

# Margaret Atwood's Rhetorical Epilogue in *The Handmaid's Tale*: The Reader's Role in Empowering Offred's Speech Act

DAVID S. HOGSETTE

You want to have it so  
you arrange us:  
  
in front of a church, for perspective,  
you make me stop walking  
and compose me on the lawn;  
  
you insist  
that the clouds stop moving  
the wind stop swaying the church  
on its boggy foundations  
the sun hold still in the sky  
  
for your organized instant.  
  
Camera man  
  
how can I love your glass eye?

—Margaret Atwood, "Camera," *The Circle Game*

## I

At first glance, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) appears to be a radical divergence from Margaret Atwood's traditional novelistic style. Atwood readers who are accustomed to encountering the mysteriously primordial woods of some Canadian outland as in *Surfacing* (1972), the hectic traffic of crowded downtown sidewalks in such novels as *The Edible Woman* (1969) and *Life Before Man* (1979), and escapist realms like Italy in *Lady Oracle* (1976) and the Caribbean in *Body Harm* (1981) are witness, instead, to political takeover of some unidentified, futuristic North American province. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood exchanges

her traditional realism for science fiction. But even though she leaves behind her contemporary Canada in order to create a futuristic dystopia, Atwood carries with her the significant issues that characterize her previous novels, short stories, and poetry—issues of self-discovery, self-expression, self-construction, gender discrimination, political oppression, and patriarchal domination. However, Atwood distinguishes *The Handmaid's Tale* from her earlier work not only by writing speculative fiction but also by exploring those important feminist and humanist concerns explicitly in terms of the power dynamics of discourse within social, political, and economic communities. Like the poststructuralist perspectives of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and Denise Riley, Atwood suggests that language is never value-neutral. That is, she examines the political, social, and sexual dimensions of discourse, focusing specifically on oppression enforced by institutionalized control of acquiring knowledge and using language and on the self-liberating potential of an individual's act of storytelling. Although several critics have carefully explored the ways in which storytelling serves as the impetus for Offred's self-empowerment, no one has yet recognized the way in which Atwood complicates the political effectiveness of narrative acts by ending her novel with the ironic "Historical Notes" epilogue, an ending that demands a rereading of her novel. Significantly, though, this rhetorically induced rereading does not go unguided, for the epilogue's ironic information provides readers with an example of how not to read Atwood's novel and thereby directs readers toward a proper reading of both the novel and Offred's narrative.

Feminist critics such as Chris Weedon, Rita Felski, and Linda Alcoff argue for a specific feminist paradigm of poststructuralism that helps illuminate the sociopolitical dimensions of Atwood's project. Contrary to some poststructuralist models that imply that the individual is always already overdetermined by existing discursive practices, Weedon's theory of the social agent (125), Felski's notion of dialectical interrelation agency (58-59) and Alcoff's theory of positionality (318-26) each suggest that women can use language to create their own subjective meaning and thus challenge certain socially and politically oppressive institutional meanings. Those theorists suggest that a social agent is someone who is aware of the political and social discourses informing his or her constructed identity and who comparatively interrogates those discourses to participate actively in the discursive construction (and continued reconstruction) of his or her identity. These theories of the discursively self-constructed and ideologically positioned subject are based on the assumption that the subject has the opportunity to engage in social discourse and the power to choose. However, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood complicates such a sociopolitical paradigm by creating a futuristic society in which women do not have overt powers of choice, do not have many options from which to choose, and are denied the opportunity to read and write, that is, the opportunity to learn and to express what they feel and think. Women become nonpersons—individuals who lack the rights and

opportunities that might enable them to counter openly society's construction of them as Martha, Wife, and Handmaid—and their society strips them of any resources with which to create their own subjective reality. The Republic of Gilead defines the Handmaids solely in terms of the condition of their ovaries, commodifying them as objectified livestock with the sole purpose of repopulating North America. From the midst of this political and social oppression, however, we receive a narrative account of Gilead's dystopian future from the perspective of one woman, Offred, who somehow manages to record her experiences, reactions, feelings, and thoughts, even though the Republic of Gilead denies women such a voice. It would appear that by telling her story, Offred reconstructs her subjectivity and articulates her own alternative perception of reality. Offred first creates an option—her subjective vision of reality—and then chooses to share that alternative vision with others, thus becoming a discursively constructed social agent

Many feminist critics have focused their attention on the political significance of Offred's storytelling. Lucy Freibert praises Atwood's social, political, and historical critique of "Western patriarchal teleology that views woman's biology as destiny and exposes the complicity of women in perpetuating that view" (280). But Atwood does not represent only the victimizing devastation, oppression, and subjugation reached at the conclusion of such a patriarchal teleology, for, as Freibert points out, even in a politically oppressive regime, women may be able to reclaim their identity, freedom, and sexuality through language and storytelling: "Atwood demonstrates through Offred that women, able to take risks and to tell stories, may transcend their conditioning, establish their identity, joyfully reclaim their bodies, find their voices, and reconstruct the social order" (285). Echoing Freibert's faith in the power of women to use language, Linda Kauffman observes, "She [Offred] first has to reclaim herself, retrieve her voice; once she does so, she turns to reinscribe the voices of other women" (227). According to Kauffman, then, Offred not only escapes her own subjugation, but becomes a heroic savior for other oppressed and silenced women. Michelle LaCombe also focuses on the political power of language use, reading the novel as a "story of non/signification, of the breakdown of normal relations between signifier and signified" (9) in an attempt to examine how the act of storytelling affords Offred the opportunity to interrogate her world, her identity, and the position of that identity in her world. Working from a deconstructive theory of language, LaCombe suggests that language use is both politically oppressive and, ultimately for Offred, self-liberating

Such discussions of Offred's narrative help to illuminate the complicated linguistic and political nature of *The Handmaid's Tale*, leading us to a richer feminist understanding about why Atwood presents the reader with the limited perspective of a woman trapped in the oppressive, patriarchal society of the Republic of Gilead. Although those critics effectively analyze the political implications of Offred's story, they do not, however, sufficiently examine the poten-

tially disruptive effect that the "Historical Notes" epilogue poses for their feminist readings. They do, of course, discuss the patriarchal structure of this post-Gilead society and Professor Pieixoto's chauvinistic misreading of Offred's narrative. But they do not consider the political ramifications of Pieixoto's compilation of Offred's text. Such a compilation forces us to ask crucial questions regarding the liberating effect and power of Offred's speaking out. Does Offred break free of her oppressed state, does she write herself back into history, and express her own subjectivity? Or is it ultimately a chauvinistic man who gives Offred her voice, who allows her to speak, who recaptures her voice within his textual authority?

By more carefully analyzing the ramifications of Pieixoto's (mis)reading of Offred's text, I hope to show how Atwood suggests that effective—and affective—reading plays a significant role in the communicative process through which women regain their voice and become social agents. Indeed, Atwood's primary concern in *The Handmaid's Tale* is to examine the political nature of language use. Offred gradually recognizes that she can manipulate language in order to create her own subjectivity, a subjectivity that can enable her to act as a subversive agent against the oppressive reality created by the Republic of Gilead. However, Atwood's epilogue brings into question Offred's political effectiveness, thus (retrospectively) foregrounding a subtextual dimension to Atwood's primary concern. Atwood not only explores the political potential of the user of language, but also suggests that the receivers of language—listeners or readers—must properly interpret the language the political agent uses for language truly to create a self-empowering subjectivity and reality. Through the epilogue, Atwood suggests that not only must women reinscribe their voices and assert their own subjectivity into the political and historical discourse of their society, but those women's audiences must learn how to read those reinscribed voices and properly interpret their subjective meanings.

## II

Atwood thus uses the epilogue to ask her readers to participate in complex author–narrator–reader interrelationships. But to assume our receiver/reader position in those user–receiver/narrator–reader relationships, we must understand how Offred develops into a politically oriented user–narrator of language–text. Although critics such as Freibert, Kauffman, and LaCombe have already addressed Offred's growing awareness of the way in which reality is created through language and how counter-realities can, and must, be created, I will recount that reading in order to establish the significance of the potential inversion offered by Atwood's epilogue. Only by using the information in the epilogue to reconsider the (accepted) critical readings of the novel can we engage in the complex reading (and rereading) process Atwood rhetorically prescribes—a construction of ourselves as readers best suited to receive Offred's message.

Because Offred's narrative is not teleological, it is difficult to trace the exact development of her linguistic awareness. However, we can notice that immediately following the Gilead takeover, Offred begins to realize the existence of a relationship among language, the self, institutions, and power. For example, when Offred first meets Serena Joy, Offred carefully considers how she should respond to Serena's questions (20-21). Offred realizes her lowly position and does not wish unduly to magnify her social oppression by having her words misinterpreted as an insult. Offred apparently already understands that language must be interpreted and can therefore be misinterpreted, and that language and institutional power are related. She does not wish to worsen her already lowly social-household status by possibly offending Serena. Offred's awareness of the effects of Serena's possible misinterpretation not only reveals how quickly Offred has learned the power dynamic of oppressor and oppressed but also provides a basis upon which she gradually builds her understanding of the political, social, and humanistic ramifications of language. Her first step toward that realization comes when she ponders the multiplicity of meaning of a single word. For example, as she waits for her dinner one evening, Offred contemplates the various levels of meaning associated with the word "chair":

I sit in the chair and think about the word *chair*. It can also mean the leader of a meeting. It can also mean a mode of execution. It is the first syllable in *charity*. It is the French word for flesh. None of these facts has any connection with the others. These are the kinds of litanies I use, to compose myself. (140)

Although her contemplation of the complexity of language calms her mentally, Offred is not yet fully aware of the impact of her language, as Kauffman points out: "But in fact there is an associative connection [among the different meanings of the word "chair"], for the leaders of the revolution enforce their power by torturing the flesh of dissenters. Resisters receive no charity, no mercy; instead, they are executed" (233). But even though Offred does not yet realize the full political potential of making associative connections between the different meanings of a single word, she is, at least, intellectually exploring—however aimlessly—the various dimensions of meaning inherent in language. Most important, however, is Offred's attempt to "compose" or reconstruct her identity with those litanies. She directly connects language and identity and indirectly relates the way in which the social and institutional dimensions of language play a part in how individuals use language to construct their own identities. As Weedon observes, language is "the place where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity, is *constructed* . . . in ways which are socially specific" (21; Weedon's italics). Only by making a connection between the Gilead power structures and language can Offred use her speech act to construct a subjectivity that can enable her to serve as an agent for social and political change.

It is easy for contemporary readers like Kauffman to be slightly critical of

Offred for not noticing the connections between the meanings of the word “chair”; however, we must not forget that she has lost many of her language skills because of the Republic’s information–communication policy that restricts reading and speaking to only a carefully selected few. As Offred begins her rediscovery of the intricacies of language, she cannot comprehend all at once its political potential. But she does continue to redevelop her understanding of language, ironically, with inadvertent help from the Commander, one of those “select few.” When she secretly visits the Commander in his office, Offred indulges in the forbidden fruit of language, playing Scrabble and reading women’s magazines such as *Vogue* and *Mademoiselle*. She actively rebuilds her vocabulary and strengthens her command over the language:

My tongue felt thick with the effort of spelling. It was like using a language I’d once known but had nearly forgotten . . . It was like trying to walk without crutches, like those phony scenes in old TV movies. *You can do it. I know you can.* That was the way my mind lurched and stumbled, among the sharp R’s and T’s, sliding over the ovoid vowels as if on pebbles. (199; Pieixoto’s italics)<sup>1</sup>

Initially, Offred does not understand the Commander’s motives, suspecting his invitations may involve sexual perversion. Later, she realizes that the Commander himself may not understand his own intentions: “I thought he might be toying, some cat-and-mouse routine, but now I think that his motives and desires weren’t obvious even to him. They had not yet reached the level of words” (199). But as the gaming and the reading continue, Offred develops her ability to raise those desires to the “level of words,” finally deciding that the Commander longs for a community and emotional sharing that his wife does not provide him (202–203). For Offred that is clearly an insult: “That’s what I was there for, then. The same old thing. It was too banal to be true” (203). She is a toy, a whim that fills in for the deficiencies of his wife. However, while the Commander satisfies his banal desires, Offred reacquaints herself with language and the language user’s ability to create positive and negative images of the self. By gazing at magazines whose articles and fashion layouts construct specific images of womanhood, Offred rediscovers the ability of an individual and a society to use language (textual and iconographic) to (re-)construct self-images. The Commander’s office, a major intelligence center for the Republic of Gilead, is ironically a training ground for a growing dissenting voice. Offred redevelops her control of language, thus enabling her to recreate and ultimately assert her own subjectivity.<sup>2</sup>

The most significant subjective meaning Offred creates for herself is an awareness and recognition—perhaps for the first time—of her personhood and humanity. In the phallogentric Republic of Gilead, the Handmaids are nonpersons, mere plastic casings filled with prerehearsed responses: “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” (21). The Handmaids’

official dialogue consists of such pat phrases as “Blessed be the fruit,” “Praise be,” and “Which I receive with joy.” Furthermore, the Handmaids become the possession of their respective Commanders, and their subsequent new names reflect the way in which the Republic structures its social hierarchy around levels of subservience and ownership. Offred is “of Fred” or “belonging to Fred.” “Ofglen” means “Handmaid of Glen.” These women subsequently lose their identities except in reference to their male Commanders. Within the Handmaid Sisterhood, however, the women share with each other their real names, thereby maintaining, as much as possible, their former identities. In that act of sharing, those women also preserve their own individual humanity, their personhood. Thus when Offred shares with Nick her real name, she is professing her love by giving of her self, by sharing her secret humanity.

Offred comes to understand the horrific extent of the semantic connection between personhood and language when she recalls the preparations she and Luke made for their escape from Gilead. In deciding what to do with their cat, Luke finally said, “I’ll take care of it” (249). She immediately realized that Luke would be killing the cat:

And because he said *it* instead of *her*, I knew he meant *kill*. That is what you have to do before you kill, I thought. You have to create an *it*, where none was before. You do that first, in your head, and you make it real. So that’s how they do it, I thought. I seemed never to have known that before. (249; Pieixoto’s italics)

By simply changing the pronoun, one can delete another’s personhood. Offred commits that very same act of dehumanization when she describes the hanged men as scarecrows and snowmen (43). Those men become inanimate objects void of any human qualities. Through such a linguistic lens, Offred can emotionally detach herself from such horrid displays.

However, when she sees the blood seep through the bag covering one body’s head, she realizes that they are real men, not snowmen, who have been destroyed by the perverse judgment of Gilead. The Republic desensitizes individuals to social and political horrors by manipulating language so as to create a different reality and by controlling what its citizens see and hear. To handle the horror of the executions, Offred similarly manipulates language through the use of metaphor, controlling how she interprets what she sees and hears. She soon realizes, however, that interpretations are indeed plural and temporary, and she decides to take responsibility for creating her own meaning, thus rejecting Gilead’s institutionalized meanings. Offred thus begins her linguistic political dissension when she vows to examine her surroundings more carefully and to make her own subjective observations as accurate as possible: “Each thing is valid and really there. It is through a field of such valid objects that I must pick my way, every day and in every way. I put a lot of effort into making such distinctions. I need to make them. I need to be very clear, in my own mind” (44–45).

Through such a careful awareness and critique of her language, Offred can reject the dehumanizing effects of Gilead's semantics and simultaneously construct her own version/vision of reality that is contrary and subversive to the reality created by the Republic.

Offred eventually learns, then, how to subvert the dehumanizing ends of Gilead's language constructs, and in the process she discovers that language can be used to rehumanize the self. Writing, or in her case speaking out, validates an individual's existence; it proves the writer-speaker was, at some point, or still may be, alive. At the Red Center, Offred comments on some graffiti she finds scratched into a desk: "This carving, done with a pencil dug many times into the worn varnish of the desk, has the pathos of all vanished civilizations. It's like a handprint on stone. Whoever made that was once alive" (145). The writing seems primitive to her, something alien from a past that the Republic has depicted as decadent. But much like stone-age paintings on a cave wall, that graffiti is evidence of preexisting life. Someone was present to write it, and that someone is validated for Offred through the remnants of the act of writing. That linguistic relic focuses Offred's attention not upon the evils of the past but upon the fact that the people of that past civilization were in many ways more alive than she is herself in the oppressive Republic of Gilead. By creating her own text, her own narrative, Offred similarly creates and validates her existence, her humanity, and her vision of reality and preserves her experience for future audiences.

Most important for Offred's growing awareness of the liberating power of language is her discovery of the Latin sentence *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum* inscribed in her closet by her predecessor. As LaCombe aptly notes, "In the absence of genuine faith, the writing on the closet floor becomes the focus of buried hope and itself appears as an act of charity by the previous female tenant" (12). Equally important, Offred realizes that language can be used as a force of resistance. Those scribbles left by a desperate Handmaid serve as words of encouragement and suggest that defiance is possible: "It pleases me to know that her taboo message made it through, to at least one person, washed itself up on the wall of my cupboard, was opened and read by me. Sometimes I repeat the words to myself. They give me a small joy" (69). Those words grant Offred the faith that her own narrative may be uncovered by some future reader. Like the writer of that Latin sentence, Offred intends her own text for whoever comes next, and that text will create or materialize Offred's reality for that intended "whoever." Offred learns that language, as Weedon explains, is a mode of resistance: "Once language is understood in terms of competing discourses, competing ways of giving meaning to the world, which imply differences in the organization of social power, then language becomes an important site of political struggle" (24).

Ultimately, Offred's speaking out accomplishes the political charge of such feminists as Helene Cixous in "The Laugh of the Medusa." In that essay, Cixous demands that women reclaim their voices that male writers of scholarship, histo-



ry, and fiction have silenced: “Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement” (875). The very act of writing empowers the writer to initiate political and social change: “. . . writing is precisely *the very possibility of change*, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures” (879; Cixous’s italics). Writing is a political act and can, therefore, urge political action.

Offred, trapped within a patriarchal society that has stripped her of her voice, explores that ideology of the power of writing:

The pen between my fingers is sensuous, alive almost, I can feel its power, the power of the words it contains. Pen Is Envy, Aunt Lydia would say, quoting another Center motto, warning us away from such objects. And they were right, it is envy. Just holding it is envy. I envy the Commander his pen. It’s one more thing I would like to steal. (241)

Offred demonstrates her control of language through the clever pun. In this phallogocentric society, the pen is power, and Offred has penis envy, that is, “Pen Is Envy.” She desires the power of the pen(is) that is monopolized by men, and she wishes to reclaim her voice through language, through writing. But Offred accomplishes more than just the reclamation of her voice that so many critics have discussed. She learns that the source of reality is in language use itself. She discovers that just as Gilead uses language to construct one version of reality, she too can use it to construct another, subversive or, at least, counter version, one that directly attacks the version that Gilead promotes. By telling her story, Offred fashions an alternative reality and forces it into the world, into history and thus makes possible social and political change. Much like Serena’s communicative garden, Offred has created something socially and politically dangerous to the Republic of Gilead: “There is something subversive about this garden of Serena’s, a sense of buried things bursting upwards, wordlessly, into the light, as if to point, to say: Whatever is silenced will clamor to be heard, though silently” (196). In creating her narrative, Offred thus appears to become, as several feminist critics have claimed, a heroic reinscriber of the female voice, a heroine of language whose subversive vision of reality transcends time and enters the light of post-Gilead intellectual reason, much like the prehistoric cave dwellers whose paintings are discovered by anthropologists.

### III

In the epilogue, we learn that Professor James Pieixoto and Professor Wade of the University of Cambridge have uncovered and reassembled Offred’s narrative. The clearly misogynistic Pieixoto, who introduces his lecture with several sexist jokes, puns, and witticisms (381),<sup>3</sup> engages in textual interpretation much like that of Gilead’s ruling elite. LaCombe explains the interpretive strategies of that theocratically totalitarian government:

. . . the language of Gilead is the phallogocentric word made flesh, the vehicle of a totalitarian state based upon literal interpretation of the Bible, at least as it is to be understood by the masses. The uses of such literal-mindedness are emphasized by the falsification of Biblical texts and their eventual merger with the canon. (13)

In other words, the men of Gilead appropriate the text of the Bible to fit their political, social, and sexual goals. In the Red Center, for example, the Aunts play a tape of a man reading the Beatitudes during the Handmaids' lunch. Of one of the Beatitudes, Offred comments, "I knew they made that up, I knew it was wrong, and they left things out, too, but there was no way of checking" (115). The Bible—a text concerned with freedom from sin, freedom from death, and hope of salvation—is used, as it has been throughout the history of Western civilization, to subjugate and oppress. Similarly, Offred's text—a text of hope that signifies her empowerment—becomes appropriated by the literal-minded Pieixoto. Offred's voice, captured on tape, is inscribed by the interpretive acts of a man.

Having finished his lecture on the historical nature of Offred's text, Pieixoto asks his audience, "Are there any questions?" (395). Indeed, there are many questions, but the most troubling for me is the following critical issue: how heroic is Offred's act of rediscovering and transmitting her voice when we consider that her text is exposed to (and composed by) a chauvinistically focused light? For, indeed, if Offred's narrative is reassembled and appropriated by the chauvinistic Pieixoto as the epilogue suggests, then Offred's development into a social agent through speaking out is retrospectively drawn into question, if not completely undermined. In other words, can we consider Offred's text self-liberating if it is Pieixoto who defragments the narrative by imposing his own phallogocentric order onto her text?

The dynamics of retrospective reading have been explored by several reader-response theorists. Menakhem Perry, for example, states that

Even though in actuality the reader proceeds in linear fashion along the text-continuum, progressing from one sentence to the next, a "backward" directed activity, even only in the mind, plays a major role in the reading-process. What has been constructed up to a certain point sheds light on new components, but is illuminated by them as well. (58)

Expressing a similar concept of retrospective reading, Peter Brooks explains that "events may gain traumatic significance by deferred action (*Nachtraglichkeit*) or retroaction, action working in reverse sequence to create a meaning that did not previously exist" (280). In the case of *The Handmaid's Tale*, the meaning a reader makes of Offred's narrative must be retrospectively influenced by the information provided in the epilogue. Therefore, after meeting the chauvinistic professor of the epilogue who, as the reader learns, has uncovered Offred's tapes and has admittedly assembled (rewritten, recreated) Offred's text somewhat arbitrarily, or at least in an order about which he is not totally confident (382–83), the

reader must consider how to interpret this fact that Offred's text has been appropriated by a male. Could it be that Offred has not reclaimed her voice at all? It appears that Pieixoto reinscribes her text, thus trapping her within his textual authority, his sense of history, and his vision of how her life should be pieced together and presented. A man grants her the chance to speak and orders the way in which her words will be received. Offred becomes Ofjames.

But is this an appropriate retroactive reading of Atwood's novel? Is Atwood's point that women's words will forever be appropriated and thus obscured and oppressed by male voices? The ironic intent of the epilogue suggests the answer to these questions is no. Pieixoto is characterized as valuing scientific objectivity and is thus interested only in accurately transcribing Offred's narrative. He views her text as a cultural artifact, ultimately judging her narrative in terms of historical accuracy. He dares not call what he discovered a document (381), because it does not include factual data, such as historical dates and substantive names (387), or a few pages from her Commander's computer (393). The irony here reveals that Pieixoto's attempt at being objective is itself a subjective act. His academic pursuit of Offred's "true" past is informed by intellectual expectations as to what constitutes a "document" and what forms of information best represent history. In the epilogue, Atwood uses irony to assert that historical representation is itself a fiction and that the historian can never achieve objective distance from his or her narrative subject. Therefore, the historian has an obligation to recognize his or her biases, political stances, and cultural and social expectations and then to acknowledge those factors when transcribing history. Because Pieixoto does not recognize the constructed nature of his (narrative) historical account of Offred's narrative, he is blinded by his intellectualizing and fails to comprehend Offred's isolation, her subjugation, and the heroic significance of the risk she took in attempting to record her thoughts and feelings. Instead, he transcribes Offred's tapes, word for word, ordering the narrative according to scholarly principles of logic and coherence. He creates textual gaps and adds emphasis to words and phrases in an effort to recapture Offred's tone and her occasional pauses. However, Pieixoto fails to understand those textual gaps and inflections. He becomes so engaged in what he considers accurate transcription that he misinterprets Offred's text.

The irony of the epilogue not only points out Pieixoto's interpretive shortcomings, but it also serves as a negative directive on how to read Offred's narrative. In other words, Pieixoto's compilation and description of Offred's text is an illustration of how not to read her text. Instead of intellectually objectifying Offred's voice, thus stripping it of its social and political efficacy, we should try to think the way Offred thinks and to empathize with her human condition. We must recognize that Offred's text is far from being incomplete or insignificant historically, mere "crumbs the Goddess of History has deigned to vouchsafe us" (393). And we must not dismiss her narrative as if it were naive and nostalgic drivel, characterized by Romantic imaginative and emotional embellishment: "It

has a whiff of emotion recollected, if not in tranquillity, at least *post facto*" (384). Offred's narrative not only relays the political, social, and human devastation of her dystopian community, but it also serves as Atwood's cautionary tale to her contemporary audience. Atwood uses the epilogue in order to instruct her readers how to construct themselves as the audience of her contemporary novel and of Offred's dystopian narrative.

By avoiding Pieixoto's tendency to not locate his interpretive position in relation to Offred's text and to decontextualize her narrative, we can construct ourselves as Atwood's politicized audience. In so doing, we understand that in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood speculates about what would happen if certain groups pursued, as they seem intent on doing, their political, social, or religious views to an extreme. As Arnold Davidson observes, "By envisioning an appalling future already implicit in the contemporary world, Atwood condemns just those present propensities that make a Gilead possible" (113). It is not difficult to recognize in Atwood's vision the absurdity of Christian fundamentalism, the environmental devastation of chemical warfare, and the careless dumping of toxic waste, or the ramifications of certain extreme radical feminist political views. Atwood's novel "is essentially a book not about the future but about the present. It is a warning that should present trends continue they will lead to a hellish future, which in the perennial struggle in human affairs between good and evil, justice and injustice, compassion and ruthlessness, freedom and slavery, the forces of evil may now be in the ascendant" (Foley 45). However, accepting Atwood's cautionary messages may not be particularly easy for all readers, especially for those readers—Christian fundamentalists and certain feminists, for example—whose beliefs are questioned and implicated in this novel. Those readers may consider Atwood's description of their views as over-simplifications of the true complexities of their particular spiritual or political stance. But before we can attempt to understand the more complex feminist and linguistic issues that Atwood raises in this novel, we must open our minds to these more obvious political concerns and examine our own society through the critical lens ground by Atwood's futuristic dystopia.

As a member of Atwood's audience, we can comprehend her portrayal of female isolation, loneliness, frustration, and terror in a world where women are objectified as natural resources in a way in which Pieixoto cannot because of his attempt to be objective. We can also understand, if we construct ourselves not only as Atwood's politicized audience but also as Offred's narrative audience, Atwood's belief that using language can liberate oppressed women. In so doing, we come to a better recognition of Offred's oppressed position and of the self-liberating power of exercising her speech, a recognition Pieixoto never achieves because he fails to become a member of Offred's narrative audience. However, properly situating one's self in Offred's narrative audience is not an automatic reaction. The position of the narrative audience is one of compassionate understanding, where the reader engages in a close, sympathetic relationship with

Offred, patiently receiving and absorbing her tale. But that sympathetic relationship develops over time as the reader becomes better acquainted with Offred's narrative. As Offred tells her tale, she repeatedly interrupts the story and directly addresses her narrative audience. For example, after the physically and emotionally exhausting birth ceremony, Offred speaks directly to the narrative audience: "I'm too tired to go on with this story. I'm too tired to think about where I am" (166). Offred asks for a break from the painful experience of remembering; clearly, telling her story is itself exhausting. For Offred to ask for the liberty of resting, of interrupting the narrative, she must trust her audience and expect them to be compassionate listeners. We as readers must recognize her implicit trust and provide her the courtesy of extending our sympathy.

Not only does she request breaks, but she also openly revises and edits her story, thus admitting to the fictitious elements of her autobiography. For example, in retelling her sexual encounter with Nick, she describes three different stories and finally acknowledges her descriptions as fiction: "I'm not sure how it happened; not exactly. All I can hope for is a reconstruction: the way love feels is always only approximate" (340). Such a comment, of course, demonstrates Offred's growing awareness of the multiple dimensions of language and her developing skill as a writer-storyteller. But this repeated revision of her narrative also implies a patient and understanding audience. She implicitly asks that we be sympathetic to the ambiguous, fictitious, and sometimes contradictory elements of her narrative. As members of her audience, we must learn to adopt a compassionate stance toward Offred. In so doing, we join in her struggle and begin to learn how "to whisper without sound" (4) and to reach through the darkness of oppression and across textual space in order to engage in Offred's developing political activism.

Obviously, it is difficult to identify and adopt the appropriate critical stance of the different audiences of Atwood's speculative novel. However, with the "Historical Notes" chapter Atwood presents a scenario of improper reading in order to teach her readers how to construct themselves as the contemporary audience of her novel and the sympathetic audience of Offred's narrative. The flesh-and-blood reader must realize that:

Professor Pieixoto does not know how to describe the document as a genre; in terms of gender, he is condescending, ascribing the aleatory construction of the discourse, its lack of style, to the poor education of North American females in the 1980s, and apologizing for the quality of Offred's mind. (Kauffman 224)

The professor completely misreads Offred's text. He does not understand her perspective; nor does he make any effort to join the audience of her autobiography. Even though *The Handmaid's Tale* is a speculative or science fiction novel, the flesh-and-blood audience of this novel must attempt a reading dynamic appropriate for more "realistic" works of fiction. We see that in the epilogue,

Pieixoto, a fictitious reader of a fictitious autobiography, does not become a member of Offred's audience. The epilogue enables Atwood to reinforce a proper reading of her novel, a reading that involves avoiding Pieixoto's blind scholarly reading pattern<sup>4</sup> and extending beyond our subjective frames of reference, thus simultaneously becoming a member of Atwood's and Offred's respective audiences.

In actively joining Offred's audience, the reader discovers what Pieixoto covers up. The telling of this narrative is the ultimate culmination of her own particular feminist *bildungsroman*; that is, Offred matures into political awareness and shares with her audience the forbidden fruit of her knowledge. Before the Republic of Gilead's oppressive regime came to power, Offred lived a life of political complacency. Even though her mother was a radical feminist, Offred turned away from politics:

Now, Mother, I would say. Let's not get into an argument about nothing. Nothing, she'd say bitterly. You call it nothing. You don't understand, do you. You don't understand at all what I'm talking about. (156)

Offred did not care about politics and how societal events could directly affect her personal life. Through active ignoring, through exercising her freedom not to care, Offred did not notice the gradual encroachment of the subjugating power of Gilead.

Even as she narrates her story, Offred contemplates the futility of speaking out. She considers withdrawing into her self and dismissing any responsibility she may feel toward contributing to the cause of liberating women:

I don't have to tell it [her story]. I don't have to tell anything, to myself or to anyone else. I could just sit here, peacefully. I could withdraw. It's possible to go so far in, so far down and back, they could never get you out.

*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum.* Fat lot of good it did her.  
Why fight?

That will never do. (291)

The textual gap between "Why fight?" and "That will never do" is an important clue to Offred's personal political development. Interestingly, though, it is Pieixoto who represents that gap. Again, the question must be asked, is it Pieixoto who grants Offred her voice? Is Pieixoto aware of the significance of such a break in the text and does he thus create the meaning in Offred's stead? The answer to those questions is clearly no. Pieixoto is concerned only with accurately transcribing Offred's narrative. He places the textual gap to indicate a pause in Offred's speech, but his purely scholarly interests blind him to the significance of the break. The reader who constructs himself or herself as Atwood's and Offred's respective audiences realizes the meaning: the textual gap demarks a pause in Offred's oration, a pause where she considers the ramifications of her selfishness and ultimately decides to contribute to the resistance in the best way

she knows how. Furthermore, she comes to a better understanding of the phrase "*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum.*" Before that message from Offred's predecessor can mean or signify, Offred must learn how to translate it and apply it to her life. She realizes that she can and must resist Gilead by leaving a narrative account of her experiences so as, in the very least, to provide spiritual and moral support to anyone who encounters her tale in the same way her predecessor's message aided her. Moreover, when read retrospectively in light of Pieixoto's misreading of Offred's narrative, her growing understanding of that message serves as an analogue to our self-construction as readers: just as Offred must properly construct herself in order to understand the scribbled message properly, we must construct ourselves as the audience of Atwood's novel and Offred's tale so that we may correctly understand and appreciate Atwood's political message and Offred's political activism.

However, the act of writing or speaking, though valiant in its own right, is not enough. Weedon makes an important observation: "The site of this battle for power is the subjectivity of the individual and it is a battle in which the individual is an active but not sovereign protagonist" (41). Indeed, the subjective speaker is not sovereign. As Atwood's epilogue suggests, the political voice of women that breaks from its earlier silenced state can be appropriated by men, thus threatening women again with silence. Women's voices must not only be expressed, but must also be received. Those voices need an audience. But that audience must be willing to empathize with the speaker and must be careful not to off-read, so to speak, that speaker's voice. Offred attempts to mandate the audience's empathy by creating her own audience: "Because I am telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are" (344). Her efforts, however, are not fully successful, for Pieixoto ignores or, at least, is blind to Offred's wishes. The individual reader, then, must actively construct himself or herself as the specific audience that Offred wills into being. With the "Historical Notes" epilogue serving as an explicit directive on how not to read Offred's narrative, the actual reader discovers that he or she must be a patient, sympathetic, and understanding audience of not only Offred's story but also Atwood's novel. Only then will the reader recognize Offred's heroic rediscovery of her voice and understand Atwood's political vision: the power of language involves two agents—a performer and an audience. Through the dynamic dialectic occurring between those two agents, a woman's voice can be truly heard.

Consequently, Atwood extends the theory of constructionism beyond the writer-speaker, applying it directly to readers as well. She suggests that in addition to the writer-speaker's learning how to construct herself in relation to certain political, social, and economic discourses through an active manipulation of language, readers must also learn how to construct themselves in a particular way so as to understand the writer-speaker's self-construction. Because all identities are constructions, readers, when attempting to join Offred's audience, must engage in the very same act of self-construction as she does. The act of reading,

much like the act of writing–speaking, thus becomes a fundamental component of the writer’s process of subjectivity and political empowerment. In other words, writing as a political act is incomplete without the act of reading. And because reading is a dynamic emotional and intellectual dialectic occurring between the reader and the author’s text (a dialectic whose synthesis produces the politicized and politicizing work), self-liberation and political empowerment never occur in isolation, but must always involve a community consisting of author agent(s) and audience agent(s), even if that community is composed simply of a single individual from both agent groups.

Much of Atwood’s work addresses women’s use of discourse (be it textual or iconographic) to construct subjectivity, and adopting the proper audience perspective is an important component of understanding this political concern. Throughout her work, Atwood attempts to cultivate a close relationship with her readers, inscribing her textual sophistication with narrative significance. For example, in her first novel *The Edible Woman*, Atwood shifts the narrative voice between the first-person confessional narrative mode and the objective third person, rhetorically signifying Marian’s shift in personal awareness. As her marriage to Peter draws near, Marian gradually loses her self to Peter’s dominating persona and to the forces of her patriarchal society. Atwood foregrounds Marian’s self-annihilation by writing Part 2 from the third-person point of view. But when Marian finally reclaims responsibility for deconstructing the society-determined self (eating her woman-shaped cake) and re-constructs her subjectivity, she regains her voice and resumes her first-person confessional narration. Those narrative shifts serve as cues to the narrative audience that underscore Atwood’s concern with self-identification. In *Lady Oracle*, Atwood weaves a complex narrative tracing the life of Joan, a Gothic Romance writer who scripts her identity in terms of the Romance conventions of her novels. Many readers decide that Joan becomes hopelessly trapped within a maze of fictional selves; however, a properly situated narrative audience will pick up on the various narrative layers and on the metacommunicative cues accompanying the narrative performance, both of which signify Joan’s ultimate re-writing (and, thus, re-righting) of her identity. But in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Atwood’s relationship to her audience is most directive, for potentially much more than fiction is at stake. Atwood ends her novel with a satiric epilogue that encourages her readers not simply to finish the book but, instead, to reconsider the implications of their interpretations. By providing a textual example of how not to read the novel, Atwood attempts to instruct her audience how to (re)read her novel properly, for without an active listener–reader who makes a sincere effort to become a member of the appropriate audience, women’s voices will forever be politically and historically silent. In that silence lurks oppression, subjugation, and, ultimately, absence.

NEW YORK INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY



## NOTES

1. I say "Pieixoto's italics" instead of "Atwood's italics" to emphasize that Pieixoto has transcribed Offred's verbal/tape-recorded narrative. The rhetorical complexities of Pieixoto's transcription of Offred's text will be discussed in greater detail later in the essay.

2. For a further discussion of Offred's subversive stealing of knowledge and power through reading and the playing of Scrabble, see Kauffman 229.

3. For a more thorough discussion of Pieixoto's blatant chauvinism and misogyny, see Foley 46-47.

4. For a more in-depth discussion of the overspecialization and scholarly objectivity that blinds Pieixoto to the personal and political significance of Offred's narrative, see Foley 44-52.

## WORKS CITED

- Alcoff, Linda. "Cultural Feminism Versus Poststructuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory." *Signs* 13.3 (1988): 297-326.
- Atwood, Margaret. *The Circle Game*. Toronto: Anansi, 1966.
- . *The Handmaid's Tale*. 1985. New York: Fawcett, 1987.
- Brooks, Peter. *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*. New York: Knopf, 1984.
- Cixous, Helene. "The Laugh of the Medusa." Trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen. *Signs* 1.4 (1976): 875-893.
- Davidson, Arnold E. "Future Tense: Making History in *The Handmaid's Tale*." *Margaret Atwood: Vision and Form*. Ed. Kathryn VanSpanckeren and Jan Garden Castro. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1988. 113-121.
- Felski, Rita. *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1989.
- Foley, Michael. "Satirical Intent in the 'Historical Notes' Epilogue of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*." *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* 11.2 (1989): 44-52.
- Freibert, Lucy M. "Control and Creativity: The Politics of Risk in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*." *Critical Essays on Margaret Atwood*. Ed. Judith McCombs. Boston: Hall, 1988. 280-291.
- Kauffman, Linda. "Special Delivery: Twenty-first Century Epistolarity in *The Handmaid's Tale*." *Writing the Female Body: Essays on Epistolary Literature*. Ed. Elizabeth C. Goldsmith. Boston: North Eastern UP, 1989. 221-244.
- LaCombe, Michelle. "The Writing on the Wall: Amputated Speech in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*." *Wascana Review* 21 (1986): 3-20.
- Perry, Menakhem. "Literary Dynamics: How the Order of a Text Creates Its Meaning, with an Analysis of Faulkner's 'A Rose for Emily.'" *Poetics Today* (1979): 35-61.
- Weedon, Chris. *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*. New York: Blackwell, 1987.