

The Postmodern Functions of The Handmaid's Tale's Epilogue

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Abstract

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) is a dystopian novel set in the totalitarian, Christian fundamentalist regime of Gilead. Based on extreme Christian Puritan teachings, Gilead is a country that has denied women fundamental rights of freedom, and freedom of expression; and has forcibly reduced all the fertile women to baby-making machines known as handmaids. The novel is a first-person narration from its protagonist Offred, who is a handmaid. After forty-six chapters of her narration, the novel ends in ambiguity leaving Offred's fate unknown. Following Chapter Forty-Six is an epilogue titled "Historical Notes". This epilogue is set 200 years in the future when the dystopian society has fallen. The epilogue informs the readers that the narration they just read was a reconstruction of Offred's audio tapes by the male historians who discovered them. This paper studies the epilogue using a postmodern framework and demonstrates how the epilogue performs the postmodern functions of decentralizing the novel's narrative and subverting the reader's expectations. The epilogue performs these postmodern functions in three ways. Firstly, by introducing the voice of a male scholar in the epilogue, which clashes with the oppressed female's narrative presented until that point. Secondly, by employing a pseudo-documentary device that frames the narrative. As opposed to typical science-fiction texts that use a pseudo-documentary framing device to establish validity, Atwood uses this device to challenge authenticity and validity of the narrative. Thirdly, the epilogue subverts the readers' expectations by avoiding the presentation of a clear utopian ending and by presenting degrees of

dystopia. *The Handmaid's Tale* is a postmodern novel that pushes the reader to critically engage with questions regarding the formation and acceptance of historical narratives as well as recognize the cyclical nature of dystopian conditions.

Introduction

The Handmaid's Tale is a novel by Canadian novelist Margaret Atwood, first published in 1985. The novel is set in the Republic of Gilead, which is a theocratic, totalitarian state run by white male Christian fundamentalists (known as Commanders) who run Gilead on laws based on Christian Puritan teachings. Due to severe chemical warfare, fertility rates have reached an extreme low, and there are only a handful of women left who can bear children. These women have been assigned the roles of handmaids, wherein their sole function is to bear children for the respective Commanders they have been assigned to. All women's rights have been taken away, and the women have been classified as "Handmaids", "Aunts", "Wives", or "Marthas" based on the function assigned to them by the State.

The novel is narrated through the voice of Offred, who is a handmaid of Gilead. Throughout the novel, the readers are presented with a first-person narration of the events that transpire in Offred's life as a handmaid, and her life prior to the inception of Gilead is narrated through flashbacks. The last chapter ends with Offred being taken away by the driver Nick, and Offred is unsure whether she is being taken away to safety, i.e. to the resistance group known as "Mayday", or whether she is being taken to her punishment, i.e. to the "Eyes", the state's surveillance forces.

Following the last chapter is an epilogue titled "Historical Notes". The epilogue takes the reader to an academic conference on Gileadean Studies happening 200 years after the events in the prior chapter, at a time when the fundamentalist Gilead regime and society no longer exist. Through the speech of the conference's keynote speaker – Professor Pieixoto, the reader is informed that Offred's account of events that was presented to them for the entirety of the novel till the epilogue, was a transcription of thirty audiotapes discovered by Pieixoto and his colleagues long after Gilead had fallen. In his speech he discusses the processes of discovering, transcribing, assembling, and editing Offred's tapes, and the challenges faced in these processes. He further talks about the difficulty of identifying the characters in Offred's story and the problems of authenticating Offred's story.

The epilogue of *The Handmaid's Tale* has been heavily debated and discussed for its unconventional functions that differ from those of a typical epilogue. In literary fiction, the

epilogue is the last chapter of the book which concludes the text. The epilogue is set after a certain amount of time has passed since the last chronological event of the novel. This can be a few hours, days or even years. The aim of the epilogue is to provide, to the reader, some closure of the narrative. It may conclude the fates of certain characters and resolve loose ends that were not resolved in the resolution of the story's climax. Sometimes an epilogue is also used to indicate that the narrative can continue, and this presents the possibility of a sequel to the reader ("Epilogue," 2013). The epilogue of *The Handmaid's Tale* is conventional in appearance, in the sense that it is set in the future and it provides the reader with closure regarding the fate of Gilead and partially that of Offred. However, the revelations that come forth through the epilogue do not fit into the above-mentioned functions of a typical epilogue.

The implications that the epilogue has on the reading of the text can be considered as postmodern in nature. Due to certain functions that the epilogue performs on the novel's complete narrative, the epilogue can be seen as rendering the text as a postmodern one. To recognize these postmodern functions performed by the epilogue, it is crucial to first define postmodernism itself. However, the difficulty in defining postmodernism is perhaps its only characteristic that is widely agreed upon. Postmodernism is evasive of definition and identification and resists confinement to any single explanation (Malpas, 2005, p. 4). Nevertheless, there are certain recurring characteristics that have come to be associated and identified as postmodern characteristics.

Postmodernist works can be characterized by a concern with the question of reality. Postmodernists argue that there can be no single reality experienced by everyone; rather, different realities exist for different people. Due to the inexistence of a universal logic to understand the world, meanings are arbitrarily attached to reality, resulting in different subjective experiences of reality (Bishop & Starkey, 2006). This attitude is often reflected in postmodern texts through a lack of narrative or truth that the reader of the text can centre the text around. This is often achieved through techniques such as unreliable or multiple narrators and consequent unreliable or multiple narratives.

The breaking of boundaries is another crucial feature of postmodernist works. Postmodernist works are often multicultural, and also borrow from high culture and pop culture, as well as multiple genres. As Lehman states, a postmodernist work "steals from all over" (as cited in Bishop & Starkey, 2006, p. 133). Therefore, just like its definition, postmodernist works resist conformity to one style, genre, or idea. Moreover, not only are postmodernist works unrestricted in their genre or style, they also play around or experiment with the traditional conventions of these styles. Hence, postmodern works are difficult to predict and consequently subvert the readers' expectations.

This paper aims at demonstrating how Atwood has used the epilogue of the novel as a literary device to perform the two postmodern functions mentioned above, i.e. decentralizing the novel's narrative and subverting readers' expectations. Atwood enables this through three methods. Firstly, she contrasts the first-person narrative of an oppressed female that is present throughout the novel, with that of the voice of a male scholar's present in the epilogue. Secondly, she employs a pseudo-documentary device of narration in the epilogue which renders the validity of Offred's narrative as questionable. Thirdly, Atwood portrays a nascent dystopia in the epilogue.

The Voice of the Oppressed Female and Privileged Male

In order to understand the significance of the contrast brought forth by the epilogue's revelation of a male-authored narrative, it is important to contextualize the narrative of the first forty-six chapters as a feminist narrative. In doing so, we can refer to feminist literary theory writings by Elaine Showalter (1977), Sandra Gilbert (2000), and Susan Gubar (2000). In recognizing the feminist characteristics of Offred's narrative through feminist literary theory, the shock of Pieixoto's voice in the epilogue is accentuated. Atwood draws upon the feminist tradition of writing in the first forty-six chapters and builds a strong feminist narrative, and this is then upended by the epilogue.

Feminist literary critic, Elaine Showalter, has described women's writing as existing in three phases: the feminine, the feminist, and the female. The first phase (1840s -1880) is characterized by "imitation" and "internalization" (p. 13) of the prevalent male-dominated modes and tradition of writing, the second (1880-1920) by "protest" (p. 13) against patriarchy and "advocacy" (p. 13) of women's rights, and the third (1920 – 1970s) by "self-discovery" (p. 13), where the woman writer is engaged in a search for identity, and her work is no longer tied down to her gender. The three phases are not strictly inflexible or constrained by a time period, and the characteristics of each phase often flow into the works of women writers throughout history (Showalter, 1977). The contemporary woman writer falls in the phase of female writing. However, the nature of their content reflects that they are all heavily influenced by all the three phases of writing – the feminine, feminist and female (Showalter, 1977).

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood can be recognized as such a contemporary writer, i.e. as one who reasserts continuity with the feminist phase of writing. This is evident through her writing of Offred's narration. The reader is introduced to Gilead through the linear, first-person narration of Offred. As a handmaid of a high-ranking commander of Gilead, Offred lives in the thick of the atrocities meted out to the handmaids and other individuals living in the Gileadean regime. In this regime, the handmaids are subjected to a complete denial of human rights. They are prohibited from reading, writing, and any form of individual expression. Gilead is thus an extreme representation of a society that completely denies women the right to write and restricts writing and reading to the male domain.

Therefore, Offred's narration becomes an act of resistance and protest. In a society where female independent thought and action are illegal, and language is forcibly taken away from women, the act of narration becomes an anti-establishment act. In having a first-person narration of a handmaid, Atwood gives a voice to one of the most oppressed and silenced classes in the Gilead regime. Atwood brings forth the fear of engaging in such an act of narration by making the narration "breathless" (Ketterer, 1989) through the use of short sentences and phrases. At regular intervals, Offred informs the reader about her past. Through flashbacks, she recounts her life with her husband Nick and her daughter Hannah, allowing the readers to reconstruct her life before the Gilead. Her refusal to forget her past and her recounting of the past, is an instrument of resistance against Gilead's erasure of her identity. The several claims of possession she makes, such as "my room" (p. 60), "my own time" (p. 47), "my territory" (p. 83), is another way she demonstrates resistance against a system that denies her any form of possession, beginning with her own name. Through the incorporation of frequent flashbacks, dreams, and a stream of consciousness-like style, Atwood skilfully writes this narration in a way that allows it to be read as a voice of resistance from the oppressed, and the act of Offred narrating her story becomes an empowering act of rebellion.

Additionally, the novel's premise itself is a means through which Atwood protests against patriarchy, conservatism, and the dangers of religious fundamentalism. The novel was written at a time rife with political and religious conservatism, with the Reagan government in power in the United States and the Thatcher government in Great Britain. The movement of New Right conservatism was embraced by Americans in their social, economic, and political beliefs, and Christian fundamentalism dominated the socio-political discourse of the decade. By creating a dystopian society through an extreme escalation of her current reality, *The Handmaid's Tale* becomes a novel that protests and critiques the growing conservative, patriarchal sentiments of the times. This is another significant reason for Atwood's novel being labelled as a feminist work.

In the epilogue that comes after Chapter Forty-Six, the reader becomes aware that Offred's narrative that was presented so far, was a transcription of audiotapes by two male historians. The narration presented to the reader was not by Offred but was a narration that was restructured and rewritten by a male scholar. This realisation completely challenges the reader's assumption of the narrative as a feminist text. The first forty-six chapters draw upon the tradition of feminist writing that has emerged in line with advocacy for women's rights and protest against patriarchal practices. The setting of Gilead reminds the reader of the 18th and 19th centuries' refusal to allow women to write, and Offred's first-person narration appears as resistance against this denial to think and write.

However, through Pieixoto's address, the epilogue very strongly reminds the reader of the patriarchal conditions wherein female rebellion must be "silenced". Gilbert and Gubar (2000) have argued that the male author, who has written a female character, presumes to have authority over her, and resultantly own her (where she becomes his property). Furthermore, the male author's "dread" (p. 14) of the female pushes them to want to figuratively "kill" (p. 14) and "silence" (p. 16) her. Atwood brings forth this historical tendency of patriarchy through two of Pieixoto's behaviours in the epilogue.

Firstly, he casts questions of legitimacy and significance regarding Offred's narrative. He cautions his audience (and the reader) that the narrative should be considered as an approximation which is in need of further research. He makes it evident that he values statistics and facts over experience, as demonstrated in his wish of finding the Commander's computer. While he spends a significant portion of the speech discussing the possible identity of the Commander, he dismisses the task of identifying Offred as impossible and unimportant. He states that the handmaid must simply be seen "within the broad outlines of the moment in history of which she was a part" (pp. 305-306), instead of further delving into her personal experiences. As Norris (2009) argues, Pieixoto claims that nothing can be learned about Offred, even though Offred divulges a lot of information about her past life and of her experiences in Gilead. Pieixoto opines that this is not valuable information.

On the other hand, Pieixoto states that identifying the Commander would enable Pieixoto and his colleague to "make some progress" (p. 306) in their academic endeavours to study Gilead. This shows Pieixoto's need to analyse history on the basis of a male biography, and thereby silence the woman's voice (Murphy, 1990). He wishes for history but believes that Offred can only offer her story, which cannot be assumed as history (Grace, 1998).

A second way in which Pieixoto demonstrates problematic patriarchal behaviour is through his repeated need to establish authority over Offred's narrative. His speech shows that he is more concerned with his role in the recovery of the text and its authentication, than with the implications of the text. He pushes his archaeological accomplishments and academic opinions to the forefront of the speech rather than focusing on the challenging experiences of the handmaid who narrated the tapes (Murphy, 1990). His reference to Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* in explaining the title of the document i.e. "The Handmaid's Tales" signifies his likening of Offred's story to a work of fiction, as well as his crucial editorial role in the creation of this text (*The Canterbury Tales* have been assembled and shaped by editors, similar to Offred's tapes having to be transcribed by Pieixoto) (Grace, 1998). His need to claim editorial authority over Offred's narrative results in Offred and her narrative becoming his property.

Therefore, through the first-person narration of the oppressed woman, Atwood very masterfully draws the reader into believing that they are reading a narrative of protest. The revelation in the

epilogue subverts the reader's expectation and the reader realizes that the 'handmaid's tale' was never the tale of the oppressed handmaid, but was in fact, the reconstruction of one by a male scholar. After reading the epilogue, the readers are left with no truth or narrative that they can centre the novel around. They realize that the character whom they thought central to the novel, was never authentically represented to them, and neither was her story.

This subversion of the reader's expectation and a decentralization of a narrative is a recurring theme of postmodern texts. Postmodern texts often portray the past as problematic and contradictory. These texts challenge the traditional ideas of constructing narratives which are made out to be objectively true and historically valid (Malpas, 2005).

The decentralization of narratives in postmodernism unsettles hierarchies in gender, sexuality, race, class etc. It draws power away from any single identity and suggests that each identity is relevant in its perspective of the past. The past is thus a fragmented confluence of these many perspectives, and it is impossible to arrive at any single perspective to determine the past. However, if this idea of "hybridity" (Butler, 2003) suggests that if everyone's perspective is relative, then so is that of the privileged class. Atwood thus complicates the postmodern notion of challenging metanarratives. She uses a traditional mode of narrative constructivism, which is first-person narration, and establishes a narrative of the oppressed. She then introduces a narrative of a privileged scholar, to challenge the prior narrative. This is thereby a means through which the novel brings forth the invalidity of any single metanarrative, whether it is the feminist voice of the oppressed (Offred), or whether it is the voice of the privileged (Pieixoto).

The Pseudo-Documentary Framing of the Narrative

Another feature of the epilogue that is important to study while exploring the postmodern characteristics of the novel, is its implementation of a pseudo-documentary framing device. The pseudo-documentary framing device refers to a documentary style of narration used in a work of fiction. This formal device of narration performs the function of validating and supporting the authority of the text and creating verisimilitude in the narrative (Grace, 1998). Patrick D. Murphy (1990) delineates the reason behind the pseudo-documentary framing device being of particular use in science fiction novels. A utopian or dystopian novel is typically set in a world that is displaced spatially and/or temporally from the readers' world. The authors of these novels face the challenge of this spatial and/or temporal distance interfering with the "didactic signals" (Murphy, 1990, p. 25) of the genre. According to Darko Suvin, (as cited in Murphy, 1990, pp. 25–26), the similarities and interaction between the contemporary world of the reader and the fictional world in the science fiction novel must adequately ensure that the readers experience a "parabolic freedom" (Suvin, 1988, as cited in Murphy, 1990, p. 26), i.e. the readers must be able to learn and understand a parable about human nature that encourages social reflection and action. This is what Suvin terms as "cognition" (1988, as cited in Murphy, 1990, p. 26). The

challenge that science fiction writers face is ensuring that the fictional world of the novel is not too distanced from that of the readers, such that there is a lack of recognition of a parable by the reader and consequent absence of cognition.

Murphy states that many science fiction writers use a pseudo-documentary framing device to ensure that the distancing between the novel's world and the readers' world does not lead to an absence of cognition. The pseudo-documentary framing device appeals to the conventions of journalistic and academic writing, and hence draws its ability to provide verisimilitude to the narrative from this appeal.

A primary aim of science-fiction texts is to present future human conditions, as developed from current reality. The science-fiction genre is therefore significantly concerned with presenting fiction as fact and reality. Presenting the narrative in pseudo-documentary style aims to validate the truth of the narrative by presenting it as history and consequently, encourages the reader to suspend disbelief.

The use of the pseudo-documentary framing device can be seen in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), wherein parts of the narrative are revealed to the readers through letters. These letters offer "putative documentary evidence" (Grace, 1998) to the readers, enabling them to accept the historicity of the narrative. Other examples include Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia* (1975) that uses a journalistic writing style to frame its narrative. The narrative is written in the form of reports and journal entries by a reporter. In *The Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) by Marge Piercy, the novel's final chapter is a list of the protagonist's medical conditions as recorded by her doctors. Ursula Le Guin employs ethnographic and academic pseudo-documentary framing in her novel *Always Coming Home* (1986), by writing parts of the narrative in the form of an ethnographic record and a textbook record.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood uses a first-person narration throughout the entire novel and employs this pseudo-documentary framing device through the epilogue. The implementation of this style in the epilogue is through a setting of the academic conference, wherein it is revealed that the narrative heard so far was a compilation of transcriptions of discovered audiotapes. This revelation can therefore serve to authenticate the novel's narrative and historicise it.

However, rather than validating the narrative, the pseudo-documentary device as enacted in the epilogue creates doubt in the reader regarding the reliability of Offred's account. Instead of strengthening Offred's narrative with objectivity and reliability, the epilogue renders the truth and authenticity of Offred's narrative as questionable (Grace, 1998).

Pieixoto's speech is titled "Problems of Authentication in Reference to *The Handmaid's Tale*" (p. 300). The speech's title itself is the first major indication for the reader to begin doubting the

validity of the narrative they have read so far. Through Pieixoto's speech, the readers learn that Offred's narrative was reassembled and edited by him and his colleague based on educated guesswork. As mentioned before, he reminds the reader that the narrative should be considered as an approximation of the events and is in need of further research. Furthermore, Pieixoto addresses the difficulty they faced as historians in establishing the identities of the individuals in Offred's story due to the very high probability of the mentioned names being pseudonyms (pp. 305–306).

The epilogue draws the reader's attention towards the difficult and challenging processes of construction and reconstruction of the narrative of a Gileadean handmaid (Murphy, 1990). As Ken Norris (2009) states, while it may appear that Offred's story is authenticated by the academic setting of the epilogue, her story is subverted and dismissed. Norris argues that the "Historical Notes" section leads the reader to experience a dissolution of the boundaries between fiction and history. Atwood problematizes the process of historicising, by demonstrating that this process of historicising events is simply another means through which a narrative is created. The reader is made to become aware of the inevitable emergence of fiction in historical narratives.

Therefore, in contrast to the conventions of utopia or dystopia that use a pseudo-documentary framing device to establish validity and create verisimilitude, Atwood incorporates this framing device to create inauthenticity of the predominant narrative provided to the readers. She subverts the conventional use of a pseudo-documentary framing device, and this subversion can be recognized as a postmodern characteristic of challenging genre conventions.

Degrees of Dystopia

Dystopian novels often present a utopia that contrasts with the predominant dystopia of the novel. While the majority of the narrative is set in a dystopia, the reader is made aware of the utopian conditions that either preceded or succeeded the dystopian setting. An example of such a novel is Jack London's *The Iron Heel* (1906), wherein a socialist utopia follows the oligarchic dystopian setting of the narrative (Ketterer, 1989). Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) ends with the protagonist Montag meeting a group of intellectuals who strive to keep books in existence through their memory, in the book-less, anti-intellect society that the novel is set in. This group of intellectuals who rebel against the dominant socio-political system in order to sustain human intellect and rebuild civilization, is Bradbury's provision of utopia to the readers. As opposed to these novels, some dystopian works such as George Orwell's *1984* (1949), and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) have a bleak ending, wherein the same dystopian conditions appear unalterable and inescapable.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the setting of the epilogue may appear to be utopian, since Gilead's disintegration is confirmed and the academic conference takes place in a post-Gilead setting. The

demographic of the academic conference presents women in positions of power, the dominant American academic culture has integrated Native American culture, and there is a deep appreciation, respect, and engagement with the environment.

However, the academic society in the epilogue is one that is far from utopian. Through Pieixoto's sexist speech and the audience's positive reaction, it appears that the conditions that led to the formation of Gilead are still present in 2195, such as patriarchal behaviours of casual objectification, appropriation of women's narratives, and the condescension of women's experiences. It becomes clear from his speech that Pieixoto is a misogynistic male, as evident through his sexist jokes such as "enjoying" (p. 300) the charming female chair of the conference and calling the "The Underground Femaleroad" (an underground escape route from Gilead) as "The Underground Frailroad" (p. 300). Not only is he sexist, the audience is complicit in this sexism as well, as all his jokes are met with laughs and/or applause. Moreover, as explained before, Atwood depicts his chauvinistic self-dictated authority over Offred's narrative.

Thus, the sexist undertones of the post-Gileadean society, and the chauvinistic appropriation of Offred's narrative is Atwood's way of eschewing a utopic ending to the novel and undercutting the readers' expectation of a dystopian text (Grace, 1998).

The provision of a utopian ending is further complicated by the two endings that the novel has. One ending is at the culmination of chapter forty-six, and another ending is provided by the epilogue. It is important to note that these two endings come in contrast with another in their provision of utopia to the reader. Hammill (2005) argues that a characteristic of dystopian narratives is the provision of a utopian hope either outside the text or within the narrative. Dystopian narratives maintain the utopian hope outside the text by presenting the narrative as a warning of dystopia, so that the readers can hope to avoid a dystopia in their own reality. Hence, the readers' utopian hope is for themselves. Orwell's *1984* exemplifies this, as the reader reads the novel as an escapist warning and can then return to their own comparatively utopian society. On the other hand, some texts provided an open-ended narrative to allow the readers to hope for utopia within the narrative itself, wherein the utopian hope is for the protagonist. Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* allows the reader to hope for a better future for Montag, by leaving his fate ambiguous after he meets the resistance group.

One can argue that *The Handmaid's Tale* falls into the latter category, wherein Atwood provides the readers with a utopian hope for Offred. By ending the novel with Offred being taken away by Nick, either to the hands of "Mayday" or "The Eyes", the narrative would be left completely ambiguous. The readers would be left with a lack of closure, and this opens several narrative possibilities for the protagonist, allowing the readers to hope for Offred's safety. The ambiguity of the open ending maintains the "utopian impulse" (Hammill, 2005) of the narrative, within the narrative.

The epilogue complicates this provision of utopian hope. The last chapter does not clarify Offred's fate, and hence the readers remain unaware of Offred's ending and can only hope for a utopian ending for her. However, this hope for Offred's utopia clashes with the presence of a sexist society in the epilogue. The knowledge that Gilead has fallen, combined with the realization of the sexist society that has once more risen, obliterates the utopian hope that the ambiguous ending provides.

Therefore, Atwood's inclusion of the epilogue is not only an instrument through which she subverts the reader's expectations of a utopia, but is also a means through which she does not provide a simple binary of utopia or dystopia to the reader and instead presents degrees of dystopia (Grace, 1998).

As Norris (2009) points out, readers of the forty-six chapters of Offred's narrative are sensitized to the atrocities of Gilead and are thus able to recognize Gilead's informing principles and formative ideologies. Hence, they are uncomfortable with the version of society presented in the epilogue because although the societies have vastly different features, they have dangerously similar ideologies (Murphy, 1990). Atwood does not present a choice to the readers where they can prefer the "lesser of the two evils" (Murphy, 1990, p.32).

Atwood's refusal to resolve the story forces the reader to continue questioning the ending of the novel and remain wary of the society presented in the novel's epilogue (Norris, 1990). She does not allow the novel to be read as an escapist text that allows the reader to be relieved at the prospect of not living in such a dystopian world. She pushes the reader to be critical of the current conditions of society and recognize the dystopia in their current reality. In this recognition, the readers realize that *The Handmaid's Tale* is not simply a story about the possible future conditions of human society but is a story of the present conditions.

Conclusion

The epilogue of *The Handmaid's Tale* gives rise to the question of whose authority is the reader is expected to place their trust in. It can neither be Offred nor Pieixoto, as the former's voice was never truly heard while the latter was a privileged voice, ridden with sexist undertones that resemble Gileadean thought in its nascent stages. This question is also supported by the lack of a utopian or dystopian ending, and the presentation of a cyclical nature of the rise and peaking of dystopian societies.

As is the function of postmodern texts, the reader is left to decide upon the interpretation of the narrative and its authenticity. A reference can be made here to the importance that Barthes ascribes to the reader of text, wherein he argues that the ultimate interpretation of the text lies in

the hands of the reader: “A text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination” (Barthes, 1977, p. 148), and the destination of a text is the reader.

Postmodern fiction enables the power of the reader and does not allow the reader to remain a passive receiver of a narrative. *The Handmaid’s Tale* pulls this rug of passivity from below the reader’s feet, through the inclusion of the “Historical Notes”, and forces the reader into an active and critical engagement with the text. Atwood’s complex decentralization of the narrative through the inclusion of two unreliable narrators, and her subversion of readers’ expectations of a dystopian novel is important for rereading and recognizing the political significance of *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Atwood does not hand the readers a correct interpretation of any narrative. She does not demand for the reader’s rejection of Offred or Pieixoto’s account. While the epilogue causes the reader to cast doubts on Offred’s narrative, the readers are also aware that they can rightfully doubt Pieixoto’s “complacent historical understanding” that is devoid of an acceptance of personal female experiences as valuable (Grace, 1998). The attitudes of the people in the epilogue’s academic conference makes the reader uncomfortable as the reader recognizes that Gilead is simply an “intensification and formalization of attitudes in our own world” (Nicol, 2009, p. 150).

As mentioned previously, postmodern texts are rooted in the fragmentation and disintegration of any one truth, reality or narrative that can be considered as central or dominant. This gives rise to two kinds of postmodern texts. The first kind of text is playfully self-reflexive, and completely overturns dominant traditions to produce a fun, new way of reflecting on previous traditions. This is known as pastiche, and Malpas (2005) describes it as parodic mimicry, wherein there exists a self-reflexivity and appropriation of different traditions simply for a “generation of its own performative style” (p. 25). The second kind of text that postmodernism has given rise to is the text that is self-reflexive in order to raise cultural, political, and ideological questions of history, identity, and subjectivity. Postmodern thought is therefore used by writers to engage with rapidly emerging questions of feminism, post-colonialism, queer theory, and so on (Malpas, 2005, p. 6). *The Handmaid’s Tale* falls under this category of postmodern texts, as its epilogue challenges previous traditions of dystopian novels, and thereby engages in a self-reflexivity that enables a critical engagement with questions regarding subjectivity and authenticity of narratives. By virtue of the epilogue, the novel does not present one meta-narrative or grand truth, but instead leaves the reader asking questions.

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