

# “THAT’S NOT HOW WE HANG PEOPLE HERE.” GILEAD IN THE EYES OF WITNESSES IN MARGARET ATWOOD’S *THE HANDMAID’S TALE* AND *THE TESTAMENTS*

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## Abstract

Witness and testimonial literature have gained special significance in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in response to the traumas that people experienced then. Two dystopian novels by Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Testaments*, are also classified as such, even though they are set in the fictitious Republic of Gilead in the near future. In both cases, the story is told by a first-person narrator, unreliable by default, but still able to bear witness to the events. In the first novel, the narrator is trapped by the circumstances, but still looking back to the pre-Gilead times. Her tale is her means of survival. In the second novel, the narrating voice is splintered into three distinct ones – one of the architects of the system, a girl raised in Gilead and an outsider, travelling south but unable to fully grasp the reality there. Once the four voices intertwine, the picture of the regime takes the form of her-story. The aim of the paper is to analyze the way in which the four narrators in the two novels perceive the regime and how they deal with the trauma.

## Key words

*First person narrator; unreliable narrator; witness; testimony; dystopia; The Handmaid’s Tale; The Testaments*

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## 1. Introduction

During a public lecture at Dalhousie University in 1980, Margaret Atwood described the role of the writer as “bearing witness” – not just expressing themselves, not even making an artistic statement, but rather “giving voices to those who lack them so that they may speak for themselves” (Atwood 1980: 425). She thus determined one of the most important leitmotifs of her works, which is the testimony, the evidence carried by words attesting what a person has gone through (Howells 2021: 4). However, the role of the writer in the process is more complex. They are “an eye-witness,” having a first-hand experience of the event, while also being “an I-witness” by retelling the occurrence and making it more

meaningful for others (Atwood 1980: 425). Naturally, such a double role carries great responsibility, as it entails making a commitment to relate the events to one's best ability in a way that will be comprehensible for others, too. What they offer is a testimony – a highly subjective relation of events, sifted through the teller's memory, cognition, and personality (Felman and Laub 1992: 5). It is their own account of the trauma, sometimes given as an autobiography, other times taking the form of a fictitious account of the events that could (have) happen(ed). Atwood merges the two kinds to some extent, using the format of a testimony and the occurrences that have already happened at some point, in some place (Atwood 2017), but employing fictitious narrators in an imaginary setting to tell the tale.

Witness literature and testimonial literature have gained special importance in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in response to the traumas of the world wars, genocide and totalitarian regimes experienced by millions of people around the world (LaCapra 2014: XXX). Felman and Laub (1992: 5) even call that time “the age of testimony.” Even though the genre itself is not easy to define, the common denominator for such stories is the fact that the writers of testimonies present the story that is antithetical to the official narrative (Labudová 2020: 100). Such an account is often fragmented, its causal links are broken, and the events seem to exist outside of the temporal structure (Felman and Laub 1992: 69) – the “now” seems to be endless, the “before” is blurred and the “after” is uncertain. Since the testimony is made up of loosely connected pieces of recollections that are emotionally charged, the narration is unreliable, and the account does not form a coherent picture that would give the recipient hard knowledge of what happened (Felman and Laub 1992: 5). The final picture is essentially a reconstruction, fragmented and inconsistent. Hence, the question that the reader faces is whether they can trust the narrator and their story at all (Labudová 2020: 101).

Every testimony implies a reader. Atwood (1980: 426) calls it “an act of faith” and “an act of hope” – writing or testifying, believing that one day someone will discover the document and will read the story, thus giving credence to the witness. As Labudová (2020: 100) maintains, “even the silent voices can scream their stories” as long as there is another person who is willing to hear it, to notice them. Therefore, writing is also a means of survival, of contradicting the official narration, undermining the logic of the oppressor, and carrying one's story well beyond the circumstances that kept the witness suppressed and marginalized in the first place.

Both *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and its long-awaited sequel, *The Testaments* (2019), can be classified as witness literature. In both cases, the story is told by a first-person female narrator – one in the first novel, three different ones in the second. Such narrators are unreliable by default, as their knowledge is either severely restricted by their limited circumstances, or at least influenced by them to some extent. They bear witness to the ordinary life under the regime, the official rules governing people's activities, as well as the ideological layer that is at its foundation. Due to their different social stances and different timeframes, they offer a broad picture of both the day-to-day reality and the working mechanisms of the totalitarian state. This way, they write their private her-stories in the place

of the dominant his-story (Gheorghiu and Praisler 2020: 92). However, as their tales are embedded into the master narratives in the Historical Notes appended to both novels, in which a group of scholars led by Professor Pieixoto analyze and refocus the stories, the question of bearing witness and really getting to tell their tales remains open.

The two novels are set in the theocratic Republic of Gilead, which was founded on the embers of the United States after a group of religious fundamentalists engineered a coup d'état and managed to take control of all the state institutions. While the narrator of *The Handmaid's Tale* bears witness to the early days of the regime and looks back on the events leading up to it, *The Testaments* presents its gradual decline until its final breakdown; therefore, it gives the reader an opportunity to savor the system which has “settled into its dog-eat-dog maturity” (Atwood 2019: 61) and to experience the forces which can implode it. However, as it is peppered with elaborate flashbacks showing the establishment of the new state, it also offers a close-up look at the mechanisms which led to the successful change of the government and the formation of all the new rules and regulations which everyone was forced to obey since then. As the whole story is told by four different first-person narrators, each with her unique perspective due to her position and life experience, the reader gains a new look on this dreary place, as seen by one of the oppressed, one of its architects, a girl raised and indoctrinated in it, and an outsider, brought up in Canada and therefore having a completely different mindset.

Since the newly instated system is highly oppressive for most of its citizens, the books are often categorized as dystopias. The word “dystopia” is derived from the Greek words denoting a hostile and ominous place (Claeys 2017: 4), though in literature the phrase usually refers to a regime of the totalitarian kind that was actualized after a futile attempt to introduce the ideal system – a utopia – that was too good to be true (Claeys 2017: 5). Hence, it serves as a warning to the reader, showing what might happen in the future if people do not resist the change at its earliest stages and wait until it is too late to do anything instead (Dopp 1994: 49). Dystopias are “dark shadows cast by the present into the future” (Atwood 2006: 87), unreal but likely to happen. For this reason, Atwood (2006: 86) calls such novels “speculative fiction” – fantasy that may turn into reality if “we live as usual, by ignoring. Ignoring isn't the same as ignorance, you have to work at it” (Atwood 2017 [1985]: 56). Both Gilead novels belong to speculative fiction and are dystopian. As Tolan (2007: 147) observes, *The Handmaid's Tale* follows the typical pattern of the genre: it starts in the middle of a terrifying “elsewhere,” and it adopts the perspective of an alienated protagonist who comments on her individual experience as well as on the working of the system. *The Testaments* offers insight into the declining stage of the regime, showing its gradual degradation until its final dissolution.

This article offers a comparison of the four distinct narrating voices in the two novels to trace the differences between them and to show how the perception of Gilead changes depending on the narrator. The novels complement each other not only in terms of the story, one showing mostly the early years of Gilead, whereas the other shows its maturity, but also in terms of the perspective: Offred

is limited by the circumstances and is mostly focused on her inner life and her own predicament, whereas the three narrators of *The Testaments* are (or become) active agents, with much wider knowledge and different life experience, focused on their personal quests, although motivated differently in their enterprise. The four narrators reflect the variety of female roles available in Gilead, and their narratives are complementary as they show a fuller picture of the regime.

## 2. Welcome to Gilead: *The Handmaid's Tale*

*The Handmaid's Tale* is narrated by Offred, an anonymous Handmaid belonging to Commander Fred Waterford. It is first person narration, which means it lacks the omniscience which could be granted by a third person omnipresent narrator. Hence, as Hutcheon (1988a: 11) notes, Offred cannot be considered a meaning-generating entity due to her limited circumstances – her physical confinement mainly to the four walls of her room and her lack of access to any reliable source of knowledge about the surrounding world. Her tale is highly subjective and fragmented. In fact, she seems to be unable to tell a coherent story as she often struggles to find the right words, she loses the thread of the account and she needs to push herself to continue, for example, “I don’t have to tell it. I don’t have to tell anything, to myself or to anyone else” (Atwood 2017 [1985]: 227). She is also highly unreliable as a narrator, since not only memory sometimes fails her (“I can’t remember the last time I saw her” – Atwood 2017 [1985]: 254), but also she blurs dream with reality (“But I’m not awake this time either” – Atwood 2017 [1985]: 109), and she offers multiple variants of the same event, all of them just her own interpretations or assumptions, never pointing to the one she considers correct (“I believe Luke is lying face down in a thicket”/“I also believe that Luke is sitting up, in a rectangle somewhere, grey cement” – Atwood 2017 [1985]: 104). As a narrator, Offred has scarce possibilities to collect information from the outside world, therefore she concentrates on her inner life: her recollections from the pre-Gilead past, her musings about the present situation. It makes her tale highly subjective, with every word sifted through her personality and her failing memory.

By doing so, she talks like a traumatized person and her fragmented account becomes her testimony (Ołtarzewska 1999). She often seems to be confused and perplexed, for instance:

But then what happens, but then what happens?  
I know I lost time  
(Atwood 2017 [1985]: 39)

Her disorientation points to her agitation caused by the extreme situation that she has found herself in. The circumstances make her look inward, into her dreams and memories rather than outward, on the reality that is intimidating. Yet, her inner journey also prompts her to create an audience for her thoughts – an imaginary reader or listener whom she often addresses in her musings. Dolitsky (1998) calls it “second person narration,” thus acknowledging the signif-

icance of the “you” in Offred’s tale. It is particularly pointed in fragments like: “A story is like a letter. *Dear You*, I’ll say. Just *you*, without a name” (Atwood 2017 [1985]: 40, emphasis original), where the narratee becomes an integral part of the story, Offred’s only friend and confidante at that moment. The identity of the narratee is unclear, though. Sometimes it is equivalent with herself, for example when she is in Jezebel’s with the Commander, sharing a bed with him, and she reminds herself, “Fake it, I scream at myself inside my head. You must remember how. Let’s get this over with or you’ll be here all night” (Atwood 2017 [1985]: 257). Other times, it seems to be an imaginary friend – a witness to her tale or another protagonist, because “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” (Atwood 2017 [1985]: 39). The presence of the reader/listener makes Offred more self-confident, as it is her means of survival, of passing her story on, of being remembered even though her identity is obliterated, and her name is forgotten in Gilead: “Because I’m telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are” (Atwood 2017 [1985]: 269). Apparently, she realizes the fact that “*You* can mean more than one. *You* can mean thousands” (Atwood 2017 [1985]: 41, emphasis original), since that would imply her testimony being really heard and understood.

As becomes clear at the end of the novel, in the Historical Notes, Offred’s testimony is heard, although it is not comprehended at this point. In fact, it is sorely distorted in the process of reconstruction supervised by Professor Pieixoto, a chauvinistic researcher from the future, who speaks about “this item – I hesitate to use the word *document*” (Atwood 2017 [1985]: 303, emphasis original), belittling its value in every possible way. He admits that after the discovery of the tapes with the recording, a team of academics arranged them in what they deemed a logical order and then prepared a transcription, “based on some guesswork and to be regarded as approximate, pending further research” (Atwood 2017 [1985]: 304). He diminishes the value of the account (“What would we give, now, for even twenty pages or so of printout from Waterford’s private computer! – Atwood 2017 [1985]: 312) and rejects most of it as insignificant and too trivial for scholarly interest. However, as Hutcheon (1988b: 18) argues, therein lies Offred’s strength as the real teller of the story: she gets to bear witness to the life of a woman and a Handmaid under the regime and it is this part of the account that survives, whereas the official documents disappear into oblivion, presumably destroyed in or just before the fall of Gilead.

Survival is also prevalent in Offred’s words throughout her story. She often uses words to distance herself from the reality, but also to regain some control over herself and her life. When stating, “what he is fucking is the lower part of my body” (Atwood 2017 [1985]: 94), the narrator creates a verbal separation between herself and her oppressor, thus making the ritual rape more bearable. Yet, it is irony and wordplay that become her real weapon and let her defend herself against the outside world. As Hutcheon (1988b: 7) observes, irony is her means of subverting the authority of the dominant group and rejecting their language’s ultimate meaning. She uses puns and homonyms, for example when musing about the Handmaids’ attire and playing around with the double meaning of the word “habit” (“Some people call them *habits*, a good word for them. Habits are hard

to break” – Atwood 2017 [1985]: 24, emphasis original), she makes an additional comment about these women’s defiance. Moreover, she sometimes uses syllepsis, which Dvorak (2021: 133) defines as “a grammatical congruence or match which clashes with the semantic incongruity”, as in Offred’s comment, “What we prayed for was emptiness, so we would be worthy to be filled: with grace, with love, with self-denial, semen and babies” (Atwood 2017 [1985]: 194). The discrepancy between the abstract concepts and the physical effects of sexual intercourse has a humorous effect and it ridicules the very premises of the system, where rape is officially elevated to the rank of a grace.

The language is not only Offred’s defense, but also the main building block of the regime. It is based on the rhetoric of marketing and public relations, which is predictable, given that one of the main architects of Gilead, Fred Waterford, originally comes from the advertising professional background (Atwood 2017 [1985]: 309). As Greene (1999:112) argues, the application of such jargon is supposed to show how the official discourse can come close to and reflect the lives of women. Indeed, the ideological founding fathers of the regime have come up with many creative solutions, for example naming the Aunts after popular commercial products (Atwood 2017 [1985]: 311). Characteristically for newspeak, though, much of this language is devoid of its original meaning, thus misleading the audience, for example “Salvaging,” which suggests the word “salvage” (rescue someone), actually stands for an execution, or “Soul Scrolls,” offering mechanized prayer for a fee, which obviously is far from religiosity or spirituality. The Gileadean dialect is so widespread, though, that characters use it constantly, on all kinds of occasions, and even in the form of body language (Dvorak 1998: 453), like the Commander waiting for his private meeting with Offred, with “jacket off, elbows on the table. All he needs is a toothpick in the corner of his mouth to be an ad for rural democracy” (Atwood 2017 [1985]: 183). Using advertising jargon Atwood satirizes the consumer society of the pre-Gilead period (Dvorak 1998: 450), while also emphasizing how empty the regime is, with beautiful-sounding words being just a façade used to cover the void.

### 3. Gilead revisited: *The Testaments*

*The Testaments*, a long-awaited sequel to *The Handmaid’s Tale*, does offer the answers to some questions posed by its predecessor, yet it is not a direct continuation of that story. On the surface, it seems to be “almost simple” (Hedlin 2020: 18). It is mostly set in Gilead, but it is removed by several years from where the previous novel ended. It is hard to pinpoint the exact date, as the story is fragmented between three separate narrators, each initially operating within her own timeframe which is not parallel with the remaining two for a large part of the story. Moreover, there are numerous flashbacks, reaching back to different moments in history, which blurs the narrative even further. When the three narrators and the three timelines finally intertwine, interesting cultural differences emerge, precipitated by their age, life stories and positions (Feldman-Kołodziejuk 2020: 79). Again, there appear various versions of the same event, but this time the modi-

fictionation is caused by the fact that a given situation is narrated by three women, and not by the fact that dream or fantasy blends with the reality in the narrator's mind, as was often the case with Offred. Moreover, as Atwood reveals in an interview (Feldman 2019), the title of the new novel is meaningful, too, since it points to the Bible that is the cornerstone of Gilead (Old and New Testament), while also making a direct reference to the testament (last will) and a testimony given by a witness. All these aspects are reflected in the three interwoven narratives, thus revealing the multi-layered meaning of the story.

The part marked as The Ardua Hall Holograph is written down in a form of a secret diary by Aunt Lydia, one of the founders of the regime, responsible for the female sphere in it and controlling “the women's side of the enterprise with an iron fist in a leather glove in a woolen mitten” (Atwood 2019: 62). Even though she features in *The Handmaid's Tale*, she is actually absent from that narrative, as she mostly appears as a disembodied voice in Offred's mind which the narrator usually reiterates, but which she sometimes distorts or ridicules, too, for example: “Where I am is not a prison but a privilege, as Aunt Lydia said, who was in love with either/or” (Atwood 2017 [1985]: 8). That Aunt Lydia is occasionally seen in a flashback, and usually just takes the form of a cliché, a catchphrase that is ingrained so deeply in every Handmaid's mind that it becomes inescapable. The Aunt Lydia of *The Testaments* is physically present from the outset of the story. Moreover, she is even doubled from the very beginning, as “already, [she is] petrified” (Atwood 2019: 3) – there is her statue in Ardua Hall, which she treats as an extension of herself (“I am standing straight, shoulders back, my lips curved into a firm but benevolent smile. My eyes are fixed on some cosmic point” – Atwood 2019: 3), her second identity equipped with a camera, which she uses to spy on others. She describes herself at one point as “a fly on the wall; or, to be more exact, an ear inside the wall” (Atwood 2019: 251), thus admitting what she considers to be her main mission there.

As one of the leaders, Aunt Lydia has in-depth knowledge of all the working mechanisms of Gilead. In her multiple flashbacks, she offers a “defense of her own life” (Howells 2020: 20) as she bears witness to the early days of the regime, when the key choices were made and when it was decided who is an ally and who is a foe. The account of her detainment shows the barbaric methods of breaking people in an attempt to convert them: keeping crowds in confined spaces in humiliating conditions, without any amenities, simply reducing them to animals (Atwood 2019: 117–118, 142–143, 148). It is then that she has to decide which party to side with, and when she concludes that it is “better to hurl rocks than to have them hurled at you” (Atwood 2019: 178). It is also the moment when she starts planning her retribution. Her symbolic transformation from a weak human to a cold machine armed with “a third eye” (Atwood 2019: 149), recording everything, informs her attitude all through the novel. While co-creating Gilead, she is already thinking how to end it. Significantly, she distances herself from her own resolution here – she speaks of herself in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person, indefinite pronoun (“someone”), as if her thoughts belonged to another person, the strong one from the future, looking back on the weak, tortured one from that moment in the past, comforting her and toughening her at the same time.

Due to her unwavering position of power in the female sphere in Gilead, Aunt Lydia is regarded by many as omnipotent and superhuman: “she was like God – real but unreal at the same time” (Atwood 2019: 86). She concurs with such an image of herself, additionally explaining, “I have become swollen with power, true, but also nebulous with it – formless, shape-shifting. I am everywhere and nowhere: even in the minds of the Commanders I cast an unsettling shadow” (Atwood 2019: 32). As a God-like figure, as well as “the Recording Angel” (Atwood 2019: 277), she has a much broader perspective, as she can access many official documents, listen in on private conversations around Ardua Hall, as well as enter private houses to advise on the matters connected with the Wives, the daughters, and the Handmaids. All along, though, she is also the voice of conscience, or the Nemesis, able to exercise punishment when the time comes. “Knowledge is power” (Atwood 2019: 35), as she has been aware since the moment when she decided to join the ranks of Gilead supporters.

Aunt Lydia has never been blinded by the new ideology yet having no real choice and having been “hardened in the fire” (Atwood 2019: 288), she joined the Sons of Jacob in establishing the new system. Due to her theoretical and practical knowledge of law and human psychology which she gained while working as a judge in the pre-Gilead times, she has better orientation in the intricacies of the groundwork. When everything needs to be invented: “laws, uniforms, slogans, hymns, names” (Atwood 2019: 177) to provide strong ideological foundations for the emerging state, the marketing language proves to be useful, as it allows the founders of the regime to come up with the idea to use the names of household products, like instant food or cosmetics, to call the Aunts (hence, Aunt Gabbana, Aunt Sara Lee, Aunt Vidala, Aunt Dove, or Aunt Maybelline), but it also provides creative solutions for what essentially must be understood as slogans and logos, like the strings of pearls for the Pearl Girls, who are Gilead’s missionaries to other countries. Even the Ardua Hall motto, *Per Ardua Cum Estrus*, coined by Aunt Lydia based on the classic proverb *Per ardua ad astra* is, in fact, rather meaningless – “Through childbirth labor with the female reproductive cycle” (Atwood 2019: 289). It is a cluster of wise-sounding words, with a distant reference to higher morals, but it is fake and just empty, just like everything else in Gilead.

Similarly to *The Handmaid’s Tale*, extensive fragments of the narrative take the form of the second person narration, with Aunt Lydia making a direct address to the “Dear Reader” in her diary. Her relationship with the narratee is a power relation, yet it tends to fluctuate. Clearly, they depend on each other, with her, God-like, creating her future reader, and the reader being her only means of survival after her plans are fulfilled. Each can destroy the other easily: she can be forgotten despite all the effort, since “possibly you will tear [these pages] apart, or burn them: that often happens to words” (Atwood 2019: 317), but she can also erase them in “one flare of a match and you’ll be gone – wiped away as if you had never been, as if you will never be” (Atwood 2019: 317). As she imagines the reader “as a young woman, bright, ambitious” (Atwood 2019: 403), she visualizes a better post-Gilead future in which women are empowered again, they are allowed to read and make a name for themselves in any career they choose. Hence, the second person narration in this case bridges the gap between the illiterate

and oppressed women in the present and their female saviors from the past, accepting their testimony and ensuring that their voices are heard.

There is yet another similarity between Lydia and Offred as the tellers of their tales. Knowledgeable and experienced as Aunt Lydia undoubtedly is, as a narrator she is sometimes highly unreliable, too. She forgets some facts, corrects herself and edits her text, as in “I was telling you about the van with darkened windows – no, looking back a page, I see we’d arrived at the stadium” (Atwood 2019: 115). She also edits her speech, planning all the remarks and punchlines she is going to make, for example, when preparing the cover-up after the escape of Agnes and Nicole (Atwood 2019: 371). She often uses catchphrases and platitudes, too, in a similarly studied way, like in her musings, “All things come to she who waits. Time wounds all heels. Patience is a virtue. Vengeance is mine” (Atwood 2019: 251), when she uses short clichés, so easily recognizable that she herself calls them “these hoary chestnuts” (Atwood 2019: 251). However, she twists the second phrase, which may pass unnoticed at first, since it is not emphasized in any way. Turning the original “time heals all wounds” by switching the positions of the two key words, she reflects on the brutality and violence so common in Gilead – after all, “wounded heels” are the result of the harsh punishment often given by the Aunts to the rebellious Handmaids. It is a clear reference to *The Handmaid’s Tale*, where Aunt Lydia is made of platitudes only repeated in Offred’s mind. Here, however, the words are used in a metafictional sense and as such, they imply that the account is an elaborate reconstruction, too.

The remaining two narrators, Agnes Jemima/Aunt Victoria and Daisy/Jade/Nicole presumably recorded their accounts after their successful escape to Canada where they found a haven, since their parts of the story are marked as “Transcript of Witness Testimony 369A” and “Transcript of Witness Testimony 369B”. Therefore, it could be assumed that they could talk openly and honestly, without the threat of punishment should some Gilead officials find some fragments too dangerous. Nevertheless, as narrators, they are even more unreliable than Aunt Lydia, which is caused by their age and position.

Agnes Jemima is a young girl raised in a Commander’s family and educated within the oppressive regime. As such, she is heavily indoctrinated and accepts many things without questioning them, since she often does not know any other way of doing them, and she is largely unaware of what is happening, because women and girls are not supposed to know anything about the state affairs. In many respects, her position is like Offred’s of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, although her language is less creative and more formulaic and studied. She begins her account in her early childhood, which results in certain imprecision or gaps in her story, like “How old was I at that time? Perhaps six or seven. It’s hard for me to know, as I have no clear memories before that time” (Atwood 2019: 14). As she grows up, hesitation happens less frequently, but she gradually distances herself from her younger self, putting on condescending attitude for instance while describing her own reaction after the death of a Handmaid: “Melodramatic, I know: I was still a child really” (Atwood 2019: 104). Such critical and patronizing remarks additionally reinforce the unreliability of her narration, as they make the account more subjective and more emotion laden.

Agnes's story provides insight into a girl's life after she reaches puberty and enters the marriage market. It is what Gelfert (2014: 20) calls "a mundane testimony" – the narrator describes her home and her school, her conversations with her schoolmates, her toys, and her food. Curiously, though, the voice of her younger self merges with the adult voices around her, thus achieving a polyphonic effect. For example, in her account of her father's job: "What my father was doing in there was said to be very important – the important things that men did, too important for females to meddle with because they had smaller brains that were incapable of thinking large thoughts, according to Aunt Vidala, who taught us Religion" (Atwood 2019: 15), highly infantile expressions are intertwined with more complex set phrases. It proves her thorough indoctrination, with the words ingrained so deeply that she cannot disentangle them in her mind even many years later. The propaganda continues to affect her cognition and her behavior even after she leaves Gilead, when she feels that jeans and typical female underwear are "slippery and depraved" (Atwood 2019: 365) and she feels uncomfortable when forced to put them on.

Daisy/Jade/Nicole shares the basic features with the other two narrators, but there are certain characteristics that distinguish her, too, and make her point of view truly unique. From the beginning, there is a duality about her: she is both a native to Gilead, as she was born there and smuggled out as a baby, and an ex-centric (to use the term coined by Hutcheon 1988a: 12), raised in Canada, hence perceiving Gilead differently, with a distance typical for outsiders. She has a double identity in the story: Daisy is a teenage girl coming from a decent middle-class family, Jade is a rebel traveling to Gilead to try and destroy it from the inside. Furthermore, she has been fascinated with Baby Nicole for years, not knowing that it is in fact her alter ego: "every time I'd seen that famous photo, I'd been looking at myself" (Atwood 2019: 185). She sometimes feels out of place in Canada ("I discovered that I was a fraud [...] I was a forgery, done on purpose" – Atwood 2019: 39), but she always is and behaves out of place in Gilead: she fidgets, she keeps saying the inappropriate things, using the language which sounds offensive in a young girl's mouth (Atwood 2019: 323, 379).

She uses second person narration just like Aunt Lydia, though less frequently and with an important difference. Since all her account is an official testimony, "you" could be understood as the person listening to her statement, and – by extension – the actual reader of the novel. For example, the words: "You've said that you'd like me to tell you how I got involved in this whole story, so I'll try" (Atwood 2019: 39) could be directed to the officer recording her confession just as well as the reader, naturally wondering about the motives and the background of her story. However, she also uses the second person narration to generalize and to put herself in a broader context, for instance: "once you're safe, you can cry all the tears you couldn't waste time crying before" (Atwood 2019: 123). In this context, "you" is an indefinite pronoun, signifying all the people who experience such an ordeal.

Once she arrives in Gilead, she discovers a cultural barrier that prevents her from communicating properly: "I couldn't read people's faces, and I often didn't know what they were saying. I could hear the words, I could understand the

words themselves, but I couldn't translate them into meaning" (Atwood 2019: 321). The citizens there, around two decades into the existence of the regime, are wary and distrustful. It can be deduced from what Jade describes that the people never talk openly, and most likely they use empty phrases that do not carry any real meaning. Raised in a different culture, she misinterprets the subtle signs carried by their body language – for instance, she considers them “part friendly and part hungry”, as if they were supposed to turn into vampires and take her life to sustain theirs (Atwood 2019: 321). At the same time, she needs to be taught to edit her thoughts and not to speak out so openly, because such behavior is just dangerous there. Still, her spontaneous remarks give valuable insight into the reality of Gilead that tends to be overlooked by its citizens. For instance, only after she refuses to eat the “mouldy dishwater” or “fish eyes in glue” (Atwood 2019: 323) in Ardua Hall does the reader learn how unappetizing the food is there.

Her language is foul-sounding (“we're screwed whatever we do” – Atwood 2019: 327) and her words often sound blasphemous to the girls raised in Gilead (a tattoo is “itchy as hell” and God is just “an imaginary friend” – Atwood 2019: 326). At times it may seem that the pious, formulaic language used by Agnes and the teenage slang used by Daisy/Nicole are so divergent that no real communication is possible:

“What is a bucket list?” Becka asked.

“Stuff I want to do before I die.”

“Why is it called that?”

“It's from ‘kick the bucket’,” said Jade. “It's just a saying.” Then, seeing our puzzled looks, she continued. “I think it's from when they used to hang people from trees. They'd make them stand on a bucket and then hang them, and their feet would kick, and naturally they would kick the bucket. Just my guess.”

“That's not how we hang people here,” said Becka.

(Atwood 2019: 324)

This short exchange highlights several issues caused by the girls' upbringing and education/indoctrination. They use their own dialects, typical for their place of origin, but they also have a different view on what is acceptable or appropriate and what is not. Hence, what may seem to be the pride with the local customs, is a verbalization of the basic difference between the two countries, with death being a staple happening in one and an anecdotal reference to the past in the other.

#### 4. A discussion and conclusion.

Both *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* are set in a bleak and scary place, which Agnes calls “a place of snakes and ladders” (Atwood 2019: 86). Yet even though their timeframes coincide to a certain extent, the image they present is largely different. The first story, told by a woman suddenly trapped by the system and still remembering the pre-Gilead times, is terrifying because the narrative is

so intimate and personal. Unreliable and limited as the narrator undoubtedly is, the events she describes or dreams about are accurate, and may be assumed to be either real or at least possible in the regime. Her position of the silent observer does not rule out her sharp perception of the things occurring within the restricted space which she is confined to. On the contrary, her free-flowing and often unedited thoughts, together with her flashbacks, offer an accurate snapshot of the early years of the regime as seen by one of the oppressed.

The image presented in *The Testaments* is much fuller and much more varied, though. The story is told by three women in different positions, none of them like Offred's. As the three perspectives are added, juxtaposed, and intersected, a new picture of the place and the society emerges: "the still heart of the tornado," with "a tremor, like that near a high-voltage power line" hidden underneath the calm and placid surface (Atwood 2019: 277). Two decades into the regime, people have replaced actual communication with clichés or empty phrases. Presumably, most of them realize the gravity of the situation but terror paralyzes them into inaction. Brainwashed after years of indoctrination, like Agnes Jemima and many of her classmates, they accept the reality and try to find a niche for themselves in it.

Although different and physically distant at the beginning, the four narrative voices converge at the end of the second novel (Gheorghiu and Praisler 2020: 93) and they sound like one in testifying against the regime. The four witnesses manage to record their testimonies and they are determined enough to break the propagandist narrative created by the founding fathers (and mothers) of Gilead. As all the other evidence disappears, destroyed before the system finally collapses – "the blood-smeared fingerprints of the past must be wiped away to create a clean space for the morally pure generation that is surely about to arrive" (Atwood 2019: 4) – it is the women's testimonies, their her-stories that survive and bear witness to what really happened. Not much historical trace is left of the theocratic state, as is made clear by the two surviving monuments: the one of Aunt Lydia, damaged beyond recognition, and the one of Becka, still standing (Atwood 2019: 410, 414–415). The first one, which once spread propaganda of the state's greatness, has fallen into oblivion, together with other artifacts from Gilead, whereas the latter, celebrating women's solidarity in overthrowing the oppressive rule, stands strong.

The power and the significance of the four testimonies is also noticeable in the Historical Notes appended to *The Testaments*. Although the Notes are a transcript of the proceedings of another Gileadean symposium in which scholars dissect the scarce evidence they have from the period, the tone is different than a year before, as described in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Professor Pieixoto admits to being "very excited by it, since first-hand narratives from Gilead are vanishingly rare" (Atwood 2019: 412), thus finally acknowledging the value of the informal testimony, be it oral or written, as given by a woman. As Feldman-Kołodziejuk (2020: 80) points out, the validity of such evidence is further emphasized by the juxtaposition of the two statues, mentioned above. Once it becomes apparent that hard data such as Aunt Lydia's monument is unreliable and incomplete as a source of knowledge, academics like Pieixoto, so steadfast in his views before, are forced to change their opinion and accept witness testimonies instead. When the four

voices speak as one, it finally becomes “a convincing testament” (Atwood 2019: 415) for the sceptics, ridiculing the value of any such document before.

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