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THIS WOMAN'S WORK: CORROSIVE POWER STRUCTURES, GENDERED
LABOR AND WEARINESS IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE HANDMAID'S
TALE* AND *ORYX AND CRAKE*

by

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B.A. University of Central Florida, 2020

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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ABSTRACT

In her 2007 essay “Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency),” Lauren Berlant asserts that “in the scene of slow death, a condition of being worn out by the activity of reproducing life, agency can be an activity of maintenance” (759). This concept emphasizes the difficulty of maintaining one’s agency while experiencing chronic exhaustion, or what can be referred to as the “wearied state.” Utilizing Berlant’s theoretical framework, this thesis investigates the concept of weariness in two dystopic texts: Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) and *Oryx and Crake* (2003). The respective protagonists of *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*, Offred and Oryx, each struggle to maintain their agency in the dystopic societies that work to oppress them. Offred, by utilizing wordplay, locates a way to successfully navigate her weariness while simultaneously subverting those who hold power over her. Oryx, oppositely, fails to recognize the sexual power dynamics of her position as a sex slave. Oryx fails to locate her agency, which causes her to normalize her sexually traumatic past. Overall, this thesis argues that weariness need not be final if one makes no attempt to normalize traumatic experiences, remains privy to oppressive ideologies, and retains the ability to cope.

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INTRODUCTION

WEARINESS AND WORDPLAY IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S DYSTOPIAS

When one begins to think about it, American depends rather heavily on women's passive dependence, their femininity. Femininity, if one still wants to call it that, makes American women a target and a victim of the sexual sell.

—Betty Friedan

I. Defining Weariness and Slow Death

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) takes place in Gilead, a radical military territory that forcibly utilizes handmaids—fertile women who serve as vessels for the infertile upper-class citizens of Gilead—to bolster the population of the nation. The narrative centers on Offred, a handmaid assigned to Commander Fred Waterford and his wife, Serena Joy Waterford, in the hope that Offred will conceive a child through ceremonial rape. The significance of Offred's name, “of Fred,” emphasizes the culture of control and ownership in Gileadean society. During the period that she is assigned to them, Offred becomes the property of Commander Waterford. Stripped of her identity, her freedom, and her bodily autonomy, near the end of the novel Offred laments, “Fatigue is here, in my body, in my legs and eyes. That is what gets you in the end” (292). Offred, crippled by the weight of her oppressive occupation and the seeming futility of escape, deteriorates physically, emotionally and psychologically. Offred's lack of freedom coupled with the trauma of chronic ceremonial rape wearies her, and it is this “fatigue,” as she calls it, that begins to separate her from her sense of agency, a crucial element for survival in a dystopic world.

At different moments in the novel, the burden of fatigue almost forces Offred to accept her unfortunate fate. But Offred's fatigue is never quite enough to kill her; rather, it motivates

her and compels her to locate ways to counteract it. For example, when Serena Joy gives Offred a picture of Hannah, Offred's daughter, living her new life in Gilead, Offred responds, "I can't bear it, to have been erased like that. Better she'd brought me nothing" (228). Although the photograph lowers Offred's spirits, she does not give in. She remarks, "I sit at the table, eating creamed corn with a fork. I have a fork and a spoon, but never a knife. When there's meat they cut it up for me ahead of time, as if I'm lacking manual skills or teeth. I have both, however. That's why I am not allowed a knife" (228). Initially, it appears as if Offred's reference to the Waterfords' forbiddance of knives indicates that they fear Offred will take her own life. However, Offred notes that even though she is thought to lack manual skills and teeth, she still has both. That is to say, even if Offred lives in a household that oppresses her, she is nevertheless willing to bear her "teeth" if need be. In "Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency)" (2007), Lauren Berlant states, "in the scene of slow death, a condition of being worn out by the activity of reproducing life, agency can be an activity of maintenance" (759). The Ceremony, a monthly ritual that Offred must participate in, resembles Berlant's "scene of slow death," and Offred struggles to maintain her sense of agency due to the continuousness of the ritual. When one normalizes traumatic experiences, they run the risk of separating themselves from their sense of agency, as seen in Atwood's novel and a later work, *Oryx and Crake* (2003). The laborer—in the form of the handmaid or, in *Oryx and Crake*, the sex worker—grapples with trauma constantly. The internal struggle one must go through to dilute exceptionally traumatic events down to mundane events inevitably leads to weariness. Kathleen Stewart, in *Ordinary Affects* (2007), asserts that "[t]he ordinary registers intensities—regularly, intermittently, urgently, or as a slight shudder" (10). Here, the ordinary is work in the form of sex and childbirth, two of the

most significant events one can experience in life. Yet, when childbirth and sex are reduced to the mundane by normalizing their emotional affects, the act of procreation becomes rudimentary. By reading Atwood's novels in light of the theoretical framework of Berlant, as well as those of Karl Marx, Catharine MacKinnon, Sianne Ngai, Kate Millett and Gloria Anzaldua, I hope to shed new light on the severity of fatigue and the consequences of falling victim to it.

Overall, this thesis examines the manner in which sexual oppression leads to slow death in dystopic fiction. It asks: how is one meant to cope with slow death? What are the steps necessary to free oneself from it? *The Handmaid's Tale* suggests coping by way of wordplay to subvert the power of rulers of Gilead, while *Oryx and Crake* rejects coping through wordplay and lacks any evidence of Oryx subverting the power of her sexual captors.

In *Oryx and Crake*, mundane gendered work takes the form of the adolescent sex worker. Oryx, a child sold into slavery by her mother, alienates herself from her work for her own survival by normalizing her participation in child pornography, and eventually, trading sex for literacy. By divorcing the concepts of work and love, she places herself in a position to accept the traumatic as the ordinary. Berlant highlights something similar to this phenomenon when she states that such "practices ... can absorb how time ordinarily passes, how forgettable most events are, and, overall, how people's ordinary perseverations fluctuate in patterns of undramatic attachment and identification" (760). In choosing to detach her emotions from her work, Oryx accepts the forgettable-ness of her profession. Her aversion to negative experience forces her to prioritize her value as a commodity over freedom. However, her tendency to normalize sex prevents her from recognizing the corrupt and oppressive behaviors of her masters, which leads to her untimely death.

While the strange mundanity that the novels make of sexual reproduction is an important factor of slow death, the setting in which slow death occurs is of equal importance. Weariness occurs when the environment that slow death thrives in becomes cyclical, which makes trauma easier to normalize. Berlant explains that slow death is “a domain of revelation where an upsetting scene of living that has been muffled in ordinary consciousness is revealed to be interwoven with ordinary life after all” (761). In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the state of disorder masked as the ordinary occurs when Offred participates in the Ceremony. Her obligation to her work forces her to partake in a traumatic event, but the cyclical nature of the Ceremony, which happens monthly, propels her into a constant state of weariness. Contrarily, Oryx does not come to terms with her “upsetting scene of living” until she realizes that her tendency to normalize sex prevents her from recognizing the sexual oppression to which Crake subjects her.

To analyze chronic weariness and monotony further, one must first reframe the concept of habituation as an aversion to negative experience. Oryx and Offred both experience aversion to negative experience in a way that impacts their daily lives and how they choose to cope, or not, with oppression. Berlant’s “Slow Death” also explores “zone[s] of ordinariness, where life building and the attrition of human life are indistinguishable, and where it is hard to distinguish modes of incoherence, distractedness, and habituation from deliberate and deliberative activity, as they are all involved in the reproduction of predictable life” (754). Berlant’s zone of ordinariness aptly describes the Waterford household. Here, Offred familiarizes herself with sexual trauma in an attempt to normalize the experience of repetitive ceremonial rape. Offred explains that to do so, “[o]ne detaches oneself. One describes” (95). Such detachment takes considerable effort, and the effect of traumatic sexual abuse, though ignored, remains present.

Offred does so because facing the realities of such a heinous act is, in itself, exhausting. But one must keep in mind that Offred continuously utilizes coping mechanisms to *counteract* and stave off her exhaustion.

Berlant's concept of slow death as the tipping point for dystopic society will aid in the examination of the suffocating burden of gendered work, how it pertains to societal weariness, and the manner in which excessive weariness makes room for corrosive power structures to thrive if one ignores it. Gendered labor, coupled with sexist oppression, inevitably leads to disillusionment and fatigue, which in turn catalyzes aversion to negative experience. Therefore, the novels suggest that the solutions to weariness lie in the audacious destruction of oppressive power structures and the usage of coping mechanisms that subvert despotic ideologies.

II. Sex Work, Gendered Labor and Commodities

In *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Karl Marx forewarns that, under the jurisdiction of "political economy," one "sinks to the level of a commodity and becomes indeed the most wretched of commodities; that the wretchedness of the worker is in inverse proportion to the power and magnitude of his production" (652). Over time, the worker becomes all the poorer; the more wealth the worker produces, the more their production increases in power and range. While Marx's dichotomy of "property-owners" and "property-less workers" addresses the complex relationship between capitalist society and its dependence on the laborer and the work that they perform, one must consider the significance of "property-less workers" becoming property themselves (Marx 652). In the case of Offred from Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, the property-less worker becomes the property in the form of the handmaid, who too becomes the

“means of production.” Moreover, the child, the inherent property of the handmaid, is taken from her and surrendered to the property-owner in the form of the Gileadean Commander. In *Oryx and Crake*, Oryx’s body becomes the means of production. Her purpose is to provide sex as entertainment for her captors and patrons on the internet.

The idea of sex slavery as a commonplace solution to issues such as plummeting birthrates and sexual entertainment at once marries the concepts of gendered work and commodity. For Offred, gendered work takes the form of the handmaid, where the handmaid and the child are both commodities. Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* serves as a critique of the traditional Marxist model, by aligning the work of the handmaids with that of the property-less worker. For Oryx, gendered work takes the form of child pornography, whereas Oryx and her films are the commodities. She realizes that she and the other child workers “had a money value: they represented a cash profit to others ... they were worth something” (126). Oryx realizes that possessing monetary value cannot equate to love or autonomy; however, she decides that retaining some worth is far better than being worthless (126). Oryx is averse to losing value in any shape or form. When she discovers that her position as a child porn actress allows her to be acknowledged, it is that much easier for her to normalize sexual abuse and oppression.

Although Marx offers an exemplary representation of the dangers of separating worker from work, he neglects to touch on *gendered* labor and how women’s work correlates to weariness. Marxist theory emphasizes the class system and how it relates to power and inequality. However, gendered labor cannot be examined through the same lens. In “Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State” (1982), MacKinnon argues that “Marxism is male defined in theory and in practice, meaning that it moves within the world view of men” (518). Considering

that Marxism is most applicable to male labor, it becomes difficult to examine female labor in the same manner.

Female labor does not easily find a home within a classist system. Male labor, for Marx, includes factory work and the relationship between the worker, his commodity, and his position in the class system, while female labor tends to “value women in terms of their ‘merit’ by male standards ... women are invisible except in their capacity as ‘workers,’ a term that seldom includes women’s distinctive work: housework, sexual service, childbearing” (MacKinnon 522). Although both theorists explore the concept of the worker being defined by the work that they produce, the two remain very separate entities. MacKinnon continues, “[f]eminists argue that analyzing society exclusively in class terms ignores the distinctive social experiences of the sexes” (518). Class remains relevant to both social experiences; however, the effect of gendered oppression differs greatly in males and females.

While male oppression correlates to position and class, female oppression is two-fold; women suffer under both classist and sexist oppression. MacKinnon asserts that “the Marxist meaning of reproduction ... is punned into an analysis of biological reproduction ... as if this social analogue to the biological makes women’s definition the material, therefore based on a division of *labor* after all, therefore real, therefore (potentially) unequal” (526). Here, MacKinnon references a form of social inequality that correlates to the biological subordination of women. Women become material and are consequently separated from men on the basis of sex. Offred and Oryx become victims of biological subordination, as they are defined by their bodies. Considering that they are forced into a form of work that is solely based on their biological ability to reproduce, it becomes necessary to question the effect of such oppressive

gendered labor. The additional burden of sexist oppression in the form of biological subordination promotes disillusionment, which in turn gives way to excessive weariness, affecting one's sense of agency.

III. Literature Review

Critics of Atwood's novels tend to invert the theories usually associated with gendered power structures and feminism when examining the novels' corrosive subject matter. In "Women Disunited: Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* as a Critique of Feminism" (2006), Alanna Callaway argues that "the real threat in Gilead comes not from male but female control. The ultimate result of the micro-stratification in Gilead is ... not as we usually think of it, as men's hatred of women, but as *women's* hatred of women" (9). Callaway's thesis provides an interesting perspective regarding the possibility of corruption within both sexes; however, the affective repercussions of being stripped of power are absent. I would argue that chronic weariness and the desperate acquisition of personal autonomy prompts the women of Gilead to betray one another, not same-sex hatred. Hitesh Karan examines the complex nature of the handmaid's occupational role. She states that, "[a]lthough the women's biological function is a privilege, she becomes marginalized as a human being" (233). I would agree with Karan, and likewise argue that the controversial concept of childbearing as a privilege only exacerbates the complexity of forced childbirth and how one is to view having the ability to provide the gift of life, which in turn catalyzes the wearied state.

Sexual oppression is forced upon Oryx, and I find it problematic that some feminist scholars reframe it as, to some degree, voluntary. For instance, in "Dystopia, Feminism, and

Phallogocentrism in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*" (2019), Javier Martín asserts that "Oryx ... embraces voluntary prostitution as liberating and self empowering to women, who are able to take advantage of the role men have given them as consuming objects" (179). While it is arguable that Oryx does not view her prostitution as oppressive, Oryx's position is not voluntary. Oryx's mother sells her into child slavery; Oryx does not choose to become a sex slave, and her lack of vengeance towards her oppressors establishes her inability to understand the oppression to which she is subjected. Tyler Dinucci speaks to the importance of the manipulation of sex to ensure survival. He states, "Oryx ultimately uses her sex work as a way to manipulate outcomes: she is able to travel to America through sex and she is able to gain the trust and hearts of both Jimmy and Crake through her sexuality" (29). Although Oryx manipulates her viewpoint of sex frequently within the novel, one must question whether she does so in order to achieve literacy.

IV. Chapter Overview

This thesis includes two chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter examines weariness as aversion to negative experience, with an emphasis on female social experiences. Offred navigates her way through a militant, patriarchal society that seeks to alienate her from her bodily autonomy, while Oryx attempts to come to terms with the fact that her worth is dependent upon her previous position as an adolescent sex worker. Oryx's impulse to normalize her traumatic experiences makes it that much easier for Crake to manipulate her. By utilizing Berlant's framework regarding weariness and Mackinnon's theorization of gendered work, this chapter will draw connections between gendered work in the form of ceremonial rape, exploitive

work in the form of sex trafficking, and provide a close examination of the similarities between the two to establish concepts of weariness in the form of aversion to negative experience.

Chapter two explores the concept of wordplay as a coping mechanism. Offred utilizes wordplay to come to terms with the life that she has been forced to lead. As she scribes the phrase “[n]olite te bastardes carborundorum” she begins to materialize her *own* sort of power, the Word (186). Here, wordplay becomes a form of personal autonomy, which becomes necessary to combat weariness and instills a sense of agency in the oppressed. In utilizing the Word, Offred begins to realize that freedom is within reach. Oryx does not partake in wordplay—or any coping mechanism for that matter—because of her complex relationship with language and her past as a sex worker. Oryx is blind to the oppression she constantly faces, and reasons that sex is what provides her with knowledge and literacy. While Offred understands her role as the oppressed, Oryx does not. Oryx’s inability to locate the corrosive power structures in her life leads to her death. Therefore, this chapter applies Kate Millet’s framework from her book *Sexual Politics* to illuminate the political nature of sex and the inherent power structures hidden within it. It also utilizes Gloria Anzaldua’s essay “Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza” to examine the reasoning behind Oryx’s troubling relationship with sex and language. Finally, Ngai’s affective emotional theory situates both Oryx and Offred in a position of power as they utilize wordplay to affectively respond to corrosive power in the form of gendered work.

The conclusion of this thesis consolidates the concepts already established in the preceding chapters, wraps up integral points concerning the stakes of the argument, and proposes topics for continued scholarship. By establishing the importance of coping mechanisms and the

dangers of ignoring the signs of corrupt behavior, I aim to prove that weariness need not be final if one continues to fight.

V. Unearthing the Truth in the Speculative

The stakes of this investigation are quite high, because the sexual oppression that takes place within the *Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* is prevalent in contemporary society. In “*The Handmaid's Tale and Oryx and Crake in Context*” (2004), Atwood contends that, even though she is often considered to be a science fiction writer, she considers herself a “dabbler” of science fiction (513). She states “I liked to make a distinction between science fiction proper—for me this label denotes books with things in them we can’t yet do or begin to do ... and places we can’t go—and speculative fiction, which employs the means already more or less to hand, and takes place on Planet Earth” (513). Indeed, Atwood exaggerates the dystopian landscapes of *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*, but the concepts of forced surrogacy and sex trafficking run rampant even today. In Nepal, foreign nationals seek out illiterate families and lure them into signing confusing and deceitful contracts that force unmarried women and girls to “[provide] surrogacy services without any ethical considerations” (Alok Atreya 1). The concept of illiteracy as a gateway to oppression is very apparent here, and mirrors Oryx’s experience with illiteracy. The forced surrogacy, of course, mirrors Offred’s narrative as a handmaid. Furthermore, sex trafficking is a worldwide issue that persists. In *A U.S. Remedy for Sex Trafficking in Women: The Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000* (2002), Susan Tiefenbrun comments that “sex trafficking is a growth industry that is rapidly developing around the world because of ... wealthy tourists and businessmen seeking sexual services while

traveling abroad” (139). The concept of wealth and the infatuation with the “other” corresponds with Oryx’s position as a sex worker. Uncle En resembles the wealthy businessman who recruits children to perform sexual acts for cyber “tourists.” These issues are alarming, but they are nothing new. They happen around us every single day and we are often blind to them. Therefore, I would like to consider this thesis a call to action. We may not know what is in store but, as long as we remain privy to the power structures around us, all hope is not lost.

In theorizing the concept of weariness and how it pertains to one’s loss of agency, this thesis examines the emotional debilitation Oryx and Offred experience in *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*. It engages with the effect of corrosive power structures and how one is meant to navigate and persevere under severe systems of oppression. While this thesis focuses on dystopic society and the injustice present in both *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*, it likewise explores the manner in which Offred and Oryx choose to combat weariness, or not, and the techniques necessary to subvert and dismantle oppressive ideologies. Corrosive power structures need not prevail, as long as one retains the ability to cope and, hopefully, overcome.

CHAPTER ONE

“FLOATING SIDEWAYS”: CORROSIVE POWER STRUCTURES AND GENDERED LABOR

Ha, it's funny in a way, women liberated and educated, free at last to learn the truth, and the truth? That she is the only creature on earth in perpetual heat. What a discovery! That she is only good for one thing.

—Walker Percy

No one is more arrogant towards women, more aggressive or scornful, than the man who is anxious about his virility.

—Simone de Beauvoir

Introduction

Offred and Oryx, the respective female characters of *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and *Oryx and Crake* (2003), struggle to locate any remaining agency in the patriarchal societies that constantly beat them down. This chapter, by reframing the concept of weariness from acute tiredness to an aversion to negative experience that is all encompassing, theorizes the deceptively ordinary concept of aversion to negative experience that affects Offred and Oryx in the novels. It also engages with the consequences associated with surrendering to the gravity of sexual work that corrosive power structures enforce. Completely at the mercy of those who oppress them, Offred and Oryx navigate societies that define them by their ability to “work” as sexual slaves. As their sexual occupations weigh on their minds and bodies, Offred and Oryx attempt to navigate their exhaustion in dystopic societies that have arguably succumbed to fatigue themselves. As the corrupt power structures located within these novels grow in power, their oppressive ideologies affect all who reside in them, even those in positions of power.

Corrosive power structures coupled with sexually oppressive ideology eventually lead to weariness, a concept that resembles slow death. Berlant's theory of "slow death," or "a condition of being worn out by the act of reproducing life," emphasizes one's scene of living, while weariness precedes the separation of one from one's agency resulting from an aversion to negative experience to one's environment (759). This separation is referred to as the "wearied state," the state in which one's agency is stripped away in a manner that renders one incapacitated by the gravity of fatigue, which potentially leads to death. Weariness affects both female protagonists in the Atwood novels.

Although their oppressive experiences resemble each other, it becomes important to note the differences in Offred and Oryx's descent into weariness. Offred is fully aware of the violation of her autonomy associated with her work, which involves participation in a monthly rape ceremony designed to produce a child for the upper-class citizens of Gilead. She understands the wrongness of ceremonial rape, and attempts to find comfort in the memories of before. Contrarily, Oryx chooses not to dwell on the perversity of her occupation, which requires her to star in pornographic movies that provide entertainment for the oversexed society that she resides in. She argues that "[m]any people did it," a thought process that inevitably leads to her untimely end (119). The contrasting narratives of Offred and Oryx acknowledge that no matter the journey, chronic fatigue and aversion to negative experience establishes a sense of potential finality and disillusionment in the sexually oppressed, leading to Offred's loss of agency and Oryx's demise.

I. "Not Mine, But My Bodies": The Gravity of Weariness

Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* immediately places the reader in an environment of exhaustion, marrying the concepts of forced survival and crippling nostalgia. An environment of exhaustion resembles Berlant's notion of "a dialectical scene where ... structure and agency is manifest in predictable repetitions" (760). While lying in a cot in an abandoned High School Gymnasium after the rise of Gilead, a military regime that utilizes religion as an excuse to force women into various social castes to offset plummeting birthrates, Offred compares her previous life with the one she has newly inherited. She grieves, "I remember that yearning, for something that was always about to happen and was never the same as the hands that were on us there and then" (3). This statement exemplifies the complexity of Offred's relationship to her sexual desire as her resiliency begins to erode. She grapples with the ideas of agency and sexual slavery throughout the entirety of the novel. Although her frequent references to the past kindle her sense of optimism, this analeptic attitude eventually becomes a cruel reminder of the oppression she engages with on a frequent basis.

As Offred references the consequences of her previous sexual yearnings, she acknowledges her "talent for insatiability," initiating the inner war on her sexuality (4). The backdrop of the gymnasium, complete with army-issue blankets, militant Aunts, and chain link fences, serves as an exemplary environment for Offred's internal turmoil. This *mise en scène* alludes to the Gileadean war as well as Offred's psychological battle: "Think of it as being in the army," quips Aunt Lydia (7). By establishing a combative environment, the oppressive leaders of Gilead trap Offred in a state of hopelessness.

The setting of the Waterford household, where Offred resides and participates in ceremonies, represents bleakness as well. The handmaids are forbidden from ending their lives, which aligns with the Foucaultian concept of “biopower,” or one’s ability “to *make* something live or to let it die” (qtd. in Berlant 756). Offred’s environment is swathed in the residue of previous suicide attempts. The Waterfords alter her room to prevent her from personal destruction. She ponders, “[t]here must have been a chandelier, once. They’ve removed anything you can tie a rope to” (7). Offred *must* live; her body *must* act as a vessel for the Waterfords. As the prospect of personal release disappears, Offred finds herself exhausted.

Both outside and inside the house, Offred finds herself surrounded by Serena Joy Waterford’s red tulips, which represent sex and blood. In Elizabeth Peloso’s “The Flowers That Bloom in the Spring: A Critical Look at Flower Imagery in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*” (2002), she references “red and orange blossoms” symbolizing “sexuality gone horribly wrong” (4). The red tulips that surround Offred symbolize the barbaric nature of the monthly rape ceremony. Serena Joy’s “tulips are red, a darker crimson towards the stem, as if they have been cut and are beginning to heal there” (12). The red flower becomes a reminder of the monthly rape ceremony; the cutting and healing of the flower implies Offred’s mutilation during the ceremony and the vaginal healing that must take place before she is forced to participate again. Considering that Offred finds herself in an environment where oppression is inevitable, it comes as no surprise that such an environment, over time, wearies her.

The concept of slow death can be best examined through the Waterford Household’s recurrent “Ceremony,” in which the Commander’s wife restrains the handmaid so that she may be forcibly raped to produce a child (81). The Ceremony itself, though heinous, becomes

ordinary due to the temporal nature of the event. The setting of the sitting room mirrors temporality in referencing “the heavy cloth, fading daffodils, the leftover smells of cooking (80). The repetitiveness of the Ceremony dilutes the nightmare usually associated with sexual assault, creating an enigmatic dynamic between the traumatic and the ordinary. Berlant argues that “[s]low death prospers ... in temporal environments whose qualities and whose contours in time and space are often identified with the presentness of ordinariness itself” (759). The cyclical nature of the ceremony creates an atmosphere of mundanity, making it an environment for slow death to prosper. Cora, a Martha, or housekeeper, who serves the Waterford household, expresses the dullness associated with the ceremony in stating, “[w]ish he’d hurry up,” in reference to the Commander’s lack of punctuality (81). Nick, the family’s chauffeur, expresses the same sentiments as Cora, in returning her sentiment, “[h]urry up and wait”; together, these *laissez-faire* attitudes stifle the significance of the rape that Offred endures every month (81). During the ceremony, Offred compares sexual desire with sexual oppression. She alludes to the eroticism usually associated with sex to establish the irony of reducing such a memorable event to an ordinary one. She jests, “isn’t this everyone’s wet dream, two women at once? They used to say that. Exciting, they used to say” (94). In doing so, she aligns her experiences with Serena Joy’s, who suffers from patriarchal oppression as well, regardless of her faithfulness to the Gileadean regime:

What’s going on in this room, under Serena Joy’s silvery canopy, is not exciting. It has nothing to do with passion or love or romance or any of those other notions we used to titillate ourselves with. It has nothing to do with sexual desire, at least for me, and certainly not for Serena. Arousal and orgasm are no longer thought necessary; they

would be a symptom of frivolity merely, like jazz garters or beauty spots: superfluous distractions for the light minded. (94)

Serena Joy's room serves as an environment of forgettable events, and Offred's complete detachment from her assault alienates her from the severity of rape. Like Berlant's environment of ordinariness, a place where "events are not of the scale of memorable impact but rather are *episodes*" (760), Serena Joy's room resembles a doctor's office: a place where the ultimate goal lies in producing a child. Serena Joy alienates herself from the event as well to quell the humiliation of lacking the ability to bear a child of her own, and the humiliation associated with watching her husband perform sexual acts on someone else.

Offred is aware of Serena's hatred, and remarks that after the ceremony, "[t]here is loathing in her voice, as if the touch of my body and flesh sickens and contaminates her" (95). The convoluted nature of Offred and Serena Joy's relationship fatigues them; Serena's fatigue finds a home within her hatred for Offred; Offred's fatigue becomes two-fold, as she is expected to endure rape *and* Serena Joy's hatred. Such an environment of loathing becomes crippling, and considering that the repetitive nature of the ceremony enhances the air of animosity between Offred and Serena Joy, it becomes difficult to refute that the ceremony slowly incapacitates them.

II. "Everything Has a Price": Weariness and the Mundane

Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* takes place in an oversexed dystopic world that finds pleasure in viewing obscene videos that showcase child pornography and war. Oryx's journey begins in the same manner as Offred's. Oryx's mother sells her and places her in the hands of her new

keeper, Uncle En. During her trip to the city, Oryx considers the reasoning behind her capture. She yearns for her mother and ponders the reasons why she sells Oryx and her brother into slavery. Oryx decides that, in choosing to sell her brother and herself simultaneously, her mother has done so out of love. She “took this double sale as evidence that her mother had loved her. She had no images of love” (121). However, her trek to the city is still debilitating. Oryx finds solace in the fact that, regardless of whether her mother sold her out of love, Oryx at least embodies monetary value.

Oryx’s failure to understand the corruption associated with her position can be attributed to psychological repression, and her tendency to shirk any negative associations with her betrayal resembles Berlant’s theory concerning lack of agency and slow death. Berlant explains that “agency can be an activity of maintenance” (759). Oryx’s revelation concerning her value prompts her to lean into her unfortunate situation. She understands that she “wanted to go home, but ‘home’ was becoming hazy in her mind” (128). She realizes that her relationship to the home she once knew, and the home in which she currently resides, have converged into one entity. Her mother’s “voice was become fainter and more indistinct,” which allows Oryx to accept her situation (128). Oryx maintains her discomfort by accepting her situation at face value. She learns of Uncle En’s abusive tendencies from the other enslaved children, yet she ignores them. Oryx’s decision to ignore the horrors surrounding her pushes her into the realm of the mundane. Although she finds comfort in the ordinary, the act of reducing the horrible to the dull becomes exhausting.

After Oryx’s time working for Uncle En ends, she finds herself at Pixieland, a pornography warehouse. Here, Oryx takes part in pornographic films with other children to

entertain patrons on the internet. In her mind, Oryx draws parallels between acting in a pornography film and “doing what you’re told” by a parental figure; she makes the conscious decision to repress perversity for the sake of professionalism. Javier Martín reframes Oryx’s lack of attachment to her position as a metaphorical adoption of “voluntary prostitution” (179). Although Oryx accepts her position, the reasoning behind her acceptance appears to be more complex. Oryx detaches herself from her profession due to her aversion to negative experience in the form of fear. When Jimmy, the man that she has an affair with following her time as a sex slave, reprimands Oryx for being nonchalant about her awful experiences, she challenges him, saying:

If they wanted you to smile then you had to smile, if they wanted you to cry you had to do that too. Whatever it was, you had to do it, and you did it because you were afraid not to. You did what they told you to do to the men who came, and them sometimes those men did things to you. That was movies. (138)

Oryx simplifies the act of performing sex due to her fear of reprimands that, as the novel implies, comprise both verbal and physical (sexual) abuse. If she does not perform accordingly, punishment is inevitable. As she continues her conversation with Jimmy, Oryx furthers her reasoning regarding her nonchalant attitude towards sex work. Berlant’s theory regarding environment, predictable repetition, and the irony of “how forgettable most events are” can be applied to Oryx normalizing her sexual experiences (760). Oryx’s sexually exploitative environment becomes routine for her. Her lack of connection to her traumatic childhood resembles the forgetfulness of her environment, mirroring Offred’s detachment from the rape ceremony.

While Oryx's dismissal of sexual exploitation might save her from reliving negative experiences, her tendency to turn a blind eye ultimately leads to her demise. Oryx's position at Pixieland leads her to Crake, Jimmy's childhood friend. When Crake reaches adulthood, he becomes the head of an institution called "Paradice," a compound where various experiments take place (297). Crake appoints Oryx as teacher of the "Crakers," a genetically engineered species of his own creation. Crake plans to restart humanity by distributing a pill named BlyssPluss, a product that allegedly protects the user against all sexually transmitted diseases, sustains libido, and maintains the user's youth (294). The pill's true purpose becomes apparent to Oryx shortly after she distributes them to the rest of the world. After consumption, the pills kill the user due to their ability to break down internal organs. Astonished by the mass murder, Oryx attempts to contact Jimmy. She exclaims, "[i]t was in the pills. It was in those pills I was giving away, the ones I was selling ... [t]hose pills were supposed to help people!" (325). Oryx's tendency to normalize sex leads to the destruction of the human race; by remaining blind to Crake's horrible plan, she loses her life. Considering that Oryx regularizes sex to combat weariness, I would argue that, in normalizing the effects of the BlyssPluss pill, she becomes blind to the evil lurking within it.

Oryx's appearance during the scene of her death signifies a return to her time in Pixieland. When Crake realizes Jimmy's awareness of his plan to obliterate all humanity, he decides to destroy Oryx. Before Crake does so, Jimmy takes note of Oryx's "long pink-ribboned braid" (329). This comparison alludes to Oryx's time in Pixieland, where "[e]very hair bow, every flower, every object, every gesture" is essential to produce the perfect film (139). Oryx's bow symbolizes her time at Pixieland, and wearing it just before she dies arguably signifies that

the regularization of her sexual trauma is what kills her. Considering that Oryx's normalization of sex leads her to Crake, it is unsurprising that the deceptively mundane shatters her agency and results in the loss of her life.

III. "Don't Let the Bastards Grind You Down": Power Dynamics and the Scrabble Game

Oryx and Offred's relationships to the deceptively mundane influences their ability to rebel against the power structures oppressing them. As Oryx and Offred attempt to adhere to the mold that their sexual occupations require, the management of weariness becomes more difficult. The patriarchal power structures that imprison them find new ways to encourage weariness. Paradoxically, as the Commander allows Offred more freedom within the Waterford household, their relationship grows in complexity, and the affective labor necessary to manage these new challenges begins to unveil the motivations behind the freedoms Commander Waterford allows Offred to indulge in.

It has already been established that Commander Waterford exerts patriarchal control by orchestrating the rape ceremony. However, he manipulates Offred in other ways as well, allowing her to be within proximity to the written word. In Gilead, women are expected to be illiterate to keep them submissive, as "writing is in any case forbidden" (39). MacKinnon asserts:

If women are socially defined such that female sexuality cannot be lived or spoken or felt or even somatically sensed apart from its enforced definition, so that it *is* its own lack, then there is no such thing as a woman as such, there are only walking embodiments of men's projected needs. (534)

When Commander Waterford asks Offred to accompany him in his study, she becomes a woman subject to his needs. Commander Waterford attempts to present his study as a place where Offred can experience freedoms that are usually forbidden, but only in a way that ensures his control over the situation. He startles Offred by asking her to participate in a game of scrabble, which she initially finds amusing. However, she realizes that “[n]ow it’s dangerous. Now it’s indecent ... [n]ow it’s desirable” (138-139). Offred considers that, by allowing her to play a forbidden game, the Commander has compromised his position as well as hers. Nevertheless, Offred’s nearness to the Word weighs her down, as she lacks the authorization to wield this power. One must consider that slow death thrives when “the horizons of the taken-for-granted are brought into proximity” (Berlant 759). Offred longs for autonomy. Remaining so close, yet so far away from the Word breeds inner conflict. As her amusement transforms into realization, Offred understands how difficult agency becomes when faced with oppression disguised as freedom.

Offred acknowledges her waning agency as she departs from Commander Waterford’s office. She laments, “[t]ime’s a trap, I’m caught in it. I must forget about my secret name and all ways back. I am Offred now, and here is where I live” (143). Offred’s comparison of the past and the future catalyzes her wearied state. Her distress only mounts when Commander Waterford transforms their secret meeting into a routine event.

During the next meeting, Commander Waterford surprises Offred with a women’s magazine. Intoxicated, she states, “I wanted it. I wanted it with a force that made the ends of my fingers ache ... I’d taken such magazines lightly enough once” (156). At first glance, it appears as if Commander Waterford has decided to loosen his oppressive hold on Offred; however, his deceitful freedoms turn out to be new manifestations of his despotic tendencies. Commander

Waterford exacts his control by allowing Offred nearness to power only to strip it away. Furthermore, in requesting a kiss from her, his use of her stems from his own personal needs. Offred realizes this in stating “there must be something he wants, from me” (136). Offred hypothesizes that the Commander seeks her company due to loneliness; but Commander Waterford desires her companionship because he knows he cannot receive it from Serena Joy. He knows that Offred wants the Word, and possessing the power to give and take it away furthers his tyrannical nature. Offred realizes this fact in stating, “for him, I must remember, I am only a whim” (159). Their frequent meetings become fatiguing as Offred begins to lose herself in the hunger for equality.

As the complexity of Commander Waterford’s and Offred’s relationship grows, he allows her to delve into novels. In the time before Gilead, Offred transferred books to computer disks, engaging with the Word constantly. At first, when Commander Waterford permits her to read, she “read quickly, voraciously, almost skimming ... if it were sex it would be a swift furtive stand-up in an alley somewhere” (184). Offred’s comparison of reading to sex marries the Gileadean regime’s forbiddance of reading to her sexual oppression. She continues to state that “the Commander sits and watches me do it, without speaking but also without taking his eyes off me. This watching is a curiously sexual act, and I feel undressed as he does it” (184). Commander Waterford’s voyeuristic act of watching her read exposes his oppressive intentions. Extreme scrutiny is how he exerts his power over her.

After Offred refuses Commander Waterford’s offer to read in his presence, she encourages him to reveal the meaning of the phrase “*nolite te bastardes carborundorum*,” a

secret expression she finds scrawled in her closet by the Waterfords' previous handmaid (184).

When Commander Waterford permits Offred to scribe the phrase, she relishes every pen stroke:

I print the phrase carefully, copying it down from inside my head, from inside my closet. *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*. Here, in this context, it's neither prayer nor command, but a sad graffiti, scrawled once, abandoned. The pen between my fingers is sensuous, alive almost, I can feel its power, the power of the words it contains. Pen Is Envy, Aunt Lydia would say, quoting another Center motto, warning us away from such objects. And they were right, it is envy. Just holding it is envy. I envy the Commander his pen. It's one more thing I would like to steal. (186)

The phrase "pen is envy" references the Freudian theory of "penis envy." In his piece, "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality" (1905), Freud claims that, "when little girls discover that little boys have penises and they don't, they are overcome with jealousy, even wishing to have penises ... themselves" (qtd. in Stevens 215). Offred does not envy Commander Waterford's penis; she envies his male privilege. Offred also envies Commander Waterford because he obtains the power of the Word due to his maleness. In *Ugly Feelings* (2005), Sianne Ngai references the unpleasantness of envy by examining it through a feminist lens. She asserts that envy becomes "uglified to such an extent that it becomes shameful to the subject who experiences it, envy also becomes stripped of its potential critical agency—as an ability to recognize ... and respond to, potentially real and institutionalized forms of inequality" (129). Ngai's theory of envy aligns with Offred's envy of Commander Waterford's literary privilege. Offred, who resides in an environment of slow death, has been stripped of her agency. In taking for granted her former reading and writing privileges, she falls victim to her envy. Aunt Lydia's

use of the phrase “pen is envy” echoes Ngai’s concept of shame. Aunt Lydia, in “uglifying” the concept of the Word, removes the agency usually associated with the feeling of envy in an attempt to establish the power dynamic between the handmaids and their oppressors.

After she annotates the phrase *nolite te bastardes carborundorum*, Commander Waterford explains the meaning it holds, or rather, lacks. He cackles, “[t]hat’s not real Latin ... that’s just a joke,” consequently shattering Offred’s spirit (186). The phrase unites Offred with the previous handmaid of the house, providing her with a sense of comfort. She prompts him further about the meaning behind it, to which he states, “[i]t meant, ‘Don’t let the bastards grind you down’” (187). The phrase becomes ironic for Offred. Bearing in mind that the previous handmaid of the household had etched the phrase into Offred’s current closet, Offred understands that the odd relationship she has with the Commander is not an anomaly. In discovering the cruel joke behind it, Commander Waterford successfully “grinds her down.” Offred realizes the gravity of her disposability and the hopelessness of constantly being ground into a state of weariness.

Offred continues to probe Commander Waterford about the previous handmaid of the household in an attempt to discover the reason behind her absence. Commander Waterford states, “[s]he hanged herself ... that’s why we had the light fixture removed” (187). This news debilitates her, as she grasps the severity of the relationship she has been subjected to. Offred has no freedom here. What little bit of power she manages to wield becomes beholden to Commander Waterford’s mercy. Every scrabble game, book, and pen becomes a tool of control for him, and Offred finds herself reduced to a pawn. She discovers an “upsetting scene of living” in the form of Commander Waterford’s deceitful freedoms (Berlant 761). The death of the

previous handmaid brings into context the senselessness of seeking autonomy from Commander Waterford. It becomes apparent that liberation from oppression and weariness lies not in the Commander, but within Offred herself.

Oryx and Crake's power dynamic differs slightly from Commander Waterford and Offred's relationship. Although Crake's oppressive tendencies may not be as blatant, they remain evident. Oryx is sent to Crake as a student prostitute. Her sole purpose is to provide him with sex so that Crake retains focus while in school. Martín argues that Crake "behaves in a patronizing manner towards women in general, and towards Oryx in particular ... he will give Oryx what he believes Oryx needs, not what she naively considers she needs" (179). Crake entrusts Oryx with distributing the BlyssPluss pills to the masses. Martín argues that he does so to exact "revenge on the men who abused her as a child and young woman" (179). However, Oryx does not desire revenge. Oryx alienates herself from the trauma of sex by normalizing her relationship to it. Crake decides to avenge her based on an assumption that does not align with Oryx's stances. His patriarchal view of Oryx's situation stifles her agency, which becomes clear when she discovers his plan to utilize her for pill distribution. She, quite literally, becomes a vehicle for Crake's sinister needs. Oryx's regulation of sex coupled with her wearied state eventually leads to her death, which therefore establishes the potential for finality in weariness.

Corrosive and patriarchal power structures thrive in the realm of weariness. As Oryx and Offred descend into chronic fatigue, the power structures that surround them grow exponentially. Weariness becomes dangerous when one normalizes extraordinary events, and fatal when one becomes blind to such normalization. Oryx loses her life because of her carefree relationship with sex, and Offred and Oryx both lose their agency due to the corrosive power structures that

oppress them. Both Oryx and Offred, in alienating themselves from their sexualized work, are defined by their wearied states. Although weariness can be fatal, it does not have to be. The next chapter of this thesis explores the notion of wordplay as a defense mechanism. In exploring wordplay, the finality of weariness can be quelled, if one retains the ability to cope.

CHAPTER TWO

“THE WORD”: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF GAMES AND WORDPLAY IN MARGARET ATWOOD’S DYSTOPIAS

If knowledge is power, power is also knowledge, and a large factor in their subordinate position is the fairly systematic ignorance patriarchy imposes upon women.

—Kate Millett

Introduction

Offred and Oryx find it nearly impossible to survive due to the oppression they experience in the aggressively patriarchal societies of *Oryx and Crake* and *The Handmaid’s Tale*. To forestall the loss of agency and combat weariness, one must first locate and establish tactics for survival against corrosive ideologies. Wordplay, or the “witty exploitation of the meanings and ambiguities of words, especially in puns,” allows room for ambiguity in a lexically oppressive society (“Wordplay Lexico”). The puns in *The Handmaid’s Tale* often take the form of the *double entendre* due to the fact that the dystopic society of Gilead chiefly operates by sexually exploiting women. For example, Offred’s reference to Aunt Lydia’s phrase, “Pen is Envy,” which likewise spells out the phrase “Penis Envy.” In *Oryx and Crake*, however, wordplay is used to manipulate the meanings of words in a manner that emphasizes the dystopic horrors associated with the Pleeblands, where most of the citizens in *Oryx and Crake* reside. This approach to wordplay makes it more difficult to utilize as a coping mechanism, which I will explore in greater detail in this chapter. Wordplay includes techniques such as spelling, phonetics, and semantics along with figures of speech (metaphors, similes, irony) to shift the implications of an individual word or phrase (literaryterms.net). In his book, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, Johan Huizinga claims that, for human societies, “play is

more than a mere physiological phenomenon or a psychological reflex ... It is a *significant* function—that is to say, there is some sense to it” (1). Play is not a senseless practice. It has the potential to transcend societal norms, as the rules of play are often versatile and malleable.

This chapter engages with the significance of wordplay in contemporary societies in order to analyze the importance of word play within *dystopic* societies. It begins by examining how Offred takes advantage of the ambiguity of words. She rearranges them in a manner that adds a layer of comic relief and perversity to an unfortunate situation in order to disarm it. This tactic is extremely effective due to the fine line between comedy and tragedy. In the essay “Comedy Has Issues,” (2017) Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai explore the deceptive ambiguity of comedy. They explain that “[c]omedy’s propensity to get in trouble ... gets thrown into sharper relief when we think of it as a vernacular form. What we find comedic (or just funny) is sensitive to changing contexts. It is sensitive because the funny is always tripping over the not funny, sometimes appearing identical to it” (234). The idea that the funny and the not funny have the potential to coexist permits Offred to shift her perspective on the oppressive situations that she faces; this allows her to diffuse the severity of the trauma she constantly copes with. Berlant and Ngai go on to quote Horace Walpole and Mark Twain by stating, “[t]he world is comedy to those that think, and tragedy to those that feel,” and “[t]ragedy + Time = comedy” (238). Gilead is a civilization dependent on its ability to control the masses through trauma and dogmatism, and for some, the utilization of wordplay as comic relief becomes essential to combat wearying oppression.

I. “Two-Legged Wombs”: The Subversion of Power Structures Through Wordplay

Scholars have noted the importance of wordplay in Atwood’s oeuvre, particularly wordplay’s ability to dismantle “The Word,” or the right of the males and Aunts of Gilead to read and write, as a tool of oppression. In Joseph Andriano’s essay “The Handmaid’s Tale as Scrabble Game” (1992), he contends that “[t]he Word has only one meaning as far as [Gilead] is concerned. So our narrator, June, to undercut the Word, is constantly playing with words, bringing up multiple meanings, whose existence shatters the monolithic Word” (2). For Andriano, June’s manipulation of words and language subverts the power structures that oppress her. I would agree, and further posit that wordplay not only shatters the “monolithic Word,” it also reinforces Offred’s connection to her sense of self-worth. In *Language in the Dystopian Landscape: Wordplay, Euphemism, and Morality* (2019), Kacey Rigsby argues that, in utilizing language as a form of control, “Atwood shows ... that language at its root, down to the ways in which we refer to other people, can be politicized and shaped into propaganda for its own agenda” (18). The nation of Gilead indeed politicizes language to control the masses; for example, the term “Unwomen” serves to dehumanize the lesbian women of Gilead (119). Nevertheless, language also has the potential to be employed in an empowering manner. Towards the end of the novel, Offred states:

There is something powerful in the whispering of obscenities, about those in power. There’s something delightful about it, something naughty, secretive, forbidden, thrilling. It’s like a spell of sorts. It deflates them, reduces them to the common denominator where they can be dealt with. In the paint of the washroom cubicle someone unknown had

scratched: *Aunt Lydia sucks*. It was like a flag waved from a hilltop in rebellion. The mere idea of Aunt Lydia doing such a thing was in itself heartening. (222)

The idea that wordplay has the potential to deflate those in power allows Offred to keep her agency partially, or at least sometimes, intact. As chapter one established, weariness has the potential to be fatal. Therefore, it becomes crucial for Offred and her fellow handmaids to *lean* into the power of wordplay, because its secretive nature allows one to stay within the bounds of law and order while still retaining the ability to cope under devastating circumstances.

Throughout the narrative, Offred engages in wordplay that critiques and immobilizes the sexual perversity of the handmaid's occupation. This approach to wordplay allows Offred to engage with the reality of her position as a handmaid while simultaneously sustaining her sense of agency. By contrast, Oryx rejects wordplay and embraces the textual landscape in her dystopic society, which contributes to her unawareness regarding Crake's corrupt plan to end the human race because words, in a sense, allow her to escape her traumatic past.

Much of Offred's wordplay critiques the responsibility of the handmaid. Considering that the handmaids are valued for their ability to reproduce, it is quite fitting that much of Offred's wordplay builds on phrases that are vulvic in nature. She likens the handmaids to "two-legged wombs ... sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (136). In *Games Authors Play* (1983), Peter Hutchison asserts that functional wordplay, the type of wordplay that Offred practices most, "create[s] situational humour," which adds a layer of absurdity to a situation or event, thereby diffusing it (18). For example, during Aunt Lydia's speech about the value of the handmaid, Offred critiques Aunt Lydia's ironic stance on patriarchal ownership. Aunt Lydia comments, "A thing is valued ... only if it is rare and hard to get. We want you to be valued girls ... Think of

yourselves as pearls” (114). Aunt Lydia wants to instill a sense of purpose within the handmaids by likening them to pearls that are, typically, only accessible to those with status. Offred returns, “We are hers to define, we must suffer her adjectives. I think about pearls. Pearls are congealed oyster spit” (114). Offred, by commenting that pearls are “oyster spit,” undermines this claim to specialness. She takes the pearl metaphor, strips it of its luster, and renders it banal. Offred realizes the deceit embedded in Aunt Lydia’s use of the simile, and thereby works to dismantle it by way of the bathetic fall.

Offred dismantles Aunt Lydia’s power by reframing Aunt Lydia’s language. The vulvic imagery of the pearls and oyster shells, which resemble the clitoris and the vulva of the vagina, suggest two organs that define the handmaids’ existence. By critiquing Aunt Lydia’s metaphor, Offred defuses the notion that the handmaids are valued as women, emphasizing instead that the handmaids remain dehumanized slaves. Offred understands that the handmaids do not contain value *themselves*, they are valuable due to their *fertility*. The oyster, read as vulvic, represents desire more than it represents reproduction. Here, Offred is pointing out something like a cognitive dissonance. Gilead, at first glance, claims that its chief focus is to rescue society from infertility. But Aunt Lydia’s reference of the pearl refutes and challenges this claim. It is quite clear that Aunt Lydia wants the handmaids to be *wanted*. In choosing to combat Aunt Lydia’s skewed view of the handmaid, Offred works to protect her agency.

When Aunt Lydia further attempts to convince the handmaids of the high status of their positions, Offred once again subverts Aunt Lydia’s words to bring them back into perspective. When commenting on the handmaids’ privilege of having access to “porridge with cream and brown sugar,” Aunt Lydia remarks, “[t]here’s a war going on, things are rationed. You are

spoiled girls” (89). Aunt Lydia wants the handmaids to celebrate their new positions. To get them to do so, she attempts to brainwash them by way of flattery. Offred comments that Aunt Lydia’s eyes “twinkled, as if rebuking a kitten. Naughty puss” (89). Here, Offred creates a pun that likewise functions as a *double entendre* between the word “puss” and “pussycat” or “pussy.” By comparing the handmaids to kittens, Offred suggests that the handmaids, like cats, are animals that society attempts to domesticate but can never truly succeed in fully domesticating. But she also implies, since another definition of “pussy” refers to the vagina, that the handmaids are valued for their sexual organs. Aunt Lydia’s twinkling eyes suggest that she finds pleasure in belittling the handmaids in this way, and that she is aware of the perversity of their position. Offred understands Aunt Lydia’s tactic, and therefore constantly reminds herself of the reality of her work in order to make it more difficult to normalize her traumatic existence.

Offred’s use of wordplay is crucial to her survival while in the Waterford household. Here, Offred faces extreme hardship in the form of the Ceremony and the suffocating expectations of the Waterfords. Wordplay is her chief coping tactic while under their surveillance. In one example, while pondering her purpose as a handmaid, Offred creates a pun, *double entendre* and homonym, all simultaneously, with the words “lie” and “lay.” She states, “[t]he night is mine, my own time, to do with as I will, as long as I am quiet. As long as I don’t move. As long as I lie still. The difference between *lie* and *lay*. Lay is always passive. Even men used to say, I’d like to get laid. Though sometimes they said, I’d like to lay her” (37). The word “lie” can mean to fib or, alternatively, to press oneself along the ground. To “lay” refers to placing an object onto a surface or another object, but it can also mean successfully engaging with a partner sexually. In reference to Commander Waterford and the Ceremony, Offred is

expected to “lie” to herself to transform a horrific event into a normal one, while the Commander “lays” her down and likewise gets “laid.”

Offred’s examination of the passive/active aspect of “lie” and “lay” harkens to the ownership that Commander Waterford has over her. The term “lay” must include an object. When the Commander “lays” Offred down on the bed during the Ceremony, he objectifies her and her womb all at once. Furthermore, the Commander is “laying” her or having sex, an act that becomes possessive when performing rape. When Offred compares the terms lie and lay, she trivializes the words associated with sexual activity. She cannot “lie” herself down, she is forced to be “laid” down by the Commander. To “get laid” or “lay someone,” in a perfect world, requires consent. Therefore, it is fascinating that Offred references getting laid when in reality she is the victim of ceremonial rape. At first glance, it appears as if Offred is lying to herself about the monstrosity of the Ceremony. However, she does so in a way that allows her within proximity to the monolithic Word. By locating a way to attach herself to the monolithic Word while simultaneously examining the intricacies of those words, Offred stabilizes herself in a debilitating environment while effectively critiquing the patriarchal society she resides in.

Commander Waterford’s office is a controlling environment, which explains why much of Offred’s wordplay takes place here. The scrabble game that Commander Waterford and Offred play symbolizes Offred’s struggle to retain her agency and his struggle to divorce her from it. Adriano references the benefits of Offred’s wordplay in the form of the scrabble game. He contends that Offred, or June, “asserts her voice in yet another way; in a broader context, she continuously asserts her voice in the speaking of her tale. She also makes the words valance, quince, and zygote ... but in the context of her own tale” (4). When Commander Waterford and

Offred play, Offred creates words that refer to her experience as a handmaid. She explains, “[w]e play two games. *Larynx* I spell. *Valance*. *Quince*. *Zygote* ... This is freedom, an eyeblink of it. *Limp*, I spell. *Gorge*. What a luxury” (139). Here, it appears as if Offred is choosing to spell out the narrative of the handmaid by literally playing with words. The “larynx” alludes to the silencing of the handmaids by forbidding them to read and write. The term “valance” refers to the drapery of the bed frame where the Ceremony takes place. When used in conjunction with the terms “quince” and “zygote,” the context of the terms transform. The “Quince” is a small tree that bears the quince fruit, and a “zygote” is a fertilized ovum. “Limp” can refer to an injury, or it can mean a lifeless vessel or object. Here, the term “limp” appears to refer to the absence of arousal in male genitalia. If a penis is limp, the handmaid will not be impregnated. When Offred plays this word in the game, she challenges the reality of the Ceremony and establishes her desire to evade pregnancy. Finally, the term “gorge” usually means to eat excessively or fill oneself up, but it can also mean the opposite; for example, when the term gorge refers to a geographic location such as a canyon. Therefore, the term gorge also alludes to the vagina. When placed together, the words signify the silent handmaids and the all-powerful Commanders, who must gorge their limp organs, or fail to utilize their limp organs to enter the gorge of the handmaid, under the canopy of a bed to help the handmaid bear the fruit of the child.

By playing a game and offering words that speak Offred’s truth, she is able to explore her narrative in a way that prevents her from hopelessness. Adriano further explains that “June takes pleasure in the tiles themselves ... she spells the word limp, enjoying the making of the word, even though the word itself comments on the nature of her freedom” (4). Adriano’s theory that Offred enjoys the act of making the word more than what the word signifies is accurate. I argue

that the act of playing words that represent one's experience provides one with a sense of empowerment, especially given the fact that Offred beats the Commander in the first game. Offred's choice of words forces him to acknowledge the hardship associated with her sexual occupation. Her ability to speak her truth through words is cathartic, which allows her to continue to persevere.

As Offred begins to spend more time with the Commander, she musters up the courage to inquire about the phrase "*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum.*" As she writes the phrase and feels the pen between her fingers, she recalls Aunt Lydia's comment "Pen Is Envy," a motto frequently touted in the Red Center. This Freudian pun delivers two meanings at once. All the women in Gilead envy the "pen" itself, or the power to wield the Word, and "penis envy," or the organ that all the women envy in Gilead. While the latter may not be true, Offred's pun subverts the power of Aunt Lydia and Commander Waterford simultaneously. The monolithic Word is a privilege, and Offred works to dismantle the power of the Word that is enjoyed by Aunt Lydia and Commander Waterford alike by likening it to a debase Freudian joke. The result is empowering for Offred, as it diminishes the hold that both authoritative figures hold over her.

The backdrop of Serena Joy's serene garden might seem at first to contrast the oppressive environment of the Waterford household. Upon taking a closer look, however, the garden mirrors the oppressive environment of the home. While examining the contents of the garden, Offred utilizes similes, metaphors and irony to establish a passage that resembles a call to arms:

Well. Then we had the irises, rising beautiful and cool on their tall stalks, like blown glass, like pastel water momentarily frozen in a splash, light blue, light mauve, and the darker ones, velvet and purple, black cat's ears in the sun, indigo shadow, and the

bleeding hearts, so female in shape it was a surprise they'd not long since been rooted out. There is something subversive about this garden of Serena Joy's, a sense of buried things bursting upwards, wordlessly, into the light, as if to point, to say: Whatever is silenced will clamor to be heard, though silently. A Tennyson garden, heavy with scent, languid; the return of the word *swoon*. (153)

This passage, filled with floral imagery, is yonic in nature. The flowers represent female sex organs and the concept of "deflowering." The passage grows in perversity when Offred references the "black cat's ears in the sun," which can be taken to mean the female pudendum raised in the air. The "bleeding hearts" Offred refers to symbolize a fertile, menstruating vagina. The fact that they are being "rooted out" or removed symbolizes Gilead's desire to forestall the handmaid's menstrual cycles, which is the first indicator of pregnancy. Furthermore, the flowers "bursting upwards into the light" signal a subtle act of defiance. Offred references the word "swoon" at the end of the passage, an act that is often considered to be feminine in nature. The term swoon can mean to become enraptured or to be within a state of ecstasy ("Swoon" def. A.1,B.1). Both definitions are orgasmic in nature. When Offred references the *return* of the word swoon, she appears to look towards the return of consent. Because the Ceremony involves rape, orgasm, in theory, becomes divorced from the act of sexual intercourse. The return of the word "swoon" would signify a return to the enjoyment of sex. In other words, Offred wishes to have the power to "lie" herself down as opposed to being forced to "lay." By utilizing figurative language, Offred makes it clear that she values her agency and is willing to do anything to keep it intact.

II. “Paradice Lost”: Sexual Dominion and the Fall of Oryx

While Offred manipulates words in a provocative, often comedic manner that simultaneously provides comfort, Oryx struggles to utilize language in ways that empower her. The dystopian society in which Oryx resides does not utilize the Word as a control mechanism. Instead, this society “mutates” words to reflect the disturbing realities of the dystopian landscape. For example, the Chickieknob, a neologism that describes the genetically modified chickens that lack heads and brain functions, represents the horrors of a society that mutates creatures to maximize economic profit, and Maddaddam, a palindrome and the name of the organization of internet game masters, represents an order of corrupt scientists who invent creations like the Chickieknob. Moreover, the names Oryx and Crake are code names, which are another sort of language game. In “*Oryx and Crake: A Lexicotopia Translated*” (2007), Vladimir Z. Jovanovic argues that “[t]he lexical ‘freaks’ and the ‘malformations’ in the language are there to strongly suggest the violations of the basic substance of nature ... it is only understandable that the names and words designating the items from extralinguic reality should be reflecting reality itself” (196). Jovanovic’s reference to malformations and deformities within the textual landscape of *Oryx and Crake* emphasizes the grotesqueness and unnaturalness associated with the language of the Pleeblands.

The words used in the Pleeblands and Paradice are a suffocating reminder of the morally corrupt society that Oryx and Jimmy call home. However, Oryx is blind to the corruption in this “lexitopical” landscape, which might help explain why she lacks the desire to subvert it. Paradice is not Oryx’s original home. For Oryx, who grew up in a village with illiterate inhabitants, Paradice represents a fresh start, a place where she might leave her previous life of sex work

behind. Although Oryx is able to start anew, the acquisition of the English language and literacy by way of her previous slave owner, Jack, connects her to the trauma of her former life. Gloria Anzaldua's "Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza" grapples with the struggles one experiences when belonging to two cultures simultaneously. Anzaldua references the "*mestiza*," or the mixture of races, to explain the complexity of being "[c]radled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all ... cultures and their value systems" (2212). Although it is unclear if Oryx is multi-racial, she straddles two cultures at once: a culture built on sex and a culture built on corrupt scientific progress. Literacy, in a sense, functions as the threshold that Oryx has to cross to become part of the culture built on corrupt scientific progress. Oryx creates this threshold when she trades her body "[t]o speak English, and to read English words" (141). But Oryx's inability to fully cross into the culture built on scientific progress prevents her from recognizing, and subverting, the sexual oppression she encounters in the form of Crake and Jack, the man teaches her to read and write.

Oryx experiences sexual oppression throughout the entirety of her life, especially when she comes into contact with Jack and his sex garage. Because sex is all Oryx has known since childhood, she is unable to identify when she is being oppressed. In *Sexual Politics* (1970), Kate Millett discusses the political nature of power dynamics built on the basis of sex. She contends that "[w]hat goes largely unexamined, often even unacknowledged (yet is institutionalized nonetheless) in our social order, is the birthright priority whereby males rule females" and goes on to argue that "[h]owever muted its present appearance may be, sexual dominion obtains nevertheless as perhaps the most pervasive ideology of our culture and provides its most fundamental concept of power" (25). Oryx is grateful to Jack for teaching her to read and write

and does not regret having sex with him; but the sexual transaction that must take place for Oryx to learn to read suggests the presence of coercion, which is an extremely corrupt control tactic. If Oryx had been aware of the oppression to which she was being subjected, she likely would not have allowed Crake to manipulate her.

By the time Oryx meets Crake, she is completely numb to sexual oppression and manipulative behavior. Therefore, she happily accepts her position as his sex slave and the teacher of the Crakers, Crake's genetically engineered race of humans. Crake's and Oryx's purely sexual relationship is apparent from the start. When Jimmy asks Crake about the nature of Oryx's position he initially implies that he hires Oryx to "offer her a more official position," but Crake reveals his true intentions when he states, "I have to say she's a devoted employee" and smirks at Jimmy (310). Here, Crake makes it clear that he values his sexual, not emotional, relationship with Oryx. The presence of the Student Services organization emphasizes the importance of sex in the dystopic world of *Oryx and Crake*. The organization's purpose is to provide sex workers to stressed students for comfort, which is why they approach Crake to assist him in finding a slave. Crake asks them to make "private arrangements" to locate Oryx (310). Crake remembers her from the pornographic film he watches with Jimmy via the online Extinctathon gateway. Once Crake makes his way to Paradise, he offers Oryx "a more official position ... with a lot of perks" (310). The perks that Oryx receives serve as another form of coercion. They mirror Jack's coercive strategy to use knowledge as a bribe. This tactic is extremely effective because Oryx believes that she is receiving just treatment and stands behind Crake whole-heartedly. She insists, "I believe in Crake, I believe in his ... vision. He wants to make the world a better place. This is what he's always telling me" (321-322). However, Crake's

mission to make the world a better place is a ruse, and Oryx's unwavering belief in him leads to the end of her life and all of humanity.

Crake decides to end the world by way of the Blysspluss pill. The pill protects the user against sexually transmitted diseases, provides an endless supply of libido, prolongs youth, and acts as a source of birth control (which Crake does not tell the public) (294). Blysspluss is sex in a bottle, and Oryx's insouciant relationship with sex makes her the perfect candidate to distribute these pills. Crake's final act of manipulation occurs when Oryx distributes the pills to the masses. When Oryx realizes that the pills are lethal, she is devastated. She laments, "[i]t was the pills. It was in those pills ... I was selling ... [t]hose pulls were supposed to help people!" (325). Here, Oryx makes it clear that she believes that an endless supply of sex for all is a necessity. Oryx's inability to realize the dangerous reality of Crake's plan mirrors her inability to locate the sexual power dynamics and sexual oppression to which she has been subjected. To Oryx, sex is normal. It is all she has ever known. But by the time Oryx comes to the realization that she has been manipulated and misled, it is all too late.

Although wordplay has the potential to keep one's agency alive, it becomes irrelevant if one is blind to the blatant presence of oppression and corruption. Offred is fully aware of the corruptness of Gilead; therefore, she is able to practice techniques to forestall and combat the oppression she faces. Oryx, however, is blind to Jack's and Crake's oppressive behavior. By the time she realizes Crake's sinister plans, it is too late. Coping mechanisms are only effective when the oppressed are aware that they are being oppressed. And so, it is crucial to be privy to injustice and corruption as soon as it begins to become apparent in society. If not, dystopic societies like those present in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* might become a reality.

CONCLUSION

One's life has value so long as one attributes value to the life of others.

—Simone de Beauvoir

In Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, both female protagonists must find a way to survive in societies that oppress women and force them to exploit their bodies. This exploitation forces Oryx and Offred into a state of weariness, where one becomes separated from one's agency due to an aversion to negative experience. Although Gilead is a nation where women have no autonomy, Offred finds ways to exert her power by subverting the power of the Word through wordplay. This tactic is effective because it allows Offred to disarm the tyrannical ideologies of her oppressors in a manner that allows her to keep her life. Oppositely, Oryx is unable to locate any sense of autonomy or practice coping mechanisms because she fails to understand that she is being oppressed and used for her body. Oryx believes that trading sex for knowledge and literacy is necessary, and she does not blame her oppressors for abusing her because she receives an education because of it. However, Oryx's inability to fully understand the politics and corruption associated with sex slavery allows Crake to manipulate and discard her. By the time Oryx discovers Crake's plan, the world is already in shambles. In *Oryx and Crake*, Paradise and the Pleeblands fall, but only after the world comes to an end. The women of Gilead are able to persevere, but the oversexed nation of the Pleeblands crumbles due to their inability to understand and cope with the presence of corrosive power structures.

Weariness resembles Berlant's theory of "slow death." It consists of "the condition of being worn out by the act of reproducing life" (759). Although weariness appears to be an inconsequential affect, its danger lies in its mundanity. Victims of excessive weariness might

normalize traumatic experiences to divert the pain associated with trauma. Such a tactic is dangerous, as it divorces one from one's will to cope or persevere during times of hardship. While in the wearied state, victims are easier to manipulate. If they do not conform, they are punished, and the cycle continues.

The oppressive ideologies in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* are nearly inescapable, but both novels' textual landscapes allow the citizens that inhabit them to utilize language, or not, to subvert the despotic nature of language. Language is a powerful tool. Having access to literacy and language instills one with a sense of power. Stripping one of that power is devastating, because language is how society makes sense of the world. Therefore, wordplay becomes a powerful coping mechanism in societies that forbid language and literacy. Moreover, the thin line between comedy and tragedy allows one to utilize puns and figurative language to disarm the authority of those in power who have the privilege of utilizing language. For example, Offred's frequent use of the bathetic fall to subvert Aunt Lydia's teachings. All things considered, it is important to note that the use of wordplay as a coping mechanism is only effective if the user knows *why* they are coping and is aware of the oppression they are experiencing. If not, one becomes blind to manipulation, and, like Oryx, has the potential to fall victim to weariness.

Considering that there is little to no scholarship on weariness as an affect, particularly within dystopic or speculative fiction, future scholarship would do well to look into the impact of corrosive power structures on the oppressed and the full spectrum of emotional affects one experiences under crippling oppression. The effect of oppression is not linear and each person grapples with it in different ways. Therefore, it is important that future scholarship explores the

many ways that society navigates oppression. This thesis explores the manner in which women are oppressed in dystopic societies and what happens to them during the wearied state; however, it neglects to engage with racial oppression and its affects. Considering that racism and marginalization are issues that society grapples with in the current day, it would be extremely beneficial to explore and examine cultures that are oppressed and treated unjustly because of their race.

Corrosive power structures persist today, which is why novels like *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* are so important. We live in a society that is in a state of constant flux, with new laws and regulations constantly coming into form. The societies in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* are fictitious, but they are not completely absurd realities. These societies have the potential to exist, and even thrive, if one chooses to fall prey to weariness and normalize the hardships one faces. It is so important that we remain aware, stay alert, and choose to uplift those who are currently marginalized. People are much easier to control when they are separated, which allows corrosive power structures to thrive and secure positions of power. If we are able to cope with our weariness, we are able to persevere. If one maintains the will to carry on, there is hope, even if it is wearied.

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