

Homo Ludens in Gilead: The Handmaid's Tale Revisited

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Abstract: *This paper aims at looking into the concept of play and its manifestations in language and art in Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel The Handmaid's Tale by utilizing the theories of Johan Huizinga, who, in his study Homo Ludens, argues that civilization itself is an outgrowth of play. By examining the ways play subverts oppressive strategies, it offers a larger view of the disarming and overpowering potential of the ingenious and humorous usage of language and exercise of art as extensions of play.*

The Handmaid's Tale is narrated by a woman whose function is reduced to the reproductive capacity of her body. Every individual in this society has their assigned places and roles, and any deviation from them is punishable by no less than death. For the authorities of the Republic of Gilead committed themselves to return to a biblically ordained order in which the minimum suffices and there is no place for any forms of excess. However, as Atwood demonstrates, life reduced to biological necessities alone goes against life itself. For that reason, Gileadean regime inadvertently gives rise to subversive acts not only from the oppressed but from the oppressors themselves. Under such severe oppression, subversion assumes a shape that at first sight appears harmless: the human propensity for play. As opposed to the stipulated order in Gilead in which everything is defined by function, play is based on excess, a surplus of need and necessity. Moreover, based on the voluntary participation of all participants, it is an equalizing arena in which one player can only be defeated by a more ingenious one. Therefore, in this paper play will be examined as a platform on which socially-constructed categories based on power structures are fundamentally rejected.

Keywords: *Margaret Atwood, The Handmaid's Tale, Johan Huizinga, Homo Ludens, play, subversion.*

Homo Ludens Gilead'da: The Handmaid's Tale'e Yeni Bir Bakış

Öz: *Bu çalışma, Margaret Atwood'un distopik romanı The Handmaid's Tale'de, oyunu ve onun dil ve sanattaki yansımalarını; Homo Ludens adlı yapıtında uygarlığın oyunun bir uzantısı olduğunu ortaya koyan Johan Huizinga'nın kuramları çerçevesinde incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu yüzden, mizahî dil kullanımı ve sanatsal edimlerin baskıyı etkisiz kılan potansiyellerini, daha geniş bir çerçevede içinde, oyunun baskıcı rejimleri altüst etme biçimlerinin uzantıları olarak, ele almaktadır.*

The Handmaid's Tale, işlevi bedeninin üreme yetisine indirgenmiş bir kadın tarafından anlatılır. Bu toplumda her bireyin yeri ve rolü belirlenmiş olup, bunlardan en küçük bir sapma ölümle sonuçlanabilen cezalara neden olabilmektedir. Gilead yetkililerinin amacı Kutsal Kitabın normlarına geri dönmeyi hedefleyen, minimumla yetinilen ve fazlalığın hiçbir biçimine izin verilmeyen bir düzeni inşa etmektir. Ancak, Atwood'un gözler önüne serdiği gibi, yalnızca biyolojik gereksinimlere indirgenen bir yaşam, yaşamın kendisine ters düşmektedir. Bu yüzden, Gilead rejimi farkında olmadan, yalnızca ezilenler değil baskıyı bizzat inşa edenler tarafından sabotaj edilir. Bu tür aşırı baskıcı ortamlarda başkaldırı, insanın oyuna olan yönelimi gibi, ilk bakışta zararlı görünen bir kaynaktan beslenir. Gilead'da öngörülen her şeyin işleviyle tanımlandığı düzenin aksine, oyun, fazlalığın, gereksinim ve zorunluluğun dışına taşarak var olur. Üstelik, oyuncuların gönüllü katılımlarına dayanması ve yalnızca bireysel yeteneklerinden dolayı kazanabilmelerinden dolayı eşitlikçi bir alan oluşturur. Bu yüzden, bu çalışmada, oyun iktidarın oluşturduğu yapıların sonucunda toplumsal olarak inşa edilen kategorilerin kökten reddedildiği bir platform olarak ele alınacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Margaret Atwood, The Handmaid's Tale, Johan Huizinga, Homo Ludens, oyun, başkaldırı.*

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Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel *The Handmaid's Tale* portrays a dystopia with a totalitarian state Gilead run by religious fundamentalists who instituted an oppressive regime in place of the United States. The novel is narrated by a woman who is known to the reader by the name Offred and whose function is reduced to the reproductive capacity of her body. Offred is one of the "handmaids" in Gilead, who are women of child-bearing age, circulated among the homes of the Commanders, the ruling elite of the new regime. The Handmaids' sole mission in Gilead, in fact their *raison d'être*, is to become impregnated by the Commanders during intercourses arranged monthly in the presence of the Commanders' wives and ritualized on the basis of the biblical story of Sarah and her maid Hagar. Failure to become pregnant at the end of the third assigned home sends the Handmaids to the Colonies, places of toxic waste. Like the Handmaids, every individual in this society has their assigned places and roles, and any deviation from them is punishable by no less than death. For the authorities of the Republic of Gilead committed themselves to return to a biblically ordained order in which the minimum suffices and there is no place for any forms of excess.

In *The Handmaid's Tale* Atwood questions the possibility of life without excess, life brought down to ground zero of biological needs. In order to bring this question to light, Offred tells the Commander towards the end of the novel that in designing Gilead, they overlooked some essential trait and need of humans: "love." Even in its most basic interpretation as an extension of sexuality, love exceeds the dire limits of procreation. Love is, according to the Commander, Nature's excess, and as such, it has no place in Gilead. But love, belonging to the larger category of "play"—which Atwood's narrator does not trace as the origin and source of love—is as essential and inescapable as food or air. Play is so ancient and so vital that John Huizinga opens his *Homo Ludens* by declaring its indispensability not only to humans but also to all life: "Play is older than culture, for culture, however inadequately defined, always presupposes human society, and animals have not waited for man to teach them their playing" (Huizinga, 1944:1). Since no one is *biologically* impaired for lack of play, its *sine qua non* quality is disregarded by the Gileadean authorities. Throughout *The Handmaid's Tale*, play functions as a subversive potential employed by almost every character, oppressor and oppressed alike. It lurks behind almost every cultural creation peculiar to humanity, such as narrative language, art, government and state. In fact, as Huizinga, argues, civilization itself is an outgrowth of play. The large variety of ingenious and humorous usage of language and exercise of art in *The Handmaid's Tale* provides its narrator with tools to resist and subvert the meanings attached to her and redefine herself in ways that even her oppressors cannot help but participate in. In fact, Atwood demonstrates, by means of the acts that every major character in *The Handmaid's Tale* is involved in, that both authority and resistance have their origins in play and both are closely interwoven with language.

Though human propensity for play as a strategy for resistance to oppression hails from the least expected quarters, its qualities mark it as one of the most fitting tools of

resistance and subversion. First, it is an element of almost every aspect of culture so much so that its presence is often ignored. Next, as opposed to the stipulated order in Gilead in which everything is defined by function, play “transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action” (Huizinga, 1944:1). Older than humanity itself, play, according to Huizinga, is a mental category, superfluous to all physical necessities. “Play is superfluous. The need for it is only urgent to the extent that the enjoyment of it makes it a need. Play can be deferred or suspended at any time. It is never imposed by physical necessity or moral duty. It is never a task. It is done at leisure, during ‘free time’” (8). As such it is “irrational” and “supra-logical” (4). Irreducible to any other category or inexplicable by the categories of wisdom or folly, “play is a function of the living” (7).

Moreover, based on the voluntary participation of all participants, it is an equalizing strategy in which one player can only be defeated by a more ingenious one. Therefore, play offers a platform on which socially-constructed categories based on power structures are fundamentally rejected.

For the Handmaids, life in Gilead is based solely on their reproductive capacities. During their training and orientation, they are reminded that “For our purposes your feet and your hands are not essential” (Atwood, 1985:118). Offred, the narrator, defines her role in Gilead in such reductive terms: “We are two legged wombs, that’s all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices” (Atwood, 1985:176). They are kept, fed and tolerated only as long as they can potentially or actually give birth. Everything in their lives, ranging from their food to clothing and living quarters, is geared towards enhancing this biological function. Just as the female body’s “unessential” organs lose importance, the food served to the Handmaids contains nothing more than barely necessary. Their food is made up of highly balanced but unsavory mixtures of protein, fat, carbohydrates and minerals. Offred recounts the contents of her meal on the tray: “A baked potato, green beans, salad. Canned pears for dessert. It’s good enough food, though bland. Healthy food. No coffee, or tea ..., no alcohol” (Atwood, 1985:85). Their habit-like clothing, based on the duties assigned to the Handmaids, covers them from top to toe and has zippered pockets to carry tokens, units of exchange, for shopping. Their comfortable flat shoes complete their outfit. The red habit hides their bodies in order to prevent any suggestion of sexuality. The wings by the side of the headdress may at first seem like a superfluous item, but as Offred notes, they have an essential function: “The white wings ... are to keep us from seeing, but also from being seen” (Atwood, 1985:11). Seeing anything more than necessary, or being visible as identifiable individuals are thus ruled out by their clothing. Their living quarters have the most basic furniture such as a cot, a rug, a lamp and a chair. In short, the Gileadean authorities leave no room for anything that exceeds the essentially necessary for the Handmaids.

It is possible to state that in trying to eradicate excess Gilead has waged war against the potential for play. Yet as the novel demonstrates, extermination of play necessitates

extermination of civilization as a whole. Huizinga notes “in myth and ritual the great instinctive forces of civilized life have their origin: law and order, commerce and profit, craft and art, poetry wisdom and science. All are rooted in the primaeval soil of play. ... [P]lay and culture are interwoven with one another. ... [P]ure play is one of the main bases of civilization” (Huizinga, 1944:5).

In Gilead, language is redesigned and narrowed to the constricted needs of the Handmaids. They are allowed to greet each other by the prescribed words, “Blessed be the fruit,” which must be met with the similarly prescribed answer “May the Lord open” (Atwood, 1985:25). Their conversation is limited to the praises of good news from the front on the success of the Army against the rebels and the gift of good weather from God. Rebelling against the shrinking and withdrawal that define the lives of the Handmaids, Offred attempts at breaking the silence and physical isolation ascribed to her by means of language and touch, which serve as her major ways of resistance and subversion.

She wishes to talk and hungers ‘to commit the act of touch’ (2: 14). As they are being indoctrinated to become Handmaids, she and the other women whisper, lip-read and hold hands in the semi-darkness when the Aunts are not looking (1: 4), and she sneaks into the lavatory to talk with her friend Moira (13: 94-95) and to touch fingers through a hole in the wall of the stalls (15: 116) (Stillman & Johnson, 1994:72).

While touch establishes ties of love, language has the potential to deconstruct the given reality and reconstruct another version, a fact that Offred comes to realize as she becomes increasingly aware of this power of language. Hogsette states,

[Offred] discovers that just as Gilead uses language to construct one version of reality she too can use it to construct another subversive or, at least, counter version, one that directly attacks the version that Gilead promotes. By telling her story Offred fashions an alternative reality and forces it into the world, into history and thus makes possible social and political change (Hogsette, 1997:270).

Even as speech is limited to the expressions of bare necessities and morally sanctioned phrases, written language is totally forbidden to the Handmaids. For in Gilead, reading and writing are the privilege of the select few. Yet Atwood’s novel itself is a proof of the futility of erasing writing and reading from memory. The first person narration in the novel is the first and foremost subversion of this ban. Although the Handmaids have no access to any written material nor any tool for writing, with her conscious effort to remember her pre-Gilead past and—after she supposedly attains her freedom—her days in Gilead, the narrator leaves a taped record of her life, which reaches the reader in writing. Offred’s narration constantly moves between different time periods, from her

recollections of pre-Gilead past to her days at Commander Fred's home, and owing to the lack of access to writing and writing tools, it becomes increasingly filled with self-doubts as to how accurate her memories of the past are. Such nuances create a textual richness that goes against linear narrative style. In other words, "Against the prescribed mono-tone voice, the narrator creates a personal, multivocal tale: 'this sad and hungry and sordid, this limping and mutilated story' (p. 267)" (Staels, 1995:462-463).

The text she leaves behind has further layers. For example, she hides her name in the text. Writing and naming are the most expansive forms of play Atwood employs, for they are intimately bound up with play. Huizinga states,

Language allows [man] to distinguish, to establish, to state things; in short, to name them and by naming them to raise them into the domain of the spirit. In the making of speech and language, the spirit is continually 'sparkling' between matter and mind, as it were, playing with this wondrous nominative faculty. Behind every abstract expression there lie the boldest metaphors, and every metaphor is a play upon words. Thus in giving expression to life man creates a second, poetic world alongside the world of nature (Huizinga, 1944:4).

The Handmaids do not have names of their own; they are addressed with "of" prefixed to the Commander's name. The narrator is known to the reader as Offred, for the Commander at her present home is called Fred. But she manages to slip her name into the text. During their training under the Aunts before they were sent to Commanders' homes, would-be Handmaids learn to lip-read and whisper their names to each other while lying in bed at night. "Alma. Janine. Dolores. Moira. June" (Atwood, 1985:5). Of the names the narrator lists, all except June are mentioned as belonging to others. Offred later connects love and her name "June," as she quotes Aunt Lydia: "*Love*, said Aunt Lydia with distaste. Don't let me catch you at it. No mooning and June-ing around here, girls" (Atwood, 1985:285). Yet as Ketterer notes, "June" may be a name chosen by the narrator to hide her identity: "Offred's list of names may be a list of protective pseudonyms. If so, Offred has deliberately chosen for herself a name that, she reminds us, signifies love" (Ketterer, 1989:214-15). Not only does the narrator hide her treasure of name in the text for the discerning reader and thus resist being named by the system by means of this simple act but she also associates her hidden name with love, against the power of which the rulers of Gilead have waged war.

This strategic slipping of her name into the text also enables her to exert her authority over her narrative, in that she provides access to her name only to those who read her text carefully enough. Professor Pieixoto, for example, who discovers the taped story, announces that

she “does not see fit to supply us with her original name” (305), blaming her for not taking a risk he wanted her to take. Thus “June” becomes at once a password into the text for the reader and a sign of Pieixoto’s inability to read the Handmaid’s story. If this sounds like a petulant and irrational demand—“if you loved me, you would KNOW my name”—that is exactly what it is. Pieixoto doesn’t care about Offred, and we do (Bergmann, 1989:353).

Offred’s narration and naming herself are her way of subverting the reductive policies of Gilead by adding something to the barely physical, the merely biological roles assigned to her. Moreover, playing with Gileadean usages and nomination, Atwood, as well as her protagonist, demonstrates the arbitrariness and ambiguity embedded in language, which are part and parcel of the play element of language, enabling the speakers/writers of language to turn this potential to active use. Thus, argues Feuer, Atwood’s “distrust of certainty becomes part of the linguistic texture of the novel, as Offred ponders the multiple possibilities of language, cherishing the ambiguity that the regime is unable to control, at least in her case” (Feuer (1997:91). The authorities of Gilead constantly face failures even when they think they themselves invent tools of control by means of language and symbols. Offred’s ability to play with language generates new meanings unforeseen by authorities. For “Her individual speech produces a profusion of words and desires that are not allowed. Offred crosses the boundaries of accepted meaning by giving voice to an alternative perspective and an alternative discourse that continuously cut through the rigid logocentric logic texture of the superstructure” (Staels, 1995:459). The narrator’s given name is a case in point:

[H]er patronymic undercuts itself, for it is impossible for most readers not initially to mispronounce it: we want to say “off red” rather than “of Fred.” Since the colour red in the context of the new order has come to be associated with the handmaids (“red: the color of blood, which defines us” [8]), to be “off red” is to be resistant to complete absorption in the wavelength of the Gileadites. The narrator’s patronymic, then, becomes a sort of shibboleth: we who mispronounce it are the Ephraimites to these new Gileadite (Andriano, 1992-1993:8).

Offred is not the first Handmaid in the Commander’s home to leave a record behind. As she tries to find traces of the former Handmaid, she comes across the words scratched into the wood: “*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*” (Atwood, 1985:69). Elizabeth Hanson (1994) refers to James Scott’s concept of “hidden transcript” (Hanson, 1994:57), “‘off-stage’ behaviors [that] undermine” the discourse of the powerful (58). This note from the former Handmaid is both literally and figuratively a hidden transcript, and, as such, it empowers the writer and her reader. Even without knowing the meaning of

these words, they give the narrator power; they invite her to discovering their meaning; therefore, she starts a game which connects her to her predecessor, the former Offred. Later she discovers the meaning of the mock Latin phrase as “Don’t let the bastards grind you down” (Atwood, 1985:242). Although, as the Commander tries to explain to her, it is no more than a joke from the Commander’s school days, both its literal meaning and the way its remembrance turns the Commander into a freckled schoolboy with a cowlick (Atwood, 1985:242) put her in the position of adult and him in that of a mischievous teenager and transform these words into a magical incantation and her into a sorcerer of sorts reciting a subversive chant.

Offred comes across another hidden transcript at the Red Center where their training is overseen by the Aunts:

On the top of my desk there are initials, carved into the wood, and dates. The initials are sometimes in two sets, joined by the Word *loves*. *J. H. Loves B. P. 1954. O. R. Loves L. T.* These seem to me like the inscriptions I used to read about, carved on the stone walls of caves, or drawn with a mixture of soot and animal fat. ... This carving, done with a pencil and dug many times into the worn varnish of the desk, has the pathos of all vanished civilizations. It’s like a handprint on stone. Whoever made that was once alive (Atwood, 1985:144-45).

This text gives Offred the power to transcend her temporal and spatial restrictions; they help her find refuge in another time and place more real and nearer to her. Commenting on how this discovery empowers Offred, Hogsette indicates:

Someone was present to write it, and that someone is validated for Offred through the remnants of the act of writing. That linguistic relic focuses Offred’s attention not upon the evils of the past but upon the fact that the people of that past civilization were in many ways more alive than she is herself in the oppressive Republic of Gilead. By creating her own text, her own narrative, Offred similarly creates and validates her existence, her humanity and her vision of reality and preserves her experience for future audiences (Hogsette, 1997:269).

Thus the written words, in ways not predicted even by the Commander—for whom they were no more than an inside joke—by the previous Offred and the unknown lovers, multiply their meanings, subvert categories of power and empower the narrator. In short, expressions of love or childish mockeries from the Commander’s schooldays become a subversive tool for Offred. In the bracket they open as pretend, that which begins as pure play thus has the potential to turn into serious or earnest. As such, play challenges boundaries, not only those that separate serious from fun but potentially all boundaries that divide and separate a Handmaid from a Commander.

The most detrimental threat to upset the hierarchies that define the relationship between the narrator and the Commander comes from the Commander himself. For, as in any totalitarian regime, in Gilead, too, subversive actions are the hallmarks of the behavior not only of the oppressed but also of those who belong to the established elite. Inviting Offred to his room to play Scrabble, the Commander initiates an illegitimate relationship with the narrator, which surprises both Offred and the reader simultaneously. This invitation may at first strike as a pretty harmless desire. Yet, in games, as in Bakhtinian carnivalesque atmospheres, hierarchies are at best suspended or toppled over because in them, the element of pretense leads to the changing of roles. Among the distinguishing characteristics of play, Huizinga lists voluntariness and freedom in addition to its superfluity. Also play lies outside the real world; it involves a bracketed “make believe” situation, it is a pretend. It is also set apart from real life in space and time; secluded portions of time and place are allocated to play. Play is “an intermezzo, an interlude in our daily lives” (Huizinga, 1944:9). It thus provides a bracket to move out of a life based merely on biological necessities, and it is from this space *beyond* or *outside* that it offsets a life as such. Play redefines reality by its own rules; therefore, it challenges the rules of oppressive regimes with its disarming and overpowering potential. Thus, rather than responding to oppression with the tools of oppression, a player locates herself in an alternative reality where boundaries of “real” life disappear.

[T]he consciousness of play being ‘only a pretend’ does not prevent it from proceeding with the utmost seriousness, with an absorption, a devotion that passes into rapture and, temporarily at least, completely abolishes that troublesome ‘only’ feeling. ... The inferiority of play is continually being offset by the corresponding superiority of its seriousness. Play turns into seriousness and seriousness to play. Play may rise to heights of beauty and sublimity that leave seriousness far beneath (Huizinga, 1944:8).

The Commander’s choice of the game Scrabble is significant also because as a game that depends on language and memory, it goes radically against the strategies of the new state, which the Commander helped mastermind. Scrabble not only involves the use of language, which itself is play, but also it is play on language. Therefore, if play is subversive, Scrabble is doubly so. It offers Offred an opportunity for exercising her linguistic and verbal prowess, the power that enables her not only to survive and but also to leave a record of her survival. She is at her native home playing Scrabble, for as Stillman and Johnson note, “She loves words, she loves to listen to them, to play with their meanings, to explore the play, to take figurative words literally and literal words figuratively, to examine roots and derivations” (Stillman and Johnson, 1994:72). She ponders the rich potentials of language, the possibilities that she treasures in her memory: “I sit in the chair and think about the word *chair*. It can also mean the leader of

a meeting. It can also mean a mode of execution. It is the first syllable in *charity*. It is the French word for flesh" (Atwood, 1985:140). And in a more politically charged passage, she remembers the meaning of "Mayday," which the rebels of the Underground Female Road use as a password: "'It's a beautiful May day,' Ofglen says. ... *Mayday* used to be a distress signal, a long time ago, in one of those wars we studied in high school. ... Do you know what it came from? said Luke. *Mayday*? ... It's French, he said. From *m'aidez*. Help me" (Atwood, 1985:58). Granted Offred misses her companion Handmaid Ofglen's message about the underground organization, but Atwood's message does get across to those who read her novel with an open mind. Offred also remembers Luke's explanation of the root of the word "fraternize," which has no female corresponding word for the female: "*Fraternize* means to behave like a brother. Luke told me that. He said there was no corresponding word that meant *to behave like a sister*. *Sororize*, it would have to be, he said" (Atwood, 1985:15). Atwood demonstrates that the patriarchal authority has long been embedded in language by its negations and erasures, and by creating a protagonist who contemplates on and creates alternative meanings out of such gaps in language, she sends a wake up call to her readers. Offred realizes meanings in language that she had not paid attention to before. Now she puts up a big fight in order not to lose her only foothold to survive. Therefore, "[Scrabble] is a particularly subversive activity for Offred because it centers on words, and reading and writing are illegal for women. Starved of any degree of control in her own life, Offred wants to absorb the power that Scrabble represents" (Parker, 1995:355).

In the game, Offred positions herself as the superior party. She says triumphantly, "I win the first game, I let him win the second" (Atwood, 1985:180). Offred notices the shifting of roles between her and the Commander when she takes charge of the situation and he enjoys following her lead. "Sometimes after the games, he sits on the floor beside my chair, holding my hand. His head is a little below mine, so that when he looks up at me it's at a juvenile angle. It must amuse him, this fake subservience" (Atwood, 1985:272). The scene not only infantilizes the Commander but also connects the act of game and play with lovemaking, another forbidden act in Gilead. The almost romantic scene with tenderness between the two calls to mind an affectionate aftermath of lovemaking in which the couple express their love in bodily proximity and regressive role-play.

The Gileadean hierarchies and rules are further violated when the Commander cheats and invites Offred to cheat with him. "[W]e take extra letters and make words with them that don't exist, words like *smurt* and *crup*, giggling over them" (Atwood, 1985:271). Like lovemaking and play, these words do not have any meanings and linguistic functions. The Commander turns into a child, who enjoys what he does for what it is. As such, the Commander violates the laws of Gilead, according to which nothing is allowed to be wasted, every action is instrumental for a "good" cause, and pure pleasures are forbidden.

Although Offred gains power by playing Scrabble, the Commander thinks they are not equal participants in this game, for he often assumes the role of teacher or trainer with her. In the following sentence she describes herself in terms of a house pet to whom the Commander is proud to teach tricks and in whose shows of quick learning he takes pleasure: “The Commander likes it when I distinguish myself, show precocity, like an attentive pet, prick-eared and eager to perform” (Atwood, 1985:238). The Commander hardly doubts his superiority over her, *because* Offred does not shake his illusion. On the contrary, being one step ahead in the game, she plays along to match his expectations. Besides, getting to know the Commander in person, as an accomplice in transgression, gives Offred the power to negotiate with him. Although her negotiations begin with requests for simple things such as hand lotion, the mere fact that she can negotiate with him is significant. In fact, she gets to the point where she can ask him for explanations for his and the Gilead authorities’ rationale for the new system (Atwood, 1985: 243, 273, 283).

As the illicit relationship between the two develops, Offred also gets access to written texts. The Commander allows her to read some women’s magazines from the old times, whose memories they had been trying to eradicate both from the public domain and from the private memories of the Handmaids. But just as the places converted from their old functions bear marks of the past like palimpsests, those magazines and the promises that they held lurk in Offred’s memories. He dangles a women’s magazine in front of Offred, “like a fish bait” as if inviting her to a luscious meal (Atwood, 1985:200). The Commander’s luring achieves its purpose; Offred is mesmerized by the images and the promise in the magazine: “They suggested one adventure after another, one wardrobe after another, one improvement after another, one man after another. They suggested rejuvenation, pain overcome and transcended, endless love. The real promise in them was immortality” (Atwood, 1985:201). The attraction of these magazines resonates with the choices Offred makes in Gilead. Throughout her narrative Offred repeatedly makes it clear that for her survival comes first. For it is only by surviving that she can pass her story onto her audience and hopefully caution them to the politics of enslavement that kills and annihilates. Thus, her record documents her choice of life over death whereby she immortalizes herself. She reclaims her immortality from the Commander and Gilead by means of language and play.

Play inevitably involves an element of tension, which gives it a moral value although pure play lies outside any moral categories. Offred’s relationship with the Commander shows the antagonistic face of play in all its nakedness. Offred remarks that the Commander has something that the others at home, namely women, do not have: “He has something we don’t have, he has the word. How we squandered it, once” (Atwood, 1985:114). As Bergman (1989) aptly notes, “Most prisoners miss things; Offred misses words” (849). Throughout the novel, she tries to re-appropriate or reclaim what the Commander has deprived her of.

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 (Atwood, 1985:241).

Access to the written word particularly empowers Offred as a player: The grounds of language, native soils of play, become doubly fertile in writing because the arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified has an added layer of the visual symbols in writing. By taking advantage of this added arbitrariness in written language, Offred employs Scrabble to beat the Commander at his own game.

The Commander's final act as player can be observed in his Jezebel, a whorehouse where lesbians, nuns and other marginal women who refuse to become Handmaids work as prostitutes. In addition to demonstrating the hypocrisy of the Gileadean state, it is a proof that even the authorities of Gilead are well aware of the impossibility of eradicating play from life. But what they do is only half recognition, for it is a licensed privilege of the Commanders alone. Such legalizing goes starkly against the spirit of play, which, despite having its own rules and order, allows, to a great extent, for the ingenuity of players and will not be restricted by an external force. Therefore, the Commander is not satisfied with this privilege; he takes the narrator there pretending that she is one of the prostitutes there. With the elements of pretend, separate time and space, and tension, Jezebel offers much of the essential qualities of play and brings the Commander further to an equal footing with Offred as a player.

In her play with the Commander, Offred gains power also before the Commander's wife. In her present conditions, Offred knows something that Serena Joy does not, and this gives her an advantage over her and blurs the lines of authority between them. Offred thinks:

Now that I was seeing the Commander on the sly, if only to play his games and listen to him talk, our functions were no longer as separate as they should have been in theory. I was taking something away from her. ... [I]f I took it away, this mysterious "it" I couldn't quite define ... what would be left for her? (Atwood, 1985:209)

Although what goes on between Offred and the Commander is "on the sly" without the knowledge of Serena Joy, Serena Joy herself is responsible for initiating a hidden relationship with Offred, which has play characteristics.

Like the Commander, she has a double role as suppresser of play and player. In addition to the interior of the Commander's house, she also has authority over the garden.

“[The] garden is the domain of the Commander’s Wife,” Offred announces. Rather than being a place for peace, the garden for Serena Joy is a domain to be controlled, kept in check for overgrowth, excess and luxury. When she is in the garden, “a basket at her side with shears in it and pieces of string for tying the flowers into place” accompanies her. Therefore, Offred concludes, “[the garden]’s something for them to order and maintain and care for” (Atwood, 1985:16). Offred observes Serena Joy in the garden: “She was aiming, positioning the blades of the shears, then cutting with a convulsive jerk of the hands. Was it the arthritis, creeping up? Or some blitzkrieg, some kamikaze, committed on the genitalia of the flowers? The fruiting body” (Atwood, 1985:195). As opposed to her death-inspiring act, the garden is full of flowers of every hue and smell:

we had the irises, rising beautiful and cool on their 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 (Atwood, 1985:196).

Offred observes that despite the cutting, cropping, shaping and minimalizing, the garden grows back in all its beauty. Then she sees something shared between what is done to the garden and to herself and takes inspiration from the garden’s lushness, determination, and energy to fight back.

Offred realizes “[t]here is something subversive about this garden of Serena’s [the Commander’s wife], 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” (196). Though Offred originally thinks the garden “looks like peace” (17), when she looks at it in a different context, she identifies the garden as a symbol of her own imperative to tell her story (Laffen, 2009:110).

No matter how much Serena Joy tries to control the spirit of play, it will sprout back like the vegetation that she tries helplessly to control. Ironically, she herself is no exception to the rule, for the other favorite activity of hers situates her as a player. She is constantly busy knitting scarves for the young soldiers called the Angels. “[S]he stays in the sitting room, knitting away at her endless Angel scarves, turning out more and more yards of intricate and useless wool people: her form of procreation, it must be” (Atwood, 1985:197). The patterns she makes are more like patterns designed for children’s clothing; therefore, Offred suspects Serena’s scarves are never used by the Angels but unraveled and brought back to her to keep her eternally busy. Serena’s act of knitting endlessly has unmistakable allusions to Penelope’s trick of endlessly weaving and unraveling in *The Odyssey* to keep her suitors busy. But unlike Penelope, who plays a trick on the suitors,

the person on whom the trick is played is Serena Joy. For Serena the play has become something serious, for she knits those scarves not for fun, nor as part of a trick she has planned but in earnest. As such, she has been trapped in her own game. The fact that the scarves bear children patterns is also significant because it shows Serena Joy's desire to return to childhood in which play has a central role.

A subversive plot, similar to the one Offred has with the Commander, takes place between her and Serena Joy. The latter offers to set up a plot to get Offred pregnant, which turns them into equal parties in a game. As soon as she makes the proposal, Serena Joy cannot stare at Offred as she used to: Both are aware that old hierarchies will not work in their new deal. "I look up at her. She looks down. It's the first time, we've looked into each other's eyes in a long time. Since we met. The moment stretches out between us, bleak and *level*" (Atwood, 1985:264). The rest of the scene is like one between playmates trying to agree on the rules of the game. Although it is Serena who has done the planning, Offred knows that she has the power to negotiate. When the possibility of trying to get pregnant with a doctor arises, she protests: "Not with a doctor" (Atwood, 1985:265). On the suggestion of Nick, she still puts forth other points for consideration. "'It is a risk,' I say. 'More than that'" (Atwood, 1985:266). Despite the obvious risk, though, this is an opportunity that she cannot pass, for in her third home, she has not yet conceived. Moreover, in return for her agreeing to the deal, Serena offers another promise: a cigarette and a picture of her daughter.

The picture of Offred's lost daughter may have persuaded Offred to have intercourse with Nick, but the need for love and sexual pleasure explain why she *continues* to see him unbeknownst to Serena. In a notable conversation with the Commander the narrator criticizes the rulers of Gilead for overlooking love (Atwood, 1985:284). His defense that they tried "to return things to Nature's norm" shows that what they think of as Nature is no more than biology, but, as Offred also evidently thinks, though it cannot be reduced to procreation, love is also part of Nature. Likewise, for the Gilead rulers, sexual pleasure is an excess that they have tried to eradicate. The sexual act that takes place in the Commander's house is a solemn affair that starts with prayers and takes place with as little touching and arousal as possible with the accompaniment of the Wife. It is something that the narrator finds hard to name: "Below [my hitched-up red skirt] the Commander is fucking. What he is fucking is the lower part of my body. I do not say making love, because this is not what he's doing" (Atwood, 1985:121). The act is not voluntary or fun, but her relationship with Nick is both. The narrator visits Nick's room more than once as arranged by the Wife. She goes there to merely to touch and hold another being and to be touched and held by him. Touching, holding, and kissing are superfluous to the mere function of procreation and, as such, cannot be explained in terms of function alone. Therefore, as Huizinga observes, "love-play [is] the most perfect example of all play, exhibiting the essential features of play in the clearest form" (43). "Love-play" is totally forbidden not because the Gileadean authorities overlooked love, but they tried to

eradicate it and all other expressions of play. At this point it is worth remembering the connection between Offred's real or chosen name "June" and "love" (Ketterer, 1989:214-15). The narrator thus announces herself to be embodiment of love. Therefore, not only by being involved in play's "clearest form" but by being love itself, Offred poses an extreme threat, which can potentially shake the foundations of Gilead.

The play element is most obvious and deployed to its most subversive potentials by Moira, who is the narrator's best friend—also her alter-ego—from the pre-Gilead days. A lesbian, Moira stands as a prime example for Offred to subvert the meanings that the new Gileadean regime attaches to reality. Just as her sexual orientation threatens the procreation-oriented and homophobic Gilead ideology, the way she employs the possibilities of language mocks and undermines the grim and ideologically charged meanings advocated and indoctrinated by the Commanders and the Aunts. Listening to the biblically inspired somber messages of the Commander in charge of the Prayvaganza, one of the many the formal ceremonies in Gilead, Offred remembers the playful subversion of Moira who would re-verse the words of the hymn "There is a Balm in Gilead" as "There is a Bomb in Gilead" (Atwood, 1985:283). When Aunt Lydia calls for a need for "a spirit of camaraderie among women," Moira pictures to Offred a scene in which the Aunts' pet Janine and Aunt Lydia are involved in an illicit lesbian relationship. Initially embarrassed by such obscenities uttered in her presence, Offred then comes to accept their potential to turn the matter on its head. "There's something powerful in the whispering of obscenities, about those in power," she admits.

There's something delightful about it, something naughty, secretive, hidden, 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 threatening (Atwood, 1985:288).

Moira's subversions act as an inspiration for Offred at the most seriously charged moments. When some years later, imagining the Angels and their brides having intercourse, Offred visualizes the scene in similar subversive images: "So now I imagine, among those Angels and their drained white brides, momentous grunts and sweating, damp furry encounters; or, better, ignominious failures, cocks like three-week-old carrots, anguished fumbblings upon flesh cold and unresponding as uncooked fish" (Atwood, 1985:288). A similar image turns the Commander that leads the Prayvaganza into a "rutting salmon." Noticing the "balding and squarely built" Commander who "looks like an aging football coach" with his "sober black" uniform, insignia and decorations, Offred admits, "it's hard not to be impressed, but I make an effort." This effort takes the form of playful subversion: "I try to imagine him in bed with his wife and his Handmaid. Fertilizing

away like mad, like a rutting salmon, pretending to take no pleasure in it. When the Lord said be fruitful and multiply, did he mean this man?" (Atwood, 1985:282). In addition to the animalizing of the Commanders, the passage serves a number of other purposes. Not only does Offred's image bring down the authority of the Commander but it also allows the reader to confront the hypocrisy on which this system is instituted: as awkward as it is and as sober as he tries to look, how can one really believe that Commander does not take pleasure in the sexual intercourse? The Gileadean authorities have not been able to erase the excess, the surplus from life; they have simply turned a blind eye to their human nature. They are not "returning things to Nature's ways," as the Commander claims they are, but they are trying to recreate Nature in their own image, an act doomed to failure from its inception, for they are themselves products of Nature that they try to defy and redesign.

Their self-negating act becomes more evident when the origins of government and state are brought to light. Play is intimately related to another category of activities which Thorstein Veblen (1899, 1944) identifies as leisure: namely, government, priestly and sports activities (p. 1). These are set apart from industrial activities in that they are based on superfluity and excess. Similarly, referring to Granet's explorations of the agonistic element in the ancient Chinese rituals, Huizinga notes the relatedness between leisure activities defined by Veblen and play:

From these age-old seasonal contests between the parts of a tribe and then between whole tribes, a social hierarchy was born. The prestige won by the warriors in these sacred contests was the beginning of the feudalizing process so long dominant in China. "The spirit of competition," says Granet, "which animated the men's societies or brotherhoods and set them against one another during the winter festivities in tournaments of dance and song, comes at the beginning of the line of development that led to State forms and institutions." (Huizinga, 1944:55)

The relationship Huizinga establishes between play and agonistic instinct, which Veblen calls "predatory instinct," is made even clearer in his evaluations of "potlatch," an ancient ritual, "a great solemn feast, during which one of the groups ... makes a gift on a large scale to the other group for the express purpose of showing its superiority" (Huizinga, 1944:58). He adds, "[t]he underlying principle in all the strange usages associated with the potlatch is, in my view, the agonistic 'instinct' pure and simple. They must all be regarded first and foremost as a violent expression of the human need to fight. Once this is admitted we may call them, strictly speaking, 'play'" (p. 61). Unlike the industrial activities geared towards the necessities of life, the activities Veblen associates with this instinct have a fundamental element of make-believe and play. Since they do not produce anything essential, they themselves are based on excess. Therefore, it would not be wrong

to suggest that in fact, all forms of governmental and religious activities are outgrowths of the instinct for play in humans.

However, Huizinga laments, the play element in human life has been almost lost among his contemporaries in civilized life. “Civilization today is no longer played,” he complains, “and even where it still seems to play, it is false ... so that it becomes increasingly difficult to tell where play ends and non-play begins” (Huizinga, 1944:206). The loss of the borders between play and non-play is traceable to the etymology of the word play. Investigating the etymology of the word play, *ludere* in Latin, Huizinga reminds us that play and illusion are cognates. Illusion “means literally ‘in-play’ (from *inlusio*, *illudere* or *inludere*)” (Huizinga, 1944, p. 11). A player is literally involved in illusion, which should last for an allocated amount of time. Like most politicians and bureaucrats, Gileadean authorities mistake government activities, which begin as part of play, for earnest; they extend the bracketed time of play to the rest of life. In other words, they take the illusion they create to be more real than reality. Politics and government that have lost their play element are literally detrimental to humanity, for, as Huizinga asserts, “the elasticity of human relationships underlying the political machinery permits it to ‘play,’ thus easing tensions which would otherwise be *unendurable or dangerous—for it is the decay of humor that kills*” (Huizinga, 1944:207). Therefore, the Commander and his friends have generated something deadly out of the most typical element of life. As such, their project is suicidal from the start. Their venture is doomed to failure for other reasons, such as, that it goes against the very foundations on which it has been constructed. As has already been stated, play is superfluous, but the Commanders’ attempts are directed at eradicating anything superfluous from Gilead; therefore, they are involved in a self-annihilating project.

Part of the success of Atwood’s novel is its implication that life is not reducible to simple biology and physical existence, for humans and animals share a mental level of existence where they have fun in pretense. They create illusions albeit temporarily and enjoy the limited time in the illusions that they have created. These illusions may become subversive strategies in the face of oppressive regimes which take the illusions they have created to be earnest. As such playfulness threatens those who take their play overly seriously and shows them both the illusory element of their systems and that once one play turns into earnest, other forms of play are inevitably formed. If *The Handmaid’s Tale* still enjoys popularity almost thirty years after its first publication, it is also due to pointing at a new direction in resistance to oppression. While resistance is often portrayed as a solemn matter, Atwood proposes versatility and subversion of play with its fun, pleasure and joy. It is hard to foresee as of yet, whether in real life play and playfulness will be as successful as Atwood’s novel promises, but one thing is certain: resistance is certainly much more colorful and youthful these days.

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