

**Language, Identity, and Oppression: Reading Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* as Slave Narrative**

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By *CANDACEMARTIN*

Thesis Director  
GWEN ASHBURN

Thesis Advisor  
LORENA RUSSELL

Language is an extremely powerful medium; Margaret Atwood understands this power, harnessing it in her dystopic novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. The story follows Offred, the main character and narrator, as she struggles with her new position as human incubator; it is a "memoir" about what happens when an oppressive, patriarchal society denies the voice of its female population. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred is essentially a slave. Whereas the African American slaves of antebellum America were condemned according to the color of their skin, Offred's judgment stems from her gender. Like her African American counterparts, Offred's oppressors deny her access to language, thereby fragmenting her sense of self and keeping her in a position of powerlessness. By telling her story, Offred parallels the African American slave narrative, using language to reconnect with her identity and, in effect, rebel against the society in which she lives. Thus Atwood mirrors her *Tale* against the structure and content of the slave narrative in order to illustrate the importance of language in establishing identity, power, and authority.

Historically speaking, the storyteller has always been pivotal role in resisting oppression, especially for women. Notes Karen F. Stein in her book, *Margaret Atwood Revisited*, "Women's stories, in particular have, throughout history, often contained unauthorized and dangerous knowledge.... For them narrative is a life-and-death concern" (2). Stein argues that Atwood has a preoccupation with storytelling and the role of the storyteller in order to ask the reader key questions, including "What would happen if we heard the stories of marginalized, usually silent people, especially women? What stories do women tell about themselves? What happens when their stories run counter to

literary conventions or society's expectations?" (1). Such questions are extremely important when one considers the emotional and political implications present within the very act of storytelling. Hogsette helps to answer some of these questions by focusing on the "self-liberating potential" of storytelling in relation to Atwood's novels, claiming that "even in a politically oppressive regime, women may be able to reclaim their identity, freedom, and sexuality through language and storytelling" (263, 264).

Thus the powerful role of storytelling emerges, a role that is pivotal to any analysis of *The Handmaid's Tale*; Offred is a woman in a male society and her struggle, like Stein says, is one of "life-and-death." Forbidden to read or write, Offred is, in effect, a slave, a "two-legged womb" whose sole purpose is to bear children in an increasingly barren world (Atwood 136). By telling her story and speaking out in the face of her enforced illiteracy, Offred fulfills the "self-liberating potential" addressed by Hogsette.

However, women have not been the only marginalized, oppressed group of people throughout history. In fact, when reading *The Handmaid's Tale*, a connection emerges between Offred's enslavement and the enslavement of her African American counterparts. *Incidents in the Life of a Slavegirl*, by Harriet Jacobs, best exemplifies the connections between slave narratives and Atwood's *Tale*. Like Offred, Jacobs is a slave whose white, male oppressors deny her access to language. Ultimately, both women fight back in the only way they know how: by telling their stories. In the end, the protagonists tell their stories for a number of reasons: 1) to subvert the authority of their oppressors, re-establishing their own authority in the process, 2) to reconnect with their true identities via self-empowerment and self-ownership and 3) to gain support for their

cause. However, in order to accomplish these goals, both women must first harness the power of the written word.

In the end, it all comes back to language. After all, says Ildney Cavalcanti, "Futuristic dystopias," such as *The Handmaid's Tale*, "are stories *about* language" (152, emphasis mine). Cavalcanti goes on to address the role of the contemporary feminist dystopia as "instrument of both (men's) domination and (women's) liberation." She illustrates the five basic ways that men have traditionally silenced women: 1) through "strongly regulated forms of address," 2) by "enforced use of formulaic or contrived speech," 3) by denying "access to public speech, reading and/or writing," 4) via restriction to "representation in public forums," and finally 5) by simply cutting out the women's tongues (152). Atwood's text pays particular attention to numbers two and three of Cavalcanti's argument, denying her protagonist access to both written and spoken forms of language. In doing so, Atwood creates a protagonist whose own struggle with literacy mirrors the struggle of her African American predecessors.

In both cases, the dominant group has used restriction to language in order to objectify, and therefore dehumanize, the subject. In her article, "African American Slave Narratives: Literacy, the Body, Authority," Lindon Barret quotes Henry Louis Gates, Jr. when he says that "sheer literacy was the very commodity that separated animal from human being, slave from citizen, object from subject" (418). In this scenario, Offred and the African Americans of the 19<sup>th</sup> century are both illiterate objects, slaves to their respective dominant society. Thus the parallel between *The Handmaid's Tale* and the African American slave narrative, best exemplified by Jacobs, reveals itself, both in

content as well as in structure. Contextually speaking, several themes continually emerge between the two texts: namely, the connections between language, power, the body, and identity.

The purpose of language is, in essence, to transfer information from one place or person to another. Transferors of knowledge exist as both givers and receivers: speakers, listeners, writers, and readers—all exist in order to give or receive knowledge via language. In addition, says Bonnie St. Andrews in her book *Forbidden Fruit*, "...the desire for knowledge is, assuredly, a human one" (ix). Still, despite this universal need for knowledge and, in effect, language, history has proven time and time again that language can be manipulated and denied according to the whim of those in power. By controlling access to language, states Mario Klarer "the leading class is able to consolidate the basis of its monolithic state and keep all others in their assigned positions" (Orality). Margaret Atwood expands on this idea by addressing the relationship between voice and power: "The aim of all such suppression is to silence the voice, abolish the word, so that the only voices and words left are those of the ones in power" (qtd in Klarer). In both texts, *the Handmaid's Tale* and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, voice and narrative are inextricably connected; the narrative is essentially a means of reclaiming the voice that has previously been silenced. "Pain," says Kimberly Drake, "destroys the victim's voice, his/her ability to express him or self in *words*"; Offred and Jacob's stories, then, are an attempt to reclaim that voice, a chance to speak out and finally be heard (91).

Oftentimes, those in the position of powerlessness manage to cope by telling

stories of their own. African slaves of pre-Civil War America saw literacy, both written and spoken, as "crucial to their quest for freedom" (Drake 92). For the same reasons that their oppressors forbade it, the African American slaves craved language. Jacobs speaks of the power of language in the first chapter of her narrative, at which time she recounts the death and betrayal of her former mistress. Jacobs, only ten at the time, assumes that her loving and benevolent mistress will set her free; instead, she is "bequeathed...to her sister's daughter, a child of five years old" (8). Though angered and hurt by the announcement, Jacobs adds that "she taught me to read and spell; and for this privilege, which so rarely falls to the lot of a slave, I bless her memory" (8). Thus, despite the fact that Harriet Jacobs has just been sentenced a lifetime of pain and servitude, she blesses her former mistress because of the lifelong gift she receives from her: the priceless gift of literacy.

Mirroring this same struggle with voice in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood creates Offred, a character whose own act of storytelling gives a voice to the otherwise silent generation of women around her. Offred's story is a story of warning, a self-conscious representation of a marginalized society. In fact, it is precisely the naive, inexperienced tone of Offred's voice that "makes *The Handmaid's Tale* credible" (Freibert qtd in Deer 94). Her voice is colloquial yet distant; she is a neutral observer with bursts of subjectivity. For example, Offred begins the novel by describing her surroundings: "The floor was of varnished wood, with stripes and circles painted on it...". She then goes on to personalize her observation by including the senses: "I could smell, faintly like an afterimage, the pungent scent of sweat," and finally, Offred includes a memory, a part of

herself: "I remember that yearning, for something that was always about to happen..." (Atwood 3). Offred tries to be objective, to simply record the events as she remembers them; however, as the story progresses, her observations get more and more subjective. Hogsette makes the explicit connection between Offred's voice and the story that she tells: "by telling her story, Offred reconstructs her subjectivity and articulates her own alternate perception of reality" (264). Thus over the course of the novel, as Offred's subjectivity increases, her voice grows even stronger.

However, this voice is continuously silenced by Gilead, the theocratic, male-dominated society in which Offred now lives. Through Offred's story, Atwood provides the reader with a tale about the influence of language upon the individual and his/her larger society. Because Gilead, "know[ing] the power of words," forbids Offred to read or write, "personal talk is the only means left for communication and information transfer" (Andriano, Scrabble; Klarer, Orality). Unfortunately for Offred, even "personal talk" is restricted. From the very beginning of her enslavement, Offred learns that to speak, to exert oneself in any way, is considered blasphemy. In order to convey information at The Red Center, the training facility for Handmaids, the women "[learn] to whisper almost without sound" (4). Offred goes on to explain that "it was best not to speak unless [the Aunts] asked you a direct question" (13). Such a "speak only when spoken to" oral structure is especially reminiscent of slave societies of the past. Harriet Jacobs recounts an incident with her master, Dr. Flint, during which time he strikes her and she bursts out in anger, "How I despise you!" Following the outburst, both parties are shocked into silence, not because of the physical abuse, but because the slave dared

speak to the master in such a manner. "Do you know what you have said?" asks her master. "Do you know that I have a right to do as I like with you,~that I can kill you, if I please?" When Harriet attempts to reply, Mr. Flint shouts, "Silence! By heavens girl you forget yourself too far!" (39-40). This scene is pivotal in *Life of a Slave Girl* because it illustrates the direct role of language, even oral language, in establishing and supporting power structures.

Thus, not only is there a hierarchy around when to speak, there is also limitation on *how*. Like Cavalcanti explained, restricted speech is yet another means of silencing a subordinated population; even when speech is permitted, it is to be scripted and forced. The typical mode of discourse between Handmaids is a fine example of the limited capacity for speech in oppressed societies such as Gilead. Such a conversation would go as follows: "Blessed be the fruit.. .May the Lord open.. .The war is going well.. .Praise be.. .We've been sent great weather.. .Which I receive with joy..." (19). To sway from such language would be to draw attention to oneself and, in effect, become targeted as an enemy of the state.

Later in the novel, Offred recounts her secret rendezvous with Nick, the house chauffeur and servant, explaining how both subconsciously subverted to another form of scripted language, a language of flirtation and false coyness, a language only present in old movies from the 1940s. Offred, noticing their shift in conversation, explains the purpose of such banter: "to keep the core of yourself out of reach, enclosed, protected" (262). Thus scripted language accomplishes several things: for starters, it controls the flow of knowledge from one person to another, thus empowering the powerful and

subordinating the powerless. Secondly, from the perspective of the subject, it is also a way of removing oneself from the situation; it is, as Offred says, a means of protection.

Still, Offred cannot help but yearn for the satisfaction of discussion, of simply talking with another human being. As a Handmaid, Offred lives in virtual isolation. The little contact that she has with another person is stiff and, as stated above, scripted. Upon thinking back on 'small talk' of former times, remembering phrases, adages, and the like, Offred says to herself, "How I used to despise such talk. Now I long for it. At least it was talk. An exchange, of sorts" (Atwood 11). However, all of this changes when the Commander, male head of the household and formidable leader of Gilead, calls Offred to his study. Suddenly, Offred finds herself being asked questions, real questions, with the implication of response. Says Offred, "I can feel speech backing up inside me, it's so long since I've really talked with anyone... I want more" (185). Still, Offred understands the temptation behind such implied freeness; it is, like other things, an illusion. "There's no doubt about who holds the real power," Offred reminds herself (136).

Unfortunately, the leaders of Gilead, men like the Commander, extend the boundaries of their power beyond restricted speech, denying women basic access to the written word: they are not allowed to read or write. Because of this restricted access to language, Offred is continually preoccupied with words. While sitting in her room alone, thoughts drift aimlessly through Offred's mind. Oftentimes, these thoughts drift to etymological constructions, analyzing the words "chair" and "household," or distinguishing the difference between "lay" and "lie" (110, 81, 37). It is while in that very room that she encounters the phrase that will come to serve as a kind of mantra for

Offred, adding a sense of hope to her otherwise dismal existence. The phrase, "Nolite te bastardes carborundorum," is a Latin joke, which Offred later discovers translates as "don't let the bastards grind you down" (a phrase that I am sure even Harriet Jacobs would find insightful!) (52). Even before Offred discovers their true meaning, she finds "a small joy" in the words, sometimes repeating them to herself over and over again (52). The words, inscribed into a closet corner by the room's previous inhabitant, are for the most part, just that: empty words in some foreign language, words without any true meaning. Yet Offred manages to attach her own meaning to the inscription, giving it a power only present within herself. Much of this power comes from the connection Offred feels with the writer of the hidden phrase, a fellow Handmaid from another time. Thus sometimes the very act of writing, of recording a time and a place, a feeling or thought, is enough to inspire a significance all its own. Like the inscription in the closet, Offred finds a deep connection with anything written by another person. While at the Red Center, which happens to be located in an abandoned school, Offred lets her fingers trace over the words scraped into her desk by the hand of some distracted, lovesick teenager years before, phrases such as "J. H. loves B.P. 1954." Offred describes these engravings as feeling "incredibly ancient" like "the inscriptions.. .carved on the stone walls of caves" (113). Words have already become something of the past, a "lavish," even "immoral" activity of a "vanished civilization" (113). Still, Offred cannot help but gawk at the evidence left behind, if only because whoever wrote it "was once alive" (113). It is this simple fact that is so alluring to Offred: words represent a connection, a connection to the past and a connection to another human being. In a world

of such extreme isolation, any sort of link is cherished, no matter how small.

It is not surprising, then, that Offred begins to associate words with a physical, almost sensual, pleasure. Mid-way through the narrative, the Commander has begun setting up secret meetings with Offred, times during which the two play scrabble and the Commander attempts to suppress his own guilt by making Offred's life more "meaningful." It is during the first of these such meetings, when she encounters "this game of old women, old men...or adolescents, once, long long ago," that Offred compares words to freedom, drugs, even sex: it is a temptation, perhaps the greatest temptation of all. Suddenly, language has taken a physical form, a form that can be touched, caressed, even tasted. "The feeling is voluptuous," Offred says as she holds the "glossy counters with their smooth edges." "This is freedom, an eyeblink of it," she goes on to say. Scrabble-letters-words-language-freedom-power. Suddenly a game, simple as it may be, takes on a whole new meaning. Offred picks up a counter: "The letter C. Crisp, slightly acid on the tongue, delicious" (Atwood 139).

As Offred connects letters and words with physical sensations, she is illustrating the pivotal relationship between language and the body, a theme present throughout Atwood's novel. The body itself is especially important in *The Handmaid's Tale* simply because it is such a determining factor in the lives of so many, especially Offred, whose oppressors choose her for one reason and one reason only: because she is a young, fertile woman. Offred's body defines her, enslaving her in the process. In the beginning, her body is a source of empowerment, one thing that she thinks they cannot take away from her, something that could possibly be used to her advantage. Upon looking back to her

days at The Center, Offred speaks for her fellow Handmaids when she says, "we still had our bodies. That was our fantasy" (Atwood 4). They may have taken away their property, their family, even their self-respect, but Offred and her fellow soon-to-be Handmaids still have their bodies, their own flesh and blood. However, this empowering outlook takes on a darker form later on in the novel when, upon facing a mirror, Offred declares that "she [doesn't] want to look at something that determines [her] so completely" (63). Eventually, the body as fantasy morphs into a vision of the body as a fragile shell: "The body is so easily damaged, so easily disposed of, water and chemicals is all it is, hardly more to it than a jellyfish, drying on sand" (105). Every month Offred is forced to participate in what would easily be considered an involuntary sexual act. Just as the Commander, sole reader of The Word, controls Offred's access to language, so he controls access to her own body. Thus Offred's body becomes the source of her shame, her pain. It is no wonder, then, that Offred's view of her own body begins to take the shape of a drying jellyfish, empty and helpless, lying on an endless shore, with no help in sight.

In order to cope with such a dismal existence, Offred attempts to detach herself completely. Looking back on her sessions with the Commander, Offred speaks of "existing apart from the body," of "pretend[ing] not to be present, not in the flesh" (160). Over the course of the novel, Offred becomes more and more fragmented. Her self and her body no longer act as one, united force; instead, they are separate, often opposing, entities. At one point, Offred addresses the reader, apologizing for the pain and confusion evident throughout her story: "I'm sorry it's in fragments, like a body caught in

crossfire or pulled apart by force" (267). Thus even the structure of the novel reflects the fragmented nature of the narrator. The text, chronologically out of order and in a semi stream-of-consciousness format, is indeed in fragments. Oftentimes the narrative seems disconnected, distant from the actions or emotions present on the page. Atwood structures her novel in this manner on purpose: it gives the reader a similar sense of unease, of feeling disconnected from the essential source, just as Offred's body is disconnected from her essential self.

The body is an important part of any analysis of *The Handmaid's Tale* for a number of reasons. For starters, Atwood's protagonists typically struggle with their bodies, acting as "battlegrounds" for the socio-political struggles going on around them, "where anxieties relating to wider power structures are written into female flesh" (Davies 58). Furthermore, the body is pivotal in the establishment of ownership and authority and it plays a key role in the formation of identity. Because language is such an integral part of the developmental process, restriction to language can be detrimental to the establishment of self. For Offred and slaves such as Harriet Jacobs, the narrative is an attempt to overcome obstacles of mis-placed authority and discarded identities, thereby gaining ownership over their own bodies and reconnecting with their true selves; in both cases, language is the glue, connecting the pieces and holding everything together.

Ownership is a powerful word with powerful implications. To be owned, by another human being, is a horrifying prospect. Nevertheless, it is a fact of life for many people throughout history, oppressed women like Offred and slaves such as Harriet Jacobs. Through the lens of ownership, another connection emerges between these two

Heroines: both use sexual affairs with other men as means of reclaiming ownership over their bodies and, in effect, their selves.

Laura Tanner explicitly discusses Harriet Jacobs' relationship with Mr. Sands, an affair that inevitably brings about the wrath of her jealous master, Dr. Flint. Tanner views the affair as "a reaction against Dr. Flint's attempt to appropriate her, body and soul, as property" (416). Jacobs' sexual promiscuity is motivated by an "attempt to maintain control over her own body" (415). Tanner goes on to associate sex with freedom and, in effect, self-ownership: "There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you.... By entering into a freely chosen relationship based on 'tender feeling,' not compulsion, [Jacobs] asserts her independence as a human being" (416). It is quite possibly this self-assertion that is so infuriating to Jacobs' master. After all, slaves were not supposed to have human characteristics; they were savage animals, immune to more complex feelings and emotions. Above all, in taking a lover, Jacobs acts on her own free will, taking charge of her body—and Dr. Flint knows it. In fact, he spends the rest of the narrative desperately trying to reclaim that lost sense of authority, an authority that Jacobs has, to a degree, already begun to take as her own.

Like Jacobs, Offred experiences a similar desire to express her own free will, no matter how dangerous. Says Karen F. Stein in her book *Margaret Atwood Revisited*, "through her desire for Nick, Offred rejects Gilead's repressive culture to assert her sexuality and her personhood" (85). For the same reason that Jacobs sought out an affair of her own, Offred seeks a romantic liaison as a means of self-affirmation. Speaking of her affair with Nick, she says, "I did not do it for him but for myself entirely. I didn't

think of it as giving myself to him, because what did I have to give?" (Atwood 268). In this moment, Offred comes to a harsh realization: she has nothing to give because she literally *has* nothing. Even her body belongs to someone else. In such a dominating, patriarchal society, women such as Offred find that they are "reduced to a space that defines itself by not being there at all" (Davies 62). Offred simply cannot give herself to Nick when the "self has become such an abstract, non-existent entity. Thus this passage shows, once again, how disconnected Offred truly is; she no longer identifies her body with her self nor her actions.

With this in mind, Offred also recognizes the importance of staying in control. Before entering Nick's apartment, Offred always asks if it is too late for her to stay. She knows that the answer will always be "no" but she asks anyway simply because, as Offred explains, "It makes me feel more in control, as if there is a choice" (269). In the end, it all comes down to choice. Those in control have options while the powerless have no choice at all. Offred and Jacobs are both objectified women living in their subject's world; both are essentially choice-less and, in effect, powerless. Therefore the very act of *choosing* a sexual partner is of utmost significance in enacting a measure of control and ownership over their own bodies.

However, choosing a forbidden sexual partner is not necessarily the most effective means of establishing authority. In fact, when it comes to influence, language has the upper hand. In Offred's world, language is a luxury, a privileged tool of the powerful, and a measure of independence. Therefore, by using language to tell her story, Offred displays her own form of power, exerting ownership and authority in the process.

Literacy for the slave narrative serves a similar purpose: "For the slave, learning how to read and write provides implicit claim to self-ownership and self-possession that is the basis for any claim to autonomy and authority" (Drake 101). Therefore, by telling her story, Offred, like the slave narratives of the past, establishes a self-ownership and power that her oppressors have purposefully denied her. In the end, says Cavalcanti, Offred "speaks her own authority in, over, and through language," taking the first steps towards re-establishing her independence and power as a woman.

In "African American Slave Narratives," Barret takes the concept of literacy even further, connecting it directly to issues of the body: "what literacy affords those who acquire it is precisely the ability to some extent to do away with the body" (423). In other words, by using language to subvert her oppressor's authority, Offred is also pushing aside the judgments that they have placed upon her. This kind of purging is especially pivotal considering the effect that the body has upon an individual's concept of self.

When discussing the African-American struggle, Barret states that "the body, within the ideologies of the dominant American community, holds the ultimate terms of identity for African-Americans" (419). Barret's words resonate with any marginalized, oppressed population and, therefore, can easily be applied to the women in *The Handmaid's Tale*. By telling her story, Offred releases herself of the burden of being a woman in a male society; with the weight of her own body lifted, Offred is given the chance to finally reconnect with her true identity, an identity that has thus far been suppressed under the gauze of enforced silence.

Thus the connection between language, the body, and identity finally comes to

light. Patricia Goldblatt comments on the nature of Atwood's protagonists, noting that they tend to "measure their worth in terms of body" (278). Such is the case with Offred, whose very identity is wrapped up in notions of the body. However, Offred is disconnected from her physical self, that same body whose essence is so pivotal to her self-worth. Davies expounds upon this fractured sense of self, noting that "the relationship between mind and body is stressed constantly," producing a level of fragmentation that results in "alienated bodies...on which political power is exercised"(58). In *The Handmaid's Tale*, there are a number of reasons for Offred's inner fragmentation, a fragmentation overtly caused by the socio-political reality in which her environment suppresses her. Furthermore, Offred purposefully detaches herself as a means of self-protection, separating her body from her inner being, thereby numbing herself to the pain surrounding her. Most importantly, the prohibition of language, such an integral part of one's identity, stunts Offred's growth as a person, thereby distancing her from an understanding of her true self.

Offred's warped sense of identity is perhaps best exemplified by Gilead's patriarchal naming system. Her name: "Of-Fred, is literally a possessive form of Fred, the name of her Commander. By giving up their former name and taking on the name of men, "these women subsequently lose their identities except in reference to their male Commanders" (Hogsette 268). However, upon first reading the word, the pronunciation "Off-Red" is perhaps the most common. Over the course of the novel, Red becomes synonymous with the Handmaids; says Offred, "red: the color of blood, which defines us" (8). Because "red" is such an integral part of the Gilead regime, off-red would imply

a resistance to that system (Andriano, Scrabble).

Still, it is important to understand the integral nature of a person's name. Affirms Andriano, "One's own name is a magic spell that creates the sense of self, of individuality, we need to keep us sane" (Scrabble). By taking away Offred's former name, a name representative of her identity and worth as a person, and replacing it with a patronymic, Gilead purposefully cuts the link to Offred's former life, her former self. The African-American slaves experienced a similar sense of loss, as their masters replaced their given names with a name identifying them as property *of* someone else. Not only do such naming traditions establish ownership and authority, but they also aids in forgetting; soon, the slaves will forget all about their former lives, their former selves, and their former names, knowing only their reality as slave and as property.

However, Offred has not forgotten. In fact, one way that Offred manages to stay connected to her "former personality" is by "hoarding] her memories" (Kolodny 42). While lying in bed with Nick, Offred feels warm and safe; so safe, that she reveals her most prized possession, the symbol of her selfhood: she tells him her real name, a name that is never explicitly stated, but implied to be "Jane." Says Offred, "I tell him my real name and feel that therefore I am known." Finally, Offred is able to give herself to Nick, not via sex but through a single word. Unfortunately, it is, like everything else in Gilead, an illusion, and Offred knows it. "I act like a dunce," Offred says. "I should know better" (Atwood 270). A certain sense of vulnerability comes with such openness. By re-identifying herself with her former name, Offred loses that sense of detachment. Despite it all, there is safety in numbness; Offred may have succeeded in reforming a sense of self

that was previously hidden, if even for a moment, but with such a reformation comes an even greater risk: the risk of feeling the pain of what one once had, and what one has since lost.

In the end, language is an essential, undeniable part of one's identity. It is, according to Jean Bethke Elshtain, "the central way we come to know ourselves, reveal ourselves to others, and express our own identities." Therefore, to suppress such communication "is to impoverish possibilities for transformative human discourse that gives expression to human discontents" (608). Language as self-discovery is a pivotal part of the identifying process. Still, the fact of the matter is that language largely reflects our reality, no matter how hard we try to fight it. "The 'real world,'" says Klarer, "is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group" (Orality). Klarer's comment seems rather pessimistic in nature, arguing that language and reality are inextricably intertwined; this means that Offred's linguistic potential is dependent upon her socio-political position. Considering this relationship, it is perhaps even more empowering that Offred *chooses* to step out of her inscribed linguistic box and use language to speak out against her socio-political position, much in the same way that Harriet Jacobs and other slaves have done for centuries.

Essentially, the narrative is a tool that both Offred and Jacobs use to reconnect their previously fragmented selves. In telling her story, Offred learns that "language can be used to rehumanize the self (Hogsette 269). In the process, she becomes aware, perhaps for the first time, "of her personhood and humanity" (268). There is also a sense of molding and shaping the self via the text; after all, these are subjective stories written

by an objectified people. Their story will perhaps be the only documentation of their existence; it is not surprising then, that "ex-slaves would attempt to re-create themselves in their narratives" in an attempt to gain more support from their readers (Drake 94).

However, in order to draw supporters to their cause, the narrative would have to represent someone whom the general population would *want* to support. The desire to please is thus present throughout both texts, justifying the self-reflexive nature of the narratives. Offred uses techniques of metafiction throughout her narrative, continually addressing the reader and referring back to her text. "I wish this story were different..." says Offred. "I'm sorry there is so much pain." (Atwood 267). Most importantly, she apologizes for the way in which she is represented: "I wish [this story] were more civilized. I wish it showed me in a better light, if not happier, then at least more active, less hesitant, less distracted by trivia" (267). In order to gain support for her position and the positions of her fellow women of Gilead, Offred must appeal to the sensibilities of her audience, who probably view Offred as weak, complacent, even boring. Unlike other characters in the book, such as Moira or Ofglen, Offred is not your typical revolutionary and she knows it. Therefore, by apologizing to her reader, Offred acknowledges her weaknesses, but asks that her story be listened to and taken to heart, nonetheless. "After all you've been through," says Offred, "you deserve whatever I have left, which is not much but includes the truth" (268). By humbly proclaiming her honesty, Offred reassures the reader of her reliability as a narrator.

Atwood uses the tool of self-reflexivity, a common strategy used throughout slave narratives, in order to specifically identify Offred with a slave. Harriet Jacobs, for

example, addresses the reader, and her work, throughout the text. Compared to Offred, Jacobs is more direct in addressing her purpose: "Reader, it is not to awaken sympathy for myself that I am telling you truthfully what I suffered in slavery. I do it to kindle a flame of compassion in your hearts for my sisters who are still in bondage, suffering as I once suffered..." (54). There are also more subtle moments in Jacobs' narrative, moments in which she apologizes profusely for her immoral affair with Mr. Sands. Jacobs understands that she, too, must follow the prescriptions of the cult of womanhood if to gain any sense of respect and/or sympathy from her primarily white female readers. However, Jacobs' affair with Mr. Sands, a white man, is "outside the realm of moral propriety for the vast majority of white people" at that time (Tanner 418). Therefore, Jacobs spends several pages apologizing for her immoral and shameful behavior, even going so far as to grovel at the feet of her morally superior readers: "Pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous reader!" (Jacobs 55). Harriet Jacobs once may have been a slave, but she is no fool; she knows that to offend her reader has the potential to jeopardize her cause completely. Therefore, she takes the appropriate steps to make sure that her honesty and morality is well accounted for. Like Offred, Jacobs establishes herself as a reliable narrator in the process.

The tool of authentication has also been used as a device for substantiating an author's reliability. The authentication process was especially important in the slave narrative, as it proved via dates, facts, and personal accounts that the story being told did in fact happen. Most of the time, the editor, usually a white abolitionist, provided such a document in order to give a credible voice to the work. In the case of Harriet Jacobs, the

authentication appears at the beginning of the text, in the form of an introduction by her Editor, L. Maria Child. In her two-page introduction, Child affirms the character and dignity of Jacobs, stating that "the author of the following autobiography is personally known to me, and her conversation and manners inspire me with confidence" (Jacobs 3). Child goes on to defend Jacobs' unusually sophisticated literary abilities and urges her fellow Americans to join up against the shameful of slavery in the name of "duty" and morality (3).

Atwood uses the role of the authentication and twists it on its head. Like Jacobs, Offred's tale does not stand on its own. In order to be deemed worthy of critical respect, a white man must affirm it. Offred's text is indeed authenticated by a Professor Piexoto in section entitled "Historical Notes." The date is now 2195 and Dr. Piexoto, a chauvinistic white male, is credited with the discovery and re-assembly of Offred's text, which, we find out, was actually spoken aloud on a set of audiocassettes. Traditionally speaking, the "Historical Notes" mirrors Child's "Introduction" as a means of validating Offred's story. However, underneath the validating exterior lies the implication that Offred's tale is not quite her tale at all. Instead, it has been re-told through the eyes of an objective, sexist historian, a man who refuses to refer to the text as "document" and blames Offred for not having "the instincts of a reporter or spy" in her documentation techniques. "However, we must be grateful for any crumbs the Goddess of History has deigned to vouchsafe us," Piexoto says, resigning himself to the fate of such an incapable narrator.

With the knowledge of the Epilogue in mind, David S. Hogsette poses a pivotal

question: "Is it ultimately a chauvinistic man who gives Offred her voice, who allows her to speak, who recaptures her voice within his textual authority?" (265). Does Piexoto manage to rob Offred of the authority she painstakingly fought for over the course of telling her story? After all, in the end, Offred's tale is in the hands of a man, just as her oppressors controlled her voice during her lifetime. Still, Hogsette argues that, no, Piexoto does not take away Offred's authority. If anything, he simply shows the reader how NOT to interpret Offred's tale, illustrating how the reader "must learn how to read those reinscribed voices and properly interpret their subjective meaning" (265). The real power behind Offred's words, says Hogsette, lies in the hands of the *audience*.

According to Hogsette, the role of the audience is pivotal in substantiating Offred's speech act. It is one of "compassionate understanding" and involves a "close, sympathetic relationship with Offred" (273). Offred understands the importance of her audience, not only in supporting her cause, but also in giving her voice the credibility it needs. Addressing the reader directly, Offred literally wills her audience into being: "By telling you anything at all I'm at least believing in you, I believe you're there, I believe you into being. Because I'm telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are" (Atwood 268). There is an obvious air of trust in these words; Offred puts everything she has into her words and she trusts that her audience will be "compassionate listeners," thus completing the cycle of information transfer. Offred speaks; they listen.

By listening to Offred's tale, the audience acts as *the empowering force*. Says Hogsette, "Women's voices must not only be expressed, but must also be received. Those voices need an audience" (276). However, that audience must be prepared to embrace

the voice in a manner that uplifts, not, as Piexoto exemplifies, by tearing down. In the end, "writing as a political act is incomplete without the act of reading" (277). The writer *needs* a reader in order to be heard just as a reader *needs* a writer in order to be able to listen. Thus language as an act of subversion is a two-way street; it is a partnership between all levels of communication.

When one considers the role of communication and understanding in giving a voice to a marginalized population, it is not surprising that so many societies restrict access to language, thereby blocking the chain of communication and keeping the powerless in their place. Mario Klarer takes this one step further, surmising, "It could be well argued that the advent of the printed word coincided with the advent of democracy." He goes on to ask the key question: "Can democracy function at all without a literate public?" (Orality). I would argue that Atwood's response to such an inquiry would be in the negative. Gilead, the society in which Offred lives, is anything but democratic; it is a patriarchal theocracy, in which the prohibition of language results in a society of Have's and Have-Nots. Atwood points out that by telling her story, Offred attempts to rise above the system in which she lives, much in the same way the African-American slaves used literacy to rebel against the slave system. In both cases, language is the missing piece of the puzzle, a piece that, once found and utilized, provides a voice that was otherwise silent. Offred best describes her own struggle with voice upon examining a flower, "wordlessly" fighting through the dark earth, towards the light: "Whatever is silenced" says Offred, "will clamor to be heard, though silently" (153). Thus, like the flowers that she mentions throughout her story, Offred fights to be heard; she is fighting to live, to

survive, eventually reaching her own "light" at the end of the novel (295).

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