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“Diss”-Topia: *The Handmaid’s Tale* and False Future Nostalgia

Margaret Atwood begins her 1985 novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* with a simple two-letter word that creates an immediate bond between author, narrator, and reader: “We” (Atwood 3). How should a reader approach this text in order to arrive at the meanings intended by author and narrator? With the narrator’s stylistic use of repeated traces and doublings, the novel reads like a textbook case-study for Deconstruction; however, in an obviously political novel, such a purely linguistic reading seems to miss the point. On the other hand, the Marxist critical prism seems ready-made to take on both the totalitarian regime of the novel’s main section, as well as the obvious change in power hierarchy Atwood provides in the epilogue-like “Historical Notes.” After nearly three hundred pages of depicting an oppressive Gilead, Atwood jumps ahead two centuries to a seemingly safer society where academics are revered. However, by looking at both the reconstruction of the Handmaid’s narrative through a Deconstructionist lens and a comparison of Gilead and post-Gilead society in a Marxist reading, the enlightenment of the 2195 society found in the “Historical Notes” section should be heavily discounted. Incorporating existing criticism of the novel by such scholars as Stillman and Johnson, Bakhtin, Bergmann, and Grace, it becomes apparent that the future society depicted is not one to be respected, but one that is disrespectfully mocked. Furthermore, by sarcastically creating not a Utopia but rather a “diss”-Utopia in this next society, Atwood debunks Marxist political theory by way of an almost nihilistic Deconstructionist reading.

A note before beginning: for the purposes of this paper, the novel's narrator will not be referred to as "Offred" or even "the Handmaid." Both are reductive--the former as a possession, the latter a mere type. Instead, the narrator will be referred to as June--as Harriet Bergmann posits as a probability (Bergmann 853). After all, at the end of the first chapter, the narrator remembers, "In this way, we exchanged names, from bed to bed: Alma. Janine. Dolores. Moira. June" (Atwood 4). The first four names are used throughout the course of the narrative; the last (in the position where one would politely list one's self) never again.

At times, the novel reads like some textbook case-study of Deconstructionist literary theory. In summing up the philosophy behind Derrida's "*differance*," Rivkin and Ryan state, "Ideas and things are like signs in language; there are no identity, only differences" (Rivkin and Ryan 258). These kinds of traces can be found throughout June's tale. During her first descriptions of Nick, she begins three consecutive paragraphs of possible motivations for his actions with the same word, "Perhaps" (Atwood 18). Each paragraph presents a different possibility--no identifiable answer, only differences. Near the center of the tale, June reviews the actions possible for her to respond to Ofglen's questions about God: "I could scream. I could run away. I could turn from her silently" (Atwood 168), again presenting different options for the same problem. Near the end, when looking at the hanging bodies, she describes them "like chickens strung up by the necks in a meatshop window; like birds with their wings clipped, like flightless birds, wrecked angels" (Atwood 277). These human bodies, at first reduced to domesticated fowl raised for slaughter, rise in status to damaged, wild fowl, to birds intact, to heavenly but broken creatures. June is adept at giving the reader multiple possible ways of reading her text. But if there are multiple ways of reading the text, can the text have any

meaning? This is the crux of the “meaning-generating and meaning-subverting” (Johnson 341) Deconstructionist view of language.

If June gives the reader (listener?) multiple avenues of discourse in her tale, then that narrative as a whole is but one possible text. In the “Historical Notes,” it is revealed that the text that precedes it is but an assemblage of the thirty or so cassette tapes by Professors Pieixoto and Wade; and Pieixoto admits that “all such arrangements are based on some guesswork” (Atwood 302). By giving the reader doubles and traces on both the micro- and macro-levels, Atwood nearly assures a Deconstructionist reading of the book. This “Historical Notes” section “undercuts our faith in the reliability” of the overall narrative just as June’s “narrative strategies consistently stress the failure of any single reading of an event” in that narrative (Grace 484, 485). June even admits her story is a “reconstruction” (Atwood 140) which is the best both she “can hope for” (Atwood 263) and the reader can expect.

While June is busy admitting a fragmented style that bespeaks a Deconstructionist reading, there can be no denying that this is an overtly political story, lending itself to a Marxist reading as well. If Gilead is a society where women have been stripped of power, where Serena Joy, a woman of some previous power, “doesn’t make speeches anymore. She has become speechless” (Atwood 46), then in the world of the “Historical Notes” two centuries later, women have regained the power to make speeches again--at least those speeches given by academic chairs to introduce the male keynote speaker. The casual oral sexual harassment that opens James Pieixoto’s speech (the uncomfortable char/chair pun and play on the word “enjoy”) would have fit easily in an academic conference from 1985, not what one would hope for from a society that advanced from Gilead. By the future audience’s laughter and applause, they become

complicit with Pieixoto's "sexism, thoughtlessness, and lack of feeling" (Stillman and Johnson 82). Pieixoto and Wade have arranged the thirty tapes June has left behind--something Pieixoto won't even describe as a "document" (Atwood 301)--reconstructing meaning and creating "[Pieixoto and Wade's] document [which is] in its own way eloquent" (Atwood 311). June's work is a mere "item" (Atwood 301), but the male professors' reconstruction of her "reconstruction" is an eloquent document: Hogsette may be onto something when he posits, "Offred has become Ofjames" (Hogsette 272). This society may seem to find "those previously marginalized by the racist discourse of Euro-American imperialism now occupy[ing] the center" (Finigan 450)--Native American, South Asian, and Aztec names are found--but sexism still exists.

Pieixoto claims to have used "guesswork" to create an "eloquent" document from June's fragments. But is it truly eloquent? No. It is not "characterized by forcible and appropriate expression" (OED), but rather it is either sloppy academic work or wholesale editorial re-writing and not just a "painstaking work of transcription" (Atwood 301). While the use of both past and present verb-tense can be attributed to June, as befits an unscripted oral retelling, what can be made of the inconsistent use of quotation marks. One cannot imagine entire sections of the tape sounding like:

quote / What happened to her? / end-quote

He hardly misses a beat. quote / Did you know her somehow? / end-quote

quote / Somehow, / end-quote I say.

quote / She hanged herself, / end-quote he says... (Atwood 187, *spoken*

*punctuation mine*)

What reader would believe that June voiced “quote / end-quote” in the above passage? And if so, that she would be so inconsistent in their use? In the first major section, “Shopping,” the dialogue starts without punctuation, but will change four times over the course of the five chapters. These shifts do not correspond to chapters or even sections within chapters; the third section of Chapter 2 begins without punctuation but ends with (Atwood 10-11). Might they be aligned with verb-tense (dialogue in the past without punctuation; present with)? In many cases, yes, but there are times when the present tense is used without punctuation. These instances could be explained by saying that entire scene was happening in the past, and for some reason, June is using the present-tense; but in those cases, can one really expect an unwilling and inexperienced storyteller to be that nuanced in verb-tense. This is overzealous editing, not transcribing.

More problematic is the use of present tense without punctuation in cases that are clearly in the present. At the beginning of June’s night with the Commander in the hotel room, she recalls, “I tell the Commander just a minute, and go into the bathroom” (Atwood 251). If Pieixoto has been so intricate in his “transcription” as to handle verb-tenses nested in one another like a set of Russian dolls, one would expect that line to read, “I tell the Commander, ‘Just a minute,’ and go into the bathroom.” Curious too is the use of “Fake it, I scream at myself inside my head” (Atwood 255). Must the reader assume non-punctuation for internal dialogue? Again, this is either overzealous or sloppy. And what to make of the fourth section of Chapter 41? Clearly in the present tense in both verbs and temporality, yet no punctuation. The careful reader’s only conclusion is that Professor James Darcy Pieixoto is not the eloquent

documentarian he claims to be. But why this disconnect? It's as if Atwood has planted this clue for the careful reader as a detail that might pay off later, like the setup for a joke's punchline.

Pieixoto becomes representative of the failure of the future society depicted in the "Historical Notes." From a Marxist point of view, the society presented is built on the ideology of academia, one that "represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (Althusser 693). This world, presented as a kind of Utopia coming from the Dystopia of Gilead--exhibited as result of a socio-political revolution, giving rise to a theoretical world where "intellectuals will compose an equal society" (OWL: PC)--is a fraud. The fraud of Gilead had been perpetrated by the Despots, while the fraud of 2195 is overseen by different Priests, the intellectuals; in both, it is these Priests and Despots "who are the authors of the great ideological mystification" (Althusser 695), an illusion that keeps the working class oppressed. Grace calls this future society "far from an eutopian [sic] alternative to the dystopia of Gilead" (Grace 481), further described as "sexist" (Finigan 450), unironic (Wagner-Lawlor 92) and unfeeling, inactive, and unquestioning (Stillman and Johnson 81). In other words, the new world is a repudiation of Marxist political theory.

If the novel as a whole concludes with a statement on Marxist political theory, it shines a light on Deconstructionist theory as well. Like a punchline at the end of a nearly 300-page joke, the "Historical Notes" presents Atwood at her most "mocking" (Wagner-Lawlor 92), "ironic" (Hogsette 263), "parodistic" (Hammer 47), and "funny" (Bergmann 852). She sets this symposium at the "University of Denay, Nunavit," a homophone for "deny none of it," a pun that is both a preemptive statement of purpose and so blatant that it practically shouts, "See what I did there?" Atwood will deny none of this "Historical Notes" section, it's there for the taking.

And what there is to take: discussions of a “fishing expedition” (Atwood 299), a perfect metaphor (if it wasn’t already a cliché) of the kind of academic meaning-finding taking place in the main lecture; the reference to the “Republic of Texas,” Atwood the Canadian’s outsider vision of a Texan’s dream-future; and our quasi-narrator in this section--James Darcy Pieixoto. To give this character the name of a famed romantic hero (from Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*) is both wonderfully fitting and another joke: like Darcy, Pieixoto is arrogant and “pompous” (Hammer 47), and while the expectation is that this man will somehow save the (work of the) oppressed June, he instead “usurps Offred’s tale” (Joodaki and Jafari 13). Some of Atwood’s jokes, though, may be *too* subtle: Pieixoto’s partner Knotly Wade is obviously a homophone for “not Lee Wade,” but there doesn’t seem to be an appropriate Lee Wade or Li Wade in existence (nor does “Knotly Wade” appear to be an anagram of some sort). Is this linguistic fishing expedition Atwood has set up for the reader yet another mocking joke? This kind of sarcasm in the tone of a supposedly factual document forces the reader to call into question the meaning of a novel where “truths are illusions” (Nietzsche 263), a fitting conclusion for a Deconstructionist reading.

If the novel-ending “Historical Notes” calls into question the meaning of the whole, what does one make of the novel’s dedication (which appears in some--like the Houghton Mifflin--but not other--Anchor Books--editions of *The Handmaid’s Tale*)? The novel is dedicated to Mary Webster, a Puritan ancestor of Atwood’s who was hanged as a witch but who survived the ordeal, and Perry Miller, a scholar in American literature--focusing on the Puritan period--under whom Atwood studied at Harvard. Are these two to be taken as analogs for June (a survivor of a puritanical society) and Pieixoto (a centuries-later scholar of that period)? It seems

counterintuitive to dedicate the novel to a man who will be savagely parodied in the epilogue. Or is this a nod to the Deconstructionist concept that a work of literature is not “a self-contained artifact but ... a product of relations with other texts or discourses, literary and nonliterary” (Encyclopedia Britannica)? If Webster is June, and Miller, Pieixoto, then history is cyclical rather than linear (Grace 484). And this cyclical view of history would not be out of place within a Marxist “cycle of contradiction, tension, and revolution” (OWL: MC). And thus, Deconstructionist and Marxist literary theories dovetail in June’s narrative.

Marxist theory posits that literature can only be understood within its context, including that of the writer at the time of composition (Rivkin and Ryan 644). Atwood wrote *The Handmaid’s Tale* in the mid-1980s, when the “Religious Right” was asserting its political power in the United States, feminism was facing a cultural backlash, and President Reagan was as much an icon of an older generation as he was a leader. If “contextual overtones...are inevitable” (Bakhtin 677), then a resulting 1980s novel that depicts a dystopia where women are reduced to their most female attribute--their ability to conceive, gestate, and give birth to new life--seems perfectly fitting. A nightmare for women, perhaps, but a better world for men: “Better never means better for everyone, [the Commander] says. It always means worse, for some” (Atwood 211). This “better” world isn’t progress. Instead, it is “a reactionary step backwards in time” (Hammer 45), which in turn makes the world of the “Historical Notes” a “Back to the Future [Part II]” version of Atwood’s own world. In “Simulacra and Simulations,” Deconstructionist Jean Baudrillard writes, “When the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning” (Baudrillard 369). And thus, in *The Handmaid’s Tale*--and its ironically titled “Historical Notes” section--Atwood creates a nostalgia for a false future.

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