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“Gilead Is Within You”:

Official History and Female Oppression in Margaret

Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale

MA dissertation

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Abstract

Approaching Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) from the perspective of the Betty Friedan's social study in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), the main aim of this dissertation is to explore Atwood's novel from a historiographical as well as a feminist perspective by approaching *The Handmaid's Tale* as a dramatisation of systems of female oppression. I will argue how the author introduces the many parallelisms with Friedan's work in order to question traditional historiography, deconstruct the official discourses of history and raise awareness of how they are to blame for the oppression women have suffered for centuries, while also highlighting the universal and circular nature of these systems of oppression. Atwood deconstructs "official history," that is, the hegemonic version of history promoted by the dominant powers, by drawing on real-life systems of female oppression — such as the "feminine mystique" — and transporting them to her novel's past, present and future. She does so, I will argue, in order to blur the temporal boundaries and the lines between fiction and reality, thus questioning the idea of linear progress and suggesting that the structures of power that limit women in the novel — and in the real world — are cyclical and resurgent. Atwood, thus, offers at the same time both a warning about the circularity of patriarchal structures of power and a challenge to all the forces that have contributed to construct official history and keep it in place, suggesting that unless these discourses are questioned, the systems of female oppression they promote will keep on resurfacing in the future.

Keywords: *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood, *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan, Historiography, Science Fiction, Speculative Fiction, Gender Studies, Feminism.

0. Introduction

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, published in 1985, has recently gained significant attention after being adapted into a popular television show by Hulu, started in 2017. The novel revolves around a dystopian future where an extremist, authoritarian government — that of the Republic of Gilead — has taken over the United States. Traditional, oppressive values have been brought back, and women have been once again relegated to their domestic and biological roles, confined to their houses and completely submitted to this patriarchal system. Although depicting a dystopian, apparently unreal future, the events portrayed in the show — mass shootings, violence, discrimination — do not deviate significantly from current events, and watchers are left with the impression that this could be the future soon. Unfortunately, this feeling has been confirmed as correct, as women in the United States have seen their freedom severely hindered by the recent overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, on the 24th of June, 2022, which protected the constitutional right to abortion, thus stripping away from women the right to make choices about their own bodies.

This dissertation will focus on the original novel, a work of science speculative fiction that has been usually read in relation to the social and political context in which it was written and thus understood primarily as a dystopian work exploring the right-wing religious movements of the 1980s, imagining the oppression women would suffer “in a society governed by religious fundamentalists” were their ideologies to be taken to the extreme and carried out in practice (Miner 149). The main aim of this paper, however, is to explore Margaret Atwood's novel from a historiographical as well as a feminist perspective by approaching *The Handmaid's Tale* not merely as a reflection of the religious environment of the time, but as a dramatisation of the systems of female oppression, most specifically, of the events described by Betty Friedan in *The Feminine*

Mystique (1963). I will do so to examine how the author deals with traditional historiography, questions the official discourses of history and raises awareness of how they are to blame for the oppression women have suffered for centuries. Although published two decades apart, I will argue that Margaret Atwood introduces in *The Handmaid's Tale* many of the issues and anxieties raised by Friedan, the oppressions that women suffer in life before, during, and after Gilead being in great part those suffered by women in the real world and those described in Friedan's study.

As I see it, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood deconstructs "official history," which is "sponsored and published by or with the support of an agency of government" (Blumenson 153). This is the hegemonic version of history promoted by the dominant powers, and which has traditionally been taken as factual and truthful, but which "presents a special outlook or plea that serves the government" and therefore "may not be able to follow where evidence leads" thus having to "overlook or even suppress pertinent information" (Blumenson 153). Atwood questions the unchallenged objectivity of official history by drawing on real-life systems of female oppression — such as the feminine mystique — and transporting them to the novel's past, present and future.

She does so, I will argue, in order to blur the temporal boundaries and the lines between fiction and reality, thus questioning the idea of linear progress and suggesting that the structures of power that limit women in the novel — and in the real world — are cyclical and resurgent. Visibility and awareness are key in determining whether those that are oppressed are able to subvert these hegemonic discourses. As portrayed both in *The Feminine Mystique* and in *The Handmaid's Tale*, women cannot fight against that which they are unable to see, or of whose existence they are unaware, against a problem with no name. Atwood thus offers both a warning about the circularity of patriarchal structures of power and a challenge to all the forces which have contributed to construct official history

and keep it in place, suggesting that unless these discourses are questioned, the systems of female oppression they promote will keep on resurfacing in the future.

One of Margaret Atwood's main concerns throughout her authorial career has been that of reflecting female oppression; her work has always revolved around issues of gender and her literary career has coincided with the establishment of second-wave feminism. From her first published novel, *The Edible Woman* (1969), a work revolving around a woman whose body and sense of self start disappearing, her concern with female anxieties has been visible. Thus, Atwood has also been extensively studied in relation to feminism and *The Handmaid's Tale* been widely approached from a Gender Studies perspective. Fiona Tolan, for instance, has offered a comparison between Atwood's *The Edible Woman* (1969) and Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. Tolan argues that, even though Atwood has always avoided labelling herself as a feminist, any author's work is deeply influenced by their contemporary cultural background, as "the text does not occur in a vacuum," and, therefore, there exists "a dynamic relationship between her fiction and feminist theory" (1). It is precisely in the introduction to *The Edible Woman* that Atwood comments, "like many at the time I'd read Betty Friedan," proving her familiarity with the ideas of *The Feminine Mystique* (qtd. in. Tolan 9). Thus, drawing from Tolan's study and extending her analysis to a different Atwood novel, I will argue that *The Handmaid's Tale* too can be read from the perspective of Friedan's social study. Where I depart from Tolan is in using *The Feminine Mystique* less as influence than as a tool to illuminate Atwood's historiographical approach in making visible the structures of power that oppress women across different periods. Indeed, while Tolan provides her own reading of *The Handmaid's Tale* as a critique of "the limiting and prescriptive nature" of 1980s feminism, portraying "a dystopian society that has unconsciously and paradoxically met certain feminist aims" (145), my own approach, as I have indicated, shows how Atwood

uses Friedan's concept of "the feminine mystique" to go beyond the immediate context of the novel's publication.

In order to determine the deeper historiographical implications of the presence of Betty Friedan's ideas in the novel, I will also rely on Herb Wyile's study of contemporary Canadian speculative fiction in *Speculative Fictions: Contemporary Canadian Novelists and the Writing of History* (2002), where he explores the recent turn of interest of Canadian fiction towards exploring the past (xi). Contemporary historical writers, setting themselves apart from the traditional aim of the historical novel of offering a realistic portrayal of notable past events, are becoming more and more speculative instead (Wyile xii). One of the reasons behind this change, Wyile explores, is the growing concern for the exclusive and limited definition of "what counts as history," which has encouraged many "to question the objectivity of a history that has left them out" (5), a shift which mirrors the growing "scepticism in historical and literary studies [...] about historical knowledge and its literary representation" (Wyile xii). That is, historical fiction has taken a turn towards the speculative: becoming overtly subjective, authors aim to convey the unreliability of traditional representations of history by dealing with the present circumstances, the past, or the relationship between both. Thus, although Wyile's study focuses on historical fiction, seeing it in his analysis as a kind of speculative fiction that deals with the past, I believe his ideas could also be applied to speculative fiction that, as *The Handmaid's Tale*, is concerned too with the future.

Margaret Atwood, an author who "chooses to focus her attention upon another nation and another history that she also claims as her own," comments "both as an outsider and as an insider," and sets her work primarily on the United States (Dodson 68). However, as a Canadian writer of fiction, Atwood also reflects the growing attention towards those that official history has systematically othered. Wyile even devotes a

chapter of his study to exploring how authors such as Atwood “have exposed, and pushed beyond, the barriers of class, gender, race, and ethnicity that ‘official’ history both constructs and naturalizes,” focusing his analysis on her novel *Alias Grace*¹ (1996) (xiv). Participating in the shift of focus towards whose voices official history has attempted to repress (34), Wyile explores how, in *Alias Grace*, Atwood highlights “the dynamics of power behind the construction of gender and sexuality” (Wyile 66).

Herb Wyile draws mainly from theorists such as Frederic Jameson and transports his ideas on history and science fiction to the context of Canadian literature. Jameson, too, puts these two genres in direct relation with each other and is deeply concerned with the concept of false progress, suggesting that, since the appearance of symbolism in the late 19th century, abstract concepts such as that of progress have lost the unquestioned objectivity with which they were once perceived (147). In his collection of essays *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005), Jameson explores the genre of science fiction in relation to historiography and our relationship with the past. Exploring the idea of false progress that is paramount to this paper, Jameson pointed to capitalism as its originator, as “in the moment of the emergence of capitalism the present could be intensified, and prepared for individual perception, by the construction of a historical past from which as a process it could be felt to issue slowly forth, like the growth of an organism” (Jameson 152). That is, he explains how this shift was due to a new sense of temporality that emerged at that time, prompted by the promoters of capitalism: a new conception of the past as very distinct from the present from which people could sense a great distance, thus enhancing the image of great progress brought on by capitalism (149).

¹ A work of historical fiction based on a series of murders in Canada in 1843.

Furthermore, he explores how the genre of science fiction has always carried significant historical implications, as it deals, primarily, not with the future, but with the present and the past, thus positing science fiction as a counterpart to the historical novel (150). Jameson, for instance, examines how the futures that science fiction depicts change over time, precisely because these imagined futures function as a reflection of present history. Thus, typical images of “wonder-working, properly ‘S-F’ futures of technological automation” are no longer being produced, since “that particular Utopian future has in other words turned out to have been merely the future of one moment of what is now our own past” (Jameson 151). Therefore, Jameson argues, science fiction is more concerned with transforming our perception of the present through imaginations of the future than with proposing accurate future scenarios. The present being sometimes too inaccessible to process, science fiction turns it into a fictional future’s past, historicising it and creating a distance between readers and their contemporary circumstances, thus making the present more tangible (151). Similarly, “The Republic of Gilead strikes us, not as a techno-dystopia” which follows traditional, futuristic science fiction imagery (Hammer 45), as Atwood’s work does not attempt to provide a plausible prediction of the future, but instead functions as an extension of the author’s contemporary circumstances.

According to Wylie, then, and following Jameson’s conception of science fiction, speculative fiction² reflects on certain present situations by projecting them into the future, while historical fiction might be argued to do the same, but in the direction of the past (xii). Atwood, performing a similar exercise, transports both past and present situations to the future, not only to reflect on the present and how the future will be

² It was science-fiction author Robert Heinlein who first used the label ‘speculative fiction’ as an alternative to technology-oriented ‘science fiction’ in his essay *On the Writing of Speculative Fiction* (1947).

affected if circumstances remain unchanged, but also to explore how the official representation of past events has affected our understanding of the present and will consequently affect our future too, thus making Wyile's analysis applicable to *The Handmaid's Tale*. At the same time, Atwood offers readers a distance from the real world, making it more accessible by transforming it into the past of a dystopian Gilead, allowing readers to reflect not only on the past and the future, but also on the present.

Wyile also offers an extensive analysis of all the strategies Canadian authors use to convey the unreliability of traditional history, some of which, as I will explore, Atwood uses in *The Handmaid's Tale* to deconstruct historiography. In order to do so, this paper will rely mainly on a few of Wyile's ideas such as that of our presumed "false detachment" from the past (11), the deliberate use of anachronism that authors use to "highlight our assumptions about historical progression," (15) the introduction of real-life events, which prompts "the blurring of the real and the fictional" (16), as well as the revision of history as fragmentary and the use of metafictional devices.

The Handmaid's Tale has been approached from this historiographical perspective by many critics. For instance, Dominick M. Grace's analysis in "*The Handmaid's Tale*": "*Historical Notes*" and *Documentary Subversion*, which explores exclusively the final section of the novel, proposes that although the future depicted in the 'Historical Notes' appears to be more progressive than Gilead, some of the oppressive attitudes of the authoritative regime are still very present, even in the far future of 2195 (481). While he too suggests a "cyclical rather than a linear model of history," Grace nevertheless argues that the historical model of the last pages suggests "that Gilead is neither inevitable nor permanent" (484). Adding to Grace's perspective that these systems of oppression will resurface and "continue to do so as long as we contextualize, compartmentalize, and historicize them, in order to avoid judging them," (490) I will argue that not only is this

subversion of historiography present in the future of the 'Historical Notes,' but all throughout the novel, and it suggests the inevitability and permanence of female systems of oppression as long as official, patriarchal history remains unquestioned, showcasing "fate of women within a patriarchally circumscribed history" (Wylie 73). That is, Atwood reflects how dominant patriarchal forces make use of official history to keep themselves in power while keeping women in submissive positions and dramatises the universality of these oppressive systems, as they exist at any given period in history and will continue resurfacing unless these official discourses are challenged.

1. Margaret Atwood and Betty Friedan: Parallelisms between *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Feminine Mystique*

Having established the methodological background for my analysis, the following part of this dissertation will explore the influence of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* on *The Handmaid's Tale*, analysing the many parallelisms between the social study and the novel and highlighting their presence not only in the Gileadean period, but also in life before and after the authoritarian regime. The systems of oppression that both authors depict share many characteristics, not only related to their treatment of women, but also to how they came to be established orders and maintained in place. As both Friedan and Atwood explore, these forces work primarily by manipulating the past, thus re-writing official history, and shaping the present according to their own interests, creating new realities that many feel pressured to conform to.

Atwood could thus be said to dramatise the many oppressions that women have suffered throughout history, exemplifying them by specifically introducing those of *The Feminine Mystique*, but suggesting their universal and cyclical natures. Atwood, through the many parallelisms with Friedan's study, portrays Gilead not as unique, but as a combination of pressures which have always been present, as they were present in the form of the feminine mystique, and which reshape themselves as time advances, for instance, in the form of Gilead. Friedan, too, argues that such forces are not a new phenomenon, but resurgent models of female oppression which have taken various forms throughout history, helping "to document that social progress is reliably two steps forward, one step back" (Shriver vii). Therefore, Atwood could be said to pose Gilead and the feminine mystique as equals, portrayed as being the same phenomenon in different shapes. For instance, by making *The Handmaid's Tale* revolve around "the control of women and babies" which "has been a feature of every repressive regime on

the planet” (Atwood), Atwood gives Gilead the defining traits not only of the feminine mystique, but also those of every system of female oppression. Thus, both authors reinforce the circular and universal nature of such systems; while Friedan calls them mystiques, Atwood gives them a face and the name of Gilead. Furthermore, by making these invisible systems of female oppression take on a visible form in the shape of an authoritarian government, Atwood raises awareness of the extreme pressure these forces exert on women, portraying the limitations that they indirectly impose not as abstract, unseen constraints, but as concrete laws directly imposed by Gilead.

Betty Friedan’s main aim in her study was to explore the anxieties that white, middle-class, suburban women suffered in the United States during the 1950s and 1960s. She explored how, after WWII ended, the men came back home and reclaimed the jobs that the women had taken for them while they were away. Consequently, a number of social discourses were generated that sent women back into their houses. These forces, powerful enough to stop the fight for women’s rights started by first-wave feminism, are very similar to those which promote the rise of the Gileadean government in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Friedan named these forces “the feminine mystique,” a phrase she also used to describe the idealised image of femininity that was set as the standard for women in the U.S. at that time, as the “suburban housewife” model was established as the epitome of femininity. This image of the perfect housewife, a woman who had attained “true feminine fulfilment” through taking care of “her husband, her children, her home,” promoted the idea that a true, feminine woman was one whose main goals in life were “to get married, have four children, and live in a nice house in a nice suburb” (Friedan 7). Thus, the feminine mystique restricted the channels available for women to achieve fulfilment to those of domesticity, motherhood, and marriage.

Friedan recorded the extreme unhappiness of the American housewives that conformed to this lifestyle after she herself experienced what she called “a schizophrenic split.” That is, she noticed a tremendous gap between the way women saw themselves, how they wished to live their lives, and this new, unattainable and unrealistic model of femininity of the feminine mystique (1). Deciding to explore this occurrence by interviewing several housewives, Friedan discovered that, even though they were living the supposedly perfect suburban life, most of them felt extremely unhappy, “afflicted with uneasiness, mournfulness, disquiet” (Shriver v), most of them reporting a sense of emptiness, “a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction” (Friedan 5). She called this phenomenon “the problem that has no name,” as it was an issue that “lay buried, unspoken, for many years” (Friedan 5). Even though most housewives experienced the same struggles, each was forced to deal with them alone. How could they feel dissatisfied with the life that was supposed to entail the biggest fulfilment for them? The conclusion most housewives arrived to was that there was something inherently wrong with them, thus becoming too ashamed to admit that, after having obtained everything that was to make them feel realised as women, they felt empty and numb, thus remaining unaware that “in finding the life of a housewife dreary, monotonous, and hauntingly empty they had plenty of company” (Shriver vii). Since each housewife felt she was alone in her struggle and too embarrassed to speak up about their discontent, a vicious cycle was created which kept women silent for a long time, thus, they would not realise, for many years, that theirs was a universal problem (Friedan 8).

In Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the protagonist, known not by her original name but as Offred, fits in perfectly with the suburban housewife model, being “a Caucasian woman in her mid-thirties. Middle class, married with an eight year old daughter, she had a prosperous and rather unexceptional existence until the political

troubles that culminated in the creation of Gilead” (Hansot 57), precisely like the women in Friedan’s study (Shriver xi), and who could be said too to suffer from “the problem that has no name.” That is, Atwood conveys, in the years preceding Gilead, a similar sense of awareness that there was an existing issue, the circumstances imperceptibly changing, but not being able to specify how. For instance, Offred begins her narrative with a flashback of her being held captive in a gymnasium, where she remembers feeling that sense of “expectation, of something without a shape or name. I remember that yearning, for something that was always about to happen” (Atwood 9). Reflecting the same uncertainty housewives felt before the problem with no name became a known occurrence, both authors use similar words to describe this paradox: the inability to see the oppressive forces at work and thus not being able to change the circumstances. At that time, however, “Offred lacked an understanding of the larger political and social structures and forces surrounding her” (Stillman and Johnson 78). That is, even though she was aware that there had been a shift, the alterations were so gradual, that “to her, any problem as well as its solution was a totally personal matter” (Stillman and Johnson, 78). Lacking awareness of the all-encompassing nature of these changes, she believed that her problem was an individual one, as many housewives did in the context of the problem with no name. This blindness was mainly a consequence of Gilead not being a visible source of pressure, since, at that moment, “There wasn’t an enemy you could put your finger on” (Atwood 179). Therefore, Offred, as well as all other women, remained ignorant that there was anything to subvert against, or that their anxieties were not an individual problem, this pre-Gileadean state of anxiety mirroring Betty Friedan’s problem with no name.

This suburban housewife model that Friedan described reduced women’s identity solely to their biological functions, since childbirth and domesticity were imposed as the

only ways in which women could fulfil their identities, and motherhood was “defined as a total way of life” (Friedan 41). Thus, women became unable to develop a sense of self other than that of mothers and wives, as the feminine mystique promoted the idea that there was no way a woman could “even dream about herself, except as her children’s mother, her husband’s wife” (Friedan 45). Therefore, because the way in which women were allowed to gain a sense of self was so limited, these became women’s only goals in life, their identities defined by their anatomy, and could only construct a sense of self through their husbands and children.

In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, identity is also a pressing issue, as women are also defined according to their reproductive abilities. The protagonist, Offred, is a fertile woman on whom has been imposed the role of Handmaid and who is sent to a wealthy household she is to provide children for. Handmaids must wear red uniforms, a red dress and cloak with “white wings around the face” (Atwood 24), through which they are marked as women able to reproduce, as red is “the colour of blood, which defines us” (Atwood 14). In a manner similar to the women living under the feminine mystique, Offred has thus become “enveloped in a one dimensional public persona constructed around female reproductive capacity” (Hansot 57), deprived of any individuality which does not revolve around her anatomy.

Furthermore, Offred’s identity also depends entirely on the man of the household, Commander Fred Waterford. In the same manner that housewives could only build identities through their husbands and children, the names that the Handmaids are given reflect the women’s complete dependence on men. The Handmaids’ names — Offred, Ofwarren or Ofglen — are composed of their Commanders’ names and the possessive article, their new identities, deriving directly from the men’s. Thus, Offred struggles with keeping her individuality, as her former self is being slowly replaced by the imposed role

as Handmaid. Offred could even be argued to report an experience like that of Betty Friedan's "schizophrenic split," the breach between her real self and the selfhood that Gilead has given her. For instance, looking in the mirror, she only sees "a distorted shadow, a parody of something" (Atwood 15), this mirror reflecting an exterior image which is distorted and does not correspond with her own, interior image of herself. Not only that, but many times Offred conveys feelings of emptiness similar to those which the suburban housewives reported feeling, as she learns that, in order to survive, she must avoid her feelings: "What I feel is that I must not feel" (Atwood 39). Gilead, as well as the feminine mystique, thus exerts "social control" through the "suppression and manipulation of human feelings" (Ambruster 148), promoting this state of emptiness and inactivity, which prevents women from taking any subversive actions.

Not only are the Handmaids affected by the incredibly limiting impositions of Gilead, and by those of the feminine mystique, but also every other woman portrayed in *The Handmaid's Tale*. For instance, Offred reflects about the Commander's Wife, Serena Joy, and how "possibly she feels nothing." That is, she too is trapped inside in the house, having been given no other function than to knit, take care of her garden, and wait for a child from Offred. Handmaid and Wife could thus be argued to be two faces of the same coin, as even Offred points out: "I see the two of us, a blue shape, a red shape. [...] Myself, my obverse" (Atwood 267). This, furthermore, exemplifies the paradox of the problem that has no name, as neither of these women is able to sympathise with the other, unaware that they are both suffering the same anxieties.

The idea that feminine fulfilment was only possible through childbirth and motherhood was at the core of the feminine mystique, an idea which was disseminated mainly through the glorification of the role of women as mothers. Women were told by women's magazines, for instance, that the only way they could contribute to society was

by giving birth (Friedan 30). In Gilead, too, motherhood is glorified and turned into the only goal in women's lives until it becomes a matter of salvation for women like Offred. For instance, seeing a pregnant Handmaid, Offred looks at her as if she were a miracle: "She's a flag on a hilltop, showing us what can still be done: we too can be saved" (Atwood 32). And on a visit to the doctor, as he proposes impregnating Offred himself, Offred's first reaction, aware of her desperate situation, is to repeat the mantra, "*Give me children or else I die*" (Atwood 67). That is because Handmaids are given three chances to become pregnant, in three different households. If they fail to do so, they run the risk of being declared Unwomen and sent to the Colonies, labour camps where those unable to contribute to the regime are discarded and where "you've got three years maximum [...] before your nose falls off and your skin pulls away" (Atwood 256). Atwood thus dramatises the core idea of the feminine mystique as, in Gilead too, having children marks the difference between being labelled a true woman or not. Motherhood thus becomes Offred's only means of survival in Gilead, since her life depends on it, bringing to the extreme the pressures that housewives felt to fulfil their feminine roles through motherhood.

Sinking further into her defined identity as Handmaid, Offred is depicted as slowly losing her grip on her original sense of self. As Friedan reflects about suburban housewives, "If a woman's needs are not recognized by herself or others in our culture, she is forced to seek identity and self-esteem in the only channels open to her" (Friedan 254). This is precisely Offred's situation: incredibly limited by her role, the only channel through which she can assert her humanity is motherhood. For Offred, thus, giving birth becomes a matter not only of physical survival but also mental survival, as it is her only way to gaining a sense of purpose and as the expectations imposed on her slowly become her own too: "Each month I watch for blood, fearfully, for when it comes it means failure.

I have failed once again to fulfil the expectations of others, which have become my own” (Atwood 79). Portraying “women’s physical and mental imprisonment within a [...] male regime” (Hammer 39), Offred becomes desperate to carry out this function that defines her entirely.

Gilead and the feminine mystique also share many similarities regarding the way they came to be established sources of oppression and the forces that worked together to put them in place. These forces rely mainly on the manipulation of the past for purposes of the present and on the dissemination of unquestioned, official misrepresentations of women to justify the limited roles it imposes on them. The image of the suburban housewife, for instance, was in great part disseminated by trusted voices of authority such as those of magazine editors, college educators or psychoanalysts, as they told women that the only way for them to feel satisfaction in life was by fulfilling their own femininity, a femininity which, they claimed, could only be fulfilled through childbirth, marriage, and domesticity. By doing so, these dominant voices redefined the concept of womanhood and the role of women, creating an oppressive new model of femininity which many women felt pressured to pursue (Friedan 5).

Friedan explores how these authorities from many different fields attempted to stop any movements that could hinder the development of the new model of femininity. For instance, in a widespread attack to feminism, women were taught to pity all those who refused to conform to this new standard and to see those who sought careers outside the house as “neurotic, unfeminine, unhappy women,” bringing many to believe that feminism had become a thing of the past, old-fashioned and futile (Friedan 6). Feminism thus became “one of history’s dirty jokes,” and feminists were seen as women who had deviated from their natural roles and turned into “victims of penis envy who wanted to be men” (Friedan 60). Instead, the feminine mystique promoted the belief that, because

feminists had attempted to fight for equality with men instead of accepting their own feminine roles, they had become frustrated women.

This idea was based on the Freudian concept of “penis envy,” defined as an “unconscious phenomenon” whereby girls come to have “the desire for a phallic organ” (Nathan 39), a theory that posits “the female body” as “nothing more than a defective male body and thus hopelessly “othered”” and “renders the feminine and its corporeality insignificant” (Appleton 62). The manipulation and misunderstanding of this theory contributed greatly to reinforcing the negative prejudices around feminism (Friedan 78). Friedan also explores how the use of this theory was not unique to the context of the feminine mystique, but that it had been repeatedly used to hinder women’s fights for equality, the image of feminists as victims of “penis envy” having already been promoted by those who had opposed women gaining the right to vote (Friedan 75-76). Friedan thus notices how, the more women start to fully participate in society, the more society realises it is not ready for the participation of women. The glorification of domesticity is thus put in place to entice women to return to their houses as it did, for instance, in “the chivalry of the Middle Ages [...] and the artificial pedestal of the Victorian woman” (Friedan 195) highlighting, again, the circularity and universality of the systems of oppression that both Friedan and Atwood portray. Furthermore, Friedan repeatedly calls the suburban housewife image “the new feminine mystique,” implying the existence of an old one, and explores how this new model is the same, old image of femininity which had been imposed before the first wave of feminism emerged, and which was precisely the spark that ignited the movement.

The Gileadean regime, too, makes use of the “penis envy” theory, reflecting how oppressive systems universally resort to the manipulation of official history when their fear arises of women’s advancement in the fight for equality. At the Red Centre, the place

where women are re-educated so that they might better adjust to their new imposed roles as Handmaids, Aunt Lydia, one of the women in charge of said education, blatantly manipulates the concept of “penis envy.” While teaching the women why they are no longer allowed to write, Aunt Lydia states that “Pen Is Envy” (Atwood 192). In this clever wordplay, Atwood references Freudian theory in order to portray how it is manipulated by Gilead, as it was in the context of the feminine mystique, this historical misrepresentation of women reshaped by Aunt Lydia, but not questioned, in order to fit the purposes of the regime. Atwood highlights the misuse of this concept through writing it not as “penis envy,” but as “Pen Is Envy,” thus depicting Aunt Lydia manipulating not only the contents of the theory but also its name.

Therefore, because of the negative image of feminism that the feminine mystique promoted, women in the 1950s came to pity “their poor frustrated mothers, who had dreamed once of having a career” (8) having learnt that the only alternative to being a housewife was that of becoming a frustrated career woman. Offred, in the image of a suburban housewife herself, also expresses her contempt for feminism, as she repeatedly condemns the lifestyle and beliefs of her mother, who was an ardent fighter for women’s rights. Within the temporal setting of the novel, Offred’s mother appears to be a second-wave feminist, but I would argue that she also represents first-wave feminism, precisely the movement which the feminine mystique attempted to discredit, thus “making her mother the feminist and Offred the postfeminist who assumes rather than fights for improvements in the treatment of women” (Stillman and Johnson 83). Offred, for instance, attempts to ridicule her mother and her friends, saying, “I resented them. [...] I didn’t see why she had to dress that way, in overalls” (Atwood 186). Atwood thus dramatises the new dichotomy in the image of women that the feminine mystique created: that of the housewife versus the frustrated career woman.

Thus, women in the context of the feminine mystique had the choice, on the surface, of deciding what path they wanted to take. However, many other invisible pressures were at work that prevented them from pursuing careers outside the home and, therefore, most chose the return to domesticity, too scared to even consider the alternatives. Offred, too, is also perceived by the other women as having had a choice. Offred explains, for instance, how she “Heard Rita say to Cora that she wouldn’t debase herself like that” and when asked what she would do instead, she responds, “Go to the Colonies [...]. They have the choice.” Cora, on the other hand, understands that going to the Colonies is to “starve to death” (Atwood 16) and that, therefore, there is not much of a choice, that “no one goes through those gates willingly” (Atwood 37). Thus, reflecting the struggle of housewives suffering from the problem that has no name, these women remain unaware of the many pressures at work that prevent them from leaving their houses, unable to see that theirs is not an individual problem but a universal one.

This type of mentality brings individuals to assume that everyone in their community shares the same beliefs and, therefore, they must act accordingly, in order to fit in. This is one of the main methods by which the feminine mystique was maintained for so long. As Friedan explains, a difficulty that women attempting to deviate from the housewife model might encounter, is the “the hostility of other housewives. [...] Women who are living vicariously through their husbands and children resent the woman who has a life of her own. [...] And she can expect her home, her husband, and her children to be scrutinized with more than the usual curiosity for the slightest sign of a ‘problem’” (288). Therefore, for fear of being singled out by others, some women might be discouraged from pursuing lives outside their homes. This is a very pressing issue in Gilead too, where it takes an extreme form, as gossip is weaponised, and life depends on the community. Offred, for instance, is constantly paranoid, not being able to trust anyone, unable to

determine whether they are true believers of the Gileadean regime and would thus be willing to give her away to the authorities. When she meets her shopping partner, Ofglen, for the first time, she reflects: she is “my spy, as I am hers. [...] She might be a true believer, a Handmaid in more than name” (Atwood 25). Gilead thus relies on the population to control each other, and even women, like the Aunts, are appointed to keep other women from straying from their appointed paths. Thus, the regime is able to exert its complete authority thanks to “the constant monitoring of behavior of everyone [...] coupled with the ever-present threat of clearly defined punishments” (Hammer 46), in a way similar to how housewives controlled each other during the feminine mystique, although the punishments were not so clearly defined. Therefore, Offred suffers from yet another source of pressure to conform to the Gileadean model, as she cannot risk giving herself away and being reported as, in Gilead, “Those who do not fit the society's norms are re-educated, expelled, or executed” (Stillman and Johnson 71). Thus, she remains unaware, for a long time, of what the women around her really believe, and that they are suffering as she is, a situation very reminiscent of the problem with no name.

Another common occurrence both in Gilead and in the context of the feminine mystique is the enmity which these systems generate between women. The government divides women into different classes according to their biological capabilities: the Handmaids are fertile women, the Marthas are infertile women who work domestic jobs, and the Wives are mostly infertile women, married to men in the elite and managers the household. The Marthas, for instance, are tasked with cooking and cleaning for the whole house and they, too, are trapped in domesticity, presented most of the time cooking in the kitchen, where they spend their hours doing menial tasks. They are even described by Offred as being in a state of emptiness like that of housewives. As Rita the Martha is cutting vegetables at the kitchen table, for instance, Offred notes how “[t]he rest of her

body does not move, nor does her face. It's as if she's doing it in her sleep" (Atwood 214). However, these women do not understand each other, as each thinks their burden is heavier than the others'. Cora, for instance, dismisses Offred's situation by saying "It's not that bad. It's not what you'd call hard work" (Atwood 16). The Wives are at the top of the female hierarchy, but most of them are infertile. Serena Joy, thus, also resents Offred, because "I am a reproach to her; and a necessity" (Atwood 19).

Being the Wives of the Commanders, and as the name indicates, they too are identified purely based on who their husbands are, their lives decided according to what job their husbands hold and to their reproductive abilities. Serena Joy, for instance, unable to have children herself, must wear a blue uniform, in stark contrast to the Handmaids' red, and is portrayed as empty, cold and decaying, unable to fulfil her natural feminine role and, therefore: "Made of wood, or iron" (Atwood 212). Wives, even though they have more freedom, also spend most of their time behind locked doors, "Sewing, in the sitting room. [...] Or knitting scarves" (Atwood 18). Offred even suspects that the scarves Serena Joy knits are "unravelling and turned back into balls of yarn, to be knitted again in their turn. Maybe it's just something to keep the Wives busy, to give them a sense of purpose" (Atwood 19)³. This reflects precisely the suburban housewife's struggle with boredom and empty time, and with the lack of purpose of women living under the feminine mystique. One of the biggest signs that women's reality does not conform with the image that the mystique is trying to push, Friedan explains, is the women's excessive boredom (48), as their life is filled with countless empty hours, which they usually fill by doing meaningless domestic chores for hours on end, like Serena's knitting: "Her form

³ Also, making reference to the myth of Penelope and her ceaseless weaving.

of procreation, it must be” (Atwood 158). In a world where procreation has become the ultimate goal, knitting has become Serena’s.

Handmaids, Marthas, and Wives thus each represent different aspects of the suburban housewife image: motherhood, domesticity, and marriage. Consequently, as victims of the feminine mystique, their sole purpose in life has become that of having children. Offred, as has been explored, needs to give birth in order to survive. The Commander’s Wife, unable to bear children herself, desperately relies on Offred to do so, as she will keep any babies that the Handmaid gives birth to. Even the Marthas express their desire for a baby in the household, as they work unceasingly to ensure Offred is healthy enough to have a successful pregnancy. For instance, Cora the Martha’s only hope to feel satisfied with her life in Gilead is through Offred’s childbirth, this being the only channel available through which she could justify her existence, and which would fulfil her imposed role of keeping Offred healthy. When Offred is taken away at the end of the novel, Offred notes how “Cora has begun to cry. I was her hope, I’ve failed her. Now she will always be childless” (Atwood 303). Therefore, even the different tasks of motherhood are divided between these women, as the Handmaids give birth to the child, the Wives keep and support the baby, while the Marthas are appointed to take care of it. As Commander Fred appears to be sterile, their desperation for children reaches such a point that Offred and Serena plot to get the Handmaid pregnant through the Guardian Nick, an incredibly risky plan that could get both of them killed. Nevertheless, Offred accepts, knowing that “It’s my life on the line; but that’s where it will be sooner or later, one way or another, whether I do or don’t” (Atwood 212), aware of how motherhood, for her, is a matter of life and death.

The glorification of women’s function as child-bearers is thus at the core of Gileadean ideology, and can be seen, for instance, in the way the Aunts at the Red Centre

attempt to convince women of the paramount necessity of Handmaids. Thus, both in Gilead and during the feminine mystique, women's roles are glorified until they "become the very end of life itself to conceal the obvious fact that it is barely the beginning" (Friedan 195). That is, this glorification, during the feminine mystique, was aimed at making women believe that a life of domesticity was meaningful and fulfilling, and that it should thus be their only purpose in life, in order to hide the true, limiting nature of the suburban housewife model. The Handmaid's role is glorified too, and Aunt Lydia is presented as the main perpetrator, being the one in charge of educating the Handmaids. She attempts to make the women believe that "where I am is not a prison but a privilege" (Atwood 14), the Handmaids' role thus glorified through its being given a function in society, further outside the domestic sphere, as they are taught that they have a responsibility their country, which they must save by producing babies.

Education, too, became one of the main proponents of the feminine mystique, and an important source of pressure, as universities started offering courses on marriage "to prepare women for the adjustment to domestic life" (Friedan 12). Therefore, one of the fundamental reasons why it became impossible to question, was its being "broadcast by the very gens of education and social science that are supposed to be the chief enemies of prejudice" (Friedan 79). For instance, universities that had once been pioneers in offering higher education for women, were now the ones offering courses on marriage. Thus, because trusted voices of authority were the ones spreading this message, this new image of femininity was received not as a construction, but as a reality, taken at face-value and unquestioned. This is mirrored by Atwood in Gilead's use of re-education at the Red Centre to ensure women's full adaptation to the new Gileadean standards. There, they are shown documentaries of a grossly manipulated past, in order to bring the Handmaids in training to accept the validity of the new Gileadean impositions. For instance, they are

either shown “an old porno film” depicting women in sexual situations, or other, incredibly disturbing tapes showing “a woman being slowly cut into pieces” (Atwood 124). These two completely different situations are thus put at the same level in an attempt to make the women accept that the situation of all women in the past was like that of the second film. While it is true that these horrific things took place, Aunt Lydia is generalising them and extending them to stand for the life of every woman in life before Gilead, while blaming these atrocities on the liberties women used to possess, thus teaching them “that women’s struggles for equality and autonomy cause all the rape and violence” (Ambruster 147). In this manner, they are taught to “Consider the alternatives [...]. You see what things used to be like? That was what they thought of women, then” (Atwood 124). They are thus given a choice, but one which they have been pressured into taking, as what Aunt Lydia is conveying is that the alternative to following the Gileadean lifestyle is suffering the fate of the woman in the second film.

These educational “experts,” after the housewives’ unhappiness became a known phenomenon, attempted to solve the problem that has no name not by reconsidering the unrealistic model of femininity which they had helped establish, but by attempting to make women better prepared to assume domesticity (Friedan 12). When this did not help alleviate their struggles, women were simply told to conform, their issues dismissed by experts who deemed them unsolvable problems. They were told, by therapists, that this is what being a woman entailed, and that their unhappiness was a result of their inability to adjust to their natural roles (13). As Friedan explains, “when a mystique is strong, it makes its own fiction of fact. It feeds on the very facts that might contradict it” (Friedan 43). At the Red Centre, similarly, the Handmaids are taught that “Ordinary [...] is what you are used to. This might not seem ordinary to you now, but after a time it will” (Atwood 39). Thus, the feminine mystique, as well as Gilead, worked by “shaping the

very reality it distorted” (Friedan 34). That is, these systems of oppression function by creating new, incredibly limiting images of womanhood which are naturalised, turned into the new reality of many women, as they remain unquestioned, justified through the manipulation of history and scientific arguments.

The feminine mystique was able to warp women’s reality to such an extent due to the complicated theories that these experts relied on, as their ideas were kept accessible to a very few, could thus not be debated, and were taken by most people as matter of fact (Friedan 28). The deep involvement of Freudian theory in the feminine mystique, for instance, contributed to the impossibility of questioning it, and Freud’s theories became a source that gave much power to the feminine mystique, originating many of the misinterpretations around women’s frustrations and feminism (Friedan 79). Thus, Friedan highlights the relationship between official historical portrayals of women and how they have affected their present circumstances, as these misrepresentations of femininity contributed greatly to the creation of the feminine mystique.

Systems like the feminine mystique or Gilead thus take advantage of official history by manipulating it and using it to shape the present, writing a new official history according to their interests. For instance, while Freud’s theories of sexual repression were once used as arguments in favour of the women’s emancipation movement, they had now been manipulated by the feminine mystique to suit its needs. Most specifically, the concept of “penis envy” which, as has been explored, was used by many to justify and dismiss the problem with no name and condemn feminism (Friedan 80). Friedan explains, furthermore, how it was not the expert psychoanalysts who promoted these theories, but “the many popularizers” who twisted them, not considering how studies written about Victorian women were inapplicable to American women in the 1940s, and which had already been rebuked by the new knowledge acquired through the years (81). Thus, “The

chains that bind” the housewife “in her trap are made up of mistaken ideas and misinterpreted fact” (Friedan 19), as the way in which women have been historically represented and misunderstood has deeply contributed to the limiting image of femininity of the feminine mystique.

In Gilead there also has been a huge regression in the fight for women’s equality, as the old prejudices against women resurface, never having truly disappeared, these misrepresentations taken as truthful and never considered to not be applicable to contemporary life. The Commander, for instance, believes such misconceptions, which Gilead promotes and normalises, as he seems to think that women cannot write or do basic math, as Offred reflects: “Possibly he doesn’t remember I can. [...] Women can’t add, he said once” (Atwood 191). Atwood thus conveys the message that, if official history remains unquestioned, regression will continue happening every time there is progress.

The circularity of these systems of oppression and the reversion of seemingly linear progress, which Friedan calls backsliding, was present during the feminine mystique itself too, and it was made possible by the imagined idea of progress that official history promotes. That is, Friedan explains how, after women had won the right to vote in 1920, for instance, the false idea that feminism had accomplished everything it set out to, prompted the feminine mystique’s attack to the movement and prevented women from taking up the fight again, as many thought it no longer necessary (Friedan 77). Friedan thus emphasises how “a mystique takes what it needs from any thinker of the time” (107), highlighting how these dominant forces, these mystiques or Gileads, no matter the timeline or cultural context, always take advantage of any official history by transforming it into an absolute truth that fits its interests, re-writing it into their own version of reality as “the Commanders write Gilead’s official history” (Ambruster 147). At the same time

Friedan implies how these phenomena of female oppression are not isolated to the United States, but that mystiques happen constantly, and they always work by distorting both the past and the present, in order to create new realities. Thus, by relying on Friedan's theory, Atwood is not only portraying the events of the feminine mystique, but a universal pattern of female oppression based on the manipulation of history.

Unreliable official representations of women are disseminated by these forces to such a degree that they become unquestioned truth, reality and history being warped in order to control women. The educators, for instance, in the context of the feminine mystique, taught their students parts of Freudian theory, but decontextualised and without the sufficient background knowledge to interpret it correctly, which contributed to these mistaken ideas being received as scientific fact (Friedan 135). Gileadean authorities can be said, too, to rely on pseudo-scientific authorities to spread their ideology. At the Red Centre, for instance, the Handmaids in training are shown "a graph, showing the birth rate for thousand, for years and years: a slippery slope," evidence given with no context and based on undisclosed scientific studies, which leaves the Handmaids with no choice but to take it as being true (Atwood 119). The Commander, too, resorts to the use of pseudo-scientific arguments to justify his support of Gilead. For instance, when confessing the reasons behind the creation of Gilead, he attempts to justify their actions by explaining how, before all of this started, "We have stats from that time. You know what they were complaining about the most? Inability to feel." (Atwood 217).

What the Commander points as the reasons behind the construction of Gilead is the fact that women had taken over too much of the public sphere, suggesting "that women's liberation forced American men to take this drastic action," similarly to how the feminine mystique was promoted at a time where women had become more liberated than ever (Hammer 40). In life before Gilead, men started feeling that there was nothing for

them to do anymore, their traditional roles as providers slowly stripped away by the increasing independence of women from them. The Commander explains how “The main problem was with men. There was nothing for them anymore. [...] There was nothing for them to do with women. [...] The sex was too easy. Anyone could just buy it. There was nothing to work for, nothing to fight for.” (Atwood 217). With their superiority over women taken away, men underwent an identity crisis and decided to change things, the Commander justifying himself by saying that “We thought we could do better. [...] Better never means better for everyone [...]. It always means worse, for some” (Atwood 218). As has been the case throughout official history, those who are not part of the power chain are systematically left out. In this case, it has been women, as Gilead’s aim is to keep them in submissive positions so that the men can reassert their authority. He continues his justification by claiming that “We’ve given more than we’ve taken away,” stating that, as women started making money for themselves, “they got no respect as mothers” and that is why “they were giving up on the whole business” of motherhood. In Gilead, however, “They’re protected, they can fulfil their biological destinies in peace. With full support and encouragement” (Atwood 227). The Commander’s speech shares every main characteristic of the feminine mystique, as he believes that a woman’s future and identity are determined by her anatomy, and thus a woman’s only goal in life should be that of motherhood.

Gilead does not only use manipulated science, but also manipulated religion, as they keep in their reimagined doctrine only “the portions of the Christian Bible that teach women to submit to men” and which would help justify most of their oppressive ideals (Ambruster 147). For instance, they use “Scriptural precedence” to justify the Wives being able to hit the Handmaids (Atwood 22), or the Ceremonies whereby the Handmaid is forced to have intercourse with the Commander, the mantra being, again: “*Give me*

children, or else I die” (Atwood 95). At the Red Centre, “it was the Beatitudes. [...] *Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the meek.* I knew they made that up, I knew it was wrong, and they left things out too, but there was no way of checking” (Atwood 96). Offred herself is aware of the untrustworthiness of these sources, however, as only a very few have access to the original theories, people like her must take them at face-value, not always being aware of how unreliable they could be. Thus, Gilead, like the feminine mystique, makes use of manipulated historical material, either by transformation or omission, in order to generate “plausible explanations for day-to-day experiences” (Ambruster 147). Keeping the original knowledge away from those they are trying to submit, their new reality remains unquestioned.

Friedan further explores not only the forces that promoted the feminine mystique but also the very specific conditions that prompted its rapid dissemination at that time and place. It is, then, a striking parallelism, which reinforces Atwood’s having, in some form, relied on Friedan’s study, that *The Handmaid’s Tale* takes place too in the United States, Gilead representing “the U.S.A., embodying its past, its present, and its potential future” (Dodson 66), and portrayed to have been a result of very similar conditions as the feminine mystique. As Friedan analyses, right before the feminine mystique took over, the country had gone through a war and a depression, followed by the detonation of the atomic bomb in Japan. Thus, as people were faced with a huge uncertainty and a rapidly changing world, many turned promptly to the known comfort of the family and the house (Friedan 146). Furthermore, when the war ended, the men who had gone to the fronts came back and reclaimed the jobs that women had taken over while they were gone. This prompted a massive competition between the men who wanted their jobs back and the women who had them now, bringing back the prejudices and discrimination against women in the workplace, which made many women flee for the safety of their homes

(Friedan 148). *The Handmaid's Tale* dramatises this masculine overtaking of the professional world after a huge advance in women's presence in the public sphere, and the flight of women back to domesticity. Before Gilead was established, all women had jobs from which they were suddenly fired, after which Offred too turns rapidly towards the path of domesticity, as she claims, "I started doing more baking" (Atwood 185), instead of going to marches or fighting for her freedom.

This unquestioned acceptance of the manipulated Freudian theory that the feminine mystique promoted was made possible due to the "relief it provided from uncomfortable realities. [...] After the depression, [...] it became an all-embracing American ideology, a new religion," as it provided a way of escaping many pressing issues and anxieties (Friedan 97). In Gilead, too, in an attempt to escape atrocious realities such as biological disasters, widespread infertility or decreasing birth-rates, this new model of society is imposed as a new religion, something that people can believe in, an ideology and national purpose to focus on other than the frightening real world. "There is a Balm in Gilead" (Atwood 226), says Aunt Lydia, as there was a balm in the feminine mystique that allowed people to avoid facing more pressing issues. Hence, the feminine mystique, and it could be thus argued that Gilead too, became "elevated by Freudian into a scientific religion" (Friedan 98), as not only was Freudian theory used to seek answers to the behaviour of humans, but it also "filled a real need [...] for an ideology, a national purpose" (Friedan 150).

Friedan, furthermore, points out that, simultaneously to the rise of Freudian psychology was also a sudden religious revival, which might have occurred for the same reasons (Friedan 151). Gilead, therefore, relies on the same two pillars as the feminine mystique did: science and religion. Atwood thus explores not only religious ideologies being taken to the extreme, as it has been extensively argued is her main goal, but also

the resurgence of misguided ideas on femininity, such as Freudian theory, at times of deep, national uncertainty, suggesting that any time there is advancement in the fight for women's rights, patriarchal structures of power promote backsliding for fear of women taking over the public sphere dominated by men. "Gilead is within you" claims Aunt Lydia (Atwood 29), suggesting that, like the feminine mystique and all the systems of female oppression in history, Gilead is not merely a spontaneous occurrence happening at one, specific point in history, but rather a universal combination of forces and internalised patriarchal discourses which have worked together for centuries to keep women in submissive positions by manipulating official history, and which resurface every time the women's fight for equality advances. As Jane Ambruster has put it: "Gilead exists wherever the "head" (the constellation of human qualities that the culture calls "rational" or "masculine") denies the "heart" (the constellation of human qualities that the culture calls "emotional" or "feminine") its full expression" (146). Gilead, that is, is not only something physical, an authoritative government that can be taken down, but something that everyone carries inside themselves, intangible, outdated attitudes that have been passed down through official history and remained unquestioned. Gilead exists anywhere women are oppressed by men, and until these discourses are brought to the light, questioned, and challenged, systems like Gilead and the feminine mystique will keep on resurfacing.

Another main reason why the feminine mystique became so incredibly powerful was because this new model of femininity was financially beneficial for many, an image "on which companies spend millions of dollars for television time and space" (Friedan 53). Housewives being the biggest consumers in the country, the discovery was made that women spent more money more if they were kept bored and empty in their homes (Friedan 166). The housewives' lack of identity and goals in life made them easier to

manipulate, as they were made to feel that by buying, they could gain a sense of fulfilment (Friedan 167). Thus, advertisements, too, “glorify her ‘role’ as an American housewife — knowing that her very lack of identity in that role will make her fall for whatever they are selling” (Friedan 186), as many attempted to expand their market by manipulating women to stay at home, unsatisfied, so that they would feel the need to keep consuming.

These strategies, it could be argued, function similarly to Gilead. First, women are deprived of an identity other than that determined by their biology and are left feeling empty and numb. Then, by various methods, they are pressured into taking the path towards domesticity, accepting their imposed roles as women, by making them believe that it is the only way they will find fulfilment in life. At the Red Centre, for instance, “What we prayed for was emptiness,” becoming a blank canvas, so that they “would be worthy to be filled” with the expectations and selfhood of Gilead, filled “with grace, with love, self-denial, semen and babies” (Atwood 200). Thus, like the feminine mystique’s, “Gilead’s political power [...] is solidified by the isolation of every woman, the fragmentation of her social world, and the reconstruction of each woman’s world into Gilead’s mold” (Stillman and Johnson 74). That is, both systems of oppression control their subjects by depriving them of an identity and only allowing them to build another one according to the system’s new models, the women’s lack of identity being what makes them readily accept these constrictions.

Both in Gilead and in the United States, women are thus “lulled into a false sense of anonymous security” (256), as the feminine mystique allows them to face any pressing, real-world issues outside the house. This false sense of security is what compels Offred, by the end of the novel, to succumb to the Gileadean impositions that she has resisted for so long. In the end, it is easier for her to submit to the many pressures she is subject to than to face the reality of having to subvert the Gileadean forces, as it is incredibly

dangerous and possibly deadly. For instance, at the Red Centre, at the beginning of Gilead, Offred admits, “Already we were losing the taste for freedom, already we were finding these walls secure” (Atwood 139). As she accepts the fact that, in order to survive, she must leave her past life behind, that “I must forget about my secret name and all ways back. My name is Offred now, and this is where I live” (Atwood 149), she eventually fully assimilates into her new identity as a Handmaid. When her secret nightly meetings with the Commander begin, Offred sinks further into this feeling of false security, as she claims to be “happier than I was before” (Atwood 168). This feeling embraces her completely when she starts seeing Nick, as she feels that “Being here with him is safety,” even though she is aware that this feeling is only “a delusion, of course. This room is one of the most dangerous places I could be” reflecting the false security housewives felt inside their homes, avoiding any greater issues around them (Atwood 277).

Because now she is able to fulfil herself in a new way, through her relationship with Nick, she starts giving in, becoming comfortable. “I tell him my real name, and feel that therefore I am known,” thus shaping her new identity around him, and sinking further into the false safety this new realisation of her identity entails. Eventually, she loses the desire to resist and escape: even though she knows she could possibly leave Gilead, instead she claims, “I no longer want to leave [...]. I want to be here, with Nick” (Atwood 279). She thus commits, like housewives under the feminine mystique, the mistaken choice of accepting her new role and following the path of femininity imposed on her. Finally, Gilead takes complete hold of her after she finds out that Ofglen has committed suicide, right as a black van was coming to get her after having been discovered as being part of the resistance. “Everything they’ve taught me at the Red Centre, everything I’ve resisted, comes flooding in. I don’t want pain,” reaching the conclusion that it is better to survive, “in any form,” even if it means accepting every Gileadean imposition. “I feel,

for the first time, their true power” (Atwood 294), and, eventually, she reaches the feeling of emptiness, that “form of suspension [...] pervaded with indifference” that so many women living under the feminine mystique reported feeling (Atwood 299).

In the end, a suspicious black van appears to get Offred too. Initially, Offred believes she has been caught as well, but Nick is the one who comes out of it, claiming that he is with the resistance: “It’s Mayday. Go with them” (Atwood 302). Offred, however, has no way of determining whether he is telling the truth or not, only knowing that a black van like this one had come to capture and kill Ofglen mere hours ago. Even with this awareness, Offred gives herself completely to a man, as she “simply surrenders her fate to the desirable but unreliable Nick” (Hammer 42), and leaves with these people, not knowing whether she is walking towards her death or her salvation: “Whether this is my end or a new beginning I have no way of knowing: I have given myself over into the hands of strangers” (Atwood 303). Ultimately, thus, under complete submission to Gilead and to the feminine mystique, Offred leaves her destiny to be determined by Nick, as she simply waits for life to happen around her.

2. Questioning Official History: Herb Wyile's Strategies of Historiographical Deconstruction

After having explored the similarities between Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* and *The Handmaid's Tale* and having established the many ways in which these forces of female oppression work to shape women's reality by manipulating the past and the present, the second section of this dissertation will be dedicated to further exploring the historiographical implications of these many parallelisms. I will do so in relation to Herb Wyile's proposed strategies of historiographical deconstruction, the "devices that [...] lay bare the process of construction that historical discourse and realistic fiction generally strive to efface" (Wyile 14), examining how Atwood introduces Friedan's ideas in order to highlight the constructedness of official history, to remark how dominant powers make use of it to keep women in submissive positions, and to raise awareness of their being circular and universal, as they rely on pervading patriarchal discourses that are never fully erased and which have prompted, and will continue to do so, their resurgence throughout history.

Herb Wyile explores how the sudden interest of Canadian writers towards historical fiction is related primarily to their need for exploring their identity as a postcolonial country, getting to discover themselves as a nation separate from the United States. While writers in the 1960s were concerned specifically with exploring the past, contemporary writers of historical fiction became more preoccupied with dealing with both the present and the past (xi). The new conception of historiography these writers attempted to introduce through their questionings, was that of history as being fragmented. Traditionally, history has been perceived as a "smooth fabric", a linear

discourse, “a homogeneous picture of the past on the basis of fragmentary and heterogeneous evidence” (Wylie 25). That is, history has always been presented and received as a unified narrative, not taking into consideration, or omitting its having been constructed out of many different pieces of evidence.

The first strategy through which Margaret Atwood questions traditional history is precisely by “foregrounding rather than submerging the intertextuality of representations of the past” presenting a revision of history like that posited by contemporary Canadian historical authors. Atwood’s questioning of the traditional depiction of history as uniform is at its most salient in the ‘Historical Notes’ at the end of her novel. In them, we are transported to the far future of 2195, to the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies, where academic Professor Pieixoto oversees a conference regarding Offred’s story. We discover, then, that ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’ has been found by these historians, recorded in various tapes which “were arranged in no particular order, being loose at the bottom of the box” (Atwood 310). The academic in charge is presented as “the co-editor, [...] of the manuscript under consideration today” and posited as “instrumental in its transcription, annotation, and publication” (Atwood 308). Explaining how the material they are discussing, Offred’s narrative, “is not the item in its original form” (Atwood 309), because the tapes were unnumbered and disorganised, the academics have taken upon themselves the task of piecing together “the blocks of speech in the order in which they appeared to go” (Atwood 310).

Thus, Atwood depicts the historians piecing together the fragmented evidence, as Wylie puts it, “suturing the scraps” as they see fit (25), showcasing the true heterogeneous nature of the past, which these voices of authority have overlooked by ordering the historical evidence according to their point of view and which they have presented as a linear narrative. Their attempt to present ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’ as a uniform discourse

is further highlighted by the fact that these ‘Historical Notes’ do not appear until the end of the novel. Until then, readers have taken Offred’s narrative at face value, perceiving it as a uniform story. This, as I see it, reinforces the historians’ attempt to present their reconstruction of historical evidence as homogeneous, since their disclaimer of it being “based on some guesswork” does not reach readers until the very end (Atwood 310). Betty Friedan, in *The Feminine Mystique*, shares a deep concern for this issue, since, as has been explored, she attempted to showcase how those in power manipulated past and present official history, and relied on misrepresented evidence surrounding women, which contributed greatly to the creation of the feminine mystique, as it took advantage of these unquestioned, outdated discourses to create an incredibly limiting image of femininity.

Access to the past is available through various pieces of evidence, like the Handmaid’s tapes, a variety which the historians overwrite and attempt to present as a linear picture. For instance, they also assume that “the voice is a woman’s and, according to our voice-print experts, the same throughout” (Atwood 310). However, “experts” having been deemed by Atwood, and by Friedan, as highly unreliable, the possibility remains that ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’ consists of more than one narrator, remarking the uniformity the historians strive to impose on highly fragmented historical evidence. Behind “official history” lies a fragmented history, constructed of many distinct voices from very different backgrounds and contexts, such as “Native Americans, African-Americans and women,” all being “examples of peoples who have been historically locked away” (Dodson 66), the less privileged who have been systematically left out of official history.

Authors like Margaret Atwood thus raise awareness of how historical discourse should be considered as highly comparative and intertextual, combining many different

perspectives, all of which must be included in the historian's reconstruction of the past. As she explores in *The Handmaid's Tale*, however, this is not the case, as traditional historians subsume this plurality of historical perspectives in order to support their own singular authoritative voice (Wyile 26). Atwood showcases this issue through these academics, these "male historians of a futuristic society strikingly resembling ours" who "appropriated the story and did not hesitate to change it by editing and reconstruction" (Chifane 1184), thus attempting to impose their own assumptions over Offred's original story. For instance, they only have evidence of Offred's life as a Handmaid but, nevertheless, their assumption is that "Our author, then, was one of many" (Atwood 313). These experts thus generalise Offred's experience and posit it as universal for that of every Handmaid, erasing each woman's singularity and individual experience. Since we have no insight into the lives of other Handmaids, assumptions should not be made about the other women's experiences in Gilead since, as Offred has posited constantly, they are incredibly varied, with some women becoming true believers, while others become part of the resistance.

As previously explored, this is reminiscent of Gileadean behaviours, such as that of Aunt Lydia at the Red Centre, who generalises the awful violence some women underwent in life before Gilead, making it stand for the experience of every woman in pre-Gileadean life. She uses this strategy to indoctrinate the Handmaids, bringing them to accept that the impositions of Gilead are for their own good. Thus, Atwood puts Aunt Lydia and the historians at the same level of the "experts" which Friedan repeatedly mentions in her study, and who were the main proponents of the feminine mystique. Atwood, therefore, criticises these voices of authority, showcasing their use of manipulated and misunderstood history which they present as objective and truthful, and portraying their continued reliance on Gileadean attitudes. The erasure of female voices

is further remarked by the author, as Offred herself predicts that, “From the point of view of future history, this kind, we’ll be invisible” (Atwood 236), underlining the systematic omission of women’s stories in official history, which, Atwood suggests, will continue to be obliterated as long as it remains unchallenged.

Offred, on the other hand, does not attempt to present her story as a unified discourse, but recognises the unreliability of her own narrative, as she is fully aware that “This is a reconstruction. All of it is a reconstruction. [...] It’s impossible to say a thing exactly the way it was, because what you say can never be exact” (Atwood 140). Through Offred, Atwood voices her alternative view of traditional historiography, highlighting the idea that representations of the past can never be said to be completely factual, as historians do, since objective access to the past is incredibly limited, almost inexistent. Therefore, these reconstructions, made up of fragmentary evidence, cannot be presented as a homogeneous discourse. Remarking the idea that “A movie about the past is not the same as the past,” Offred’s attitude towards historiography stands in stark contrast with that of the “experts” (Atwood 243). The difference, thus, between Offred’s and the historian’s approach is that, because of his “self-created superiority and power of interpretation over Offred and her tale,” the Professor does not “question his own interpretative stance” (Stillman and Johnson 82). That is, as his position as an academic allows him to assume authority over Offred’s narrative, Professor Pieixoto overlooks how he is imposing his own views on the original material, never questioning the official history he is helping to construct.

Another strategy whereby authors deconstruct traditional historiography is by showcasing “a resistance to established notions of historical progression and the “pastness” of the past” (Wyile 14). That is, these authors question the perceived distance between the present and the past, which is created through the assumption that there has

been significant progress between the two timelines and which both Atwood and Friedan are deeply concerned with. As has been explored, for instance, the belief that feminism was no longer necessary, because a lot of progress had been made in the fight for equality, promoted the feminine mystique's attack against the movement and the consequent backsliding in women's rights. Margaret Atwood also challenges the false idea of linear progress, which she does through making the ideas of *The Feminine Mystique* present in all the timelines of her novel, not only in life during Gilead, as has been extensively explored, but also in life before and after, thus breaching "the gap that traditional historiography assumes between the present and the past" (Wyile 15). That is, as every timeline in the novel is pervaded by the feminine mystique's deeply misogynist behaviours, Atwood undermines "the apparently huge contrast between the idealized good old days and the bad new days" (Hammer 43), leading readers to perceive past, present and future as being very close together.

Even before Gilead was a known force, behaviours reminiscent to those of the feminine mystique were very much present as, for instance, "[i]mmmediately after the coup, Offred's anger and confusion surfaces not in political activity but domesticity" (Stillman and Johnson 77). That is, when limitations started being imposed on women, Offred explains how, "I didn't go to any of the marches" because "Luke said it would be futile." As has been explored, as her rights are slowly taken away, Offred's reaction is not to revolt, but to take her husband's opinion that fighting for her own freedoms is useless, locking herself in the kitchen instead. This position towards feminism as useless, which prompts Offred's return to domesticity, is like that upheld by the proponents of the feminine mystique, which they promoted in order to keep women from subverting. In this manner, even before Gilead is established, oppressive attitudes are already present, not

voiced by an authoritarian regime, but by a seemingly innocent husband, highlighting the fact that these are never truly erased, but pervade society in all its timelines.

The parallelisms between life before and during Gilead are further reinforced throughout the novel. For instance, as Offred reminisces about her relationship with her husband, she remembers how “He liked to choose what kind of meat we were going to eat. [...] He said men needed more meat than women did [...], studies had been done” (Atwood 69). Offred’s husband also relies on assumptions based around the preconceived difference between men and women, which he claims is supported by scientific evidence. As previously explored, systems of female oppression such as Gilead or the feminine mystique rely heavily on this kind of evidence, as it is easily manipulated and received as objective. This parallelism is furthered by that fact that, merely a couple of pages later, Atwood portrays Aunt Lydia at the Red Centre, using the same words as Offred’s husband to teach the Handmaids that: “You must be a worthy vessel. No coffee or tea though, no alcohol. Studies have been done” (Atwood 71). Both timelines are thus put at the same level, the distance between them erased. Atwood, therefore, does not only deconstruct the false idea of progress between Gilead and post-Gilead times, but also the apparent modernity of life before Gilead which, at first sight, appears as the utopian counterpart of the authoritarian regime.

The application of *The Feminine Mystique* to all timelines in the novel is a creative anachronism that Atwood uses “to highlight our assumptions about historical progression” (Wyile 15). That is, it disturbs temporal boundaries and suggests that progress is an illusion, critiquing the historians’ “false detachment from their image of the past” (Wyile 11) as what prompts them to exhibit such Gileadean attitudes. In the ‘Historical Notes,’ set in a distant future which at first sight appears as ideologically detached from the Gileadean regime, we also encounter patriarchal attitudes reminiscent

of both Gilead and the feminine mystique. Thus, Atwood suggests that the historians, showing a “lack of concern to avoid another Gilead” (Stillman and Johnson 82), have assumed a distance from the Gileadean past and, therefore, these oppressive ideas have remained unchallenged and will possibly contribute to the resurfacing of new systems of female oppression. Atwood portrays these academics, for instance, as not taking the atrocious Gileadean past seriously, as Professor Pieixoto “overlooks the meanings and significances conveyed by *The Handmaid’s Tale*” (Stillman and Johnson 71). That is, even though it is the object of their studies, they do not seem to be fully aware, or choose to ignore, the terrible implications of the Gileadean period. They talk lightly about relevant issues, make frivolous announcements in the middle of the conference and even make sexist, degrading jokes. For instance, they refer to “The Underground Femaleroad”, a network of resistance which helped women escape from Gilead, as “The Underground Frailroad,” resorting to incredibly damaging and outdated stereotypes such as that of women as being frail and weak (Atwood 309).⁴

Thus, they seem to show no sympathy for the harrowing experiences of these women, not taking into account the precarious circumstances in which Offred lived and possibly recorded the tapes, instead reproaching her for not supplying her Commander’s name, or including more specific, historical details on Gilead: “She could have told us much about the workings of Gilead, had she had the instincts of a reporter or a spy” (Atwood 318). This is further reinforced by the fact that the person in charge of recovering Offred’s story is a male academic. Even in this seemingly more progressive context, a man assumes authority over a woman’s story, manipulates, alters and imposes meaning

⁴ Referring to *The Underground Railroad*, many have noticed the parallelisms between Atwood’s novel and 19th-century American slave literature. These similarities, which highlight Atwood’s deconstructive historiography, are beyond the scope of this paper, and have been analysed by many critics such as Moffett and Schotzko.

on Offred's narrative. Thus, women are still being misrepresented through unreliable male voices of authority in the official history that these historians are writing. These experts do not question but rather perpetuate the patriarchal discourses of Gilead, like those experts who promoted the misrepresentations of women in official history and enabled the emergence of the feminine mystique.

In this manner, Atwood presents "historical discourse [...] as an act of power" carried out through "the assertion of a particular reading of the past that involves particular power relations, the exclusion of certain historical material and certain points of view, and the projection of a particular ideology" which helps "to justify and celebrate the status quo" (Wyile 12). Indeed, the historians, as has been explored, assert their own readings on Offred's story, and manipulate and exclude materials. Their perceived distance from Gilead is so abysmal, that Professor Pieixoto even attempts to justify the Gileadean government, believing that his current society is separate from Gilead. As Pieixoto claims, "we must be cautious about passing moral judgement upon Gileadeans. Surely we have learned by now that such judgements are of necessity culture-specific" (Atwood 310). Thus, in his "assumption of his own culture's superiority" the historian shows "an unwillingness to confront the moral questions posed by the past" (Hammer 47). Atwood, however, through the introduction of *The Feminine Mystique*, conveys how these systems of female oppression are not culture-specific, but composed of universal, internalised patriarchal behaviours that prompt these dominant discourses to continue resurfacing. Thus, it is this lack of censure and the assumed distance with the past that perpetrates forces such as Gilead and the feminine mystique.

Furthermore, Atwood blurs not only temporal boundaries but also "the boundary between the real and the fictional" (Wyile 16) in order to further question the constructedness of history and suggest that Gilead and the real world are closer than it

initially appears. She does so, for instance, through the novel's structure. Offred's narrative of life in Gilead is interspersed with constant flashbacks to her life before the regime took over, flashbacks which are situated in the real United States that readers know and are familiar with. These flashbacks come closer and closer together, until the Gileadean dystopia and reality become indistinguishable from one another. Through them, Atwood infiltrates the pre-Gileadean real world into the Gileadean dystopia, in order to reduce the distance between reality and fiction. Offred, for instance, constantly relates the places and things she sees in Gilead to how they were in life before and explains how "Luke and I used to walk together, sometimes, along these streets" (Atwood 29). As the novel progresses, the distance between these flashbacks is considerably shortened, as Offred even changes timelines and settings within the same sentence. For instance: "As Serena lights another cigarette, I get into to car. It's a Saturday morning, it's a September, we still have a car" (Atwood 90). Eventually, reality and dystopia become almost indistinguishable from one another as Atwood erases the perceived separation between life before and during Gilead. Offred remembers, too, that she "never ran at night; and in the daytime, only beside well-frequented roads. I remember the rules, rules that were never spelled out, but that every woman knew" (Atwood 30). In our real world, and in the world before Gilead, there are certain things which women do not have full liberty to do and, even though these rules do not take the form of laws such as the ones imposed by Gilead, women still suffer from severe limitations.

Atwood accentuates the similarity between reality and fiction by using real world situations, such as the feminine mystique, or other issues which are still incredibly relevant in our contemporary society. As Atwood herself has stated: "One of my rules was that I would not put any events into the book that had not actually happened" (Atwood). For instance, the fear of running alone at night that Offred reflects on is a fear

that many women still share nowadays. As Hansot claims, “The genius of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986) is in the mundane and ordinary quality of the dystopian lives it depicts” (56). With this, Atwood posits the dystopian Gilead not as a counterpart to the real world, but as a continuation, a reflection, of Atwood's contemporary circumstances. Thus, she makes the readers aware that she is relating is not a construction of events, but rather “a too logical extension of many dimensions of the present” (Staines 23), an exaggeration of existing, real-life issues and anxieties.

Offred also remembers her mother showing her a historical documentary about a woman who had been the mistress of one of the supervisors of the concentration camps for Jews during World War II. The mistress justifies this man by claiming she did not really know what he did, and Offred thinks, “What could she have been thinking about? [...] She was thinking how not to think. The times were abnormal. She took pride in her appearance. She did not believe he was a monster” (Atwood 151). Atwood, thus, goes further back in real-world time, to a familiar, globally known event, and highlights how, at that time too, there were traces of something like the feminine mystique. This woman lived under a spell, a forced ignorance that allowed her to avoid thinking about more transcendental, life-changing issues around her, such as the Holocaust, or WWII, in circumstances very similar to those women living under the feminine mystique. Turning a blind eye, she emptied her head and tried not to think, only to turn to menial tasks, such as taking care of her appearance. These glimpses of real history are thus embedded into the novel, the feminine mystique transported to them too, in order to shorten the distance not only between past, present and future but also between the reader's reality and the dystopian world of Gilead, and highlight the universality and circularity of these systems of oppression, which are present in all timelines and in both the real and fictional world.

Another main preoccupation of contemporary Canadian historical authors has been that of exploring “[t]he use of the past for the purposes of the present”, which “is for many historians a fundamental shortcoming [...] because it undermines the objective presentation of the past. The projection of the present onto representations of the past therefore has been an important consideration in theorizing about the historical novel” (Wyile 14). That is, using the past to one’s advantage in the present breaks with the assumed objectivity of the past. Many, thus, have started considering how the present is projected onto depictions of the past, something which Atwood explores in *The Handmaid’s Tale* too. In it, as has been explored, she portrays Gilead as openly making use of the past for their present purposes, re-writing official history, while at the same time projecting their present, patriarchal ideas onto the outdated historical evidence they rely on, as they do not question but promote the oppression these misrepresentations of the past entail. Furthermore, not only does Gilead do so, but so too do the historians at the end of the novel, as they actively project their current misogynistic visions into Offred’s past, distorting it for their own benefit and disseminating an unreliable, re-written official history. Atwood thus uses the past for the purposes of the present in order to showcase the shortcomings of this practice, and demonstrate its lack of objectivity.

The final strategy I will dwell on is the use of “Self-reflexive, parodic, and metafictional devices that call attention to the text as text, as imaginative construct” (Wyile 14), a method Atwood uses widely as well. Metafiction, referring to that fictional material which reflects, and seems to be aware of, its own fictionality, is very present in the ‘Historical Notes,’ which share the “self-reflexive or auto-referential nature” of metafiction (Chifane 1180). In them, Atwood uses a very ironic tone which enhances the constructedness of the historians’ representation of Offred’s narration, as it highlights their unreliability and criticises their disrespectful approach to such historical evidence,

portraying how “those who make a profession of the past always trivialize it so thoroughly when urgencies of survival and resistance are removed” (Hansot 67). For instance, through the historians’ frivolous and insensitive jokes, Atwood emphasises the little seriousness with which the academics handle such important material, evidence which gives them prime access to an incredibly impactful event in history, even claiming themselves “responsible [...] for redrawing the map of the world” (Atwood 307). About an issue they should be treating with the utmost respect, and of which they are the leading voices of knowledge at that moment, the leading “experts,” they nevertheless make irrelevant announcements and degrading comments. For instance, Professor Pieixoto comments on how Professor Wade decided on the manuscript’s title, that of ‘The Handmaid’s Tale,’ and unnecessarily adds: “I am sure all puns were intentional, particularly that having to do with the archaic vulgar signification of the word tail” (Atwood 309). The ending of the novel thus uses metafictional devices such as “satire and parody” (Chifane 1183) to subvert the official history written by the historians, as it brings attention to Offred’s text being a text, therefore, a constructed product.

The ‘Historical Notes’ have a further metafictional function, that of subverting the readers’ expectations. As Chifane explains, “metafictional novels are expected to create false expectations” so that “the idea that history actually resembles fiction no longer seems so far-fetched (1181) a purpose which the placing of the ‘Historical Notes’ at the very end could be said to fulfil. That is, Atwood creates the expectation that Offred’s narration is truthful, which she achieves by presenting her story before disclaiming the possibility of its being a reconstruction. The ‘Historical Notes,’ then, subvert readers’ assumptions about objectivity, prompting them to question everything they have previously read and highlighting the constructedness of ‘The Handmaid’s Tale.’ This ordering, furthermore, reflects the historians’ intention that the materials they showcase

be received at face value, as mirror images of the past, which is precisely what Atwood achieves through the majority of the novel. Since she “first carefully constructs one history or one version of reality that seems perfectly plausible only to thwart it away” (Chifane 1181), Atwood makes the readers aware of the historians’ manipulation of official history, how it is presented as objective, and how it is easily received without questioning. The author, through the ‘Historical Notes,’ then leads readers to reflect on representations of the past, prompting them to question the validity of the historians’ reconstruction of ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’ and, therefore, of official history.

3. Conclusions and Further Research

Exploring Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* through the lens of *The Feminine Mystique* thus opens a new reading of the dystopian novel as a dramatisation of systems of female oppression such as the one described by Friedan. Through the many parallelisms with Friedan's work, Atwood not only reflects the workings of the feminine mystique but also that of many other systems of female oppression, reflecting the universality that Friedan explores in her study. Making the patterns and conditions which prompted the emergence of both Gilead and the feminine mystique the same, Atwood posits the manipulation of official history as one of the main proponents of the oppression of women, it being the main tool that all these systems use to keep women in submissive positions. Atwood thus also suggests how they are not isolated phenomena occurring at one specific point in time, but rather resurgent cycles of progress and backsliding, founded on the fear of women's advancement in the public sphere.

Deploying many of the strategies identified by Herb Wyile in *Speculative Fictions*, Atwood also uses these parallelisms in order to raise awareness of how these "official" depictions of history have contributed throughout history to "the construction of social, political, and not least of all, national discourse" (Wyile 5). By introducing the ideas of *The Feminine Mystique*, Atwood highlights the construction of official history as a universal and resurgent phenomenon, as it is present in all timelines in the novel, in both the real and the fictional world, and used both by Gilead and by the feminine mystique, to shape patriarchal discourses of gender. Especially through the novel's closure, Atwood showcases how the voices of authority which have the power to shape official history are deeply influenced by misogynistic ideas such as those promoted by Gilead, outdated patriarchal ideas which have remained unchallenged and still pervade society. Atwood thus reflects how authorities manipulate the past for purposes of the present, but also how

misrepresentations of the past have affected the present and will therefore affect the future too, since the historians' dissemination of this manipulated official history will possibly contribute to the creation of yet other structures of female oppression. Atwood, ultimately, presents a universal pattern of female oppression: when there is some advancement in the fight for women's rights, a return to domesticity is prompted by the patriarchal structures of power, the false perception of progress allowing their attack on organised women's movements. Through the manipulation of past official history, they construct a new official history, in order to keep themselves in power. After time advances and systems like Gilead have been supposedly subverted, the false idea of progress, prompts, once again, further backsliding, creating an unreal distance between the present and the past which allows official history to remain unquestioned. Thus, a vicious cycle is created that will continue occurring unless the official history is questioned.

Building on the previous critical work concerning *The Handmaid's Tale* and combining both historiographical and gender studies perspectives, I believe, offers a much deeper understanding of the author's attitudes towards traditional history, and the historiographical implications of the novel, while also raising awareness of how official history and female oppression are intrinsically related. It also highlights the subversive message of Atwood's novel, going further than just considering it an extreme reflection of the religious environment at the time it was written, but reading it as a universal representation of the oppression women have suffered through the ages in a male-dominated history. This analytical approach, I believe, could be extended to the novel's sequel, *The Testaments*, published in 2019. This second part to *The Handmaid's Tale* is set 15 years after Offred's narrative of life in Gilead — after she, apparently, manages to escape. It offers a much more detailed insight into life inside and outside of Gilead, as it encompasses the stories of three different narrators: Aunt Lydia; Agnes Jemima, a girl

being raised in Gilead; and Nicole, smuggled out of Gilead as a baby and raised in Canada. With this extended knowledge, thus, the exploration of how systems of female oppression are present too outside of Gilead could be taken even further. Furthermore, dominant discourses do not only strive to restrict women through the manipulation of history, but all marginalised others. Therefore, this historiographical approach could be combined with other areas of criticism, such as queer or postcolonial studies, in order to assess the extensive damage that official history has done to all those who do not conform to the white, patriarchal hegemonic systems of power.

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