphere of morality is, possibly, one of the main reasons why the labelling of Grace as 'mad' held such appeal for her contemporaries – as will be discussed later – while the constant references to William Lyon Mackenzie and the 1837 Rebellion in Canada West suggest that Grace's situation within the political climate in Canada in the mid-1800's made her into a metaphor for the political conflicts and rebellions against British colonial government. Her position as an emigrant and a servant to a wealthy squire situate her within the politics of an emerging country as a symbol of rebellion and also revolt.

Canada developed as a country, aside from the native Inuit or First Nations people, from a cluster of European colonies the first of which was a French colony populated by a large group of settlers who emigrated in the Seventeenth Century. While the French colony was well-established, the British had control over the thirteen colonies to the south. At the end of the Seven Years' War and at the signing of the Treaty of Paris in February, 1763, the British gained control of nearly all of French territory in North America. Over the next century, the North American colonies would be beset by violent struggles leading to the Canadian War of 1812 and the two separate Rebellions in 1837. In this year there were rebellions against British colonial government in both Upper and Lower Canada.

²⁰⁹ Atwood, M. *Alias Grace*. London: Virago, 1997. p. 24

The rebellion in Upper Canada was led by William Lyon Mackenzie and took place as a series of disorganised raids, small insurrections, in and around Toronto. This small-scale rebellion was ultimately unsuccessful. The rebellion in Lower Canada was more substantial as it isolated Quebec City from the rest of the colony. While this rebellion was more successful than its counterpart, the rebels were defeated. Despite the military defeats suffered by both groups of rebels, their objectives were ultimately met as Lord Durham, in the Durham Report, fervently recommended a system of ‘responsible government’. While Durham’s report seemed favourable to the ideas of the radicals, it also included a more controversial suggestion: the amalgamation of Upper and Lower Canada in order to assimilate the French and English speaking populations. The Canadas were therefore merged into a single colony called the United Province of Canada under the Act of Union of 1840.

The constantly changing face of Canada in the Nineteenth Century is mirrored in the differing points of view of Grace’s character and appearance. Grace’s life is located in the midst of the violent radical conflicts against British colonialism, the rebellions and ideas of nationalism influenced Grace’s life before the murders, specifically in her relationship with Mary Whitney, and during her trial. As a servant, Grace’s position in society was subordinate to the dominant culture and as a woman and a supposed murderess the newspapers that criticized the rebel Mackenzie tended to vilify Grace for her murder of her Tory employer. Grace’s actions and those of the rebels were considered to be severe acts of insubordination against the dominant colonial powers²¹⁰. In opposition to this, “the Reform newspapers that praised

²¹⁰ Atwood, M. *Curious Pursuits Occasional Writing*. London: Virago, 2005.

Mackenzie were also inclined to clemency towards Grace.”²¹¹ Thus within the reformist perspective, Grace’s actions are a reaction to the dominant order of British colonialism and the murders are consequently acts of political resistance. The connection between the rebels and Grace as “colonized” subjects is their “placement in relationship to a dominant culture that impinges on them and seeks to define and silence them.”²¹² The reformers are defined as ‘rebels’ and violently silenced, while Grace is defined as a ‘murderess’ and silenced by those who, for various reasons, deny her a true voice.

The novel continues with Grace discussing how she believes the ladies react to her presence in the Governor’s wife’s house, after they have looked at the Governor’s wife’s scrapbook of famous crimes. She imagines the following scenario:

Oh imagine, I feel quite faint, they say, and You let that woman walk around loose in your house, you must have nerves of iron, my own would never stand it. Oh well one must get used to such things in our situation, we are virtually prisoners ourselves you know, although one must feel pity for those poor benighted creatures, and after all she was trained as a servant, and it’s as well to keep them employed, she is a wonderful seamstress, quite deft and accomplished, she is a great help in that way especially with the girls’ frocks, she has an eye for trimmings, and under happier circumstances she could have made an excellent milliner’s assistant.²¹³

Grace feels that she is defined in two ways by the women of the house: firstly as an object of fear, and secondly as an object of pity. The emphasis on the domesticity of the situation and especially on Grace’s skills as a servant and as a seamstress are again a focus on the domesticity of the novel while also juxtaposing Grace’s mundane domestic actions with her extraordinary involvement in the murders of Nancy and Thomas Kinnear. Another interesting aspect of this paragraph is that the Governor’s

²¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 226

²¹² Ochoa, P. “The Historical Moments of Postcolonial Writing: Beyond Colonialism’s Binary” in *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature*, Vol. 15, No. 2, Autumn, 2006. p. 222

²¹³ Atwood, M. *Alias Grace*. London: Virago, 1997. p. 24

wife states that “we are virtually prisoners ourselves”. In this statement of solidarity with Grace, the Governor’s wife (as she is known throughout the text, thus her identity is defined only in relation to her husband) informs the reader that, as women – although in a class position of privilege – they are also limited by their roles within a patriarchal society.

The imagined discussion by the ladies of the house about Grace carries on as such:

Although naturally she can be here only during the day, I would not have her in the house at night. You are aware that she has spent time in the Lunatic Asylum in Toronto, seven or eight years ago it was, and although she appears to be perfectly recovered you never know when they may get carried away again, sometimes she talks to herself and sings out loud in a most peculiar manner. One cannot take chances, the keepers conduct her back in the evenings and lock her up properly, otherwise I wouldn’t be able to sleep a wink. Oh I don’t blame you, there is only so far one can go in Christian charity, a leopard cannot change its spots and no one could say you have not done your duty and shown a proper feeling.²¹⁴

The Governor’s wife appears to fear not necessarily the Grace whom she encounters every day, but rather the “mad” Grace that has spent time at the Toronto Lunatic Asylum. Her lack of faith in the psychiatric treatments received by Grace at the institution suggests a Nineteenth Century return to an Eighteenth Century lack of belief in the ability of the deranged mind to be ‘healed’ or ‘cured’. This suggests that it is in the nature of the lunatic to be mad, in that the lunatic is seen as being naturally immoral, and nature cannot be changed, thus suggesting that the role of the medical practitioner is to help the lunatic to reform and repent rather than searching for a humanist ‘cure’. The reference to “Christian charity” suggests the puritanical mindset of many of the Canadian upper and lower classes. The issue of Puritanism and Christianity is prevalent in this novel as Atwood explores the immigration of

²¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 24 – 25

persecuted Christian extremists from Europe to the Americas and the effect that their break with the Church of England and the consequent intensity of their piety had on the social structures of the Canadas. The understanding of the piety of Christian charity extends from the emphasis placed by Protestantism on the experience of spirituality or holiness in the practices of everyday life especially in social engagements. The notion of public displays of belief, morality and Christianity in opposition to private spirituality in *Alias Grace* is therefore similar to that expressed by Gileadean theocracy in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Thus Atwood explores the differences between the public and the private, especially focusing on the relationship between the individual and society. She suggests in both novels that definitions of power and of madness are created by societal doctrines, rather than individual experience, hence the connection between powerless, madness and social inferiority echoing the arguments put forward by Foucault.

The feeling that Grace has towards male doctors is also significant, as shown by the nature of her response to the doctor introduced to her by the Governor's wife. She describes her reaction to him thus:

Then he comes through the doorway, big stomach, black coat, tight waistcoat, silver buttons, precisely tied stock, I am only looking up as far as the chin, and he says This will not take long but I'd appreciate it Ma'am if you'd remain in the room, one must not only be virtuous, one must give the appearance of virtue. He laughs as if it is a joke, and I can hear in his voice that he is afraid of me. A woman like me is always a temptation, if possible to arrange it unobserved; as whatever we may say about it later, we will not be believed. And then I see his hand, a hand like a glove, a glove stuffed with raw meat, his hand plunging into the open mouth of his leather bag. It comes out glinting, and I know I have seen a hand like that before; and then I lift my head and stare him straight in the eye, and my heart clenches and kicks out inside me, and then I begin to scream.

Because it's the same doctor, the same one, the very same black-coated doctor with his bagful of shining knives.²¹⁵

²¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 30 – 31

Grace's training as a servant is responsible for her inability to say no to her employer's request that she allow herself to be examined by a doctor whom she fears. Also in deference to her lower social position, Grace does not look at the doctor above his chin, focusing mainly on his girth and manner of dress. She avoids the male gaze out of deference and fear, as she has been conditioned to accept his role of power and her role as submissive to his power. The doctor's attempt at humour in his description of the appearance of virtue suggests that all is not what it may seem in this situation. Grace concludes that he fears her as, in her past experiences, men are not always able to control themselves in the face of temptation – in this case the temptation presented by a pretty and "mad" woman whose credibility has already been questioned by society because of the connection that was understood to exist between madness and immorality. The emphasis on the feebleness of the upper-classes is a recurring trope in the novel itself, as is Grace's inability to trust both men and doctors. Her experience of the asylum suggests that men are fickle and weak in terms of controlling their sexual and emotional needs. Atwood therefore restructures the historical idea that women are the "weaker sex" by suggesting that it is men who are unable to control their actions, while women are often used as scapegoats for male bad behaviour.

Grace's voice is only heard when it is heard as the voice of a lunatic, as such Atwood uses Grace's 'hysteria' as her symbolic rejection of a situation in which she feels hopelessly disempowered²¹⁶. This idea of power through madness is one which has been suggested by many feminist and postcolonial theorists, most specifically

²¹⁶ Camerino-Santangelo, M. "The Madwoman Can't Speak: Postwar Culture, Feminist Criticism, and Welty's 'June Recital'" in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Vol. 15, No. 1, Spring, 1996

Gilbert and Gubar who argue that in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a postcolonial response to Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Antoinette Rochester is also depicted as using madness in order to reject a situation in which she feels disempowered. According to Sue Spaul, Antoinette's madness is "a madness that epitomises her difference from Rochester, and her refusal to accept his perception and values as the norm."²¹⁷ The hysterical Antoinette is therefore reacting to colonial patriarchy through madness, thus allowing Rhys, like Atwood, to use "symbolic inversion to demonstrate the fallacy of a patriarchal mono-dimensional reality."²¹⁸

Grace continues to assert that she has encountered this doctor before, suggesting that he is the same doctor responsible for the failed abortion and subsequent death of her friend, Mary Whitney, thus foreshadowing the events which Grace will portray to Dr. Jordan. On remembering this terrible situation, Grace faints, suggesting that the events she has remembered are traumatic for her. She re-experiences the trauma, presenting the reader with her extreme anxiety and would, under modern psychological evaluation, be diagnosed with an anxiety disorder such as post-traumatic stress disorder. As we now comprehend these disorders the symptoms that Grace presents are more understandable than they would have been in the 1800's. Particularly in the case of Grace, Nineteenth Century doctors would have focused on the fact that she was a woman thus emphasising the influence of menstruation on her apparent insanity. Philip W. Martin notes that "menstruation might not be a cause of insanity, but it was frequently connected with the manifestation of its more extreme behavioural symptoms."²¹⁹ Martin continues to

²¹⁷ Spaul, S. "Gynocriticism" in *Feminist Readings/Feminists Reading*, Mills, S., Pearce, L., Spaul, S. and Millard, E. (eds). New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989. p. 95

²¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 105

²¹⁹ Martin, P. W. *Mad Women in Romantic Writing*. Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1978. p. 31

describe the ideas of such scientists as Thomas Arnold who outlined the ‘fact’ that the woman’s body was vulnerable to malfunctions of the blood which would likely lead to insanity, thus suggesting that the woman’s mind was “susceptible to the potential instability of her body.”²²⁰ Grace’s insanity would therefore have been labelled as being a reaction to the feebleness of the female body to the influence of the problematic uterus. As Grace continues in this scene to describe her heart as clenching and kicking out inside of her chest after which she screams and faints, a modern understanding of female physiology offers a clearer understanding of the symptoms she describes. This description is consistent with the somatic manifestations of anxiety disorder as described by Sue, Sue and Sue in *Understanding Abnormal Behaviour*:

Somatic manifestations are changes in a person’s physiological or biological reactions. They include shallow breathing, mouth dryness, cold hands and feet, diarrhoea, frequent urination, *fainting*, *heart palpitations*, elevated blood pressure, increased perspiration, muscular tenseness (especially in the head, neck, shoulders, and chest), and indigestion.²²¹

This return to hysteric behaviour suggests that the Governor’s wife’s fears of Grace and the possibility that she may again resort to hysterical violence are not wholly unfounded, although Grace does recover from the events swiftly. Her swift recovery suggests that her hysterical outburst was directly linked to a situation in which she felt uncomfortable and yet had no power to change, thus Atwood again links notions of madness to powerlessness as suggested by Foucault. Grace continues to describe her recovery:

I was brought around with a glass of cold water dashed in the face, but continued screaming, although the doctor was no longer in sight; so was restrained by two kitchen maids and the gardener’s boy, who sat on my legs. The Governor’s wife had sent for the Matron from the Penitentiary, who

²²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 31

²²¹ Italics my own. Sue, D., Sue, D. and Sue, S. *Understanding Abnormal Behaviour, Seventh Edition*. USA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003. p. 130

arrived with two of the keepers; and she gave me a brisk slap across the face, at which I stopped. It was not the same doctor in any case, it only looked like him. The same cold and greedy look, and the hate.²²²

Grace sees through the doctor's attempts at exploiting her situation as an enslaved woman for his own personal gain. The scientific developments of the time allowed people such as the doctor to justify their actions through the guise of social and scientific progress. Through her hysteria, Grace denies him the power to victimise her thus empowering herself. While she does not necessarily subvert the gender stereotype of the hysterical woman, Grace uses the avenue available to her – if subconsciously – to avoid being totally dominated by the male (patriarchal) figure of the doctor.

While Grace is sent into solitary confinement, she considers the asylum in Toronto and the women who were confined there:

They wouldn't know mad when they saw it in any case, because a good portion of the women in the Asylum were no madder than the Queen of England. Many were sane enough when sober, as their madness came out of a bottle, which is a kind I knew very well. One of them was in there to get away from her husband, who beat her black and blue, he was the mad one but nobody would lock him up; and another said she went mad in the autumns, as she had no house and it was warm in the Asylum, and if she didn't do a fair job of running mad she would freeze to death.²²³

Atwood explicitly links the concept of 'powerlessness' to madness through Grace's description of the woman who is beaten by her husband and the woman who acts mad in order to find warm shelter for the winter; madness can be seen then as being in essence constructed and enforced by the intellectual and cultural forces that operate within culture and society, connecting one who is 'powerless' to one who is 'mad'. This is highlighted by Foucault in his description of the incarceration of the poor in

²²² Atwood, M. *Alias Grace*. London: Virago, 1997. p. 32

²²³ *Ibid*, p. 33

France in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries in order to make them work and be productive. He writes of the Hopital General that:

From the beginning, the institution set itself the task of preventing "mendicancy and idleness as the source of all disorders." In fact, this was the last of the great measures that had been taken since the Renaissance to put an end to unemployment or at least to begging. In 1532, the Parlement of Paris decided to arrest beggars and force them to work in the sewers of the city, chained in pairs.²²⁴

The incarceration of the poor suggests that the discourse of madness, as it is constructed by society, can allow those in power to use those considered to be insane in whichever manner best suited the dominant. Foucault indicates that:

Outside of the periods of crisis, confinement acquired another meaning. Its repressive function was combined with a new use. It was no longer merely a question of confining those out of work, but of giving work to those who had been confined and thus making them contribute to the prosperity of all. The alternation is clear: cheap manpower in the periods of full employment and high salaries; and in periods of unemployment, reabsorption of the idle and social protection against agitation and uprisings.²²⁵

It is only in the Nineteenth Century that the mad person is similarly incarcerated within asylums which not only resembled the workhouses of the previous century, but often were created within the buildings which held the poor. Foucault continues thus:

Men did not wait until the seventeenth century to "shut up" the mad, but it was in this period that they began to "confine" or "intern" them, along with an entire population with whom their kinship was recognized.²²⁶

Foucault thus charts the development of workhouses and the progression of psychiatry in relation to power structures which allowed those in power to control an understanding of those considered to be mad. The consequence of these power relations led, in the late Eighteenth and early Nineteenth Centuries, to the conceptualisation of the relationship between madness and immorality, thus allowing

²²⁴ Foucault, M. *Madness and Civilization, A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. New York: Vintage Books, 1988. p. 47

²²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 51

²²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 57 – 58

those dominant within society to condemn those considered mad as being sinful or intemperate.

Grace does not deny the fact that some of the women in the Asylum were genuinely mad as they appear to her to present genuine symptoms of severe psychosis, as she continues to describe her experiences there:

But some were not pretending. One poor Irishwoman had all her family dead, half of them starving in the great famine and the other half of the cholera on the boat coming over; and she would wander about calling their names. I am glad I left Ireland before that time, as the sufferings she told of were dreadful, and the corpses piled everywhere with none to bury them. Another woman killed her child, and it followed her around everywhere, tugging at her skirt; and sometimes she would pick it up and hug and kiss it, and at other times she would shriek at it, and hit it away with her hands. I was afraid of that one.²²⁷

The fear of the last woman described suggests the situation in which Grace finds herself. Madness is seen, in this sense, as a kind of threat as Grace expresses her fear not necessarily of the woman herself, but of the unknown threat that is posed to society by the presence of the unstable madwoman who is genuinely insane due to loss and not to the influence of her female body. Perhaps more interesting, however, is the final woman Grace describes from the Asylum, and the reaction to this woman by the Matron:

Another was very religious, always praying and singing, and when she found out what they said I had done, she would plague me whenever she could. Down on your knees, she would say, Thou shalt not kill, but there is always God's grace for sinners, repent, repent, while there is yet time or damnation awaits. She was just like a preacher in church, and once she tried to baptize me with soup, thin soup it was and with cabbage in it, and she poured a spoonful of it over my head. When I complained of it, the Matron gave me a dry look with her mouth all tight and straight across like a box lid, and she said, Well Grace perhaps you should listen to her, I have never heard of you doing any true repenting, much though your heart stands in need of it; and then I was suddenly very angry and I screamed, I did nothing, I did nothing! It was her, it was her fault!

²²⁷ Atwood, M. *Alias Grace*. London: Virago, 1997. p. 34

Who do you mean, Grace, she said, compose yourself or it's the cold baths and the strait-waistcoat for you, and she gave the other matron a glance: There. What did I tell you. Mad as a snake.²²⁸

This discussion of religion and repentance is one which is echoed by Foucault in

Madness and Civilization as he writes:

Formerly, unreason was set outside of judgment, to be delivered, arbitrarily, to the powers of reason. Now it is judged, and not only upon entering the asylum, in order to be recognized, classified, and made innocent forever; it is caught, on the contrary, in a perpetual judgment, which never ceases to pursue it and to apply sanctions, to proclaim its transgressions, to require honorable amends, to exclude, finally, those whose transgressions risk compromising the social order. Madness escaped from the arbitrary only in order to enter a kind of endless trial for which the asylum furnished simultaneously police, magistrates, and torturers; a trial whereby any transgression in life, by a virtue proper to life in the asylum, becomes a social crime, observed, condemned, and punished; a trial which has no outcome but in a perpetual recommencement in the internalized form of remorse.²²⁹

The 'mad' person is treated as a criminal and is forced to repent for the crimes committed against the dominant, 'sane' society. While Grace has already been tried and convicted of the crime of murder, she is forced to repent for her crime while being denied a voice. Her screams are met with impatience and threats of punishment in the form of cold baths and straightjackets. The suppression of Grace's claims of innocence supports the condemnation and punishment asserted by Foucault, thus reinforcing the need for the internalisation of remorse, a need that is not only historically specific to Victorian society, but also to those labelled mad in the Seventeenth, Eighteenth, Nineteenth and even Twentieth Centuries.

Grace continues to assert the abuse of power by the doctors in the Toronto asylum, suggested mainly by her description of Doctor Bannerling and her refusal to say anything more of her affliction and conviction to the staff in charge of her:

²²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 34

²²⁹ Foucault, M. *Madness and Civilization, A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. New York: Vintage Books, 1988. p. 268 – 269

So I stopped telling them anything. Not Dr. Bannerling, who would come into the room when I was tied up in the dark with mufflers on my hands, Keep still I am here to examine you, it is no use lying to me. Nor the other doctors who would visit there, Oh indeed, what a fascinating case, as if I was a two-headed calf. At last I stopped talking altogether, except very civilly when spoken to, Yes Ma'am, No Ma'am, Yes and No Sir. And then I was sent back to the Penitentiary, after they had all met together in their black coats, Ahem, aha, in my opinion, and My respected colleague, Sir I beg to differ. Of course they could not admit for an instant that they had been mistaken when they first put me in.²³⁰

As a woman, and a 'mad' woman at that, Grace is denied any form of voice by the dominant, male doctors. Much like Offred, Grace's position in society is one of silence and solitude. She has become objectified by the society in which she lives due in part to the labels of madwoman, murderess and paramour that said society has given her. Through the discussion of gender and madness in Grace's situation Atwood explores an issue relevant to present day as well as Victorian society. According to Julia Kristeva this issue is the fact that the masculine or male is not merely defined by sex or gender, but rather it is the universal or standard by which other elements of society are defined. In this type of male dominated situation women are kept in a pre-Oedipal stage, therefore they are never allowed to individuate and as such are denied a role in the symbolic order which is based on male individuation.²³¹ If, as suggested by Foucault, the Western notion of madness is defined by the fact that the 'mad' person is a deviation from the norm, or universal standard of Western civilisation, then a person defined as 'mad' can therefore be correlated to the notion of non-male or female under patriarchy. Atwood is attempting to suggest the social and political factors in the labelling of both 'madness' and gender, as well as allowing for the possibility that both of these constructions and the implications thereof could evolve from a lack of identity, or a confused identity, extending from the postcolony.

²³⁰ Atwood, M. *Alias Grace*. London: Virago, 1997. p. 35

²³¹ Brennan, T. (ed) *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis*. New York: Routledge, 1989

Grace describes the fear projection as a reaction to her red hair as she contemplates her situation while in confinement:

My hair is coming out from under my cap. Red hair of an ogre. A wild beast, the newspaper said. A monster. When they come with my dinner I will put the slop bucket over my head and hide behind the door, and that will give them a fright. If they want a monster so badly they ought to be provided with one.²³²

Grace plays with the idea of providing those who fear her with what it is they expect. Her understanding of her situation within society is complex and sophisticated as she understands the fear associated with an encounter with Otherness. Her intelligence and her ability to understand what is required of her and to be forthcoming are significant in her relationship with Dr. Jordan, as her narrative appears to be crafted to his expectations on more than one occasion, thus suggesting the possibility that her representation of her past is not entirely authentic.

The introduction of Dr. Jordan acts to highlight Grace's ability to understand what is expected of her by society, and also her subversive reactions to said expectations as she denies him the answers he seeks while pretending to have no cognisance of his intentions. She describes the proceedings thus:

Good morning, Grace, he says. I understand that you are afraid of doctors. I must tell you right away that I myself am a doctor. My name is Dr. Jordan, Dr. Simon Jordan.
I look at him quickly, then look down. I say, Is the other doctor coming back? The one that frightened you? he says. No, he is not.
I say, Then I suppose you are here to measure my head.
I would not dream of it, he says, smiling; but still, he glances at my head with a measuring look. However I have my cap on, so there's nothing he can see. Now that he has spoken I think he must be an American. He has white teeth and is not missing any of them, at least at the front, and his face is quite long and bony. I like his smile, although it is higher on one side than the other, which gives him the air of joking. I look at his hands. They are empty. There's nothing at all in them. No rings on his fingers. Do you have a bag with knives in it? I say. A leather satchel.

²³² Atwood, M. *Alias Grace*. London: Virago, 1997. p. 36

No, he says, I am not the usual kind of doctor. I do no cutting open. Are you afraid of me Grace?

I can't say that I am afraid of him yet. It's too early to tell; too early to tell what he wants. No one comes to see me here unless they want something.²³³

His tone is kindly and suggests a level of patience yet Grace is obviously still unsure of him. Her previous experience of doctors makes her weary and her assertion that he must want something from her, while correct, suggests a shrewdness born of a history of bad experiences. She refrains from judgement at this point, waiting for his motives to reveal themselves. The notion of fear and paranoia of the dominant male is evident also in *The Handmaid's Tale* in the form of Offred's original fear of the Commander and his invitation for her to join him in his office. While Offred's fear seems to be due to a relatively new fear of persecution, Grace's history of bad experiences, such as the death of Mary Whitney and her treatment at her trial and at the Toronto asylum, seems to define her understanding of the dominant male doctor. Both women, however, suggest that something is required of them although they are both unsure of the nature of what is required. It is their past experiences that lead them to withdraw emotionally from the situations in which they find themselves, thus making them appear aloof, in the case of Offred, and obtuse in the case of Grace.

The interaction between Grace and Dr. Jordan resumes:

I would like him to say what kind of a doctor he is if he's not the usual kind, but instead he says, I am from Massachusetts. Or that is where I was born. I have travelled a good deal since then. I have been going to and fro in the earth, and walking up and down it. And he looks at me, to see if I understand. I know it is the Book of Job, before Job gets the boils and running sores, and the whirlwinds. It's what Satan says to God. He must mean that he has come to test me, although he's too late for that, as God has done a great deal of testing of me already, and you would think he would be tired of it by now. But I don't say this. I look at him stupidly. I have a good stupid look which I have practised.²³⁴

²³³ *Ibid*, p. 41

²³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 42

Through her play-acting, Grace evokes a resistance to “the ‘government of individualisation’” as she “strategically select[s] different forms of behaviour which will reveal the artificiality of what is hegemonically defined as ‘normal’ behaviour.”²³⁵ Atwood therefore satirises the gender stereotypes created by society by means of defamiliarisation as she locates a fairly mundane scene in a solitary confinement cell. Yet while Grace is able to see through Dr. Jordan’s attempts to test her, it appears that he does not notice her reversal of the situation:

I say, Have you been to France? That is where all the fashions come from.
I see I have disappointed him. Yes, he says. And to England, and also to Italy,
and to Germany and Switzerland as well.²³⁶

The discussion becomes mundane, and unusual, as Grace herself notes that “it is very strange to be standing in a locked room in the Penitentiary, speaking with a strange man about France and Italy and Germany.”²³⁷ Atwood’s use of defamiliarisation continues, as she suggests society’s belief that anyone other than the Western male, specifically the mad woman, should be treated with caution. This is emphasised by Dr. Jordan’s gift of an apple to Grace, an event which is unexpected:

He smiles, and then he does a strange thing. He puts his hand into his pocket and pulls out an apple. He walks over to me slowly, holding the apple out in front of him like someone holding out a bone to a dangerous dog, in order to win it over.
This is for you, he says.²³⁸

The attempt at a bribe is obvious since the gift is treated with trepidation as her response to the apple suggests:

I am not a dog, I say to him.
Most people would ask me what I mean by saying that, but he laughs. His laugh is just one breath, Hah, as if he’s found a thing he has lost; and he says,
No, Grace, I can see that you are not a dog.²³⁹

²³⁵ McNay, L. *Foucault and Feminism*. Oxford: Polity Press, 1992. p. 147

²³⁶ Atwood, M. *Alias Grace*. London: Virago, 1997. p. 42

²³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 42

²³⁸ *Ibid*, p. 42

²³⁹ *Ibid*, p. 43

Her hunger overcomes her discomfort with the situation as she does not return the gift, although she makes it clear that she cannot be bought over to his intentions through bribery, and he responds with a laugh indicating that he is pleased with her response. The tone of the meeting changes at this point, as the two characters begin to understand each other more clearly. Dr. Jordan begins to realise that Grace is not as unintelligent as she wants him to believe, while she begins to realise that he wants from her what many have wanted before (he wants to know her story), yet he appears to be willing to offer her small freedoms in exchange for her cooperation. He wants her story in order to cure her amnesia and thus prove her innocence in the murders but this becomes complicated by his need for her to be innocent and his growing emotional attachment to her as he deludes himself into believing that there is no element of curiosity in his need to hear her version of events. The evidence of his curiosity lies within his first question to her when she is placed under hypnosis as he asks whether she had sexual relations with McDermott, and not whether she was involved in the murders.

The interaction foreshadows the rest of their relationship as Dr. Jordan uses word association in order to assist Grace in the recovery of her lost memory, while Grace does not allow him to succeed. She returns to her cautionary stance because he reminds her of her sessions with Dr. Bannerling as well as her encounters with other similar men. She continues:

He's playing a guessing game, like Dr. Bannerling at the Asylum. There is always a right answer, which is right because it is the one they want, and you can tell by their faces whether you have guessed what it is; although with Dr. Bannerling all of the answers were wrong. Or perhaps he is a Doctor of Divinity; they are the other ones prone to this type of questioning.²⁴⁰

²⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p. 44

Her fear and trepidation are only exacerbated by Dr. Jordan's description of what type of doctor he is, in response to Grace's query of his discipline:

I am a doctor who works not with bodies, but with minds. Diseases of the mind and brain, and the nerves.
I put my hands with the apple behind my back. I do not trust him at all. No, I say. I won't go back there. Not to the Asylum. Flesh and blood cannot stand it. Don't be afraid, he says. You aren't mad, really, are you Grace?
No Sir I am not, I say.
Then there is no reason for you to go back to the Asylum, is there?
They don't listen to reason there, Sir, I say.
Well that is what I am here for, he says, I am here to listen to reason. But if I am to listen to you, you will have to talk to me.²⁴¹

Grace plays on Dr. Jordan's use of the word "reason" suggesting that the doctors at the Toronto Asylum do not listen to "reason" and are therefore the ones who are mad. Through this play on words, Atwood suggests the means of perpetuating the power of the dominant, "since to be sane, or reasonable, is to *have* knowledge, and therefore, power and the power *to* define; while to be insane, or unreasonable, is to be condemned, defined and unable to speak with validity."²⁴² Atwood thus uses notions of reason and unreason in order to explore Victorian ideas of modernity and rationality.

The Victorian era saw the birth and extension of modernity. The writings of Charles Darwin on the evolution of the species and the subsequent movement towards science rather than religion led to the foregrounding of reason as the highest form of mental functioning. This is so as reason is seen as transcending the boundaries of the self, thus allowing knowledge acquired from reason to be unquestionably 'True'.²⁴³ In a world foregrounding reason, then, that which is 'True' is ultimately the same as that

²⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 45

²⁴² Harris, A. M. "The Language Her Ma'am Spoke": Voicing the Mother-Tongue in Toni Morrison's Fiction. Ph.D Thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, 2002. p. 3

²⁴³ Flax, J. "Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory" (1987) in *Signs*, Vol. 12, No. 4, "Within and Without: Women, Gender and Theory". Summer, 1987

which is good and right thus highlighting the relationship between unreason, or madness, and that which is bad and wrong, as suggested by Foucault. Through the juxtaposition of the modern, rational and scientific Dr. Jordan with the mad and irrational Grace, Atwood deconstructs the Victorian ideology of truth and reason by making the reader sceptical of a search for an overarching reasoned or reasonable 'Truth' attained through knowledge. Atwood is therefore suspect of transcendental claims that "reflect and reify the experience of a few persons – mostly white, Western males."²⁴⁴

In her need to define Dr. Jordan within the sphere of her experience, Grace realises what it is he wants from her and therefore defines him:

I see what he's after. He is a collector. He thinks that all he has to do is give me an apple, and then he can collect me. Perhaps he is from a newspaper. Or else he is a travelling man, making a tour. They come in and they stare, and when they look at you, you feel as small as an ant, and they pick you up between finger and thumb and turn you around. And then they set you down and go away.²⁴⁵

Grace believes that the only value she has to these gentlemen is that of curiosity, and she understandably reacts to this objectification in a negative way. Her response to his suggestion is that all he needs to know has already been decided:

You won't believe me, Sir, I say. Anyway, it's all been decided, the trial is long over and done with and what I say will not change anything. You should ask the lawyers and the judges, and the newspaper men, they seem to know my story better than I do myself.²⁴⁶

In response to objectification, Grace suggests that he should look to the men who have assumed her voice. Her tone suggests that she does not accept their version of the events that constitute her life, but at the same time she plays on her belief that Dr. Jordan would rather hear her story from someone he accepts as being in a position of

²⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p. 626

²⁴⁵ Atwood, M. *Alias Grace*. London: Virago, 1997. p. 45

²⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p. 45

power. Her acceptance of the dominant discourse extends from a sense of resignation due to her acceptance of her position of alterity. Yet Dr. Jordan continues thus:

If you will try to talk, he continues, I will try to listen. My interest is purely scientific. It is not the murders that should concern us. He's using a kind voice, kind on the surface but with other desires hidden beneath it. Perhaps I will tell you lies, I say. He doesn't say, Grace what a wicked suggestion, you have a sinful imagination. He says, Perhaps you will. Perhaps you will tell lies without meaning to, and perhaps you will also tell them deliberately. Perhaps you are a liar. I look at him. There are those who have said I am one, I say. We will just have to take that chance, he says.²⁴⁷

He does not respond in the manner expected by Grace and this perplexes her. She holds the power in this interaction as he can achieve his aims only if she capitulates. His manipulation of her leads her into capitulation, but not without terms:

I look down at the floor. Will they take me back to the Asylum? I say. Or will they put me in solitary confinement, with nothing to eat but bread? He says, I give you my word that as long as you continue to talk with me, and do not lose control of yourself and become violent, you shall remain as you were. I have the Governor's promise. I look at him. I look away. I look at him again. I hold the apple in my two hands. He waits. Finally I lift the apple up and press it to my forehead.²⁴⁸

Grace places the apple to her forehead as she symbolically offers him her thoughts and memories. The scene for the bulk of the novel has been set at this point, as the novel continues with Grace's discussions with Dr. Jordan about her life in the form of detailed interviews. The character of Dr. Jordan as intermediary between reader and author is therefore integral to the structure of the novel as a whole.

Dr. Jordan is one of the few entirely fictitious characters in the novel and Atwood explains her creation of him as being a character that "could represent the other side of the Victorian attitude towards madness – not the popular Ophelia-like

²⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p. 45

²⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p. 46

image, but the body of medical and scientific opinion on the subject.”²⁴⁹ Educated as a surgeon before his studies in Europe focused his attention on the developing studies of the mind, the death of his father and his lack of inheritance have forced Dr. Jordan to find an external source of income. He was recommended to the Reverend Verringer, the chairman of one of the groups petitioning the Governor of Toronto for a pardon for Grace, by one of his colleagues in Paris. As a character, he plays a unifying role in that he bridges the gap that Atwood mentions in her essays and speeches on the novel in that he allows her to join the factual elements of Grace’s story with fictional interpretations of what could have happened. This element of Dr. Jordan’s role within the novel is highlighted by his own episode of near-madness as he becomes involved in an affair with his poverty-stricken landlady. Through this affair he becomes (more or less unwittingly) involved in his landlady’s plot to murder her drunken husband, and is therefore aligned with Grace in an interesting manner. Atwood therefore uses Dr. Jordan as a counterpoint to Grace’s story as she suggests the ease with which it is possible for an apparently sane person to slide into catastrophic actions. The inclusion of the fictional character of Dr. Jordan is thus significant not only because of the role he plays within Grace’s narrative, but also because he allows Atwood to reflect on the blanks of Grace’s story through Dr. Jordan’s actions and thoughts.

Dr. Jordan’s scientific and modern ideologies have made his main aim in his relationship with Grace to assist her in remembering events which she has forgotten – either by choice or as a result of trauma. His aims are never achieved, as Grace’s only apparent development is through her experience of hypnotism under Dr. Jerome

²⁴⁹ Atwood, M. “Spotty-Handed Villainesses, Problems of Female Bad Behaviour in the Creation of Literature”, 1994. *O.W. Toad.com, The Margaret Atwood Reference Site*. 23rd of June, 2006. <<http://www.web.net/owtoad/vlness.html>>

DuPont – or Jeremiah the Peddler, as he is known to Grace. Dr. Jordan is himself afflicted with amnesia at the end of the novel and while his amnesia is due to a blow to the head and subsequent illness, it is no less extreme than that experienced by Grace. In not being able to understand and ‘heal’ Grace, he denies himself a cure for his own affliction. He leaves Kingston with no clearer an understanding of the events surrounding the deaths of Thomas Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery, thus he can be aligned with the reader, who is also no nearer to a conclusive understanding of the main mystery of the murders and thus his reading of Grace remains ambiguous. His convenient disillusionment with the situation allows Atwood to deny the reader’s curiosity and leave the question unanswered.

He also represents the new developments that were being made in the fields of psychology and psychiatry at the time in which the novel is set. The evolution of the study of the mind into a science, rather than a philosophical exploration of mental awareness, was progressing rapidly in the Nineteenth Century, with important contributions from scholars such as Wilhelm Wundt in Germany and G. Stanley Hall in America. Dr. Jordan’s methodology is representative of the ideas of the fledgling science, and his explanations of contemporary thought bridge the space between the modern reader with a basic understanding of the workings of psychoanalytic theory, and the pre-Freudian ideas of the early to mid Nineteenth Century. Dr. Jordan’s references to significant places in the development of psychological methodology, such as La Salpêtrière in France (the home of such thinkers as Jean-Martin Charcot and his student, Sigmund Freud) suggest that Atwood has used the ideas of the theorists working at these institutions in order to create this specific character and to inform his interactions with the other characters in the novel. Charcot’s ideas in

relation to hysteria are significant in that he was one of the first theorists to suggest the psychogenic nature of neuroses; as such he located mental illnesses within the region of the mind and not the body.²⁵⁰ While Charcot's ideas may have influenced those of Freud, his practices and many of his theories have been discredited – such as his ideas about hypnosis and his notion that hysteria can be associated with a uterine condition (which is interesting as he himself theorised that mental illness extended from mind and not body). The influence of Charcot is, however, significant in the development of modern psychology which makes Atwood's placement of Dr. Jordan within this psychiatric community significant to the modern reader's understanding of the theories behind his thoughts and conceptions of Grace.

Dr. Jordan's focus on the scientific bases of understanding suggests the early positivism surrounding the theories of the behavioural school of psychology as well as Freud's emphasis on the observation of his patients. Dr. Jordan remembers his first interview with Grace:

Remembering the scene, Simon winces. I was indulging myself, he thinks. Imagination and fancy. I must stick to observation, I must proceed with caution. A valid experiment must have verifiable results. I must resist melodrama, and an overheated brain.²⁵¹

He also continues to analyse his own thought processes, in much the same way as suggested by Freud (who analysed his own thinking processes for over forty years), as he explores word association:

The association of ideas is truly remarkable, he thinks, once one begins to observe its operations in one's own mind. Dora – Pig – Ham, for instance. In order to get from the first term to the third, the second term is essential; though from the first to the second and from the second to the third, is no great leap.²⁵²

²⁵⁰ Roback, A. A. *History of Psychology and Psychiatry*. London: Vision Press Ltd., 1962

²⁵¹ Atwood, M. *Alias Grace*. London: Virago, 1997. p. 67

²⁵² *Ibid*, p. 67

Through Dr. Jordan, Atwood explores the relationship between language, thought and understanding. In *The Handmaid's Tale* Atwood explores the effects on the women of Gilead of their inability to read or write; in this novel however, she explores the more complex relationship between objects, words and memories. The questions asked by Dr. Jordan as he continues, are left to the reader to explore:

He must make a note of it: *Middle term essential*. Perhaps a maniac is simply one for whom these associative tricks of the brain cross the line that separates the literal from the merely fanciful, as may happen under the influence of fevers and of somnambulistic trances, and of certain drugs. But what is the mechanism? For there must be one. Is the clue to be found in the nerves, or in the brain itself? To produce insanity, what must first be damaged, and how?²⁵³

The questions that Dr. Jordan asks himself, as a scientist in the pre-Freudian era, are questions which modern scientists are still asking. The developments in psychology since the Victorian era have been significant, and yet Atwood reminds the reader that there is, as yet, no conclusive answer to the question that a doctor could have asked himself over one hundred years ago. The modern reader's understanding of the progression in understanding the processes of the mind are underscored by the fact that none of the theories posited by even the most important psychological theorists can be proven without a doubt. This fact brings Atwood, through Dr. Jordan, back to the question that holds great import throughout the novel: what is madness and how can we tell if someone is truly mad? That Grace's mental situation is never truly resolved suggests that there is no unequivocal answer to this question, and yet the relationship between Grace's insanity and the hierarchical structure of the society in which she finds herself suggest that much of our definition of madness extends from what is seen to be different from the norm or dominant discourse.

²⁵³ *Ibid*, p. 67 – 68

The meetings between Grace and Dr. Jordan suggest a leitmotif that is fascinating and which also serves to unify the actions and motivations in the novel, while at the same time representing what was considered to be acceptable work for women in the period. Grace describes the scene as follows:

I am sitting in the sewing room, at the head of the stairs in the Governor's wife's house, in the usual chair at the usual table with the sewing things in the basket as usual, except for the scissors.²⁵⁴

Grace is often described in the novel as being an excellent seamstress and her fondness for the act itself suggests to the reader the so-called "needle-and-pen trope" in which the needle and pen are oppositionally linked as "[t]he needle, not the pen, is the instrument they [women] should handle, and the only one they ever use dexterously" according to M. G. "Monk" Lewis²⁵⁵. The needle itself can be seen as "a sign of all that was comfortingly and traditionally womanly"²⁵⁶. Grace's needlework therefore defines her internalisation of her society's gender stereotypes. Unlike Offred, Grace is not forbidden from writing or reading, and she herself states that she is literate, yet she does not need to write, which brings the pen as phallus argument, as suggested by Gilbert and Gubar, into the text. This argument relates both to power and to authority, as is expressed through the relationship between Grace and Dr. Jordan.

Grace does not tell her own story as Dr. Jordan writes down only what he sees as being important. It has been this way for her for some time, as she states:

And that is how we go on. He asks a question, and I say an answer and he writes it down. In the courtroom, every word that came out of my mouth was as if burnt into the paper they were writing it on, and once I said a thing I knew I could never get the words back; only they were the wrong words

²⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. 69

²⁵⁵ King, K. R., "Of Needles and Pen's and Women's Work" in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Vol. 14, No. 1, Spring, 1995. p. 77

²⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p. 77

because whatever I said would be twisted around, even if it was the plain truth in the first place. And it was the same with Dr. Bannerling at the Asylum.²⁵⁷

Gilbert and Gubar ask the question: “is a pen a metaphorical penis?”²⁵⁸ and as their argument progresses, the two women use a fascinating quote from Edward Said which is worth including here as it relates not only to the situation of Grace as a woman, but also the situation of the novel itself as postcolonial:

Authority suggests to me a constellation of linked meanings: not only as the OED tells us, ‘a power to enforce obedience,’ or ‘a derived or delegated power,’ or ‘a power to influence action,’ or ‘a power to inspire belief,’ or ‘a person whose opinion is accepted’; not only those, but a connection as well with *author* – that is, a person who originates or gives existence to something, a begetter, beginner, father, or ancestor, a person who sets forth written statements. There is still another cluster of meanings: *author* is tied to the past participle *auctus* of the verb *augere*; therefore *auctor*, according to Eric Partridge, is literally an increaser and thus a founder. *Auctoritas* is production, invention, cause, in addition to meaning a right of possession. Finally, it means continuance, or causing to continue. Taken together these meanings are all grounded in the following notions: (1) that of the power of an individual to initiate, institute, establish – in short, to begin; (2) that this power and its product are an increase over what had been there previously; (3) that the individual wielding this power controls its issue and what is derived therefrom; (4) that authority maintains the continuity of its course.²⁵⁹

Said situates the position of the author in a model of patriarchal hierarchy which places the subordinate individual as possession. This “implicitly or explicitly patriarchal theory of literature”²⁶⁰ leaves Grace in the position of possessed subordinate individual whose voice has been appropriated by the dominant (male) discourse. Her position is elucidated by Jean-Francois Lyotard as he describes the dilemma

in which the victim of a system of dominance is defined by his/her inability to speak of his/her experiences under that system. Such a system is so pervasive as to control not only the physical beings of such victims, but also to

²⁵⁷ Atwood, M. *Alias Grace*. London: Virago, 1997. p. 77

²⁵⁸ Eagleton, M. (ed). *Feminist Literary Theory, A Reader*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, Ltd., 1986. p. 64

²⁵⁹ *Ibid*, p. 64

²⁶⁰ *Ibid*, p. 66

command the language in which they speak their stories, histories and identities.²⁶¹

Lyotard himself writes that:

The *différend* is the unstable state and instant of language wherein something which must be able to put into phrases cannot yet be. This state includes silence, which is a negative phrase, but it also calls upon phrases which are in principle possible.²⁶²

Grace herself, but also all women – especially “mad” ones – represents the *différend* in this novel as she is unable to speak of the events which took place in Richmond Hill. Through Grace’s amnesia, Atwood suggests the degree to which societal influences pervade the unconscious mind thus suggesting that Grace’s inability to speak of the events is directly related to the fact that no one, up until Dr. Jordan, wants to listen in good faith. Grace’s relationship with Dr. Jordan is therefore different from her previous relationships with men in authority. The reader is therefore encouraged to realise that Dr. Jordan has as his main aim the need to find Grace to be sane, and therefore he cannot simply be equated with those who, possessing reason, claim the power to define. This is clear as Grace continues her description of the interviews:

But now I feel as if everything I say is right. As long as I say something, anything at all, Dr. Jordan smiles and writes it down, and tells me I am doing well.

When he writes, I feel as if he is drawing me; or not drawing me, drawing on me – drawing on my skin – not with the pencil he is using, but with an old-fashioned goose pen, and not with the quill end but with the feather end. As if hundreds of butterflies have settled all over my face, and are softly opening and closing their wings.²⁶³

The connection between art, feathers and butterflies is similar to the symbolic nature of flowers, as these symbols are also subjects and symbols in art. In Hall’s *Dictionary*

²⁶¹ Harris, A. M. “The Language Her Ma’am Spoke”: Voicing the Mother-Tongue in Toni Morrison’s Fiction. Ph.D Thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, 2002. p. 141

²⁶² Lyotard, J. “The Différend, the Referent, and the Proper Name” in *Diacritics*, Vol. 14, No. 3, Special Issue on the Work of Jean-Francois Lyotard. Autumn, 1984. p. 7

²⁶³ Atwood, M. *Alias Grace*. London: Virago, 1997. p. 77 – 78

of *Subjects and Symbols in Art* feathers are described as representing hope and faith while butterflies are said to represent “life, death and resurrection” because of the “life-cycle of the caterpillar, chrysalis and butterfly.”²⁶⁴ Grace’s description of her feelings surrounding her interviews with Dr. Jordan thus suggest her hope that he will not only assist in the Committee’s request for a pardon, but that he will allow her to remember and understand the events which resulted in the murders. The relationship between language, meaning and power is thus significant in this novel, as it is in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. The meaning of words and phrases, as well as the power of the dominant to define the alterity of the subordinate is exemplified by both the trial itself and Grace’s ‘madness’.

Grace’s narrative, while focusing on her early family life, moves towards a description of how she became a servant in the house of Mrs Alderman Parkinson and her meeting with Mary Whitney. Mary functions as friend and teacher and she is described as being “fun-loving” and “very mischievous”²⁶⁵ but perhaps more significant is her reaction to class differences in the colonies as Grace remembers:

But it angered her that some people had so much and others so little, as she could not see any divine plan in it. She claimed that her grandmother had been a Red Indian, which is why her hair was so black; and that if she had half a chance she would run away to the woods and go about with a bow and arrow, and not have to pin up her hair or wear stays; and I could come with her.²⁶⁶

Through her refusal to accept the situation in which she finds herself, and her identification with the native First Nation, so-called “Red Indians”, Mary represents, according to Stephen Slemon, the “need for an identity granted not in terms of the

²⁶⁴ Hall, J. *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*. England: John Murray, 1992. p. 54

²⁶⁵ Atwood, M. *Alias Grace*. London: Virago, 1997. p. 173

²⁶⁶ *Ibid*, p. 173

colonial power, but in terms of [herself].”²⁶⁷ Mary acts as protector of the young Grace, yet this is not the only role she plays within the novel. Through her relationship with one of the sons of the household, Mr. George, and her subsequent pregnancy and abortion, Mary serves to represent, for Atwood, the negotiation of the “relationship between colonialist power and the possibilities for post-colonial freedom.”²⁶⁸ Mary’s death and Grace’s reaction to it are also significant in Grace’s future psychological development as she feels that she could have done more to save her best friend – which brings back past guilt in her involvement and reaction to the death of her mother.

The tragedy of the loss of her friend is, for Grace, irrevocable. Her feelings towards Mary’s death seem to be related to her feelings that the events have “been brought about through [her] own aggression”²⁶⁹ as is suggested by her insistence that she made an attempt to make Mary comfortable but her expression of her discomfort at not having told any other member of the household that Mary was ill intimates her feelings of responsibility for the death. She appears to be angry with herself as she fell asleep while her friend was dying, and did not pay attention to Mary’s foreshadowing of her own death, waking only to find that Mary had died alone and in pain. Grace continues her description of the events:

And then I heard her voice, as clear as anything, right in my ear, saying *Let me in*. I was quite startled, and looked hard at Mary, who by that time was lying on the floor, as we were making up the bed. But she gave no sign of having said anything; and her eyes were still open, and staring up at the ceiling. Then I thought with a rush of fear, But I did not open the window. And I ran across the room and opened it, because I must have heard wrong and she was saying *Let me out*. Agnes said, What are you doing, it’s as cold as an icicle out

²⁶⁷ Slemon, S. “Modernism’s Last Post” in *Past the Last Post, Theorizing Post-Colonialism and Post-Modernism*, Adam, I. and Tiffin, H. (eds). Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1990. p. 3

²⁶⁸ *Ibid*, p. 9

²⁶⁹ Likierman, M. *Melanie Klein: Her Work in Context*. London and New York: Continuum, 2001. p. 119

there, and I said The smell is making me sick. And she agreed that the room should be aired. I was hoping that Mary's soul would fly out the window now, and not stay inside, whispering things into my ear. But I wondered whether it was too late.²⁷⁰

The depression which Grace experiences after the loss mobilises her to wish to repair the damage she has done in relation to her actions. Her need to open the windows to let Mary's soul out, and the guilt she feels for not having done so, show clearly that Grace is, in Klein's opinion, within the depressive position.

This is significant as:

If the infant has been able to establish a good internal object relatively securely in the depressive position, situations of anxiety will not lead to illness, but to a fruitful working through, leading to further enrichment and creativity.

Where the depressive position has not been worked through sufficiently, and the belief in the ego's love and creativity and its capacity to regain good objects internally and externally has not been firmly established, development is far less favourable. The ego is dogged by constant anxiety of the total loss of good internal situations, it is impoverished and weakened, its relation to reality may be tenuous and there is a perpetual dread and sometimes an actual threat of regression into psychosis.²⁷¹

Placing Grace in the depressive position, Atwood allows for a return to more primitive modes of mental functioning and therefore for the possibility of psychosis and the subsequent disintegration of the ego as is suggested by her return to the more infantile state (in psychoanalytic terms) of madness after the murders, while also explaining her repressed feelings in the form of her amnesia.

Grace's shocking response to Mary's death is not merely the hearing of Mary's ghostly voice, as she continues:

They say I lay like that for ten hours, and no one could wake me, although they tried pinching and slapping, and cold water, and burning feathers under

²⁷⁰ Atwood, M. *Alias Grace*, London: Virago, 1997. p. 207 – 208

²⁷¹ Segal, H. *Introduction to the Work of Melanie Klein*. London: Karnac Books and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1988. p. 80 – 81

my nose; and that when I did wake up I did not seem to know where I was, or what had happened; and I kept asking where Grace had gone. And when they told me that I myself was Grace, I would not believe them, but cried, and tried to run out of the house, because I said that Grace was lost, and had gone into the lake, and I needed to search for her. They told me later they'd feared for my reason, which must have been unsettled by the shock of it all; and it was no wonder, considering.

Then I fell again into a deep sleep. When I woke it was a day later, and I knew again that I was Grace, and that Mary was dead. And I remembered the night we'd thrown the apple peelings over our shoulders, and Mary's had broken three times; and it had all come true, as she had not married anyone at all, and now never would.

But I had no memory of anything I said or did during the time I was awake, between the long sleeps; and this worried me.²⁷²

Grace's description of her hysteric reaction to Mary's death appears to be shocking and yet understandable to those who witnessed it. Significant in this passage is the reiteration of the relationship between unreason and madness as suggested by Foucault, as Grace remembers that those who cared for her feared for her *reason*, thus suggesting that they thought that she was mad. That the cause of her insanity was related to the shock of Mary's death is plausible in modern psychology, as one could describe Grace's responses to the situation as a dissociative disorder, namely dissociative amnesia. Sue, Sue and Sue describe dissociative amnesia as:

The partial or total loss of important personal information, sometimes occurring suddenly after a stressful or traumatic event. The disturbed person may be unable to recall information such as his or her name, address, friends, and relatives but does remember the necessities of daily life – how to read, write and drive. Individuals with this disorder often score high on tests measuring hypnotisability and may also report depression, anxiety, and trance states (DSM IV – TR).

There are five types of dissociative amnesia – localised, selective, generalised, systematised, and continuous – and they vary in terms of degree and type of memory that is lost. The most common, localised amnesia, is a failure to recall all the events that happened in a specific short period, often centred on some highly painful or disturbing event.²⁷³

This description of dissociative amnesia fits the description given by both Grace and Dr. Jordan, as he thinks to himself after her retelling of the death:

²⁷² Atwood, M. *Alias Grace*, London: Virago, 1997. p. 208 – 209

²⁷³ Sue, D., Sue, D. and Sue, S. *Understanding Abnormal Behaviour, Seventh Edition*. USA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003. p. 169

She'd lost her memory, too; though only for some hours, and during a normal-enough fit of hysterics – but still, it may prove significant. It is the only memory she seems to have forgotten, so far; otherwise, every button and candle-end seems accounted for.²⁷⁴

Another element of the text is at work here, however, as Atwood's use of the word "seems" suggests that the truth of Grace's story is not necessarily as it may appear to be. There is no one to validate her story and the inclusion of the "Author's Afterword" makes the reader aware of the fact that Grace's description of the events portrayed in the novel is fictitious thus forcing the reader to question the ethical ambiguity present in Atwood's portrayal of Grace as a character. Atwood's characterisation of Grace is complex and mosaic-like (much like her creation of the text itself) which encourages the reader to identify with her as a character, while the question of authenticity and the historical verity of the character is constantly questioned thus forcing the reader to be wary of falling into the trap of believing that the fictional account is "true". The character of Jeremiah the peddler/Dr. DuPont also serves to highlight this point as he suggests to the reader a distressing recognition of the constructedness of society and of history.

The meeting between Dr. DuPont and Grace towards the end of the novel takes her by surprise:

This is Dr. Jerome DuPont, she said, he is a noted medical practitioner, and Jeremiah nodded to me, and said, How do you do, Miss Marks. I was still confused, but managed to keep my composure; the Governor's wife saying to him, She is often startled by strangers. And to me, Dr. DuPont is a friend, he will not hurt you.²⁷⁵

The character of Jeremiah, another of Atwood's entirely fictional characters, suggests controversial ideas to the reader. He is the bringer of knowledge to the other

²⁷⁴ Atwood, M. *Alias Grace*, London: Virago, 1997. p. 215

²⁷⁵ *Ibid*, p. 364

characters in the text, as his mysticism and convenient appearances suggest, although many of his interactions with Grace remain secretive and ambivalent, not only to the reader but also to Grace herself as suggested by her final letter to him²⁷⁶. The scene above continues thus:

I must look into her eyes, says Jeremiah. It is often an indication as to whether or not the procedure will be efficacious. And he lifted my chin, and we gazed at each other. Very good, he said, all solemn and sedate, just as if he was what he pretended to be; and I had to admire him. Then he said, Grace, have you ever been hypnotised? And he kept hold of my chin for a moment, to steady me, and give me time to control myself.

I should certainly hope not, Sir, I said, with some indignation. I do not even rightly know what it is.

It is an entirely scientific procedure, he said. Would you be willing to try it? If it would help your friends, and the Committee. If it is decided by them that you should. And he gave my chin a little squeeze, and moved his eyes up and down very quickly, to signal to me that I should say yes.²⁷⁷

The trickster nature of the character of Jeremiah is obvious in this encounter, as he represents a form of class protest in ridiculing “the follies and vices of society.”²⁷⁸ As such a character he exhibits “changeability, refusal to be pinned down, disguise, mutability, nomadism, alterity and mystery in general.”²⁷⁹ Through her use of Jeremiah, Atwood criticises the normative assumptions of the ruling classes, thus subverting “hierarchies of value and [approaching] all forms of meaning making with abiding scepticism.”²⁸⁰ The fact that Jeremiah convinces every character other than Grace that he is a doctor is something of which she is proud, while she also finds the situation comical:

As for me, I could have laughed with glee; for Jeremiah had done a conjuring trick, as surely as if he’d pulled coin from my ear, or made believe to swallow a fork; and just as he’d used to do such tricks in full view, with everyone

²⁷⁶ Miller, R. “The Gospel According to Grace: Gnostic Heresy As Narrative Strategy in Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace*” in *Literature and Theology*, Vol. 6, No. 2, June, 2002.

²⁷⁷ Atwood, M. *Alias Grace*, London: Virago, 1997. p. 364 – 365

²⁷⁸ Cuddon, J. A. *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory, Third Edition*. London: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1992. p. 828

²⁷⁹ Gaylard, G. *After Colonialism, African Postmodernism and Magical Realism*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2005. p. 259

²⁸⁰ Strehle, S. “Satire Beyond the Norm, Review” in *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 37, No. 1, Spring, 1996. Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996. p. 147

looking on but unable to detect him, he had done the same here, and made a pact with me under their very eyes, and they were none the wiser.²⁸¹

Through this tricksterism Atwood uses Jeremiah to promote “change in a situation of stark political binaries” and also to “challenge the rational.”²⁸² Jeremiah’s success as Dr. DuPont, as well as the other personas he assumes throughout the novel, is reliant on his “knowing the habits of his enemies” and it is “by deceiving them, by taking advantage of their greed, size, gullibility or haste” that he is able to express opposition to a dominant system which believes itself to be invulnerable to attack.²⁸³ It is through this deception of the dominant groups within his society that he represents the “existential dilemma of subordinate groups.”²⁸⁴ Through his mimicry and deceit, Jeremiah is able to ingratiate himself with the dominant group he wishes to undermine. His use of the disguise of Dr. DuPont

carves out a public, if provisional, space for the autonomous cultural expression of dissent. If it is disguised, it is at least not hidden; it is spoken to power. This is no small achievement of voice under domination.²⁸⁵

Jeremiah’s infiltration into the dominant group gives Grace hope but it also shows the reader the possibility that the hypnotism which he is to perform is a form of revenge and therefore cannot be trusted. Atwood thus questions perception while raising doubts about the accuracy of Dr. Jordan’s perception of the events which are to follow. The ambiguous nature of the character of Jeremiah is echoed in the ambiguous nature of the events of the hypnotism as both offer a challenge to the rational.

²⁸¹ Atwood, M. *Alias Grace*, London: Virago, 1997. p. 365

²⁸² Gaylard, G. *After Colonialism, African Postmodernism and Magical Realism*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2005. p. 259

²⁸³ Scott, J. C. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990. p. 162

²⁸⁴ *Ibid*, p. 163

²⁸⁵ *Ibid*, p. 166

The event of Grace's hypnotism is described by Dr. Jordan, who watches the events with trepidation as well as curiosity while at the same time attempting to "preserve his objectivity."²⁸⁶ The significance of the gothic setting of the scene and Dr. Jordan's attempts at objectivity relate to psychoanalytic theory. In the terms of psychoanalysis, the gothic in literature epitomises the return of the repressed "in which subconscious psychic energy bursts out from the restraints of the conscious ego."²⁸⁷ This psychoanalytic view of the gothic in fiction is significant to the events that are about to take place as the reader and Dr. Jordan are hopeful that the hypnosis will allow Grace to express that which she has repressed through amnesia. Dr. DuPont's explanation of the theory behind the process follows:

"This is a fully scientific procedure," says Dr. DuPont. He is talking to the rest of them, rather than to Grace. "Please banish all thoughts of Mesmerism, and other such fraudulent procedures. The Braidian system is completely logical and sound, and has been proven by European experts beyond a shadow of a doubt."²⁸⁸

Dr. DuPont attempts to locate his practice within the field of science through his mention of both Mesmer and Braid; he hence attempts to suggest the authenticity of Grace's response. For the reader, however, this suggests the opposite as it highlights the possibility that the events have been constructed thus suggesting a rehearsed scene created by both Grace and Dr. DuPont in order to shock their audience. Although the possibility that the scene is not constructed is suggested by Grace's fear, as Dr.

Jordan's observation of her continues:

Grace stares at the door as if she's thinking of escape. She's so high-strung Simon can almost feel her vibrating, like a stretched rope. He's never seen her so terrified. What has DuPont said or done to her before bringing her here? It's almost as if he must have threatened her; but when he speaks to her she looks up at him trustingly. Whatever else, it isn't DuPont she's afraid of.²⁸⁹

²⁸⁶ Atwood, M. *Alias Grace*, London: Virago, 1997. p. 474

²⁸⁷ Andrews, J., "Native Canadian Gothic Refigured: Reading Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach*" in *Essays on Canadian Writing*, Vol. 73, Spring, 2001. p. 4

²⁸⁸ Atwood, M. *Alias Grace*, London: Virago, 1997. p. 474 – 475

²⁸⁹ *Ibid*, p. 475

Dr. Jordan expresses the possibility that Grace fears Dr. DuPont, yet the reader is aware of the relationship between Grace and Jeremiah, which suggests that Dr. Jordan observes only what he wants to see. Atwood again blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction by leaving the reader to come to his or her own conclusions on this point. The reader is therefore forced to question and imagine the events that took place between Grace and DuPont behind closed doors. The events continue:

He pauses. "Please lift your arm."
Slowly the arm rises as if pulled by a string, until it is held out straight. "Your arm," says DuPont, "is an iron bar. No one can bend it." He looks around at them. "Would anyone care to try?" Simon is tempted, but decides not to risk it; at this point he wants neither to be convinced, nor to be disillusioned. "No?" says DuPont. "Then allow me." He places his two hands on Grace's outstretched arm, leans forward. "I am using all my force," he says. The arm does not bend. "Good. You may lower your arm."²⁹⁰

The theatricality of the scene highlights the constructedness of the events, thus allowing Atwood to suggest artifice. The exaggerated aspects force the reader to analyse the scene in two complex ways. The first question that comes to this reader's mind involves the humour of the scene. Lydia's shock at Grace's open eyes and Dr. Jordan's description of the veil Dr. DuPont places over Grace's head as shroud is so serious as to be funny. Atwood thus acts to destabilise the reader by creating an ambiguous situation which itself exposes ontological and value uncertainty. On first reading the scene in its entirety, the events which follow the passage above overshadow the humour, it is only through rereading and analysing the scene that the irony becomes clear. The second element which is open to analysis by the reader lies in the tension created between what is true and what is done purely to entertain the audience. This aspect is questioned by Dr. Jordan himself, as he analyses the scene:

It's too theatrical, too tawdry, thinks Simon; it reeks of the small-town lecture halls of fifteen years ago, with their audiences of credulous store clerks and

²⁹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 475 – 476

laconic farmers, and their drab wives, and the smooth-talking charlatans who used to dole out transcendental nonsense and quack medical advice to them as an excuse for picking their pockets. He's striving for derision: nevertheless, the back of his neck creeps.²⁹¹

Unlike Dr. Jordan, the reader is aware of 'Dr. DuPont's' previous position as one of the "smooth-talking charlatans", yet much like Dr. Jordan the reader is also left with the possibility that the events being described may, in fact, be real. However, it is impossible to know whether Dr. DuPont and Grace are playacting, or whether the 'possession' which follows is free of artifice. Reverend Verringer seems to feel that the theatrical elements created by DuPont bring the scientific claims made prior to Grace's veiling into question as he says:

"What hope of answer or redress? Behind the veil, behind the veil," says Reverend Verringer, in his quoting voice. Simon can't tell whether or not he intends to be jocular.²⁹²

The ambiguity of Verringer's quotation of Tennyson suggests that the answers which they all seek may not be answered, which is accentuated by the loud knock that is heard before the interview with the hypnotised Grace.

Suddenly there is a loud knock, almost like a small explosion. It has come from the table, or was it the door? Lydia gives a little shriek and clutches at Simon's hand; it would be churlish of him to pull away, so he does not, especially as she's shivering like a leaf. "Hush!" says Mrs. Quennell in a piercing whisper. "We have a visitor!" "William!" cries the Governor's wife softly. "I know it's my darling! My little one!" "I beg you," says DuPont, with irritation. "This is not a séance!"²⁹³

The supposed manifestation of the supernatural is satirised by the overly-emotional response of the Governor's wife, and is made humorous by Reverend Verringer's facial expression, which is described by Dr. Jordan as "a pained smile, like a baby with gas."²⁹⁴ Dr. Jordan describes himself as being "rendered absurd, an ignorant

²⁹¹ *Ibid*, p. 476

²⁹² *Ibid*, p. 476

²⁹³ *Ibid*, p. 477

²⁹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 477

pawn, a dupe”²⁹⁵ and yet the interview with Grace resumes. Dr. Jordan expresses his feelings thus:

He’s shaken, but must try not to show it. He was expecting a series of monosyllables, mere yes’s and no’s dragged out of her, out of her lethargy and stupor; a series of compelled and somnolent responses to his own firm demands. Not such crude mockery. This voice cannot be Grace’s, yet in that case, whose voice is it?²⁹⁶

Whose voice is it, indeed? The double-consciousness exhibited by the character of Grace at this point in the novel is a reaction to the dominant male discourse within which she cannot express her own identity. That she reacts in a way that is mocking and crude is disconcerting to Dr. Jordan. The question he asks of Grace’s identity suggests not only that the voice speaking is not Grace, but possibly that it *is* Grace. He feels out of control of the situation, as what he expects from Grace is denied. Dr. Jordan’s sense of reality is displaced, making him feel both afraid and curious at once as he tries to maintain his power over a situation that is beyond his control. The image of the kerchief covered in flowers is again repeated here, a clear representation of femininity, juxtaposed with the use it is put to.

The hints about the voice become stronger both in terms of the content and the tone of voice, and yet those present need to be explicitly told before they realise that they are not dealing with Grace:

The voice is gleeful. “Stop talking rubbish,” she says. “You’ve deceived yourselves! I am not Grace! Grace knew nothing about it!”²⁹⁷

Atwood uses the “voice” to emphasise the loss of personal identity of the muted subject within a dominant discourse. An interesting element of the ‘voice’ is the crudeness of the language used. Throughout the novel Grace’s command of the

²⁹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 478

²⁹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 478 – 479

²⁹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 481

English language appears to be sophisticated and grammatically correct, yet the ungrammatical and colloquial manner in which the ‘voice’ is expressed suggests that the ‘voice’ does not belong to Grace.

The voice-that-is-not-Grace is, in fact, the voice of Mary Whitney, as Dr.

Jordan finally guesses:

“Not Mary,” says Simon. “Not Mary Whitney.”
There is a sharp clap, which appears to come from the ceiling. “I told James to do it. I urged him to. I was there all along!”²⁹⁸

After this revelation, more explanation is needed, as Mary’s voice continues to describe the events which led to her appropriation of Grace’s body:

“There?” says DuPont.
“Here! With Grace, where I am now. It was so cold, lying on the floor, and I was all alone; I needed to keep warm. But Grace doesn’t know, she’s never known!” The voice is no longer teasing. “They almost hanged her, but that would have been wrong. She knew nothing! I only borrowed her clothing for a time.”
“Her clothing?” says Simon.
“Her earthly shell. Her fleshly garment. She forgot to open the window, and so I couldn’t get out! But I wouldn’t want to hurt her. You mustn’t tell her!” The little voice is pleading now.²⁹⁹

The significance of the opening of the window is interesting as Grace is only made aware of this tradition on the boat to the Americas, yet there is no hint that such an action was understood by Mary, this could suggest the constructedness of Grace’s narrative under hypnosis – this cannot, however, be conclusively proven.

As the conversation between Grace/Mary continues questions of listening in good faith and the understanding of madness are foregrounded:

“Why not?” asks Simon.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 482

²⁹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 482 – 483

“You know why, Dr. Jordan. Do you want to see her back in the Asylum? I liked it there at first, I could talk out loud there. I could laugh. I could tell what happened. But no one listened to me.” There is a small, thin sobbing. “I was not heard.”

“Grace,” says Simon. “Stop playing tricks!”

“I am not Grace,” says the voice, more tentatively.

“Is that really you?” Simon asks it. “Are you telling the truth? Don’t be afraid.”

“You see?” wails the voice. “You’re the same, you won’t listen to me, you don’t believe me, you want it your own way, you won’t hear ...” It trails off, and there is silence.³⁰⁰

There is, in Dr. Jordan’s tone, a hint of doubt even against all the proof she has attempted to offer him, he still considers the voice to be “it” or “the voice” as he refuses to accept the name that has been given. Mary suggests that she initially found a sense of freedom at the Asylum, but her voice was soon silenced by its inability to be heard and believed, thus relocating the space from one which is protective and secure to one which is prison-like and inhibiting. As she refers to the closed window after her death the reader remembers the words that Grace claims to have heard: “*Let me in.*” The imprisonment of Mary within Grace’s psyche represents the class divisions within Canadian society in the Nineteenth Century, a class system that attempted to reproduce the class barriers created in the imperial centre of Britain.

While the events surrounding the hypnotism could have been orchestrated by Grace and DuPont, that he is described as being “quite shaken”³⁰¹ after Grace has woken from the trance suggests that the events (even if constructed) did not go according to plan. The psychological explanations for the appearance of Mary Whitney are numerous, and yet all explanations of this type cannot be definitive. One of the more interesting of the possibilities however, is related directly to the title of the novel, *Alias Grace*. As Grace assumes Mary’s name in the attempted escape to the

³⁰⁰ *Ibid*, p. 483

³⁰¹ *Ibid*, p. 485

United States, the choice of *Alias Grace* as title suggests the possibility that the character that is assumed to be Grace could, in fact, be Mary. The character that appears to be most shaken by Grace's words, Dr. Jordan, realises that there is no hope for finding truth in the history Grace has provided him with. How can he prove the facts she has detailed, and how too can they be disproved? These questions send him running from Kingston as he realises that there is a subtle doubleness in what is said and what is left out, thus highlighting the fact that Atwood herself suggests the constructedness of discourse.

The suggestion of the duality of narrative is underscored by another important scene in the novel. Grace details her acceptance of the position at the Kinnear house yet on arrival at the Kinnear estate, she realises that things were not what they appear to be, as she describes Nancy's appearance and her reaction to it as she and Kinnear first ride up the driveway:

There were flowers planted in front of the verandah, white peonies and pink roses, and a gracefully dressed lady with a triple flounce was cutting them; she had a flat basket over her arm to put them in. When she heard our wheels and the horse's hooves on the gravel, she straightened up and shaded her eyes with her hand, and I saw she was wearing gloves; and then I recognised that this woman was Nancy Montgomery. She was wearing a bonnet the same pale colour as her dress, it was as if she'd put on her best clothes to go out front and cut the flowers. She waved a hand daintily in my direction, but she made no move to come over to me; and something squeezed tight about my heart.³⁰²

Grace's discomfort at seeing Nancy acting as the lady of the house rather than a servant is warranted, as Nancy's position is ambiguous. The reference to the white peonies relates to the start of the novel in which Grace described red peonies, and the colour of the flowers, red and white, suggests the relationship between life and death, rage and innocence or purity. Nancy's actions and manner of dress in this scene

³⁰² *Ibid*, p. 244

appear to be staged for the benefit of Grace, as she attempts to locate herself within the image of the “Angel of the House”, dressed in white and acting the role of the lady. Gilbert and Gubar foreground this by suggesting that the colour red in *Jane Eyre* represents Jane’s rage and imprisonment (in the Red Room) while the colour white in the works of Emily Dickinson represent “the Victorian ideal of feminine purity” while also representing the pallor of death.³⁰³ The red and white of the peonies hints at the different sides to Nancy’s character while also foregrounding notions of good and evil. The white flowers associated with Nancy represent good as well as death, while the red flowers which haunt Grace represent blood as well as evil, yet the situation is not as clear cut as it may seem. Nancy is merely pretending to be the lady of the house, and the reader is not certain that Grace committed the acts of which she was convicted.

The character of Thomas Kinnear also appears to fluster Grace. While he is much more agreeable than his mistress, his actions are also unusually liberal, thus he does not fit the stereotype of the Nineteenth Century country gentleman. Grace is made aware of his liberal ideas when she first meets him, as he allows her to sit next to him at the front of his wagon. She states that she “was quite embarrassed”³⁰⁴ by the situation and that “he didn’t seem to give it a second thought”³⁰⁵ as they proceeded to the house. She continues to foreshadow events as she thinks that “any of those looking out of their windows at us would have something to gossip about” and she qualifies this memory by stating that she “later found, Mr. Kinnear was never a man to pay any attention to gossip, as he didn’t give a pin what other people said about

³⁰³ Gilbert, S. M. and Gubar, S. *The Madwoman in the Attic, The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979. p. 615

³⁰⁴ Atwood, M. *Alias Grace*, London: Virago, 1997. p. 242

³⁰⁵ *Ibid*, p. 242

him.”³⁰⁶ Another of the characters that Grace meets on her arrival at the Kinnear residence that does not appear to care what is thought of him is James McDermott. He is described as being churlish, rude, arrogant and unapproachable. McDermott’s relationship with Kinnear and Nancy is complex as Grace’s accounts of the situation indicate.

Claiming to be twenty one, McDermott explains to Grace how he came to be employed at the Kinnear residence. He tells Grace that it was Nancy who had hired him but he had thought that “he would be working for the gentleman himself, and doing for him in person as he had done for Captain McDonald”³⁰⁷ who was his previous employer. Yet he found himself working for a fickle woman who is living as mistress to her master. Also having emigrated from Ireland, McDermott makes a small attempt at befriending Grace yet she does not accept his attentions as she believes that he “had a strong reputation as a liar and a braggart.”³⁰⁸ The reader learns that McDermott is friendly with some of the neighbourhood’s less savoury characters and that his relationship with Nancy is antagonistic, but also that he is an excellent dancer and that his family situation in Ireland was unpleasant. Atwood thus describes him a manner which is in keeping with the stereotype of the ill-natured Irish emigrant. Atwood’s depiction of his character is believable and also empathetic to the situation of a poor, uneducated, young settler within the harsh Canadian landscape. McDermott’s relationship with Kinnear is not explored in detail as the relationship between McDermott and Nancy appears to be of more import to the progression of the novel as a whole. McDermott is the first to suggest to Grace that Nancy and Kinnear are lovers, and his disapproval of the situation is obvious, but more important than his

³⁰⁶ *Ibid*, p. 242

³⁰⁷ *Ibid*, p. 267 – 268

³⁰⁸ *Ibid*, p. 268

feelings about the sexual activities of the master of the house McDermott appears to find taking orders from a woman he sees as equal in station to himself objectionable. In this situation, then, Nancy acts the role of master and McDermott that of slave, thus Atwood plays with the notion of the master-slave positionality of the two characters by placing Nancy in the position of power. The ideology of the colonality of master-slave psychosis is thus problematised by the novel as Atwood questions the roles of men and women in Victorian society.

Mr. Kinnear's liberal nature, his relationship with Nancy and McDermott's gruff flirtation seem to be at odds with Grace as she is in many ways a conservative character as she reinscribes "the ethos of keeping one's place in terms of good and bad femininity as well as class."³⁰⁹ Her conservatism, as well as her curiosity, are the reasons why the pictures hanging in Mr. Kinnear's bedroom are accentuated by her discomfort with the way they express female sexuality. Grace describes the pictures in detail and is embarrassed by the subject matter, yet Nancy's discomfort at having Grace in her master's bedroom creates tension which Grace attempts to allay by questioning Nancy about the pictures:

To take her mind off her fidgeting, I asked her about the picture on the wall; not the one with the peacock-feather fan, but the other one, of a young lady taking a bath, in a garden, which was an odd place for it, with her hair tied up, and a maid holding a large towel ready for her, and several old men with beards peering at her from behind the bushes. I could tell by the clothing that it was in ancient times. Nancy said that it was an engraving, and that the colouring was done by hand, and it was a copy of a famous painting about Susannah and the Elders, which was a Bible subject. And she was very proud of knowing so much.³¹⁰

The story of Susannah and the Elders involves issues of sexuality and sin, while allowing a space for Grace to explore her own relationship to false testimony. The

³⁰⁹ Rimstead, R. "Working-Class Intruders: Female Domesticity in *Kamouraska* and *Alias Grace*" in *Canadian Literature*, Vol. 175, Winter, 2002. p. 59

³¹⁰ Atwood, M. *Alias Grace*, London: Virago, 1997. p. 260

picture is a reproduction of a Renaissance painting, with the image being a representation of “a fictional heroine whose innocent virtue triumphed in the end over villainy.”³¹¹ Grace does not understand Nancy’s statement that the tale is a Biblical subject, and so the interaction continues, with Grace posing her questions to Mr. Kinnear:

Well, Grace, I see Nancy wishes to keep it a secret from me, but you must tell me; and I was shy, but at length I asked him whether the picture was a Biblical subject, as Nancy had said. And he laughed, and said that strictly speaking it was not, as the story was in the Apocrypha. And I was surprised, and asked what that might be; and I could tell that Nancy had never heard the word before either.³¹²

Kinnear’s tone in this interaction appears to be teasing, as he seems to be laughing at the lack of education expressed by the two women. His role is therefore that of master and teacher as he continues to explain to the two women what the Apocrypha is:

Then he said the Apocrypha was a book where they’d put all the stories from Biblical times that they’d decided should not go into the Bible. I was most astonished to hear this, and I said, Who decided? Because I’d always thought that the Bible was written by God, as it was called the Word of God, and everyone termed it so. And he smiled, and said that though perhaps God wrote it, it was men who wrote it down; which was a little different. But those men were said to have been inspired; which meant that God had spoken to them, and told them what to do.³¹³

The story of Susanna takes place in Babylon, and tells of how Susanna, the wife of a wealthy Jew, was plotted against by two elders of the community who desired her. The two elders hid themselves in her garden in order to wait for her to have her bath. The moment she was alone, the two men accosted her, claiming that if she did not have sex with them they would “swear publicly that that they had seen her

³¹¹ Hall, J. *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*. England: John Murray, 1992. p. 294

³¹² Atwood, M. *Alias Grace*, London: Virago, 1997. p. 260

³¹³ *Ibid*, p. 262

in the act of adultery with a young man, a crime for which the penalty was death.”³¹⁴ Susanna, instead of submitting, cried for help, and the two elders fulfilled their promise and accused her of adultery, for which she was found guilty and condemned to death. Her innocence was proven by Daniel who elicited conflicting evidence from the two elders, “thus proving Susanna’s innocence.”³¹⁵ The image is therefore one of purity, which acted as a symbol in the earliest Christian art of “the final delivery of a righteous person from evil.”³¹⁶ This image of an apocryphal tale represents Grace’s situation as a whole, as “Atwood develops a parallel between the Biblical and historical tales, in the sense that Grace faces similar accusations concerning her relationship with James McDermott, and is also desired by older men.”³¹⁷ Also significant in relation to the depiction of Susanna is that in Hebrew the name “Susanna” means lily and the image of the white lily represents death, thus the image of Susanna foreshadows the murders of both Nancy and Kinnear.³¹⁸

The references to the Apocrypha, and Kinnear’s explanation of the text, suggest the constructedness not only of texts, but also of history, in that Kinnear highlights the process by which those in positions of authority have the power to choose the elements of history that they feel are significant, while discarding the rest. The inclusion of the Apocryphal image therefore highlights Atwood’s intentions in the writing of this novel. The fictitious nature of history and the selection process required highlights the level of doubt Atwood feels towards ‘authenticity’ and truth in much the same way as the “Author’s Afterword” at the end of the novel. The focus

³¹⁴ Hall, J. *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*. England: John Murray, 1992. p. 294

³¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 294

³¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 294

³¹⁷ Miller, R. “The Gospel According to Grace: Gnostic Heresy As Narrative Strategy in Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace*” in *Literature and Theology*, Vol. 6, No. 2, June, 2002. p. 176

³¹⁸ Hall, J. *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*. England: John Murray, 1992.

lies within the narrative itself, and not on the legitimacy of the narrative, in other words, the story is important in and of itself, and not the questions of truth and objectivity that could be levelled at the narrative. This aspect of the novel highlights Atwood's postcolonial bent as "postcolonialists perceive story and the means of telling it as inextricably interwoven."³¹⁹ This is significant as Atwood uses narrative in order to represent "the vagaries of memory and history."³²⁰

The "incredulity towards meta-narratives" that Atwood exhibits is not only present through the image of the Apocrypha, but also through the structure of the text itself as pastiche or collage. Similar to the image of the needle, the images of quilts within the novel are striking. The titles of the sections which make up the novel are the names of different quilt patterns, and the description of the sewing of quilts is a constant reminder that the novel itself is a patchwork. The inclusion of epitaphs at the start of each section, as well as the references to Mrs. Moodie and the developments in psychology at the time, suggest all the external sources that Atwood draws on in order to create Grace's narrative.

While in *The Handmaid's Tale* Atwood uses speculative fiction to create a world in which to express the situation of women in modern society, in *Alias Grace* the use of the retrospective novel-as-quilt is used in order to question the efficacy of history in representing the situation of women in society. Answering the question of Grace's guilt or innocence is not the main objective of the novel, but rather questions of the role played by gender stereotypes in society. *The Handmaid's Tale*, while also a retrospective account by Offred of the events she endured throughout her time as a

³¹⁹ Gaylard, G. *After Colonialism, African Postmodernism and Magical Realism*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2005. p. 124

³²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 124

Handmaid, is mediated by Dr. Pieixoto, thus her voice has been assumed by an intellectual, dominant man. Through the inclusion of the “Historical Notes” Atwood denies the reader hope that the situation and position of women within the future community has changed to any significant degree: the voice of women is still mediated by the dominant man, even though Offred has managed to express her feelings towards the situation. *Alias Grace*, on the other hand, is moderated by Atwood’s “Author’s Afterword”, and not by the overarching voice of a dominant man. Grace is allowed to tell her own story, with minor comments by the men around her. Some may argue that Dr. Jordan moderates her story, yet he never writes his letter to the Committee and as he himself is afflicted with amnesia his memories of his interviews with Grace appear to be lost. The end of the novel sees Grace within her own home, sewing quilts for her own bed, expecting her own baby (which she keeps secret from her husband) and living as an anonymous woman. The idea at the end of this novel is then one of hope and redemption.

Her description of Grace and the events of her life are qualified by Atwood’s articulation of the link between personal memory and socio-cultural history. The question of what is real and what is unreal is not answered by the novel, as the reader is forced to analyse the fluidity between truth, or reality, and fiction. Atwood does not intend to write a grand, overarching narrative of either the story of Grace Marks or of the question of women in the Nineteenth Century, instead she creates a space in which the reader is allowed to question and imagine the world and society. Significantly though, while Atwood posits the failures of the overall system of our society, these failures are acted out mostly by women. As a consequence, her female characters, like Grace, tend to hysteria. However, where a writer such as, for example, Dostoevsky in

The House of the Dead or *The Brothers Karamazov*, takes this descent into hysteria for granted, Atwood attempts to show the reader how and why this happens through her questioning of reality and realism. The focus of the novel then is not what is said, but what is left out and how the selection process is subject to the power relations evident in society.

CHAPTER FOUR

Conclusion

“The Devil is in the detail.”

On reading her texts one is drawn to Atwood’s poetic and thoughtful style of writing and the stimulating nature of her narrative, as well as her fidelity in relation to attention to the detail of the Canadian landscape. Her focus lies, however, in a place that is much more frightening and less explored than the Canadian landscape, as she attempts to explore the minds of the characters which she creates. The element of psychological introspection in both the texts explored above suggests the doubleness of the human psyche – not merely the female psyche, however, but also that of the male characters she describes. Through her exploration of the characters in the two novels described above Atwood can be seen to be attempting to open up the societal constructions of gender stereotypes, through the strict roles prescribed by the Gileadean government, and through the constructedness of Grace’s character in *Alias Grace*. Grace’s iconic status as “murderess” echoes the structures of a society which at once fears and idolises, incorporates and ostracises symbols such as the celebrated murderess, Grace Marks.

Her creation of both male and female characters allows her to explore not only the relationships between the different genders but also the bounds of societal expectations. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, she uses a dystopian setting in order to highlight the elements that she feels are significant in current society such as the situation of both men and women and the relationship between power and discourse; through satire and irony she focuses on the political factors in behaviour, coming to

similar conclusions to those theorised by Foucault. Yet she realises that it is not merely power relations in a society which are significant, but also the psychological reasons for the power structures which create the hierarchical systems in which her characters find themselves that are important. Through the combination of power and psychology, Atwood highlights the male-female, dominant-‘other’ relationships that allow her to orient her writing within the Canadian situation. According to Djwa, through the use of her imagination Atwood has consciously “set herself down, right in the middle of the Canadian literary landscape” as she orientates herself “by filtering Canadian experience through archetypes of her poetic sensibility.”³²¹ Through her use of archetypes Atwood attempts to come to terms not only with a sense of literary nationalism, but also with a sense of personal and social identity. The journey the reader takes through her fiction can therefore be described as “a descent, ultimately a journey down into the psychological self.”³²² The significance of this descent into the psychological self allows Atwood to explore questions of identity, as she herself asks “who are *we* now?” and “who are they?” by looking at the sexual, aesthetic and nature elements that make up the Canadian or postcolonial identity.³²³

The idea of Canadian literature is a debatable notion, according to many literary critics, in much the same way that Canadian identity (as separate from American identity) has been questioned. As the problem of Canadian literature itself can be questioned, the notion of Canadian literature as postcolonial raises even more questions, yet the above analysis of the two Atwood texts suggests that Atwood’s fiction can be described as postcolonial. As mentioned in the introductory chapter of

³²¹ Djwa, S. “The Where and Here: Margaret Atwood and a Canadian Tradition” in Davidson, A. E. and Davidson, C. N. (eds) *The Art of Margaret Atwood, Essays in Criticism*. Toronto: Anansi Press Limited, 1981. p. 22

³²² *Ibid*, p. 22

³²³ Atwood, M. *The Tent*. London: Bloomsbury, 2006. p. 99

this thesis, power relations lie at the heart of postcolonial fiction, more specifically the effects of unequal power relations, and as has been discussed in the analysis of both novels, Atwood's focus lies also in the effects and dynamics of unequal power relations. Yet this is not enough to qualify Atwood's work as postcolonial. More significant to her literature then, is the focus on questions of identity which she problematises at various points throughout the two novels.

According to Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, "a major feature of post-colonial [sic] literatures is the concern with place and displacement. It is here that the special post-colonial crisis of identity comes into being; the concern with the development or recovery of an effective, identifying relationship between self and place."³²⁴ This element of displacement and the resultant search for a cohesive sense of identity is one which permeates both of the novels explored above. For Offred, the dislocation produced by the change of government and her subsequent enslavement as a Handmaid have resulted in a sense of dislocation that forces her to retreat to memories of a happier time in order for her to be able to make sense of the world in which she finds herself. The same can be said for the Commander, as he also needs to retreat to a place in which interaction between himself and women is located within a familiar space that has been made unlawful by the government he himself has a hand in creating. Atwood therefore analyses both the position of the female slave and the male master as she suggests that the situation in which both find themselves requires a search for identity that often involves a degree of escapism as is necessary within a hierarchically structured, theocratic society. The significance of this conservative,

³²⁴ Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G. and Tiffin, H. *The Empire Writes Back, Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. London and New York: Routledge, 1991. p. 8 – 9

hierarchical and privileged society lies in the need it creates for the new and other that in turn creates rebellion and a sense of fear. That Offred also needs to consolidate her own sense of identity within such a separatist society suggests that the notions of exclusivity of the centre, in this case the dominant male government, are false, as is also highlighted by her subsequent escape through the underground separatist network.

Grace's inability to remember the events surrounding the murders she was convicted of also suggests the need for a space in which to escape from the reality of the situation in which she found herself at the time of the murders. However, the revelations of "the voice" that are expressed while she is hypnotised suggest a double consciousness that hints at a character that has been colonised by the dominant male discourse, particularly through the lawyers and journalists who have appropriated not only her story but her sense of who she is. The most significant of these appropriations is that assumed by Susanna Moodie who unselfconsciously critiques the landscape of Canada while imposing her British imperial sensibilities on the colonised figure of Grace. Atwood's attempt to locate Moodie within the centrist, imperial, puritanical culture from which she wrote leads the reader to understand that *Alias Grace* is located within a non-metropolitan, non-centrist or postcolonial perspective.

The notion of a search for a coherent sense of identity is not located solely within postcolonial studies, however. Understanding human behaviour (and misbehaviour) is also the basic premise of psychology. As such, one can come to the conclusion that psychology and postcolonial theory intersect at the point of

understanding the actions undertaken by people within a post- or neo-colonialist situation and the reasons for such actions. The main focus of psychoanalysis, according to Elizabeth Wright, is an exploration of “what happens when primordial desire gets directed into social goals, when bodily needs become subject to the mould of culture.”³²⁵ For the woman writer, however, the issue is problematised by the relationship between patriarchy and the Western normative family, a problem that is highlighted by Melanie Klein in her reworking of classic Freudian theory. While Freud’s conceptualisation of the Oedipus complex and the Electra complex has at its centre the image of the dominant male figure of the father, Klein suggests that the focus of the infant’s early object relations is in fact the mother, which decentres Western family normativity. Thus Klein problematises the residue of patriarchal, imperialist modes of thought on the understanding of the actions and reactions of the individual in relation to society and history. Atwood too explores this mother-centred search for identity through the relationships between the women in her novels, while also exploring the relationships between men and women in a blurring of the boundaries of the established categories of identity and culture.

The ideas of sexual domination expressed in *The Handmaid’s Tale* through Offred, Janine and Serena Joy highlight and expose “the ways in which human identity, self and culture are defined in relation to nature.”³²⁶ The power struggles between the Wives and the Handmaids, and also between the Handmaids themselves, overtly expresses the constantly changing levels of certainty within the political (power) system. Serena Joy’s envy of Offred and Offred’s anger at Janine’s

³²⁵ Wright, E. *Psychoanalytic Criticism: Theory in Practice*. London and New York: Methuen and Co., Ltd, 1984. p. 1

³²⁶ Özdemir, E. “Power, Madness, and Gender Identity in Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing*: A Feminist Reading” in *English Studies*, Vol. 1, 2003. p. 76

disintegration suggest the interiorisation of the systems prescribed by society. While all the characters in the novel use some form of escape to help them locate themselves, Janine's extreme return to primitive psychic functioning is ostracised by those, such as Offred, who should accept it as a means of escape. The relationship between Offred, Serena Joy and Janine shows that Atwood denies essentialist feminist ideology that espouses a reversal of patriarchal hierarchy. What she does do, however, is reinscribe the position of the maternal body by displacing the Phallus, or Logos, as the site of psychological development while emphasising the relationship between cultured identity and nature.³²⁷ Grace's relationship with Mary Whitney and Nancy Montgomery can also be related to sexual domination and fertility in relation to societal constructs of morality. Both Mary and Nancy are impregnated by their social betters, and both are ostracised by the other female characters which they encounter because of their supposed 'immorality'.

Dr. Jordan's relationship with his mother and his reaction to Grace's revealing hypnotic interview reveals Atwood's fascination with not only the construction of female selfhood, but also the individuation of her male characters. Through Dr. Jordan Atwood highlights the double nature of male consciousness. According to Sherril E. Grace "duplicity – deceit and doubleness – is a familiar Atwood subject and a fundamental Atwood concern. It informs her vision of this world, is at the root of her poetics, and is, indeed, the systemic model for her work."³²⁸ Through the hypnosis and Grace's revelations, Dr. Jordan is allowed to realise the possibility for Grace's deceit and duplicitous behaviour. The possibility that she has been adapting events to

³²⁷ *Ibid.*

³²⁸ Grace, S. E. "Margaret Atwood and The Poetics of Duplicity" in Davidson, A. E. and Davidson, C. N. (eds) *The Art of Margaret Atwood, Essays in Criticism*. Toronto: Anansi Press Limited, 1981. p. 55

suit her purpose serves to remind the reader that all discourse is constructed through human choice of what should be included and what should be excluded. Through Grace's narrative and Dr. Jordan's perception thereof, Atwood foregrounds the social construction of language, while through Dr. Jordan's own experience of amnesia Atwood suggests the duplicity of the inscription of social constructs such as madness. While Grace's amnesia and subsequent hysterical outbursts are defined by the dominant system as madness, Dr. Jordan's amnesia and confusion with regards to the name of his fiancé is indulged under the guise of the fever resulting from an injury gained in the American civil war. Not only does the dominant discourse openly accept Dr. Jordan's psychological situation at the end of the novel, but his relationship with his landlady is also glossed over, while the possibility that Grace was McDermott's paramour is sensationalised not only by the media, but also by Dr. Jordan himself. Atwood therefore shows how the societal perception of the actions of men differs from that of women, therefore highlighting the position of women and men within society and the role of societal constructs in the development of individual identity.

By highlighting the differences in regards to the social naming of madness and morality, through Biblical images, Atwood attempts to make the reader aware of the double nature of power relations. Her position as a Canadian writer within a Canadian context has allowed her the nature/culture motifs in which to analyse, but not necessarily criticise, the society in which she finds herself. Although both the novels analysed above take place in different times and locations, they both describe the location of identity within society in a way that forces the reader to consider his or her sense of self in relation to the norms prescribed by society. In much the same way that the reader is informed by societal constructs and the power relations that have created

such constructs, Atwood locates her characters in power structures that, at least in some way, inform their ideology and behaviour. Through her detailed narratives, and the access to the interior psychology of the characters given to the reader by the use of the first person narrative voice, Atwood affirms the fact that no individuals are located within a void. The non-linear structure of both novels, as well as the failure of the novels to provide the reader with closure, suggest that Atwood is aware of the danger involved in prescribing the binary of 'truth' in opposition to 'untruth'. The texts are therefore postcolonial in that they deny the limitations of a prescribed, 'privileged' position of a standard mode of interpretation as they refute a monocentric view of human experience³²⁹. This mode of representation refutes the colonial, or logocentric, categories of "truth", "meaning" and "purpose" by denying "the Western propensity for universalising"³³⁰ while attempting to represent the power structures that reside in discourse.

The relationship between gender and madness thus relates to the issues of identity, power and powerlessness, and discourse while these issues in turn, relate to the postcolony. While the political and economic factors in postcolonial fiction have been analysed and studied, the notion of 'postcolonial psychology' remains vague, at best. Fanon and Lyotard have touched on issues of language and thought, but neither has adequately delved into the realm of the psychology of postcolonialism. 'Psychology' itself is associated with colonialism and with Western thought, and this creates a problem for a postcolonial search for identity as the postcolonial subject has only colonial modes for understanding thought and concepts such as sanity and insanity

³²⁹ Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G. and Tiffin, H. *The Empire Writes Back, Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. London and New York: Routledge, 1991

³³⁰ Slemon, S. and Tiffin, H. (eds). *After Europe, Critical Theory and Post-Colonial Writing*. Sydney: Dangaroo Press, 1989. p. 3

(due to the colonial denial of natives modes of understanding the mind). Postcolonial fiction, such as that written by Atwood, offers the reader insight into the process of postcolonial individuation, with the help of psychological theorists such as Melanie Klein and philosophical thinkers such as Michel Foucault, a better understanding of the postcolonial psyche is possible. From my point of view the postcolonial psyche is fragmented by colonial discourse, cultural displacement and the search for a sense of self. Western psychology, specifically psychoanalysis, in its denial of the political influence on the psyche denies the postcolonial subject the space in which to identify with his or her community. While I cannot deny that a degree of focus must be placed on the individual, I feel that it is reductive to deny the role of the social and political in the development of the individual. The fragmented nature of the postcolonial psyche extends, in my opinion, from a need to identify with both cultural norms as well as those imposed by colonial ideology; there is very often a clash between the two resulting in a lack of identity and a sense of self that results in and from internal conflict. The internalisation of power relations and colonial discourse, like the notions of sanity and insanity, objectifies the “other” by marginalising the norms of native culture and foregrounding the values of the colonial culture; this process, in turn, forces the postcolonial subject to feel alienated both from Western, colonial, ideology and also from native, cultural norms. The questions that arise from this alienation is deceptively simple:

But who are *we* now, apart from the question *Who are we now?* We all share that question. Who are *we*, now, inside the *we* corral, the *we* palisade, the *we* fortress, and who are they?³³¹

The answer is the problem. Perhaps the development of the new field of Critical Psychology could help us realise who *we* are, as it critiques value-free claims of

³³¹ Atwood, M. *The Tent*. London: Bloomsbury, 2006. p. 99 – 100

Western psychology. However, this is an ongoing question that needs an understanding of lived experience, rather than techniques which appropriate identity, in order to make the path clearer; as such I propose a hermeneutic approach to understanding self and society – specifically in relation to madness and sanity – that values diversity and that is sensitive to cultural context.

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