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PINK TICKETS AND FEATHERED FROCKS:  
SEXUAL POLITICS IN YEVGENY ZAMYATIN'S *WE*  
AND MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts

at

Dalhousie University  
Halifax, Nova Scotia  
September 2004

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Dedicated to Kristian, Stefan, Sarah, and Jonathan.

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## Abstract

Dystopian novels generally depict totalitarian or oligarchic societies that undertake to control the individual through the manipulation of sexuality, procreation, family life, and gender roles. This thesis compares the sexual motifs and gender implications of Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, two dystopian novels written near the beginning and the end of the twentieth century, respectively. The nature of the twentieth-century dystopia as a genre is explored and the place of each novel within this genre is assessed. The writer then turns to an explication of the sexual systems presented within each novel as well as the form of sexual rebellion that is undertaken by the protagonists as they resist the control of the state. The states' attempts to control language and the role of writing or composing as a subversive strategy on the part of the protagonists are also explored. Finally, the writer investigates the stylistic and linguistic similarities between the novels by comparing the authors' use of symbolism and imagery to portray the fractured nature of the protagonists' suppressed psyches. Ultimately, the writer concludes that stylistic and thematic similarities between the novels support the assertion that *We* is indeed a source for *The Handmaid's Tale* and that the comparison of a classic dystopian text written by a male author with what has become a later classic dystopian text written by a female author is a fruitful endeavour. The writer suggests that further comparative studies of this nature will be beneficial to the area of gender and genre studies.

## Chapter One: Introduction

Many dystopian novels explore the theme of freedom versus happiness. That is to say, dystopian novels such as *We* and *The Handmaid's Tale* present a society in which happiness and state protection are apparently guaranteed, but this is effected through extreme social control that limits or removes freedom.<sup>1</sup> These dystopian societies contain within them attempted utopias. The dystopian novelist, however, focuses on the negative and repressive aspects of the attempt to create a perfect society. What is often revealed is that happiness and protection are not in fact guaranteed for all; personal safety is often rather tenuous because human rights have been sacrificed to ensure the efficient and controlled operations of the state. Typical control mechanisms in dystopias are constant surveillance, restriction of movement and communication, limited access to writing and the means to write, the suppression of history, control of the media, communal displays of solidarity, and public executions.

Also a common motif of the dystopian novel, and one on which I intend to focus, is the state regulation of sexual relations, procreation, and child rearing in order to assist social control in the totalitarian or oligarchic state. The treatment of this motif differs from novel to novel: sexuality may be repressed and prescribed only under certain ceremonial conditions, or promiscuity may be encouraged, couplings even being scheduled and administered by the state. Likewise, procreation may be completely mechanized or merely restricted to a physical or social elite, and child rearing (indoctrination) may be completely within the domain of the state or again relegated to

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<sup>1</sup> *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is the exception to this, where the state exercises power not to guarantee collective happiness but simply for its own sake.

the elite. By imposing such hyper-organized systems of sexuality, the state attempts to inhibit or exclude meaningful emotional bonds or relationships between individuals, also disrupting and subverting conventional family organization (not necessarily nuclear) in order to redirect such energies to state allegiance. Thus, the sexual act, partner choice and procreation are no longer issues with elements of privacy and agency; they enter completely the public domain.

This public regulation of sex determines gender roles to a great extent within these worlds. Some dystopian societies are apparently androgynous while others are built upon deeply entrenched and seemingly inescapable gender designations. I will undertake to examine the sexual and gender politics of two dystopian novels—*We* by Yevgeni Zamyatin, the probable prototype of the modern dystopia, and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, a post-modern feminist rewriting of the genre—by analyzing how the authors adhere to or subvert the characteristics of dystopia specifically in terms of gender representation. Each text illuminates, in admittedly different ways and to different ends, anxieties about gender issues of the writer's time. It is arguable that Zamyatin's concern is with equality (sexual and otherwise) at the expense of individuality and creativity within the socialist state, and that Atwood's concern is the perceived threat to women's rights from the growing American religious political right in the 1980s.

Although both novels have been compared with and seem to bookend George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, two widely read and representative examples of the genre, little critical attention has been given exclusively to the thematic and stylistic connections between *We* and *The Handmaid's*

*Tale*. At first glance the novels seem very different: *We* contains an apparently classless society in which childrearing is restricted to Numbers (the citizens of OneState are so called) who meet maternal and paternal norms, and in which procreation outside the system is illegal. Children are given up to the state upon birth so that an androgynous workforce is “free” to serve the state. Sexual promiscuity is strongly encouraged but bureaucratized; one may sleep with anyone else simply by requesting a pink ticket which bears his or her number. The state devises a sexual schedule for each number that takes into account the determined sexual “need” and requests by and for other Numbers. Although all Numbers live in glass apartments, blinds may be lowered during prescribed personal hours for these approved sexual meetings. Both sexes are free to initiate an encounter, and it is illegal to refuse a liaison.

On the other hand, *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a dystopia in which strict religious dogma rules intercourse and procreation. Far from the androgynous society of *We*, gender roles are deeply entrenched. Women’s roles are divided up between Wives, Marthas (housekeepers) and Handmaids, lower-class women who are younger and presumably fertile. Econowives serve all three functions in lower-class but legal families. Women may also serve as Aunts, those who indoctrinate the Handmaids in preparation for their service. Unwomen, infertile women who are unmarried and not fit for any other service or who are unwilling to be Handmaids, clean up toxic waste in the Colonies. The Handmaids, following Old Testament precedent, bear children for and surrender them to infertile and childless upper-class couples. Infertility is officially blamed only on women. The sexual act between Handmaids and Commanders is ceremonial and takes place in the presence of the Wives only on proscribed occasions. Lower-class men serve



either as Eyes (spies) or Angels (soldiers). Sexual freedom between lower-class men and women is prohibited, and illegal interference with a Handmaid is punishable by death.

Though the context of these societies may differ, the novels themselves have certain thematic and stylistic elements in common. Both texts share a structural relationship between sex and rebellion: the magnitude of sexual repression in these controlled sexual systems demands that any and all subversive activity be accompanied by or centred upon unorthodox and illegal sexual activity. Even in *We*, where sex is apparently less repressed than in *The Handmaid's Tale*, sex outside the scheduled system or even too often with the same partner is unorthodox. Thus, as much as sex is central to the regime's external control or attempted obliteration of the individual's inner life, it also becomes the locus for rebellion, personal liberation, and the disruption of established power systems.

As the protagonist is initiated into a subversive movement through illegal sex acts and interaction with contraband materials that suggest all the perceived vices of twentieth century life such as lingerie, magazines, makeup, alcohol and cigarettes, the key to the dystopia's satire becomes apparent, for presumably the "ideal" society was formed as a remedy to twentieth century life. OneState's pink ticket system was conceived to rule out jealousy and unhappiness as distractions from state allegiance, and Gilead's Biblical structure was a reaction to toxic waste, moral degeneracy, infertility, and the power of women in North America.

Zamyatin uses symbolic gender codes and synecdochical character representations to suggest the underlying gender differences and sexual politics in this seemingly androgynous society. He therefore suggests that the apparent sexual equality

of OneState is illusory. However, in doing this Zamyatin reinstates traditional gender distinctions. Atwood uses similar symbolic codes to illuminate the extremes to which gender differences are taken in Gilead, and Zamyatin's synecdoche can be matched by Atwood's images of bodily fragmentation and amputation that suggest the gender and sexual "functions" of her society. It is my contention that in both *We* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, the authors suggest that neither enforced equality nor religious fanaticism will solve the gender and sexual inequalities of the day. Furthermore, Zamyatin and Atwood use socio-political satire to comment subversively on the complexities of the patriarchal social and political structures present in the societies in which they wrote, Zamyatin through his subtle symbolic romanticism, and Atwood through her outright undermining of the genre of dystopia itself.

Before comparing *We* and *The Handmaid's Tale* as dystopias, it is first important to determine just what a dystopia is. The first chapter will be concerned with genre. I will review the critical scholarship of dystopia, discussing different definitions of dystopia along with trends of canon formation. It must also be kept in mind that the genre of dystopia evolved out of or as a reaction to the concept of utopia as it is expressed in utopian novels, and as such, there is a relationship between the two genres. It might be said that within each dystopia there is an attempted utopia that has gone wrong, and it is the concern of the dystopian novelist to demonstrate just what has gone wrong. After considering dystopia's relationship with utopia and distinguishing it from earlier forms such as 19<sup>th</sup> century anti-utopia and utopian satire, I will consider different genre theories as they relate to dystopia and gender, placing both *We* and *The Handmaid's Tale* within the genre and considering Atwood's undermining of motifs or divergence from the

traditionally recognized conventions of the genre. I will review the comparative scholarship between these two novels and other representative texts of the genre along with the scholarship that has addressed gender issues in dystopian novels, showing ultimately that there is a place for this particular comparison in the body of criticism on dystopia.

Social organization can differ greatly in dystopian novels. The form of social organization is integral to the experience of the protagonist as he or she finds himself or herself in opposition to the state. In the second chapter I will be concerned with contexts and constructs, comparing and contrasting the social organization and activity in each novel. I will discuss specifically the control of sexuality and the representation of gender within the specific social and political paradigms of *We* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, examining in detail where sex and gender fit within the specific ideologies, institutions, and agencies that make up the "ideal society" of each novel. As loss of freedom often results from extreme social organization, the theme of freedom versus happiness will be compared in each novel. I will then compare and contrast the systems of justice that exist within each dystopia. I will also examine the conditions or milieus in which these novels are created and from which gender issues emerge by considering the specific socio-historical attempts at utopianism to which Zamyatin and Atwood were reacting in writing their dystopias. Finally, I will examine the ways in which characters engage in sexual resistance against the state by breaking the established rules of sexual conduct in order to assert individuality and agency in the face of potentially overwhelming domination.

In both novels, the protagonist resists the strictures in which he or she lives by engaging in composition. In D-503's case, he begins a journal that records his rebellious

activity and movement towards individuality. The protagonist not only records rebellion, but the act of composition is inextricably tied into the resistance it accompanies. In Offred's case, she orally records her story, the materials and opportunity for writing completely denied her as a woman. In the third chapter I will focus specifically on the protagonist of each novel by discussing the role of writing and language in the sexual rebellion of the protagonists. I will first of all examine the role of writing within the societies presented, discussing the reasons for any repression or prohibition of writing. I will then discuss the way in which each protagonist begins to compose the self by rebelling against the state through the heretical act of writing or recording. I will investigate in what ways writing/recording is gendered differently from the male protagonist of *We* to the female protagonist of *The Handmaid's Tale* by considering the nature of the phallic pen in each novel. I will then discuss the subversive nature of language. Dystopian societies usually assert control over the use of and access to language in order to forestall resistance. If one does not have the power to fully employ language, then one does not have the power to question or challenge the regime. However, in both dystopias, the protagonists manage to use language in subversive ways. Finally, I will discuss the significance of naming within a dystopia. Personal names are closely linked with a sense of individuality and uniqueness, and so the dystopian regime often denies a meaningful name to its citizens.

*We* and *The Handmaid's Tale* have many similarities in terms of imagery and symbolism. Zamyatin and Atwood both have very poetic in their prose styles and use the image in innovative and creative ways in order to convey meaning in a narrative that is often fractured and elliptical as a direct result of the protagonist's experience of

alienation. The imagery and symbolism in both novels is often sexualized and therefore expressive of gender assumptions and relations. In the fourth chapter I will focus on the symbolic representations of gender including the authors' use of synecdoche, the treatment of the body, images of dismemberment and mutilation, and floral symbolism. I will also discuss the significance of eye imagery as it relates to issues of the gaze and surveillance and also operates as a phallic symbol and/or a site of penetration. Since the dystopian journey is one of self-discovery and the emergence of self-consciousness, I will also discuss the image of the mirror as a reflection of the heretical protagonist. This chapter will most suggestively explicate the stylistic and thematic comparability of Zamyatin and Atwood.

Finally, this thesis will discuss two novels that have previously not been subjected to careful comparative scrutiny. By placing these novels within the genre of dystopia, comparing the social constructs which they explore and in which they were written, considering the theme of writing in each, and comparing the image systems employed, I hope to show that Zamyatin influenced Atwood both in terms of dystopia and the representation of gender within dystopia. These two authors may have written in different times and on different continents, and they may have lived in times that carried with them different social anxieties, but they both express concern with the balance between individual freedom and social cohesion and the underlying gender issues that go along with social constructs and the individual's place within them.

## Chapter Two: Of Canons and Genre:

### *We* and *The Handmaid's Tale* in the Dystopian Tradition

The genre into which *We*, *Brave New World*, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *The Handmaid's Tale* fit has been called negative utopia, inverted utopia (Walsh), anti-utopia (Kateb) and dystopia (Beauchamp, Booker, Hillegas, Woodcock). Some critics use these terms interchangeably and indiscriminately (Walsh), while others suggest that differences and/or sub-genres exist (Aldridge, Morson). Furthermore, definitions of and uses of the individual terms themselves vary, depending on a given critic's own slant, so that these terms, as they are defined and used, seem to depend upon critical canonical preferences of inclusion or exclusion. Critics tend to define the genre in question on the basis of the motifs of landmark works like *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* even though, for example, the term "anti-utopia" has been applied to works written in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and earlier. My purpose in this chapter is to consider various issues of the genre and canonicity, as well as the specific history of genre issues and critical reactions to them, in order to establish a foundation for a critical perspective that is based on gender. Furthermore, I wish to consider the specific works I am addressing, *We* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, within the dystopian genre while justifying a comparative discussion about them. One of the issues I will discuss is how to compare two writers who bookend the acknowledged masters of the genre, Aldous Huxley and George Orwell. One of my central concerns will also be how to fit a woman's text within what was, until recently, a "man's" genre, defended, criticized and canonized largely by male critics within a phallogocentric discourse.

## The Response to Utopia

Some of the early critical attention to dystopia as a genre, following the publication of *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, came from utopian scholars who were trying to account for the perceived decline of the literary utopia that seemingly accompanied the rise of dystopian or anti-utopian fiction in the twentieth century. These critics accordingly tend to define anti-utopia, usually preferring this term, as something that is a direct reaction to or is in direct opposition to utopia. One such critic is George Kateb, the title of whose book, *Utopia and its Enemies* (1963), makes his perspective clear enough. His use of the term “antiutopian” is also a telling indication of his interests, which are to defend utopia against anti-utopian attacks in order to suggest how the declining genre might sustain itself. His defensive stance against this attack on utopianism is enmeshed in his very description of this genre:

This essay is meant to consider certain attacks—most of them modern—which have been made on utopianism. These attacks stem from the belief that the world some time soon (unbearably soon) will have at its disposal—if it wishes to use them—the material presuppositions of a way of life commonly described as “utopian.” Such a prospect, one would have thought, would be a cause for gladness. It has not been that, at all, but rather a signal for men of various persuasions and temperaments to devote themselves strenuously and in all sincerity to exposing both the insufficiency of utopian ideals and the unacceptability of arrangements thought necessary to the realization of those ideals. (1)

This is as close as we get to Kateb’s definition of “antiutopianism.” Without even using the term in this instance, what he sees as an antithetical genre is described as an almost inconceivable attack on the dream of perfection.

Kateb is not alone in suggesting that the turn to dystopia is dependent upon the conceivable technological ability to create utopia. He states that anti-utopianism is “a crystallization of a number of ideas, attitudes, opinions, and sentiments that have existed

for centuries,” a crystallization which has been brought about by “nothing but the development of technology and the natural sciences” (3). It would seem, then, that the dream becoming reality is an alarming prospect. Furthermore, this alarm is not based upon “*scepticism* about the capacity of modern technology and natural science to execute the most vaulting ambitions of utopianism,” but on the “*dread* it will” (Kateb 14-15, emphasis mine). Kateb accounts for this dread on the basis of what would be lost in the realisation of utopian dreams: the cost of utopia would be “the death of democratic politics” (16). However, it is naive and simplistic to associate anti-utopianism only with democracy; the issue is much more complex. As a brief example of this complexity, witness *Brave New World’s* critique of American capitalism and consumption-driven economics alongside its bleak depiction of totalitarian rule.

Gorman Beauchamp, in his essay “Man as Robot: The Taylor System in *We*” (1983), also defines dystopian novels by their expression of “the fear of utopia and the fear of technology,” although in a much less defensive vein than Kateb. He also more clearly illuminates *why* the realization of utopia might be such an alarming prospect:

Utopian images [. . .] have imagined the imposition of a rational, regimented, minutely planned schematization on the disorderly flux of history; but, because they seemed too impossible to realize, these fictive models have served more as contemplative critiques of the ills of real world societies than as literal blueprints for reforming them. If, however, [. . .] the twentieth century is moving toward the actual realization of utopia, this shift can be attributed to the agency of modern technology. The proliferating array of techniques for social control made available by modern science, that is, poses the possibility of rectifying the venerable utopian ideations of the past; and this possibility has become increasingly problematic, the specter that haunts the dystopian novel. (86)

It is precisely the ways in which technology and science could bring (and have brought) about the social control necessary to implement “a rational, regimented, minutely planned schematization” that constitutes the most nightmarish aspects of dystopian novels and has



made the once unthreatening utopian possibilities threatening. Alexandra Aldridge, in *The Scientific World View in Dystopia* (1984), concurs, while also explaining that dystopianism is not simply anti-scientific or anti-technological, but “anti-scientistic”: “dystopia always aims to critique and ridicule that [utopian] worldview for its adherence to instrumental values, its elevation of functional and collective ends over the humanistic and individual” (ix). Aldridge and Beauchamp focus not so much on the loss of “democratic values” that Kateb bemoaned as on the coercive means of achieving utopia.

To put it another way, Beauchamp and Aldridge point out how dystopian writers address the possible abuses of power that can accompany the implementation of utopia. Similarly, Keith M. Booker, in *Dystopian Literature: A Theory and Research Guide* (1994), describes dystopias as “literary works that critically examine both existing conditions and the potential abuses that might result from the institution of supposedly utopian alternatives.” He goes on to say that

dystopian literature is specifically that literature which situates itself in direct opposition to utopian thought, warning against the potential negative consequences of arrant utopianism. At the same time, dystopian literature generally also constitutes a critique of existing social conditions or political systems, either through the critical examination of the utopian premises upon which those conditions and systems are based or through the imaginative extension of those conditions and systems into different contexts that more clearly reveal their flaws and contradictions. (3)

Although he uses a phrase like “direct opposition to utopian thought,” which might place him strongly in the Kateb camp, notice that it is not utopianism itself that dystopian literature opposes, but “potential abuses” and “potential negative consequences” of not merely utopianism, but “arrant utopianism.” Booker also points out that the critique is not restricted to utopian thought, but to existing social and political constructs. Dystopia looks not only to the future, but also to the present trends that might bring about the

nightmare future. Dystopian writers provide a contemporary social critique through what Booker calls “defamiliarization”: using imaginary futuristic settings to provide a fresh perspective on contemporary issues (*Dystopian Literature* 3-4). As Mark Hillegas says in *The Future as Nightmare: H.G Wells and the Anti-Utopians* (1976), dystopian fiction provides “one of the most revealing indexes to the anxieties of our age” (3).

To return to one of the earlier critics, Chad Walsh’s work *From Utopia to Nightmare* (1962) places him in a different camp entirely from his contemporary, Kateb: “My focus will be on dystopia. I shall deal with utopia only briefly, as a necessary background to its mocking rival” (24). Notice the use of the term “dystopian” in this instance. Although Walsh acknowledges a rivalry between the two genres, he sees the dystopian response not as an “attack” but as a mockery, anticipating Gary Saul Morson’s parodic genre theory (*The Boundaries of Genre: Dostoevsky’s Diary of a Writer and the Traditions of Literary Utopia*, 1981). Morson defines anti-utopia as an anti-genre (115). In this he would seem to agree with Kateb, but Morson does not see anti-utopia as a direct assault on utopia: “The distinctiveness of anti-genres lies in the fact that those conventions establish a *parodic* relation between the anti-generic work and the works and traditions of another genre, the target genre” (115). Walsh’s reference to mockery anticipates the playfulness of this parodic theory. For these critics, then, dystopia is not an attack or direct assault on utopia, but there is a parodic and mocking relationship between the genres.

Walsh defines dystopia, although he sometimes uses the term “inverted utopia,” as “an imaginary society presented as *inferior* to any civilised society that actually exists,” (26, emphasis mine) having defined utopia as “an imaginary society presented as

*superior* to any civilised society that actually exists” (26, emphasis mine). Like Booker, he acknowledges the role of the contemporary in dystopia, but Walsh highlights the *comparative* element of dystopia’s critique of the present and the future. The focus on social commentary seems to be a distinguishing factor that separates dystopian scholars from utopian reactionaries like Kateb.

Walsh’s definition, though, is quite vague, and his use of terminology is inconsistent. The term “inverted utopia,” although it does not have the antagonistic associations of the “anti” prefix, implies that a dystopia is simply a reverse or negative utopia. This seems to have been answered by Aldridge:

The dystopia is not merely “utopia in reverse” as it has often been called, but a singular generic category issuing out of a twentieth-century shift of attitudes toward utopia. Dystopia is composed of unique qualities of imagination and sensibility—certain historically bound shifts of the social imagination—brought together not as a fictive philosophical tract, but in the form of the novel. However, the dystopian novelist, instead of recreating some fragment of the actual world, extrapolates from his concept of actuality in order to make a holistic framework, a complete alternative (inevitably futuristic) structure. (*Scientific ix*)

Aldridge provides a useful and informative definition of dystopia. She describes dystopia’s relation to utopia not as an attack or even a mockery but as a “shift in attitudes.” She alludes to the novel as the ideal form of the dystopia, and seems to contrast that with the utopian “fictive philosophical tracts.” Chris Ferns takes this notion further.

More recent utopian scholars like Ferns tend not to regard dystopia as an attack on utopia or a genre that is responsible for the fall of utopia. So far the discussion has focused on ideologies and technologies. In *Narrating Utopia: Ideology, Gender, Form in Utopian Literature* (1999) Ferns focuses on narrative forms and strategies as a means of defining both utopia and dystopia and as a way of comparing the genres:

In the case of utopian narrative, for example, there is a clear correlation between its character and that of other narrative models prevalent at the time of its emergence—and the prevalence of those models is in turn a reflection of the surrounding historical context. Thus the traveller’s tale format of so many Renaissance utopias [. . .] clearly reflects the popularity of this form during the age of exploration which constitutes part of the historical context in which they were produced. (16)

This focus on the evolution of formal constructs is quite useful. Ferns argues that the apparent decline of the traditional utopia described here has to do with the “age of exploration draw[ing] to a close” so that “the traveller gives way to the rather less glamorous figure of the tourist” (19). It is not necessarily that the dream of perfection is declining, but rather that some of the traditional forms that encapsulated the delivery of that dream are becoming less relevant to readers.

Ferns goes on to argue that “the emergence of the novel as the dominant form of fictional discourse” reveals the limitations of traditional utopian forms:

compared to the novel, the traveller’s tale appears linear, episodic, lacking in dramatic interaction—deficiencies which only become more obvious when, as is often the case in more recent utopian fiction, the writer introduces novelistic elements (attempts at individual characterization, a love interest, and so forth) in an effort to remedy the problem. (20)

However, when more recent utopian writers have tried to use the novel form, they have sometimes run into problems because the “static social vision” of these utopian worlds “prove[s] problematic in terms of fictional representation” and renders narrative elements like the passage of time and the progress and development of the protagonist meaningless (Ferns 20). Simply put, utopias are without time, and the movement of a novel depends upon the perceived passage of time.

Ferns accounts for the success of the dystopia based on the relationship between form and content and reader expectations that arise out of familiarity with certain forms.

Dystopia did not conquer its rival, then, but appeared as a genre at the right time: “Dystopian fiction, however, originating at a time when the novel constitutes the dominant narrative model, moves much further in this direction, its typical theme of the struggle of the individual against an oppressive society lending itself readily to a more novelistic treatment” (16). In contrast to Kateb and other thinkers, Ferns asserts that form, not content (ideas, philosophies, political beliefs) accounts for the shift from utopia to dystopia. Furthermore, he also points out that utopia has not faded away, but has changed: “where the concept of utopian stasis is also abandoned, as is the case in much recent utopian fiction, the range of possible narrative experiment is still further extended” (22). Ferns’s study focuses on gender as well as narrative forms and he points to the recent “utopian dreams of freedom” written by women that contrast the earlier “utopian dreams of order” written by men (27). Kateb, of course, could not have anticipated the prolific array of feminist utopias that has been produced.

Of course, it has been pointed out that the twentieth century imagination accepts more readily a pessimistic than an optimistic portrayal the future. Brett Cooke accounts for the lack of enduring popularity of recent utopian texts compared to their dystopian counterparts by observing that “this could be due to more pessimistic forecasts of technological and social development, but the human universals [. . .] in *We* suggest that dystopia better suits our innate predispositions” (11). As Agent Smith said in *The Matrix*:

Did you know that the first Matrix was designed to be a perfect human world where none suffered, where everyone would be happy? It was a disaster. No one would accept the program [. . .]. Some believed that we lacked the programming language to describe your perfect world, but I believe that as a species human beings define their reality through misery and suffering. The perfect world was a dream that your primitive cerebrum kept trying to wake up from.

Even in this science fiction realm, the artificially-intelligent designers of a distracting dream world for human beings abandoned the idea of utopia because it would not serve as a satisfactory distraction or diversion from reality. Agent Smith nicely elaborates on the dissatisfying nature of static utopia to contemporary sensibilities.

If the dystopia does focus on the negative possibilities of social control through technology in the future, that is not to say that dystopias do not have optimistic elements. The optimism inherent in any dystopia stems from its portrayal of the impossibility of achieving static and repressive social control mechanisms in reality. Dystopias show that no matter the consequences, and many dystopian protagonists do experience drastic consequences, human nature will surface and attempt to assert itself. Dystopias show that individuality cannot be completely suppressed, nor can human psychology be externally altered. Ferns supports the idea that twentieth century audiences find this aspect of dystopia reassuring because we fear the possibility that we are shaped by our social environment (107).

It is important to establish that although dystopia does have a relationship with utopia, it is a genre in its own right with its own characteristics. It is as a “singular generic category” with “unique qualities of imagination and sensibilities” (Aldridge *Scientific ix*) that is particularly suited to the modern novel form in its portrayal of a protagonist who resists a static social order (Ferns 16, 22) that I intend to examine the dystopia.

## Anti-utopia versus Dystopia

The dystopian novel did not suddenly emerge in the twentieth century, however. It has its own predecessors that reach back to the beginnings of utopianism. In order to establish what accounts for the “shift of attitudes” and what makes the modern dystopia a unique twentieth century genre, we must look at the history of anti-utopianism in general as well as the critical history of the genre more closely. Aldridge points out that “attacks on utopia or a spirit of anti-utopianism run parallel to the whole of what can loosely be called utopian thought,” going back as far as the Greek comedic writers such as Aristophanes and anti-utopian myths of Hell, Hades, and the underworld (*Scientific* 5). Incidentally, Elaine Hoffman Baruch points out that gender inversion is the basis for satire in Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata* and *Ecclesiazusae* (30). Aldridge uses three terms to suggest the evolution of the genre: utopian satire, anti-utopia, and dystopia. Utopian satire runs from those early Greek comedies until the mid-nineteenth century. Aldridge says that utopian satire “addresses itself to particular conditions in history,” but does not have the futuristic and technological elements that characterize later anti-utopian and dystopian fiction (*Scientific* 7).

Utopian satire can be set aside in order to focus on the terms anti-utopia and dystopia. Generally speaking, anti-utopian works date from about the mid to late nineteenth century and dystopian works are a twentieth century phenomenon, although many critics use the term anti-utopia when referring to dystopian fiction. Interestingly, before the 1950s and 60s, critics referred to *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as satires (Aldridge *Scientific* 12). Walsh also provides a useful evolution of the dystopian novel. He points out that “the unambiguous dystopia seems to date from the

18<sup>th</sup> century,” but “remained a minor irritant to utopia” until “conservatives became alarmed” upon the publication of Edward Bellamy’s utopia *Looking Backward*, published in 1888 (74). He describes the books that were written in direct response to this novel as “anti-utopias” whose purpose is “to expose socialism and defend *Laissez-faire* capitalism” (74). This recalls to us Kateb’s assertion that anti-utopianism is the result of utopia’s perceived threat to democracy. Walsh uses the term “anti-utopia,” in this instance, in reference to these works which he does not regard as dystopian. While he acknowledges their existence, he calls these non-dystopias “Bellamy’s bastard offspring” (75) and does not include them in the canon of dystopia.

Walsh’s dismissal of these late nineteenth century responses to Bellamy accords with an article of Morson’s selective criteria. Morson defines anti-utopia as an anti-genre, and asserts that “an anti-generic work must parody a target genre [. . .] not a single work. [. . .] For example, the class I identify as anti-utopias does not include a number of works that parody the specific utopian program inferable from *Looking Backward*” (116). Aldridge also notes the period of “anti-utopian” literature that followed Bellamy. She differentiates these anti-utopian works from earlier utopian satires and later dystopias. Her definition of this middle genre runs thus: “The pure anti-utopia is simple [sic] and primarily a direct attack on the concept of utopia. [. . .] Perhaps the first and foremost examples consist of the decade of literary reaction [. . .] against Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*” (*Scientific* 8). Morson and Aldridge thus disagree: the former sees the “bastard offspring” as responses to a particular utopia, not an assault on the utopian genre in general, while the latter explicitly characterizes them as responses to the utopian concept. This disagreement comes about as a result of the critics’ differing use of the



term “anti-utopia.” The point, however, is that distinctions are being made between late nineteenth century works and what came in the following century.

These definitions of anti-utopia remind us of Kateb’s definition, which uses the same term. However, Kateb was referring to twentieth century works like *We*, *Brave New World*, and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, failing to distinguish the particular characteristics of the twentieth century dystopia. Even H.G. Wells, whose works *When the Sleeper Wakes* and *The Time Machine* Zamyatin referred to as “anti-utopias” (cited in Brown 41) and are noted sources for *We*, are described by Aldridge as “ambiguous” dystopias (*Origins* 67) and seem to lack the sharpness and singularity of vision that Aldridge uses to define the twentieth century nightmare scenarios.

Morson defines dystopia as a sub-genre of anti-utopia, and this is where he and Aldridge seem to agree:

If the anti-genre has more than one type, its subgenres will have their own classic texts and may also have an exemplar or exemplars. Thus, Zamyatin’s *We* has been made by its successors into an exemplar of the modern “dystopia,” a type of anti-utopia that discredits utopias by portraying the likely effects of their realization, in contrast to other anti-utopias which discredit the possibility of their realization or expose the folly and inadequacy of their proponents’ assumptions or logic. (115-116)

Thus earlier anti-utopias of the late nineteenth century were concerned with discrediting a particular utopian vision (like Bellamy’s) or pointed toward the impossibility of ever achieving utopia. It would seem then that these late nineteenth century anti-utopias were anti-socialist texts, where dystopian novels like *We* deal with the worst possible outcome of an actual socialist utopian vision gone wrong. As Kateb asserted, modern dystopian writers do not doubt that utopias could come about; rather they are alarmed by the perceived outcome of utopia’s realization.

Where Morson sees dystopia as a subgenre of anti-utopia, Aldridge sees dystopia as having evolved out of utopian satire and anti-utopia: “Both utopian satire and anti-utopias lack the dark or apocalyptic strain which characterizes so much dystopic writing” (Aldridge *Scientific* 16). Both critics thus see the modern dystopia as something that is unique and distinguishable from earlier anti-utopias. Aldridge indicates that the basis of this distinction is in part due to a shift in outlook. Whether socialist or capitalist, utopian or anti-utopian, nineteenth century visions had a progressive and positive strain, or at least arose out of progressive motivations.

Walsh notes an early twentieth century book by a Russian, Valerii Briusov, called *The Republic of the Southern Cross* which broke away from the late nineteenth century trend in anti-utopias. He describes it as “more than an attack of economic and social theories; it says something about *the enduring perversity of man’s nature*” (76, emphasis mine). He therefore suggests that this work paved the way for works like Zamyatin’s *We*. This focus on the sinister aspects and potential of human nature and social organization is one of the defining characteristics of the modern dystopian novel. This confirms that dystopia is more than just a direct attack on utopianism. It is a vehicle for social commentary *and* human introspection. Modern dystopias explore the relationship between the possibilities inherent in human nature and the social constructs we have already devised or are capable of devising.

In defining dystopia we must interrogate what accounts for the twentieth century tendency to introspective reflection on humanity’s darker potential that differentiates the modern dystopia from the mere socio-political reactions of the late nineteenth century. Certainly early twentieth century historical events have played a part. Also important is

the growing reality of utopian visions: “The rise of dystopian fiction [. . .] is attributed to disillusionment with actual ‘utopian’ schemes in the real modern world” (Aldridge *Scientific* ii). Scholars like George Woodcock and Eugene Weber (1950s) indicate that “both mood *and* novel emerge for the first time in the civilizational malaise generated by World War I” (paraphrased in Aldridge *Scientific* ii).

Certainly Zamyatin was writing in the wake of both World War I and the Russian Revolution, and he was disillusioned by the possible outcome of that particular utopian vision in Russia, one which he initially supported. Critics also point to his novel as the prototype of the modern dystopia.<sup>2</sup> Woodcock (1956) pronounced Zamyatin’s *We* as “the first of the significant contemporary anti-utopian novels” (cited in Aldridge *Scientific* ii). Woodcock was the first to assert that “*We* is not merely the predecessor of such [. . .] anti-Utopias as Huxley’s *Brave New World* and Orwell’s *1984*; it also set the pattern which they followed” (cited in Aldridge *Scientific* 12).

Perhaps establishing the twentieth century dystopia as a genre requires a discussion of its form in addition to comparison to earlier anti-utopias. Hillegas constructs his definition of dystopia without reference to utopia at all by giving a very descriptive account of its conventions and motifs. He describes dystopian societies as

nightmare states where men are conditioned to obedience, freedom is eliminated, and individuality crushed; where the past is systematically destroyed and men are isolated from nature; where science and technology are employed, not to enrich human life, but to maintain the state’s surveillance and control of its slave citizens. (3)

He describes the characteristics of dystopia rather than any socio-political (anti-utopian) function. Hillegas has struck upon some trademark characteristics of the dystopian novel

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<sup>2</sup> As noted earlier, Zamyatin referred to some of Wells’s works as “anti-utopias.” Aldridge, however, refers to them as ambiguous dystopias and distinguishes them from twentieth century dystopias.

that we have not previously encountered in this discussion, like the obliteration of history and the separation of humans from nature. As useful as his motif-centred definition may be, the gender exclusive language points to some of the issues we shall be considering, such as the role of gender in dystopian works and critical traditions, whether dystopias are concerned only with men's obedience, freedom, and individuality, and whether there is room in the genre for criticism based on gender or for dystopias written by women.

### Towards a Flexible Gender/Genre Theory

Generic definitions are directly related to canonical selection. As we may recall, Walsh's definition of dystopia is quite broad and vague, so that his canon of dystopian literature accordingly needs great elaboration. Immediately after giving this definition, he explains his choice to exclude "a great deal of fantasy and whimsy, particularly in the spawning worlds of science fiction and children's stories" (27). Fair enough, but I think it worth pointing out that definitions usually serve the purpose of canon-formation, which is in itself largely dependent upon the personal preferences and predilections of critics. More recent scholars (Booker) consider dystopian works from the genres of science fiction, children's literature, and fantasy, recognizing that postmodernism has affected the dystopian genre and challenged generic distinctions. Ralph Porzdik, writing in 2001, considers the impact of postcolonial theory on both dystopias and utopias in *The Quest for Postcolonial Utopia*. Erika Gottlieb, in *Dystopian Fiction East and West* (2001), asserts that not all dystopias are futuristic and/or speculative, examining those produced within the Communist Bloc which were reflections of current realities for their writers. These recent critics have more flexible definitions and more inclusive canons than more

traditional critics.

This would seem to be a good time to turn to Morson in more detail, because he answers many of the questions I have posed. What is innovative about *The Boundaries of Genre* (1981) is that it not only deals with dystopian texts, but it directly addresses the relationship between genre and canon formation as it relates to dystopia. He acknowledges that “the particularities of texts defy the generalities of classification systems, that it is in principle possible to classify texts in an indefinitely large number of ways, and that new works (or the rediscovery of old ones) inevitably render obsolete all existing or conceivable systems” (vii). However, he does not advocate the abandonment of genre. He acknowledges the differences in previous critics’ definitions and canons, and proposes a theory that is based not on personal *preferences* or *beliefs* about the superiority of certain texts or kinds of texts, but on the *purpose* a critic may have at a certain time or within a given project:

The key word [. . .] is purpose. No doubt, one can classify a set of texts in any number of ways, each of which is arbitrary in the sense that there could be another. But the choice of one or another classification system is not necessarily arbitrary when there is a reason for classifying: given a particular purpose that a generic system may be expected to serve, some may serve it better or worse than others. (vii)

This focus on purpose allows for variation, new scholarship, and new discoveries. It also justifies the classification of certain texts together that previous classification systems may not have allowed for, and therefore new insights, comparisons, and contrasts are possible. It also leads us away from unaccounted dismissal and arbitrary exclusions of certain texts or subgenres, like Walsh’s dismissal of fantasy and science fiction. Indeed, a canonical system based on purpose allows for generic overlap and borderline cases, like those dystopian works that straddle the genres of science fiction or fantasy.

Morson explains that he classifies texts “according to their ‘semiotic nature,’ which is to say, the conventions acknowledged to be appropriate for interpreting them. Acknowledged by whom, under what circumstances, and for how long, are questions we shall have occasion to ask” (viii). I have already pointed out some of the acknowledged criteria for interpreting dystopia: its response to utopianism, its portrayal of the potential abuses of technology, its social commentary, its focus on the sinister aspects of human nature, its tendency to obliterate history, and its separation of humanity from nature. I have drawn these criteria from different sources. I will not undertake to devise my own definition of the modern dystopia; I will, however, explicate the purpose upon which I base my generic decisions in this project.

My purpose for classification is to identify *We* and *The Handmaid’s Tale* as representative dystopian texts that share certain conventions of gender and sexuality. Both texts illuminate, in admittedly different ways and to different ends, the gender issues of the respective writer’s time by presenting a totalitarian regime that imposes a hyper-organized system of sexuality through which the state attempts to inhibit or exclude emotional bonds or relationships between individuals, thus disrupting and subverting conventional family organization (not necessarily nuclear) in order to redirect such energies to state allegiance.

I have already alluded to the two major dystopian texts which *We* precedes and *The Handmaid’s Tale* follows: *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. These are the best known of the modern dystopian novels. Therefore, one might wonder at the decision to compare Zamyatin and Atwood and whether this is possible without in-depth exploration of Huxley and Orwell. *We* has been noted as the exemplar/prototype of the

modern dystopia, and Atwood's debt to Orwell has been noted by many critics.<sup>3</sup> But is a strictly linear and chronological model of influence necessary for comparison? Is any debt Atwood may owe Zamyatin traceable only through Orwell or Huxley? I would like to begin to answer these questions by reviewing the comparative scholarship that exists between these four novels.

Scholars have recognized the connections between *We*, *Brave New World* and/or *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Brown, "Brave New World, 1984 and *We*"; Sargent, "Social Control in Contemporary Dystopia"; Vohra, S.K. *Negative Utopian Fiction*; Weinkauff, Mary S. "Five Spokesmen for Dystopia"; Macey, Samuel L. "The Role of Clocks and Time in Dystopias: Zamyatin's *We* and Huxley's *Brave New World*"). Although Huxley denied knowledge of *We* before writing his dystopia, many critics disregard this assertion (Orwell, *In Front of Your Nose*; Richards 54; Seymour-Smith 239). Among other features, Huxley seems to have borrowed from *We* its institutionalized promiscuity and state-controlled child-rearing, along with the apparently "ungendered" workforce that results from freedom from family responsibilities. On the other hand, other critics (Collins 41, Stites cited in Ferns 247n) accept Huxley's denial and look to earlier writers who influenced both *We* and *Brave New World* such as Wells and Federov. Orwell acknowledged the influence of both Zamyatin and Huxley on his dystopia. Although the regime in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* uses sexual repression rather than shallow licentiousness to undermine personal relationships and strengthen state allegiance, the rebellious relationship between Winston and Julia mirrors that of D-503 and I-330, right down to

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<sup>3</sup> It must be acknowledged that Atwood's dystopia engages in a direct dialogue with Orwell's dystopia. This fact has been noted by many critics and by Atwood herself. It is also true that Orwell's text is heavily influenced by *We*. Therefore, it is evident that in many ways Atwood engages with Zamyatin at one remove. However, I have chosen to undergo a direct comparison between *We* and *The Handmaid's Tale* in order to explore the extent to which Zamyatin's influence on Atwood is not merely be mediated by Orwell.

the secret meeting-place (the Ancient House becomes the room above Charrington's shop) and use of contraband food, clothing and cosmetics. Even Winston's precarious position as a seditious journalist has its origin in D-503's initially state-commissioned poem turned journal of rebellion and discovery of subjectivity. These are only a few of many structural and thematic similarities between those three works.

Comparison on the basis of sex has also been made between these three novels. Lymon Tower Sargent, in the essay noted above (1984) that closely predates *The Handmaid's Tale*, contrasts the differing ways that sex is used as a means of social control in the dystopias of Zamyatin, Orwell, and Huxley: "One major disagreement in the classic dystopias is over the question of sex as a means of social control. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* suggests suppression; *Brave New World* proposes promiscuity; *We* has controlled promiscuity." Sargent goes on to ask whether "control through pleasure [is] more effective than control through pain" (38). Sargent's considerations here nicely anticipate the publication of Atwood's novel, and pave the way for a further comparison of sex as a means of social control in dystopias.

Critics have also examined the representation of gender in the dystopias of Orwell, Huxley, and Zamyatin. In "Women in Dystopia/Utopia: 1984 and Beyond," Joyce McCarl Neilson claims that Julia functions as little more than an earth goddess, and attributes Orwell's "lack of concern about women as a class" to the failure of liberalism to concern itself with gender equality (145). Baruch questions the role of women in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Brave New World* and asks whether unconventional sexual acts have the same liberating effect for women as they do for men in these novels:

Today, rebellion consists of redefining the context of the act itself, its motions and emotions, its causes and effects, for like the Marquis de Sade we see the sexual



relation as the paradigm of all power relationships, and recognize that what is liberation for men may be enslavement for women, something neither Huxley nor Orwell seemed to recognize. (41)

Margaret Wise Petrochenkov, in “Castration Anxiety and the Other in Zamyatin’s *We*,” considers how genital imagery associated with certain characters, particularly I-330, figures into D-503’s castration anxiety. She explicates extensively how gender is represented in *We*, and how “sexual potency” is linked with “mental creativity” through D-503’s act of writing (252). On the other hand, Sona Stephan Hoisington, in “The Mismeasure of I-330,” focuses on I-330’s mythological rather than her psychological significance and asserts that she is not the femme fatale that other critics have made her out to be, observing that Zamyatin challenges and transcends gender stereotypes (88) by having her play mythological roles that are usually reserved for men but allowing her to retain her own identity (81-82). This perspective especially calls for a comparison between this novel and *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

Likewise, critics have traced the debt Atwood owes Orwell as well as her extension of his work. Larry W Caldwell, in “Wells, Orwell, and Atwood: (EPI)Logic and Eu/Utopia,” compares the function of the epilogue and the use of filtered perspectives as anti-closural devices. Earl G. Ingersoll compares the theme of writing in both dystopias in “Margaret Atwood’s ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’: Echoes of Orwell.” Jocelyn Harris explicitly states that Atwood “openly invites comparison” (267) and “both imitates and diverges from Orwell” (268) in “*The Handmaid’s Tale* as a Re-Visioning of 1984.” Lois Feuer, in “The Calculus of Love and Nightmare: *The Handmaid’s Tale* and the Dystopian Tradition,” claims that Atwood’s text is not just a feminist version of Orwell’s text, but she “both participates in and extends the dystopian genre” (83),

claiming that Atwood's focus on the individual is what makes it different.

A few critical works have already undertaken a comparison of Atwood and Zamyatin. Laurence Davies compares the utopian elements of the societies presented in *We*, *Brave New World*, and *The Handmaid's Tale*, particularly as presented in the speeches of the Benefactor, the World Controller, and the Commander, in "At Play in the Fields of Our Ford: Utopian Dystopianism in Atwood, Huxley, and Zamyatin." Robert Fulford briefly compares Atwood to Zamyatin, Huxley and Orwell in an early review of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Amin Malak, in "Margaret Atwood's 'The Handmaid's Tale' and the Dystopian Tradition," only very briefly alludes to Zamyatin, as does Feuer in the work already mentioned. Bret Cooke's recent work *Human Nature in Utopia, Zamyatin's We* compares Zamyatin's text to many other dystopias, including references to *The Handmaid's Tale*. Chris Ferns, in *Narrating Utopia*, briefly but directly contrasts the protagonists in *We* and *The Handmaid's Tale* with protagonists in utopian works (111) and contrasts the first-person narration of both texts with the third-person point of view employed in Huxley's and Orwell's texts (131-132), while in the broader context comparing and contrasting *We*, *Brave New World*, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and *The Handmaid's Tale* (105-138) in his chapter on dystopia within this survey of utopian literature. He points out that the satire of Zamyatin, Huxley and Orwell upholds gender stereotypes and sexual power imbalances from their own times as more desirable than what we find in their dystopian worlds, but that Atwood breaks with this trend by offering a female protagonist and subverting many of the conventions of the genre (130).

I intend to contribute to this body of criticism by offering a close and explicit comparison of *We* and *The Handmaid's Tale* that goes further than the comparisons that

have already been made. I also think that it is warranted to compare the two exclusive of other dystopias to which they have already been compared. Even in comparing D-503, Winston Smith, and Offred as diarists, we can see that *We* and *The Handmaid's Tale* have something in common with each other that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* does not share. Fern has already pointed out their shared first-person point of view. The diary *is* the text in Zamyatin's and Atwood's novels; whether it is hand-written or voice-recorded, we get a first-person account in the form of a diary. This is not so in Orwell's text: Winston's diary is only *part* of the text that is narrated in the limited omniscient point of view. And both *We* and *The Handmaid's Tale* imply that the order of the record may have been reshuffled or rearranged, calling into question the very reliability of the diaries.

Certainly Feuer's assertion that "stylistically and thematically Atwood moves far beyond Orwell" (92) suggests to me the need of more in-depth relevant comparison between *We* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, if only based on stylistic elements like imagery and symbolism. It is because of the poetic and imagistic nature of the writing of both Zamyatin and Atwood that I undertake a comparison of Zamyatin and Atwood to the exclusion of Huxley and Orwell. D-503 claims to be writing a narrative poem, and Offred's oral recording puts us in mind of the oral tradition that was the beginning of narrative poetry. Both novels share poetic devices such as synecdoche, colour and floral imagery, both have significant references to mirrors, and characters in both texts are concerned with motherhood and impregnation (not only having a mother, but being a mother). Because gender and sexuality are such a large part of their imagistic and symbolic similarities, these are the basis of my comparison.

## Conclusion

Many terms have been used to denote the genre that I am treating as dystopia regarding its relationship to utopia. As well, critics have admitted certain works into this canon based on their own preferences and assumptions about the genre. Genre considerations become somewhat more complicated when gender is taken into account. Women such as Margaret Atwood have written novels within a genre that was originally dominated by men. Dystopia is a genre that is already concerned with gender roles, sexuality, and family life.

The twentieth century dystopia has evolved out of the much older genre of utopia. Some critics, such as Kateb and Beauchamp, attribute the advent of dystopia to scientific and technological advances. Aldridge and Booker focus on the means and abuses that technology might allow. Hillegas observes that dystopias reveal concerns contemporary to the writer. Walsh and Morson see dystopia as a mocking or parody genre in relation to utopia. Ferns compares the narrative flow and function of dystopia and utopia, arguing that dystopia is much more suited to the style of twentieth century fiction.

Cooke has pointed out that dystopia is well suited to the pessimism inherent in the twentieth century imagination. I agree with Aldridge in treating dystopia as a “singular generic category” (*Scientific ix*). Dystopia did not merely emerge in the twentieth century; it has its roots in utopia satire and anti-utopia. Walsh notes that dystopia reflects humanity’s perverse nature and is concerned with human introspection. Hillegas observes that dystopia is concerned with lack of freedom and individuality, the destruction of history, separation from nature, surveillance and control.

More recent scholars, like Booker, recognize that generic distinctions such as

dystopia, science fiction, and fantasy have been blurred by post-modernism. Porzdik and Gottlieb concern themselves with postcolonial and real life dystopias, respectively. Ferns considers the genre from a narrative standpoint. Morson quite usefully contends that canon formation depends upon the critic's purpose. I use this theory as the basis for comparing *We* and *The Handmaid's Tale* based on gender to the exclusion of other well-known dystopian texts. Reviewing the comparative criticism already existing in the genre, I have shown that there is a need for considered comparison between these two novels.

Chapter Three: Contexts and Constructs:  
Sex, Gender, and Society in the Dystopian Setting.

The political and social settings of a dystopian novel are very important—perhaps more important than in other fiction genres. The state itself is what the protagonist struggles against. The regime becomes a central character: the antagonist. Totalitarian rulers like the Benefactor and the Commander are really faces and voices for the state: they are emblematic. We must not forget that these fictional dystopian states have arisen out of utopian schemes. The architects of the states in question shaped gender into their blueprints. Some regimes, like OneState in *We*, attempt to gender-neutralize the population into efficient state-loyal workers who have no seeming gender differences. In part this is accomplished through state control of sexuality and the elimination of family obligations. State-directed promiscuity assures that sexual energy is expended while close familial bonds are eliminated, and the lack of family responsibilities eliminates gender-specific roles like breadwinner and homemaker. In the state uniform and bald heads are also meant to make everyone look similarly androgynous.

In contrast to this, gender differences form the very fabric of social organization in dystopian regimes such as that in Gilead in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Sexuality is closely controlled, but only certain individuals can participate under closely-monitored ceremonial conditions and only for the purpose of child-rearing. Certain individuals have no sexual outlet: both sexual intercourse and masturbation are forbidden. It seems, then, that built-up sexual energy is meant to be translated into fervour for the state. Families exist, but they are the domain of the elite. The state does not promote visual androgyny; rather, gender differences and roles are clearly signalled by the uniforms worn.

In this chapter I intend to begin an explicit comparison and contrast of the societies within the novels in question. I will engage in an explication and a comparison of the systematic societies presented in these works as well as the regulation of sex and child-rearing. Within each regime, I will examine the aim or intended outcome of such expropriation of seemingly private spheres. I will also consider the nature of freedom in these societies including the type of “freedom” that is offered by the state and the kind of freedom that is sought by the protagonists and how both kinds of freedom are inevitably at odds with one another. I will examine the relationship between the control of freedom and the systems of justice in each novel and in what ways they are, themselves, systematically sexualized. I will also consider the responses of Zamyatin and Atwood to particular examples of utopian schemes by examining the context and setting of the respective novels as well as the milieus in which they were written, questioning whether what makes a system dystopian for men also makes it dystopian for women. I will conclude with an examination of sexual rebellion in both societies, considering what it means for the characters in each dystopia to break sexual laws.

### Social Organization and Activity

Zamyatin’s OneState is a mathematical and machinelike society that is extrapolated from the assembly-line production model of Frederick Winslow Taylor (Beauchamp, *Man as Robot*; Rhodes, *Scientific Management*). The homogeneity of this society is depicted in D-503’s intended poetic treatise on the grandeur of OneState: “As usual, all the pipes of the music factory were singing the OneState March. The Numbers were marching along in step in neat ranks of four—hundreds and thousands of them in

their sky-blue tunics with the golden badge on each chest bearing each one's state number" (Zamyatin 6-7). Each number has a "bald head" and there is no externally differentiating signification of gender like the clothing and cosmetics of the twentieth century. Clearly, the androgyny that is present in *We*, as in other dystopias, is a condition of that state-serving society that aims to achieve uniformity. It seems to be a dystopian motif that the loss of individualism includes the ambiguity of gender roles and the loss of gender-marking traits. Every number is a servant of the state, a cog in the machine, and other than for the temporary engendering of children, sex roles and gender identities seem to be irrelevant to the machine's constituent parts.

At the beginning of the novel, the protagonist finds beauty and comfort in this society and describes it in utopian terms: "I saw everything: The unalterably straight streets, the sparkling glass of the sidewalks, the divine parallelepipeds of the transparent dwellings, the squared harmony of our gray-blue ranks" (Zamyatin 7). Even further on, he feels part of something greater than himself: "To the right and left through the glass walls I see something like my own self, my own room, my own clothes, my own movements, and all repeated a thousand times. It cheers you up: You see yourself as part of an immense, powerful, single thing. And such a precise beauty it is: not a wasted gesture, bend, turn" (Zamyatin 33-34). The prescribed daily walks as they are here described eerily anticipate the parades and demonstrations of later Nazi Germany, but this kind of uniformity is not restricted to cavalcades and pageantry; every activity, even the most mundane, is performed according to this Taylorian choreography:

Every morning, with six-wheeled precision, at the very same hour and the very same minute, we get up, millions of us, as though we were one. At the very same hour, millions of us as one, we start work. Later, millions as one, we stop. And then, like one body with a million hands, at one and the same second according to



the Table, we lift the spoon to our lips. And at one and the same second we leave for a stroll and go to the auditorium, to the hall for the Taylor exercises, and then to bed. (Zamyatin 13)

In this “utopia,” it is not merely political and social organization that operates as a well-oiled machine, but perfection can apparently be found in the most minuscule muscular spasm. The effect is that while D-503 intends to portray the beauty of these synchronized movements, the reader’s response is quite different; we see here a mundane and meaningless existence. Anyone who is familiar with the imagery in Fritz Lang’s film *Metropolis* (1926) should recognize the horror of this mechanized actuality.

However, the system has not been perfected. The “mathematically infallible happiness” (Zamyatin 3) that is supposed to result from this unity and lack of individualism must be supplemented with scheduled time for individually chosen and initiated activities:

Even we haven’t yet solved the problem of happiness with 100 percent accuracy. Twice a day—from 16:00 to 17:00 and again from 21:00 to 22:00—the single mighty organism breaks down into its individual cells. These are the Personal Hours, as established by the Table. During these hours you’ll see that some are in their rooms with the blinds modestly lowered; others are walking along the avenue in step with the brass beat of the March; still others, like me at this moment, will be at their desks. (Zamyatin 13)

Preference for differing activities to fill these Personal Hours shows that there is still within each Number some kind of individuality. According to this description, we can see that some have athletic and some have bookish predilections, while others are interested in more furtive pursuits behind the blinds. It is still necessary to express oneself individually; however, time for this expression is regulated by the Table of Hours.

This reference to lowered blinds brings us to the sexual activity of OneState. Sex

is the only activity that takes place behind closed doors, so to speak. All other activity within the home is monitored by neighbours, this being easily enabled by the fact that all Numbers live in apartments of glass:

Once home I passed quickly by the desk, handed the duty officer my pink ticket, and got the pass to use the blinds. We get to use the blinds only on Sex Day. Otherwise we live in broad daylight inside these walls that seem to have been fashioned out of bright air, always on view. We have nothing to hide from one another. Besides, this makes it easier for the Guardians to carry out their burdensome, noble task. No telling what might go on otherwise. (Zamyatin 19)

But it seems that they do have one thing to hide, hence the blinds. It is somewhat difficult to account for the state-sanctioned privacy that is conceded in this one area of life. One would think that in OneState, where privacy has not been valued for hundreds of years, Numbers would not hold on to any twentieth century squeamishness about being seen in or seeing others in the sex act. We could accept this as something that the state regards as necessary, along with the need for Personal Hours. It could be that the privacy that is afforded the sex act results from the early twentieth century sensibilities of Zamyatin and/or his audience. More likely though, the state recognizes the incendiary potential of expressed sexuality and keeps it behind the blinds in order to diminish any potential for rebellion. D-503 does note that during the rebellion near the end of the novel he could see “through the glass walls [. . .] that male and female Numbers were copulating without the least shame, without even lowering the blinds, without so much as a ticket, in broad daylight” (Zamyatin 212). Ironically, the state’s allowance of privacy allows subversives an opportunity for performing anti-state activities away from the public gaze. One would think that the state would be aware of the possibilities of this systematic reprieve from scrutiny. The fact that D-503 succeeds for so long in breaking the prescribed routine reveals that the system is flawed. S-4711, a dissident, does a better

job of monitoring D-503's activity than any real Guardian.

This sexual activity is actually a well-planned system of promiscuity that is programmed by the state: "They give you a careful going-over in the Sexual Bureau labs and determine the exact content of the sexual hormones in your blood and work out your correct Table of Sex Days. Then you fill out a declaration that on your days you'd like to make use of a number (or numbers) so-and-so and they hand you the corresponding book of tickets (pink)" (Zamyatin 22). Although sex is a purely recreational activity in OneState, all this bureaucracy is not put into place simply for the enjoyment and fulfilment of the Numbers. The state is attempting to eradicate or redirect—in mathematical terms, to factor out—psychological drives that would distract the Numbers from their duties: "But isn't it clear that bliss and envy are the numerator and denominator of that fraction known as happiness? And what sense would there be in all the numberless victims of the 200-Years War if there still remained in our life some course for envy?" (Zamyatin 22). In order to eradicate envy, then, the state attempts to even the playing field: "any number has the right of access to any other Number as sexual product" (Zamyatin 22). In OneState, apparently, there should be no such thing as unrequited desire.

However, the very fact that envy would exist without this system shows us that individuality is not absent from this society. Even though androgyny and uniformity rule the day, physical differences would apparently factor into Numbers' selections of sexual mates: "But some cause did remain, because noses remained the button noses and classical noses mentioned in that conversation on our walk, and because there are some whose love many people want, and others whose love nobody wants" (22). D-503's

explanation of the need to eliminate envy is echoed in the Commander's justification of Gilead's social reorganization to Offred:

We've given them more than we've taken away [. . .]. Think of the trouble they had before. Don't you remember the singles bars, the indignity of high-school blind dates? The meat market. Don't you remember the terrible gap between the ones who could get a man easily and the ones who couldn't? Some of them were desperate, they starved themselves thin or pumped their breasts full of silicone, had their noses cut off. Think of the human misery.

He waved a hand at his stacks of old magazines. They were always complaining. Problems this, problems that. Remember the ads in the Personal columns, *Bright attractive woman, thirty-five*. . . . This way they all get a man, nobody's left out. (Atwood 231)

In both cases, the playing field has apparently been evened out in order to eliminate sexual competition, envy, and misery. Therefore, OneState has apparently eliminated envy and love by reducing it all to a mathematical equation:

So it's clear—there's no longer the slightest cause for envy. The denominator of the happiness fraction has been reduced to zero and the fraction becomes magnificent infinity. And the very same thing that the ancients found to be a source of endless tragedy became for us a harmonious, pleasant, and useful function of the organism, just like sleep, physical work, eating, defecating, and so on. (Zamyatin 23)

The state has attempted to factor out not only what it sees as the principal causes of unhappiness and despair, namely jealousy and unrequited desire, but this system also has the effect that Numbers are less likely to engage in pair bonding that might distract them from their duty to the state. We can assume that gender-specific physical characteristics are not considered necessary when attracting a mate, hence the androgyny of this society. By reducing sex to a functional physical necessity, the state attempts to produce completely passionless drones. However, D-503 fails to see the mathematical flaw in this analogy: that the denominator of a fraction cannot be zero.

Sex in OneState is normally recreational and diversionary, and only under the

right conditions is conception the intended result. In typical dystopian style, D-503 explains that system while expressing a disdain of “ancient” conception and child-rearing practices:

And then—isn't it absurd that a government (it had the nerve to call itself a government) could let sexual life proceed without the slightest control? Who, when, howevermuch you wanted . . . Completely unscientific, like animals. And blindly, like animals, they produced young. Isn't it funny—to know horticulture, poultry keeping, fish farming (we have very precise records of their knowing all this) and not to be able to reach the last rung of this logical ladder: child production. Not to come up with something like our Maternal and Paternal Norms. (Zamyatin 14)

Although we are not given all the details of these Maternal and Paternal Norms, we can deduce that these are physical and intellectual standards and that the intended result is the kind of uniformity that we have already talked about. We do know that O-90 was “about ten centimeters shorter than the Maternal Norm” (Zamyatin 6). Those who meet the Maternal and Paternal norms and who are permitted to conceive surrender the child to the state upon birth. Zamyatin does not offer the kind of meticulous detail about state-run child-rearing that Huxley does, but we are given glimpses into the childhood and education of D-503 and R-13 in reminiscences about their electronic teacher, Pliapa. Again, this absence of filial responsibility allows the state to be central in the life of every Number, and it also allows for Platonic functional androgyny since child-rearing is not the domain of any one gender. However, it is worth pointing out that the only child care worker we meet is a mature female, U.

*The Handmaid's Tale's* social organization is quite different from that of *We*, but there are similarities. Although Gilead is not based upon synchronization to the extent that OneState is, there are references to auditory temporal cues: “The bell that measures time is ringing. Time here is measured by bells, as once in nunneries” (Atwood 18).

Intense public surveillance is also a necessity, although people in Gilead do not live in glass houses. Neighbourly spying and the reporting of suspicious activity is, however, a reality. That is why the Handmaids take their daily walks in pairs:

We turn and walk together past the large houses, towards the central part of town. We aren't allowed to go there except in twos. This is supposed to be for our protection, though the notion is absurd: we are well protected already. The truth is that she is my spy, as I am hers. If either of us slips through the net because of something that happens on one of our daily walks, the other will be accountable. (Atwood 29)

Offred, however, performs her own type of surveillance in the Commander's home:

"Sometimes I listen outside closed doors, a thing I never would have done in the time before. I don't listen long, because I don't want to be caught doing it" (Atwood 20). An official security network exists as well. Eyes are secretly planted spies that monitor subversive activity and entrap would-be rebels. OneState's "Guardian Angels," as D-503 comes to call the Guardians, have been split into two groups: the Guardians, men who serve the necessity of security on the home front, and Angels, soldiers who are fighting in wars for the sovereignty of Gilead.

The fact that Gilead is still trying to establish itself is one feature of this dystopia that distinguishes it from *We*. It might be said that Gilead is still fighting its answer to OneState's "200 Years' War" while OneState is aeons away from that tumultuous time: "Things haven't settled down, it's too soon, everyone is unsure about our exact status" (Atwood 23). Thus, while D-503 finds the individualism to which he is awakening strange, Offred seeks subversively to hold on to the individuality that she remembers and cherishes.

While in OneState sex and procreation are made secondary to the state, in Gilead, the state is *centred* upon sex and procreation. Because of a high sterility rate, a low birth

rate, and toxic pollution, the religious right has taken over part of the eastern United States and justifies a system of sexual slavery that apparently has Old Testament precedent. The fertile women have been rounded up and forced to serve as Handmaids to upper-class and infertile couples. Many families have been torn apart because the Gilead regime does not recognize many marriages from the former time, such as common-law marriages and those between divorcés. This is why the protagonist's marriage has been nullified and she forced to become a Handmaid. Any children from such "illegal" marriages were seized and redistributed among the elite. Thus, Offred was torn away from her husband and her daughter. She does not know what happened to Luke, but she later finds out that her daughter has been adopted. Gay coupling and membership in religious orders that require vows of chastity have also become illegal. Not surprisingly, abortion is one of Gilead's most heinous crimes. Although the sexist implications of this society are obvious, it is also a society predicated upon imperialism and rigid class discrimination. Children have become a rare and desirable resource, thus the reorganization of society has been chiefly concerned with redistributing children and viable reproductive systems among the powerful elite.

However, anti-feminism informs political and social dogma. Legally speaking, men are never impotent or sterile; women bear the blame of infertility: "I almost gasp: he's said a forbidden word. *Sterile*. There is no such thing as a sterile man any more, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that's the law" (Atwood 70-71). Women are indoctrinated to accept the double-standard that they are morally superior to men in order to justify the strictures that are being enacted against them: "All flesh is weak. [. . .] They can't help it, [Aunt Lydia] said, God made them that

way but He did not make you that way. He made you different. It's up to you to set the boundaries. Later you will be thanked [sic]" (Atwood 55).

This society, in contrast to OneState, does not promote androgyny. In fact, gender roles have become very firmly entrenched. Women's supposed roles have been doled out to them in the form of colour-coded uniforms that clearly signify any woman's given role: the blue-clad Wives of the male elite serve as status symbols and decorative arm pieces. The green-clad Marthas serve as cooks and house-servants. The red garb of the Handmaids signifies the role of child-bearer. The so-called Econowives wear red, green and blue striped dresses; these are the wives of lower-class men who have less money and lower status. Although they are not allowed to work outside the home and have little freedom, these women come closest to having any kind of normalcy by twentieth century standards: "There are other women with baskets, some in red, some in the dull green of the Marthas, some in the striped dresses, red and blue and green and cheap and skimpy, that mark the women of the poorer men. Econowives, they're called. These women are not divided into functions. They have to do everything, if they can" (Atwood 33-34). Any woman who either fails to fit into any of these categories or who becomes an enemy of the state is termed an "Unwoman" and forced to serve in the toxic cleanup that goes on in the Colonies. It is significant that the women *and* men who serve in the Colonies wear grey dresses. These non-entities are devoid of the significance of colour, and the men are wearing dresses as a visual indication that they have lost their male agency in this society. We later learn that there are unofficial brothels where women serve as prostitutes for the male elite. And we must not forget the brown-clad Aunts: those who train Handmaids in the re-education facilities for servitude.



Sex outside of marriage is strictly prohibited. In order to protect the “sanctity” of the Handmaids, measures are taken to keep the male servant class away from them. On one of her walks, Offred contemplates her possible effect on the “Guardians of the Faith” (Atwood 30): “They will suffer, later, at night, in their regimented beds. They have no outlets now except themselves, and that’s a sacrilege. There are no more magazines, no more films, no more substitutes; only me and my shadow, walking away from the two men, who stand at attention, stiffly, by a roadblock, watching our retreating shapes” (Atwood 32).

### Freedom versus Happiness

The relationship between freedom and happiness is a theme that is explored by both Zamyatin and Atwood. Dystopian states often claim to limit freedom in order to offer happiness and protection. State propaganda often utilizes tricky semantics. We know that D-503, when justifying the philosophy of OneState, often uses the visual of plus and minus signs (or positive and negative) to argue a logical paradox within the state’s dogma. When he is talking about the spiralling OneState model of human history, for example, he says:

the circles vary, some are gold, some are bloody, but all are divided into the same 360 degrees. It starts at zero and goes forward: 10, 20, 200, 360 degrees—then back to zero. Yes, we’ve come back to zero—yes. But for my mind, thinking in mathematics as it does, one thing is clear: This zero is completely different, new. Leaving zero, we headed to the right. We returned to zero from the left. So instead of plus zero, we have minus zero. (Zamyatin 112)

This kind of mathematical paradox, a negative or positive zero, cannot exist. Again, D-503 uses faulty logic where zero is concerned. D-503 goes on to say that he sees this zero as the edge of a “knife-sharp cliff”: “the path of paradox lies along the blade of a

knife—the only path worthy of the mind without fear” (Zamyatin 113). It is worth pointing out that in the OneState model, history is reduced to zero; it is negated, as it is in many dystopias, and so perhaps “negative zero” does seem to apply here. “Utopia” is history in stasis.

Part of the justification for slavery is offered by suggesting that personal freedom is the source of society’s problems. D-503 uses mathematics again to formulate an equation that links freedom with crime: “Freedom and criminality are just as indissolubly linked as . . . well, as the movement of an aero and its velocity. When the velocity of an aero is reduced to 0, it is not in motion; when a man’s freedom is reduced to zero, he commits no crimes. That’s clear. The only means to rid man of crime is to rid him of freedom” (Zamyatin 36). Again, the suggestion is that stasis and non-movement, or arriving at zero, is the way to guarantee OneState’s idea of happiness, namely freedom from crime. Freedom, associated with movement, is also associated with unbalanced equations and crime. *The Handmaid’s Tale* also contains imagery that suggests that the eradication of criminal behaviour is a return to zero, to stasis and stability. When Offred looks at the publicly displayed bodies of executed criminals, she says, “It’s the obvious heaviness of the heads, their vacancy, the way gravity pulls them down and there’s no life any more to hold them up. The heads are zeros” (Atwood 42). Criminality in Gilead is also associated with personal freedom. Aunt Lydia uses propaganda that equates freedom with the injustices that had been committed against women before the establishment of the regime:

every spring they had a Humphrey Bogart festival, with Lauren Bacall or Katherine Hepburn, women on their own, making up their minds. They wore blouses with buttons down the front that suggested the possibilities of the word *undone*. These women could be undone; or not. They seemed to be able to

choose. We seemed to be able to choose, then. We were a society dying, said Aunt Lydia, of too much choice [sic]. (Atwood 35)

Just as in OneState, the dogma of Gilead uses the former society's ills to justify the current brand of injustice. In both dystopias, this is accomplished in part by suggesting that there is more than one type of freedom, and by suggesting that slavery is, in effect, a particular kind of freedom.

D. J. Richards, writing on Zamyatin in 1962, expresses a kernel of Zamyatin's thought that is central to his philosophy: "Freedom can be negative, freedom *from*, or it can be positive, freedom *to*" (58). This also reminds us of Zamyatin's plus and minus signs. Richards nods to psychologist Erlich Fromm (*Escape from Freedom*, 1941) for the concept of positive freedom, which he defined as "the spontaneous activity of the total, integrated personality" (cited in Richards 58). Negative freedom is certainly the kind that is offered by the state regimes of twentieth century dystopias and by twentieth century totalitarian governments; it is "granted from above" (Richards 58).

Aunt Lydia's comments on freedom in *The Handmaid's Tale* seem to follow from this discussion and suggest Atwood's familiarity with either Fromm, Richards on Zamyatin or with Zamyatin's own philosophy: "There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it [sic]" (34). It is a common claim of repressive societies that individuals are giving up personal freedom for their own protection and security. It is a claim being made by those who have recently sought increased governmental powers in anti-terrorism legislation in North America. To live in a state of "freedom to" apparently comes with certain risks and dangers.

The claim of the state is that individuals will be happier without personal freedom

because of the protection that the state affords. In *We*, state poet R-13, appropriately, extols the virtues of “freedom from”: “Those two in Paradise, they were offered a choice: happiness without freedom, or freedom without happiness, nothing else. Those idiots chose freedom. And then what? Then for centuries they were homesick for the chains” (Zamyatin 61). We cannot miss the mythical allusions to utopian ends here. OneState claims to have restored Paradise:

Paradise was back. And we’re simple and innocent again, like Adam and Eve. None of those complications about good and evil: everything is very simple, childishly simple—Paradise! The Benefactor, the Machine, the Cube, the Gas Bell, the Guardians: All those things represent good, all that is sublime, splendid, noble, elevated, crystal pure. Because that is what protects our nonfreedom, which is to say, our happiness. (Zamyatin 61)

If the Numbers of OneState accept “nonfreedom” and the “happiness” that comes with it, they accept as something virtuous and good those methods alluded to here—“the Machine, the Cube, the Gas Bell, the Guardians”—which make the utopian dystopic.

Richards points out that one of Zamyatin’s sources is Dostoevsky’s Grand Inquisitor in *The Brothers Karamozov*: “people are more persuaded than ever that they have perfect freedom, yet they have brought their freedom to us and laid it humbly at our feet” (Dostoevsky 130). The point is that totalitarian regimes do not necessarily impose strictures on an unwilling and resistant population. The suggestion here is that people, insecure in their freedoms and seeking security, allow governments to take enough control to enslave them. That is the real threat. The Grand Inquisitor goes on to say, “man is tormented by no greater anxiety than to find someone quickly to whom he can hand over that gift of freedom with which the ill-fated creature is born” (Dostoevsky 131). In *We*, the Benefactor echoes these justifications for enslaving the population:

I ask this question: What is it that people beg for, dream about, torment

themselves for, from the time they leave swaddling clothes? They want someone to tell them, once and for all, what happiness is—and then to bind them to that happiness with a chain. What is it we're doing right now, if not that? The ancient dream of paradise . . . Remember: In paradise they are blessed, with their imaginations surgically removed (the only reason why they are blessed)—angels, the slaves of God. (Zamyatin 207)

Offred, instead of yearning for the protection of the state (freedom from) reminisces about the measures she once took to protect her freedom (freedom to), but neither was she a feminist nor a fighter of the regime. She was somewhat complicit in the way that the Grand Inquisitor suggests. Atwood picks up explicitly on women's complicity in allowing themselves for so long to be "protected":

I'm remembering my feet on these sidewalks, in the time before, and what I used to wear on them. Sometimes it was shoes for running, with cushioned soles and breathing holes, and stars of fluorescent fabric that reflected light in the darkness. Though I never ran at night, and in the daytime, only beside well-frequented roads.

Women were not protected then.

I remember the rules, rules that were never spelled out but that every woman knew: don't open your door to a stranger, even if he says he is the police. Make him slide his I.D. under the door. Don't stop on the road to help a motorist pretending to be in trouble. Keep the locks on and keep going. If anyone whistles, don't turn to look. Don't go into a laundromat, by yourself, at night.

I think about laundromats. What I wore to them: shorts, jeans, jogging pants. What I put into them: my own clothes, my own soap, my own money, money I had earned myself. I think about having such control.

Now we walk along the same street, in red pairs, and no man shouts obscenities at us, speaks to us, touches us. No one whistles. (Atwood 34)

Offred apparently does not accept the state claim that it is offering freedom in the guise of the confinement, limitations, and circumscriptions under which she has to live. Atwood describes the particular difficulties that women have undergone in the name of protection or "freedom from." Until recently in history, and still to a large extent, women have been "free from" military service, mentally taxing professions, responsibilities outside childrearing, academic professions, the responsibilities of voting, of owning and

being able to pass on property, and so on. At the same time, however, Atwood does not suggest that the conditions under which women have to live in present day society—enduring objectification, whistles, threat of attack or rape while going about everyday activities—when they are apparently living in a state of “freedom to,” afford any kind of real freedom either. If Zamyatin is suggesting that totalitarianism poses a threat to positive freedom, Atwood is suggesting that women have not yet necessarily attained that kind of freedom at all. While D-503 finds the concept of freedom frightening, Offred remembers the so-called freedom in which she once lived. When she sees the Japanese tourists who show their hair and legs, she says, “They seemed undressed. It has taken so little time to change our minds, about things like this. Then I think: I used to dress like that. That was freedom” (Atwood 38). This shows how easy it can be for a controlling government to affect social norms. What the dystopian regime banks on is that memory of “freedom to” will fade as people begin to feel the protection of “freedom from”: “Already we were losing the taste for freedom, already we were finding these walls secure” (Atwood 143).

### Justice in Dystopia

One of the key justifications given by governments for impinging upon or ignoring civil and human rights is the need to “protect” its citizens from perceived dangers such as criminals or terrorists. What can follow this tendency in terms of justice are zero tolerance policies and the increasing of police powers. It seems, then, that the institutions of justice are inextricably linked to any society’s attempt to deliver its citizens “freedom from” and its consequential limiting of an individual’s “freedom to.” In *We* and *The*

*Handmaid's Tale*, the respective systems of justice are crucial to controlling and indoctrinating the population.

First of all, certain vices that can conceivably cause harm to the individual are outlawed, creating the illusion that the state's protection is for the good of all. As D-503 tells I-330 as she sparks up a cigarette and produces some liquor in the Ancient House: "you know it yourself, *whoever shall poison himself with nicotine, and especially with alcohol, need expect no mercy from OneState*" (Zamyatin 54). This is a typical motif in dystopian fiction: the state treats its citizens as wards or minors and encourages a childlike and dependent relationship to the state.<sup>4</sup> These taboos seem to be for the good of the individual, but that is not the case. The collectivist belief is that to harm the self is to harm the state.

This is no different in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Serena Joy breaks the rules when she offers Offred an outlawed cigarette like a favour to a child. The usual vices are illegal here for the sake of the Handmaids' fertility. As Moira tells Offred when they meet at Jezebel's, "No nicotine-and-alcohol taboos here" (Atwood 250) where fertility is not an issue. For the sake of their fertility, which is their sole reason for existing as far as the regime is concerned, Handmaids' diets are even strictly proscribed: "You have to get your vitamins and minerals, said Aunt Lydia coyly. You must be a worthy vessel. No coffee or tea though, no alcohol. Studies have been done [sic]" (Atwood 75). Even Wives are subject to punishment if they interfere with a Handmaid's purpose: "As for the Wife, there's mostly just one thing they get salvaged for. They can do almost anything to us, but they aren't allowed to kill us, not legally. Not with knitting needles or garden

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<sup>4</sup> Ferns (114) elaborates how the state prevents maturation in individuals in order to ensure that identity will not emerge.

shears, or knives purloined from the kitchen, and especially not when we are pregnant” (Atwood 287).

However, the worst crime women have committed in Gilead’s past is making themselves available sexually and making their procreational imperative subordinate to their own pleasure:

The spectacles women used to make of themselves. Oiling themselves like roast meat on a spit, and bare backs and shoulders, on the street, in public, and legs, not even stockings on them, no wonder those things used to happen. *Things*, the word she used when whatever it stood for was too distasteful or filthy or horrible to pass her lips. A successful life for her was one that avoided *things*, excluded *things*. Such *things* do not happen to nice women. (Atwood 65)

Women are being “protected” from themselves and their inclination to display themselves sexually, so they must give up the freedom to show a little skin. Also implicit in this is the antifeminist idea that women are ultimately responsible for the offences that have been committed against them, and that they must be protected from inviting further indignities.

A serious crime in these dystopian regimes is criticism of the state or its leader. In Record 9 D-503 describes the public execution of a poet who spoke out against the Benefactor. There is no mercy in dystopian justice, and the Benefactor uses another vivid metaphor, along with some fuzzy logic, to portray the paradox of this “tough love” that is later central to Orwell’s Ministry of Love: “A true algebraic love of mankind will inevitably be inhuman, and the inevitable sign of the truth is its cruelty. Just as the inevitable sign of fire is that it burns. Can you show me a fire that does not burn?” (Zamyatin 206).

The punishment for even the smallest of crimes is out of all proportion to the offence in both dystopias. In *We*, the punishment for all crimes is the same: public



execution by vaporization at the Benefactor's machine: "Looking down from this summit, there's no difference between a woman who gave birth illegally—O—and a murderer, and that madman who dared aim his poem at OneState. And the verdict is the same for them all: premature death" (Zamyatin 112). Sometimes offenders are first tortured in order to extract incriminating evidence against others, as is the case for I-330 who steadfastly refuses to give in (Zamyatin 225).

There is no such simplicity in the punitive system in *The Handmaid's Tale*. The architects of Gilead have differentiated the punishment for crimes in creative ways: there are executions in the form of Salvagings and Particutions, and the colonies are a slow form of toxic execution for those women and men who are guilty of being infertile, subversive, or simply marginal:

Anyway, they're mostly people they want to get rid of. [ . . . ]

It's old women, I bet you've been wondering why you haven't seen too many of those around any more, and Handmaids who've screwed up their three chances, and incorrigibles like me. Discards, all of us. [ . . . ] I'd say it's about a quarter men in the Colonies, too. Not all of those Gender Traitors end up on the Wall. (Atwood 260-261)

Some crimes are punishable by a simple beating, particularly where a viable womb is at stake: "It was the feet they'd do, for a first offence. They used steel cables, frayed at the ends. After that the hands. They didn't care what they did to your feet and hands, even if it was permanent. Remember, said Aunt Lydia. For our purposes your feet and your hands are not essential [sic]" (Atwood 102).

In Gilead, the crime can predate the advent of the law; even "crimes" that were committed prior to the regime, such as a doctor's performing an abortion, are to be punished ruthlessly: "These men, we are told, are like war criminals. It's no excuse that what they did was legal at the time: their crimes are retroactive. They have committed

atrocities, and must be made into examples, for the rest” (Atwood 43). In Gilead, the crimes that deserve execution have to do with such “atrocities” against foetuses as well as homosexuality, which is counter-productive to the aims of OneState: “The two others have purple placards hung around their necks: Gender Treachery. Their bodies still wear the Guardian uniforms. Caught together, they must have been, but where? A barracks, a shower? It’s hard to say” (Atwood 53).

Medieval-style public executions and the public display of bodies serve to keep these societies in a state of fear and the citizens ever-mindful of the consequences of contravening laws and social mores. In Gilead, the bodies of the executed hang for days on The Wall: “We stop, together as if on signal, and stand and look at the bodies. It doesn’t matter if we look. We’re supposed to look: this is what they are there for, hanging on the Wall. Sometimes they’ll be there for days, until there’s a new batch, so as many people as possible will have the chance to see them” (Atwood 42). Offred visits the bodies almost daily not to be taught a lesson but in order to glean information about what is going on. She tries to figure out to whom the bodies might belong. She is looking for clues, for Luke.

Public executions that come with much pomp and ceremony are common to both *We* and *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Such extreme social control necessitates not only swift punishment of subversives, but punishment within the public’s eye. D-503 describes an execution in a manner chillingly devoid of empathy:

There was one . . . standing on the steps of the Cube, the sunlight pouring down on him. His face was white, or no, not white, it was no color at all, his glass face, his glass lips. Just his eyes, dark, sucking, swallowing holes . . . and that terrifying world that he was only minutes away from. The gold badge with his number had already been taken. His hands were tied with a purple ribbon (ancient custom; the explanation seems to be that in old times, before this was

done in the name of OneState, the condemned naturally thought he had a right to put up a fight, so his hands were usually chained). (Zamyatin 45-46)

In this passage, D-503 describes not only acceptance of the execution by the audience, but reference to “ancient” chains for the condemned shows that D-503 now expects general acceptance of their fate by those accused.

D-503 goes on to describe the actual moment of execution, for which the Benefactor is judge, jury, and executioner:

My eyes lifted up, and so did thousands of other eyes, up to the Machine. The inhuman hand made a third cast-iron gesture. And, shaken by some invisible wind, the criminal moves . . . a step . . . another . . . and takes the last step that he will make in his life. He is face up to the sky, his head thrown back, on his final resting place. (Zamyatin 47-48)

The opening lines of this passage, “My eyes lifted up,” along with reference to the multitudes, are reminiscent of Biblical narrative. The Benefactor as administrator of justice is deified and this scenario could be the Last Judgement. What follows is described in near apocalyptic language as the accused is struck by the “Hand of God” as if being struck by lightning:

Heavy, stone, like fate itself, the Benefactor made one full circle around the Machine and laid his huge hand on the lever. Not a rustle anywhere, not a breath. All eyes were on that hand. What a whirlwind of fire that must feel like—to be a weapon, to have the force of hundreds of thousands of volts. What a stupendous fate!

An instant. The hand fell, loosing the current. A sharp blade of unbearable light. A shudder in the pipes of the Machine, a crackling that you could hardly hear. The spread-eagled body was covered by a light, sparkling little puff of smoke, and then before our eyes it began to melt, and melt, and it dissolved so fast it was horrible. And then—nothing. A puddle of chemically pure water, which just a moment ago had been in a heart, red, beating up a storm. (Zamyatin 48)

If D-503 shows any emotion at all here, it is only awe and excitement at this display of power and control. The Benefactor is imbued with all the power of the regime over life

and death, and it is noteworthy that D-503 feels no revulsion against this abuse of power, but he admires it. In a dystopia, it is necessary to have a public demonstration not only to serve as a deterrent against further crimes against the state, but such occasions must be seen as an integral and necessary aspect of the dystopian society. Desensitization to horror is a result of these public displays that will lead to general acceptance of such brutal measures. Comparing the Benefactor to “fate itself” shows that there is comfort in this ceremony: the population believes that there are inevitable consequences to a given course of action. What they can rely on is that traitors will be punished.

This is also the case in Gilead: “Ordinary, said Aunt Lydia, is what you are used to. This may not seem ordinary to you now, but after a time it will. It will become ordinary [sic]” (Atwood 43). On the other hand, in the fledgling Republic of Gilead where people are not yet used to such brutal justice, the element of surprise comes in handy: “This is a district Salvaging, for women only. Salvagings are always segregated. It was announced yesterday. They tell you only the day before. It’s not enough time, to get used to it” (Atwood 284). In Atwood’s dystopia, justice is administered and witnessed according to gender. Such ceremonial segregation is meant to foster a sense of solidarity with one’s gender, the kind of solidarity that Aunt Lydia hopes for. However, the social strata are evident: “We take our places in the standard order: Wives and daughters on the folding wooden chairs placed towards the back, Econowives and Marthas around the edges and on the library steps, and Handmaids at the front, where everyone can keep an eye on us. We don’t sit on chairs, but kneel” (Atwood 285).

In Zamyatin’s execution, the Benefactor is the sole executioner. However, in Gilead, the Handmaids are more than just witnesses to the hangings. Although the Aunts

and Salvagers conduct the ceremony, the Handmaids' complicity in carrying out the death sentence is ensured by the rope: "There's a long piece of rope which winds like a snake in front of the first row of cushions, along the second, and back through the lines of chairs, bending like a very old, very slow river viewed from the air, down to the back. [. . .] The front end of the rope runs up onto the stage" (Atwood 285). By having the Handmaids involved in the hanging, they must feel in some part responsible for what is happening; they cannot simply blame the regime:

I've leaned forward to touch the rope in front of me, in time with the others, both hands on it, the rope hairy, sticky with tar in the hot sun, then placed my hand on my heart to show my unity with the Salvagers and my consent, and my complicity in the death of this woman. I have seen the kicking feet and the two in black who now seize hold of them and drag downwards with all their weight. I don't want to see it any more. I look at the grass instead. I describe the rope. (Atwood 288)

In this way, the women who are being executed are, symbolically, being executed by the entire society of women from whom they have, apparently, broken ranks by committing their crimes. Their consent is to a large degree coerced; however, Handmaids must make the conscious decision to touch the rope, and they do so in the interest of self-preservation. To do otherwise, to refuse to show unity with the Salvagers, would be to put oneself at risk.

The Particution takes this element of participation in the execution much further. Occasionally, the Handmaids themselves are compelled to collectively execute a male offender, usually accused of rape or some such crime against women. We are witness to a Particution of a man who has allegedly raped two Handmaids and caused one of them to miscarry (Atwood 290-91). Again, not to participate in the brutality is to mark oneself: "It's a mistake to hang back too obviously in any group like this; it stamps you as lukewarm, lacking in zeal" (Atwood 289). The rules are that the Handmaids will

do whatever they want to the accused between blows of the whistle (Atwood 290). The effect of this organized gang assault is that mob instinct takes over. Mob acts usually occur when individuals within the mob feel threatened or repressed. In the Historical Notes, Professor Piexoto explains the ingenuity of this invention of justice:

It is Judd who is credited with devising the form, as opposed to the name, of the Particicution ceremony, arguing that it was not only a particularly horrifying and effective way of ridding yourself of subversive elements, but that it would also act as a steam valve for the female elements in Gilead. Scapegoats have been notoriously useful throughout history, and it must have been most gratifying for these Handmaids, so rigidly controlled at other times, to be able to tear a man apart with their bare hands every once in a while. (Atwood 320)

As the Particicution proceeds, it becomes clear that their participation is more than symbolic: “There’s a surge forward, like a crowd at a rock concert in the former time, when the doors opened, that urgency coming like a wave through us. The air is bright with adrenalin, we are permitted anything and this is freedom, in my body also, I’m reeling, red spreads everywhere” (Atwood 291). These women are living under extreme strictures and given the opportunity to take out their frustrations on one man who had been marked as a scapegoat. Offred’s editorial perspective makes it clear that these women are not simply compelled to commit this execution against their wills: “Now there are sounds, gasps, a low noise like growling, yells, and the red bodies tumble forward and I can no longer see, he’s obscured by arms, fists, feet. A high scream comes from somewhere, like a horse in terror” (Atwood 291-292). The sound imagery and animal behaviour described here ensure us that in this case the Handmaids are not simply going through the motions.

While in *We* justice is administered in a paternalistic manner by a deified male who is seen as the principal authority figure, in *The Handmaid’s Tale* there is the

appearance that justice is administered collectively by an entire gender community. These systems support gender stereotypes of the twentieth century such as the male tendency to display strength and act individually and the female tendency to cooperate and show solidarity, even if that solidarity is coerced and manipulated.

### The Utopian Milieu

I have established in the preceding chapter that dystopia has a parodic relationship to utopia. Indeed, specific attempts at achieving political utopias have informed the novels here in question. Although the geographical setting of OneState is not discernible in the text itself, Zamyatin was clearly extrapolating his dystopia from existing conditions within post-revolutionary Russia (Kumar 66). We must not forget that Zamyatin was at first a Bolshevik (Richards 8) who had high hopes for the Revolution,

but gradually his hopes were chilled by misgivings. On the one hand he saw the sufferings brought by the Revolution and the Civil War, the way they brutalised man and destroyed many old but still vital cultural values, while on the other hand the new regime seemed to be betraying its faith: the former heretics were establishing a new intolerant orthodoxy and Revolution was in danger of being smothered in a blanket of Entropy. (Richards 36-37)

Richards comments further on Zamyatin's foresight regarding not only Russia, but other totalitarian regimes to come:

*My*<sup>5</sup> was a remarkable anticipation of many of the features of Stalin's Russia. We read of State Science, the Institute of State Poets and Writers, norms of motherhood and fatherhood. There is only one newspaper, The State Newspaper. The annual elections, held on the Day of Unanimity, generally result in a 100 per cent poll in favour of the authorities. There is no pretence at a secret ballot. The Single State demands that poets should write works glorifying the state, and the punishment of enemies of the state, who confess their crimes before being executed, is accompanied by odes declaiming the wisdom of this punishment. The Benefactor with his state police force has almost the political power and ruthlessness of Stalin himself. *My* was equally in many ways an anticipation of

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<sup>5</sup> The Russian title of *We*.

Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy and modern China. (Richards 68)

Richards goes on to say that these measures were not imposed on a completely unwilling population, neither in Zamyatin's fiction nor in Stalin's Russia: "these external forces would not be enough if they were not complemented by powerful desires within man himself for secure, sleepy anonymity in preference to free, awake individuality" (Richards 68). Zamyatin saw that society on some level desires this oppression, and this was one of the principal dangers against which he was warning his audience in light of the recent revolution and the influence it might have over Europe in general.

Brett Cooke, in his recent study on *We*, comments on the utopian vision's requisite reshaping of the individual in order to redesign society. He points out that when Zamyatin was writing his novel, "Plans were then afoot in the nascent Soviet Union to put social construction into action so as to create of its citizens 'the New Soviet Man' and to establish a social utopia within a few decades" (4). He goes on to say that Zamyatin anticipated many social policies that were not yet fully in existence, such as "the controlled press with its official optimism, the political constraints on the arts, the one-party system, the cult of the personality, fixed elections, secret police, and show trials" (4), echoing Richards's observations. Again, we see that the dystopian response to utopia centres on parodying and exposing the coercive means necessary for such a reshaping of society and the individual.

And although Atwood's dystopia reflects particular anxieties concerning the right-wing religious political agenda, the effects of pollution, a declining birth-rate, and the potential for usurpation in an electronic monetary system that existed in the 1980s, it is clear that she chose her setting also because of the utopian aims inherent in the early



history of the United States. The fact that Gilead is set in the eastern United States does not necessarily reveal blunt anti-Americanism; her setting has to do with the early puritan history of that region:

Now, *The Handmaid's Tale* is set in Massachusetts; let us recall that the United States began—at least that part of it did—not with the 18<sup>th</sup> but with the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and with what was essentially a theocracy. These people hanged Quakers and quite a few other people. They were not interested in dissent. They did not come to the New World in search of religious tolerance. [. . .] The Puritans we're talking about left England to set up what they thought was going to be God's kingdom on earth. (Atwood, *Speaks* 1995)

Even in this description of utopian ends, we see the employment of dystopian means. These earliest utopians of the Americas are exhibited in Atwood's dystopia: "The church is a small one, one of the first erected here, hundreds of years ago. It isn't used anymore, except as a museum. Inside it you can see paintings, of women in long sombre dresses, their hair covered by white caps, and of upright men, darkly clothed and unsmiling. Our ancestors. Admission is free" (41). Atwood goes on to state that these theocratic beginnings are still relevant to the current political aims in the United States: "American presidents are still quoting them. They may not be aware of the context, but they are still saying, 'A city upon a hill, a light to all nations'" (Atwood, *Speaks* 1995).<sup>6</sup>

Clearly, then, if twentieth century dystopias are concerned with exposing the coercive means of attaining utopia, *The Handmaid's Tale* does just that. More than that, though, Atwood exposes the particular abuses to women that may accompany the attempt to attain a patriarchal utopia. The intolerant control of women and their sexuality in Gilead echoes late twentieth century states that operated under religious extremism such as in Iran (Davies 206).

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<sup>6</sup> For more on this reference to John Winthrop and parallels between New England Puritanism and Gilead, see Mark Evans, "Versions of History: *The Handmaid's Tale* and its Dedictees."

## Gendered Resistance

Some would suggest that traditional utopias are almost always patriarchal. Baruch comments on the sexist nature of utopian and dystopian visions: “Many readers feel uncomfortable with [Plato’s] plan, for it is predicated on a communalization of wives, children, and property, to say nothing of a controlled system of eugenics, which turns out, it might here be said, to be characteristic of twentieth-century anti-utopias, or dystopias” (31). She is, of course, referring to Plato’s *Republic*, often considered to be the originating text of the concept of political utopia. Baruch points out that gender-specific functions within the perfectly imagined society go right back to the beginnings of utopianism.

Baruch’s study focuses on *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Brave New World* as far as the dystopia goes, but she makes some useful observations and asks some interesting rhetorical questions that can be useful to an examination of gender in other dystopias. She interrogates whether the scheme is dream or nightmare from the perspective of gender: “utopias for men are often dystopias for women. Might it then be possible that dystopias for men are utopias for women?” (38). Questions pertinent to this study follow: if *We* is a dystopia for men, is any female character in the novel experiencing utopia? Certainly I-330 comes to a dystopian end. Perhaps O-90, who manages to escape to the Mephi wilderness to bliss in gestation and motherhood, finds some kind of utopia, but to say that *We* is a utopia for women based on this fact would be erroneous.

It then follows to examine the female dystopia and ask whether Atwood’s world is a utopia for men. And if so, which men, the Commanders or the lowly Guardians?

According to Aunt Lydia, Gilead is attempting to effect a women’s utopia:

For the generations that come after [. . .] it will be so much better. The women will live in harmony together, all in one family; you will be like daughters to them, and when the population level is up to scratch again we'll no longer have to transfer you from one house to another because there will be enough to go round. There can be bonds of real affection [. . .] under such conditions. Women united for a common end! Helping one another in their daily chores as they walk the path of life together, each performing her appointed task. Why expect one woman to carry out all the functions necessary to the serene running of a household? It isn't reasonably humane. Your daughters will have greater freedom. We are working towards the goal of a little garden for each one, each one of you. (Atwood 171-172)

This reference to freedom will relate to my later discussion of freedom in this chapter. What she is really describing, several women working together and running a man's household, is a men's utopia. This is what the regime is trying to create, not necessarily what has been achieved. This claim to effect a women's utopia is merely an indoctrination strategy designed to nullify resistance to the regime. Similarly, the Commander claims that Gilead has gotten rid of all the supposed miseries of women's former lives:

And then if they did marry, they could be left with a kid, two kids, the husband might just get fed up and take off, disappear, they'd have to go on welfare. Or else he'd stay around and beat them up. Or if they had a job, the children in daycare or left with some brutal ignorant woman, and they'd have to pay for that themselves, out of their wretched little paycheques. Money was the only measure of worth, for everyone, they got no respect as mothers. No wonder they were giving up on the whole business. This way they're protected, they can fulfil their biological destinies in peace. With full support and encouragement. (Atwood 231)

The Commander focuses on the inequality of women's lives before the advent of Gilead in order to excuse their servitude, slavery, and loss of agency under present circumstances. Offred, not surprisingly, sees through this flimsy justification.

Sex, in most dystopias, is both a tool of repression and a site of resistance, the former for the state, and the latter for the subversives. Baruch's questions suggest that

the answers cannot be simple. She begins to answer her own questions by looking at the role of sex and of sexual resistance within certain dystopias. She points out that differences exist in different works concerning societal norms and forms of resistance:

When sex is a tool of the state, to be used as an opiate like soma or the feelies, as in *Brave New World*, sexual abstention becomes an act of rebellion. But when sex is a forbidden act, as in the sexually repressive society of *1984*, then following one's impulses is liberation. Or is it? A question we have to ask ourselves is whether the sexual act in relation to the culture bears the same meaning for women as it does for men. (Baruch 40)

In *We*, where sex is used as an outlet for the tendency to engage in personal activities, resistance comes not by abstaining but by having sex outside the prescribed parameters or in contexts different from the sanctioned norm (the Ancient House) and with the use of time communally set aside for sex for subversive activities. D-503's illegal sexual encounters with I-330 initiate his unorthodox thoughts of individualism and tendencies towards rebellion. He puts himself and his relationship with her before his duties to the state. He asserts his individuality within a collectivist society, protecting his agency so that he can preserve the affair. He is willing to lie for her and to commit sabotage against OneState by allowing her to hijack the Integral.

For I-330, does "the sexual act in relation to the culture [bear] the same meaning [. . .] as it does for men"? This is a complex question since we do not get to know I-330 as intimately as we do D-503. First of all, D-503 is a first-person narrator so there is more intimacy between him and the audience. Secondly, our experience of I-330 is filtered through his consciousness and so the reader cannot see her objectively. What we do know of I-330 is that she uses sex very specifically as a means of sedition. For her, sex is not merely connected to rebellion; it is the very means of her resistance. I-330 is apparently a more self-assured sexual rebel than D-503. Where for him sexual resistance

involves a perilous and frightening revelation of the irrational, for I-330 it is wielded like a well-honed weapon not only for her personal liberation, but for the liberation of all from the oppressive regime of OneState. Her ability to use that which the state seeks to suppress and control, sexuality, only to awaken in others that which the state seeks to repress and control, the irrational, points out the flaws inherent in the system.

In Zamyatin's dystopia, sexual rebellion also involves intentional impregnation outside the state's control, as in O-90's case. We know that O-90 yearns for a child and is willing to risk execution for the fulfillment it will bring her. Why, however, does D-503 impregnate her? It seems to be for no other reason than to get rid of her so that he can resume his affair with I-330 uninterrupted. For O-90, the sexual act and her associated rebellion has strictly personal meaning. In contrast to I-330, she engages in intentional and illegal impregnation in order to create a bond between herself and D-503. She does not desire to overthrow the state in the way that I-330 does, but she does desire to escape the restrictions that the state has placed on her experience and in the end she is more successful. In this way O-90's rebellion is similar to Offred's passive resistance: Neither woman seeks to change society through any significant actions of her own, but they both seek agency and fulfilment under restrictive conditions. In *We*, it is significant that aberrant sexual behaviour is initiated by the women, not by D-503.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred also engages in sexual resistance with two individuals. However, she is a passive participant. Her illegal behaviour with the Commander is at his behest, and she feels somewhat powerless within this arrangement. In this women's dystopia where "sex is a forbidden act," even the men who are in power engage in illegal sexual activity, though it may not necessarily be rebellious. When the

Commander takes Offred to Jezebel's, his contravention of the strict sexual norms results in a new form of subjugation for Offred: that of mistress. In the context of *The Handmaid's Tale*, it is apt to consider whether "what is liberation for men may be enslavement for women" (Baruch 41). Neither was her affair with Nick initiated by Offred herself, but by Serena Joy. Offred does find some kind of liberation in this relationship, although she describes it in the clichés of romance and soap operas, offering several different variations of the same experience. It is interesting that the relationship between Offred and Nick and between O-90 and D-503 have the same result: the illegal conception of a child that would have to be surrendered to the State upon its birth. In the end, O-90 escaped this fate, and Offred might have.

### Conclusion

Gender is essential to the political and social settings of dystopian novels because the state takes control of family organization, sexual activity, and gender roles. OneState has an androgynous population that has no filial responsibilities and can engage in controlled sexual promiscuity. In Gilead, strict gender roles are enforced; the state organizes families and sexuality is repressed. In the first case, the outcome of the manner of control is a lack of distraction from state service, and in the later case repressed energy is meant to be translated into state service. Zamyatin and Atwood demonstrate, respectively, the nightmarish outcomes of governing sexuality within an extremely collectivist or extremely conservative system.

Both authors use their dystopias to explore the theme of freedom versus happiness, and Atwood seems to have been familiar with Zamyatin's thoughts on the

subject. In both novels, the state claims to have limited freedom in order to ensure happiness for its citizens. Of course, the irony of this claim becomes obvious with the further claim that although people may have lost “freedom to,” or agency, they have been given “freedom from,” or apparent protection from crime and responsibility. Both authors demonstrate that the danger here involves people’s desire for this kind of protection, and they hint that it is a willing populace that allows totalitarian systems to come into being.

The regimes in question take an extreme approach to justice in order to afford this “protection.” They claim to be protecting citizens from destructive vices but what is really being protected is the state against breakdown and challenges from the populace. Public torture, executions, and the display of human remains are used both to deter crime and to desensitize the population to state-inflicted terror. As well, both novelists incorporate citizen complicity into the implementation of justice.

Both OneState and Gilead are fictional and speculative extensions of existing conditions within the authors’ respective societies. The seeds for *We* lie in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution, and for *The Handmaid’s Tale* in the puritan and right-wing trends that run through American history. Finally, Zamyatin and Atwood show that sexual and gender control will ultimately result in resistance and rebellion that is centred upon contravening sexual laws and gender roles, and it is this rebellion that ultimately drives the journey of the dystopian protagonist. Zamyatin and Atwood differ in the implications of this rebellion. For Zamyatin, the sexual rebellion reinstates more traditional laws and gender roles. Atwood’s novel addresses the limitations that are placed on women under any system.

Chapter Four: Language and Power in Dystopia:  
Heretical Journalists and Sexual/Textual Subversion

Among other things, writing is a universally recognized means of self-expression and for the exploration of individuality. It is not surprising, then, that totalitarian societies (in the actual world) and dystopian societies (in fictional worlds) often strive to control, suppress, or even prohibit writing and access to literature. Writing, or at least composition, is central to the heretical consciousness of both D-503 and Offred. In *We*, writing apparently is allowed but tightly controlled: state poets exist to create propaganda that glorifies the state and the collectivist philosophy. Any writer who engages in open criticism of the regime or of its leader is executed, and we are witness to such an execution in Record 9. Artistic expression that does not serve the state is seen as useless. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, writing is, at least for women, outlawed. Women in Gilead are denied access to the written word; for them even reading is illegal in a world where shop signs are devoid of writing and take on the symbolic signification of pre-literate times.

In both dystopias, the subversive struggle entails composition. D-503 begins his journey towards individuality by beginning to write a state-commissioned treatise on the glories of his society that quickly turns into a diary detailing his increasingly subversive activities and frightening sense of selfhood. In contrast, Offred, denied the materials for writing, composes in her head the story of her internal struggle against the regime, which is later to be recorded orally. She therefore creates an oral text that navigates around the state's ban on writing. In both cases, the first-person narrative account comprises the actual novel which ends up in the hands of the reader, in contrast to, for example,



Winston Smith's diary, which is a diary within a third-person narrative.

My purpose in this chapter is to explore the role of writing/composition in these two dystopias and to interrogate the significance of gender on this heretical act. I will consider the reasons why writing is suspect in utopia, explore the power that language wields in a closely controlled society, and discuss the significance of naming (or of stripping a person of her name). I will also discuss the metafictional aspects of both these novels and the effect of first-person narration on the production of these texts.

### Writing in Utopia

Before going further, it is important to establish that writing, at least in the sense of artistic expression, does not fit well into utopian schemes. This will lead us to an exploration of writing as a subversive technique in dystopia. It is worth noting that in Plato's *Republic*, poets were dispensed with entirely.<sup>7</sup> Why does the artist not work out in utopia? Cooke tries to answer this question:

Once utopian citizens learn to think on their own and for themselves, the end of utopia is near. [. . .] the arts keep challenging us to improve upon ourselves and thus never to be content. There is little wonder, then, that art is incompatible with utopia and that the subject of artistic writing comes up in so many dystopian fictions. (166)

As discussed in the first chapter, any utopian state strives to achieve a state of perfection and permanence, which leads to inaction and stagnancy. With writing come new ideas and responses to ideas; a dialogue follows. Totalitarian states practice censorship to varying degrees because exposure to new ideas, or the exploration of one's own ideas,

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<sup>7</sup> Books II, III and X of Plato's *Republic* address the poet in the ideal society. In books II and III, Plato argues that poetry can be an unnecessary and detrimental distraction in the education of the guardian class. In Book X he states that imitative poetry has no place in the ideal society because it appeals only to the emotional part of the soul. (Grube 29, 55, 239)

leads to questioning of state policies and practices. People will believe that they need something new, making a contradiction the state's claim to have taken care of everyone's needs. Cooke points out that "novelty [. . .] contradicts the predictability required by social engineering" (167). Surely one of the central concerns, then, of dystopian writers is the preservation of their craft, both generally and within their specific fictions, when faced with the possibility of a world in which the expression of creative impulses becomes hijacked or extinct.

Of course, in Zamyatin's dystopia, writing does serve a purpose: not as art, but propaganda. If art for art's sake is dangerous in utopia, the answer is to harness creative tendencies entirely to the yoke of the state. With this goes the strictest kind of censorship. D-503 becomes an amateur writer at the behest of the state. He begins his treatise in response to a newspaper announcement requesting that Numbers write propaganda pieces that would accompany the Integral as it sets out on its expedition to colonize unknown worlds on distant planets: "everyone who feels himself capable of doing so is required to compose treatises, epic poems, manifestos, odes, or other compositions dealing with the beauty and grandeur of OneState" (Zamyatin 3).

Even though the state, in this one case, makes a public appeal for testimonial writing, there are also official state poets in OneState. Surely Zamyatin took the artistic policies of early Soviet Russia, with its own puppet state poets, as his inspiration here. His essays make it quite clear what he thought of conformist artists in post-revolutionary Russia ("Literature, Evolution, Entropy, and Other Matters"). In *We*, if state poets do not produce copy that satisfies the state, or if they dare to engage in criticism of the state or the Benefactor, the punishment is execution. R-13 relates to D-503 the case of one of his

colleagues who got carried away with his pen: “I had to put a verdict into verse. Some idiot . . . and one of us poets, too. For two years we sit next to each other and he seems okay. And then suddenly something snaps. ‘I’m a genius!’ he says, ‘A genius . . . above the law!’ And the stuff he wrote . . . ah, the hell with it” (Zamyatin 43). Apparently, if a writer realizes the power of the pen, trouble ensues. R-13 is commissioned to compose a poem on the occasion of this fellow’s vaporization at the Benefactor’s machine. D-503 relates the nature of this pencrime: “Trochees . . . cutting, rapid . . . sharp as an ax [sic]. About an unheard-of crime, about a blasphemous poem, one in which the Benefactor is called . . . but no, I can’t make my hand write it” (Zamyatin 47).

D-503 explains the utilitarian aims of OneState poetry: “we’ve tamed and saddled what used to be the wild nature of poetry. Poetry today is not some impudent nightingale’s piping—poetry is government service, poetry is usefulness” (Zamyatin 66-67). This underlines the notion that “wild” and untamed art will not do in utopia: all must be “tamed and saddled,” therefore, made stagnant. The poetry that exists in OneState is sufficiently mundane and benign as to suit a utopian scheme. D-503 gives the poetic example of the “wise, permanent happiness of the multiplication table”:

*Forever enamoured are two plus two,  
Forever conjoined in blissful four.  
The hottest lovers in all the world:  
The permanent weld of two plus two. . . .* (Zamyatin 65)

No mutinous inclinations are likely to be inspired by a reading of such stale stuff. OneState’s citizens, or Numbers, were brought up on “that greatest of all monuments of ancient literature that has come down to us, the *Railroad Timetable*” (Zamyatin 12). This is the most valued literature from ancient times, which is a telling satire that comments on the value of official Soviet art in Zamyatin’s eyes.

In fact, D-503 explains the role of “poetry” in his society by disparaging the poetry of ancient times: “How could it have happened, I wondered, that the ancients did not immediately see how completely idiotic their literature and poetry was. The immense majestic power of the artistic word was squandered for absolutely nothing” (Zamyatin 66). Again, this underlines the utilitarian approach to writing. Nothing has value unless it is useful to the state and according to the state’s own terms. As D-503 said to R-13: “Thank goodness [. . .] the antediluvian times of all those Shakespeares and Dostoevskys, or whatever you call them, are over” (Zamyatin 43). A bust of Pushkin exists in the Ancient House, whose “barely detectable smile” clearly annoys D-503 (Zamyatin 29). I-330 comments on the power that artists possess when she says of Pushkin, “But the fact is, you know, that people like him were rulers with more power than those who actually wore the crown” (Zamyatin 30). This is clearly the kind of unofficial and invisible power that totalitarian rulers would seek to quell by taking control of literature.

Freedom to read and write also runs contrary to the utopian aims in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. In Gilead, women are plunged into a pre-literate world where access to writing is completely denied them. Atwood is surely engaging a dialogue with the anti-feminism and exclusionary practices that have been present in Western academia, government, and the business world. In Gilead, reading is considered a temptation from which women must be protected: “The store has a huge wooden sign outside it, in the shape of a golden lily; Lilies of the Field, it’s called. You can see the place, under the lily, where the lettering was painted out, when they decided that even the names of shops were too much temptation for us. Now places are known by their signs alone” (Atwood 35). Temptation to what, one may ask? Aunt Lydia answers: “Knowing was a

temptation. What you don't know won't tempt you" (Atwood 205). Can reading something as benign as a shop sign spur rebellion? Apparently, those who rule Gilead are not taking any chances. The availability of products in stores is advertized wordlessly: "They put the picture in the window when they have something, take it away when they don't. Sign language" (Atwood 173). This punning reference to the language of the hearing impaired is apt considering the silence in which women live in Gilead.

Of course, extra care must be taken in a society of enslaved women who *already* know how to read. The idea is that, for the future generations, the likelihood of resistance will be diminished because the illiteracy of women will be assured: "Our big mistake was teaching them to read. We won't do that again" (Atwood 320). Aunt Lydia reveals this in one of her lessons: "For the ones who come after you, it will be easier. They will accept their duties with willing hearts. She did not say: Because they will have no memories, of any other way. She said: because they won't want things they can't have" (Atwood 127). One of the aims of a totalitarian system is to cut off its population from history. Apparently, Gilead is sufficiently satisfied that the abolition of written history will do. Women in Gilead have been plunged into a world of orality, whispered gossip, myth, and legend: "The story passed among us that night, in the semi-darkness, under our breath, from bed to bed" (Atwood 143).

Oddly, women do have access to the written word in one form: the Soul Scrolls. This would seem to be an oversight on the part of the regime; the Handmaids are free to observe the printing of prefabricated prayers that Wives phone in: "The window of Soul Scrolls is shatterproof. Behind it are print-out machines, row on row of them; these machines are known as Holy Rollers, but only among us, it's a disrespectful nickname.

What the machines print is prayers, roll upon roll, prayers going out endlessly” (Atwood 175-176). However anomalous, is it significant that these printed prayers are safe behind shatterproof glass, which seems to imply that there is a danger of looting with regards to this rare commodity.

Of course, this being a theocracy, the ultimate word of authority from which the structure of this society is extrapolated and by which it is justified, “The Word” itself, is safely guarded and locked away from those without access to power:

The bible [sic] is kept locked up, the way people once kept tea locked up, so the servants wouldn't steal it. It is an incendiary device: who knows what we'd make of it, if we even got our hands on it? We can be read to from it, by him, but we cannot read. Our heads turn towards him, we are expectant, here comes our bedtime story. (Atwood 98)

It has only been in relatively recent times that the general public has had access to the Bible. Those who have access to “The Word” have the exclusive privilege of interpretation. In Gilead, only the male head of household may read from the Bible. This way, biblical interpretation cannot be challenged. Conveniently, this allows the theocracy to alter and adjust biblical passages to suit its own needs. These editorial privileges are central to Gilead's power structure. Aunt Lydia also seems willing to invoke Milton as a poetic authority in order to further the state's propaganda: “They also serve who only stand and wait” (Atwood 28).

The Commander's access to literature is not restricted to the Bible. When Offred answers his summons and enters his office on a nocturnal and clandestine visit, she is confronted with what by this time is to her a rare sight: “But all around the walls there are bookcases. They're filled with books. Books and books and books, right out in plain view, no locks, no boxes. No wonder we can't come in here. It's an oasis of the

forbidden. I try not to stare” (Atwood 147). It is not clear to what extent men in general have the means to read and write in Gilead. We can assume that men in higher positions of power, such as the Commander, have more access to the written word than those who merely serve the upper echelons. Still, this is a world where censorship reigns; even the Commander is in possession of material deemed illegal, such as women’s magazines.

Ironically, Atwood satirizes not only the kind of patriarchal attitude towards women which protects them from having to read or think, but also the kind of feminism which advocates censorship. Before the regime, Offred’s mother had participated in magazine burnings (Atwood 48). Although in this dystopia Atwood clearly deals with totalitarian injustices against women that could conceivably arise from right-wing anti-feminism, she also deals with certain movements within the practice of feminism that take a heavy-handed approach to gaining “freedom from” material exploitative of women.

### Composing the Self

In both dystopias, the protagonists compose their “selves” as they compose their journals: D-503 by writing his commissioned treatise on OneState, and Offred as she “tells” her story to an imagined listener. In the first case, composition both initiates and records a stuttered journey towards subjectivity, and in the second, telling is a survival strategy meant to preserve an already existing but increasingly threatened subjectivity. For the former, the use of language allows identity, and for the latter, the struggle to preserve language mirrors the struggle to retain identity.

D-503, before he began writing, never felt any sense of individuality; therefore,

he never felt a need to compose a self. He begins by vowing to write realistically and to be honest with the reader, to follow the patterns of his thoughts, even if this may reveal the imperfections of OneState: “I repeat: I’ve imposed on myself the duty of writing without holding anything back. So, sad as it may be, I have to record here that apparently even we haven’t yet finished the process of hardening and crystalizing life” (Zamyatin 25). Sometimes D-503 writes things in his journal that run contrary to OneState philosophy. Whenever D-503 has the instinct to self-edit, to revise or remove any instance where his writing does not accord with OneState dogma, he tells the reader about it but he does not censor those thoughts:

I wanted to cross all that out [hairy paws] . . . because that’s beyond the scope of these notes. But then I decided: No, I’ll leave it in. Let these notes act like the most delicate seismograph, let them register the least little wiggle in my brain waves, however insignificant. Sometimes, you never know, these are just the wiggles that give you the first warning . . . But that’s absurd, now. I really should cross it out. We’ve channeled all the elements of nature. No catastrophe can happen. (Zamyatin 23)

So, without realizing it, he makes his journal an instrument for measuring his increasing subjectivity. He has taken on more than was commissioned for this piece; he seems unable to reject material that is “beyond the scope of these notes.” He may be vaguely aware that his recorded thoughts may provide a “warning” of some psychological earthquake.

Of course, the psychological eruption that D-503 is anticipating is the emergence of the self that has been submerged by collectivism. Brett Cooke comments on how the solitary act of writing leads to self-consciousness for D-503:

D-503 is acutely aware that he is writing; his self-consciousness is renewed with each entry. Moreover, many of D-503’s statements are based not on empirical reality but instead only on his thoughts. D-503 writes one entry with the blinds drawn down over the glass walls of his room; his attention is more and more



directed within. His chosen genre inclines him to confession, self-reflection, and many digressions. These have the fateful result of calling subconscious aspects of his psyche, such as memory, instinctual desires, and association patterns, into a more prominent role in shaping his consciousness, thereby further compromising the objectivity of his reportage. (174)

So then, not only does the journal, like a seismograph, record D-503's increasing sense of subjectivity, but it causes it. Where D-503 set out to write an objective account of life in OneState by recording his thoughts as they come, his journal becomes more and more subjective.

Any sense of self-consciousness or individuality contradicts what D-503 has believed all his life, and his knowledge of the connection between writing and self-consciousness is symbolized in his obsession with ink stains. O-90's tears cause an ink stain on his manuscript: "She listened in her enchantingly rosy way . . . and suddenly a tear fell from her blue eyes . . . then a second, a third . . . right on the page that was open (page 7). Made the ink run. So . . . I'll have to copy it over" (Zamyatin 20). The ink blots become symbols of imperfection, both in him and in his society. On U's list there is an inkblot next to his name: "She made a scratch with her pen, and I saw myself on the page: D-503. And right next to it an ink blot" (Zamyatin 50). He associates this spot of ink with U's smiles: "she raised her head and dribbled one of her inky little smiles at me" (Zamyatin 50). The ink removes the clarity of D-503's previously mechanical thinking: "But that little smile worried me. That drop of ink in it made my pure solutions all cloudy" (Zamyatin 50). There was a smudge on the letter from O-90, and D-503 claims that such a thing bothers him now more than it would have before:

And another wound: In the bottom right corner of the paper is a stain where the ink has run, where a drop of something fell. . . . I can't stand smudges, ink or any other kind, it doesn't matter. And I know that, before, this would have just been unpleasant to me, unpleasant for the eyes, this unpleasant spot. But now. . . how

come this grayish little spot is like a raincloud, making everything darker and more leaden? Or is this just more “soul”? (Zamyatin 102)

“Soul” is D-503’s term for self-consciousness and imagination, and he seems to be more and more aware of it as he goes on. He claims here that spots of ink would not have bothered him as much before, and yet he twice mentions a time in his youth when he became quite upset and cried because he had a spot on his yuny on the Day of Unanimity (Zamyatin 128, 135). It would seem that the complicating spot was known to him before, although it was “visible to no one but himself” (Zamyatin 135), and now has grown in its proportions: “Maybe no one around me now can see the black indelible blotches all over me, but I know—I know that a criminal like me has no business being among all these wide innocent faces” (Zamyatin 135). These ink spots are described as the symptoms of disease, and certainly D-503 considers the soul to be a disease. Cooke has pointed out that the very presence of disease “indicates imperfections in the environment insofar as utopia is concerned” (15). This is one of many indications that a regime that attempts to exercise such extreme control cannot, in reality, work.

This ink, distressing as it is for D-503, is the material with which he composes his text and, therefore, himself. As he becomes more and more isolated from the hive, he senses a need to know himself. Upon finishing his friendship with R-13 because of R’s involvement with I-330, he realizes that he no longer has his family: “I don’t want to see him. Finished! End of our triangle. I’m alone. Evening. A little foggy. Milky-gold cloth over the sky. What’s beyond it? If only one could know. And know who I am, what I am” (Zamyatin 63). Subjectivity and individuality bring loneliness and isolation. His growing sense of isolation changes his description of the mechanical choreography of OneState: “Numbers were passing in rows. Thousands of feet raining down in time, a

million-footed leviathan, heaving, was floating past. But I am alone—cast up by the storm on an uninhabited island, and I search and search with my eyes through the grey-blue waves” (Zamyatin 85). He begins to go through the motions now with a growing sense of emptiness where he had previously felt unity:

From a distance a metronome is ticking through the fog, and I mechanically chew to the familiar caress of its music, counting, along with everyone else, up to 50:50 statutory chews for each mouthful. And, still mechanically beating out the time, I go downstairs, and, like everyone else, check off my name in the book as one leaving the premises. But I sense that I’m living separately from everyone else, alone, surrounded by a soft, sound-proof wall, and that my world is on my side of this wall. (Zamyatin 99)

Separated from society, he begins to identify more and more with his text, and he realizes that it is not what he intended it to be but that it is something more:

But how about this? If this world is only mine, how come it is in these notes? How come these stupid “dreams,” wardrobes, endless corridors are here? I am crushed to see that instead of the elegant and strict mathematical poem in honor of OneState, it’s turning out to be some kind of fantastic adventure novel. Oh, if only this were really just a novel instead of my actual life, filled with X’s,  $\sqrt{-1}$ , and degradations. (Zamyatin 99)

So the text is his life, and it is also his uniqueness and his subjectivity. It becomes something he cannot destroy; it is essential to the ego: “Besides, I can’t, I no longer have the strength to destroy this painful piece of myself, which might turn out to be the piece I value most” (Zamyatin 160). It becomes his justification: “you, my unknown readers, might find here something that justifies me” (Zamyatin 167).

Offred composes the self as well through her oral story: “These are the kinds of litanies I use, to compose myself” (Atwood 120). This composition works on two levels. First of all, she is trying to control her demeanour in order to maintain that cloak of invisibility which is essential to her physical survival. On another level, she is actively engaged in composing her “self” as she creates her story, which is essential to her

psychological survival. In quietly composing herself she subverts the state's attempt to compose her, to rewrite her for its own purposes. Speaking of Aunt Lydia's lessons at the Rachel and Leah Centre, she says, "We, sitting in rows, eyes down, we make her salivate morally. We are hers to define, we must suffer her adjectives" (Atwood 124), pointing to the role that language plays in defining identity.

Where D-503 strives to provide truth and objectivity (however unsuccessfully), Offred knows that what she can provide is only an approximation: "This is a reconstruction. All of it is a reconstruction. It's a reconstruction now, in my head, as I lie flat on my single bed rehearsing what I should or shouldn't have said, what I should or shouldn't have done, how I should have played it" (Atwood 144). Offred must have tried to memorize her story as she was telling it, but she was aware of the pitfalls of this strategy. Her story is narrated in the here and now; it does not read as though it were recalled from a perspective outside the regime. She knows that she will have to tell it again if it is going to exist as a text: an oral story told to no one at all does not survive:

When I get out of here, if I'm ever able to set this down, in any form, even in the form of one voice to another, it will be a reconstruction then too, at yet another remove. It's impossible to say a thing exactly the way it was, because what you say can never be exact, you always have to leave something out, there are too many parts, sides, crosscurrents, nuances; too many gestures, which could mean this or that, too many shapes which can never be fully described, too many flavours, in the air or on the tongue, half-colours, too many. (Atwood 144)

Offred anticipates here the double-frame that her narrative will take if indeed she recorded it onto cassette tapes after her escape from Gilead, as the academics guess must have happened in the Historical Notes:

Offred strives in her narrative for the multiplicity that Gilead denies her in body. Offred's voice is doubled in her continual re-telling and re-visioning of the past; she often tells several versions of the same story, and in the "Historical Notes" sections at the close of the novel makes it clear that Offred's voice is itself a

construction, and not a simple unitary confession. (Palumbo 81)

The point here, though, is that the recollection and recording of memories is always a reconstruction because of the selective process that is involved in composing. Telling a story orally, at however many removes, merely makes the reconstruction more fluid. Revision is nothing new to Offred; speaking of the time before the regime, she says, “Change, we were sure, was for the better always. We were revisionists; what we revised was ourselves” (239).

Offred, however it may dismay Professor Pieixoto, is not an historian; she tells this story in order to survive: “Storytelling is this woman’s only possible gesture of resistance to imprisonment in silence, just as it becomes the primary means for her psychological survival” (Howells 127). She tries to mitigate the pain of her experiences and the impossibility of her situation by creating a story. Like D-503, Offred wishes that this were a piece of fiction instead of her life:

I would like to believe this is a story I’m telling. I need to believe it. I just believe it. Those who can believe that such stories are only stories have a better chance.

If it’s a story I’m telling, then I have control over the ending. Then there will be an ending, to the story, and real life will come after it. I can pick up where I left off.

It isn’t a story I’m telling.

It’s also a story I’m telling, in my head, as I go along.

Tell, rather than write, because I have nothing to write with and writing is in any case forbidden. (Atwood 49)

Offred makes it quite explicit that she is turning her bizarre life into a story in order to survive and to believe that she has some amount of control over her fate. Turning her life into a story makes it seem less real and therefore less threatening: “If it’s only a story, it becomes less frightening” (Atwood 154).

Offred’s story is not linear; she creates multiple storylines and possibilities, such

as when she tells three different stories about what may have happened to Luke: “The things I believe can’t all be true, though one of them must be. But I believe in all of them, all three versions of Luke, at one and the same time. This contradictory way of believing seems to me, right now, the only way I can believe anything. Whatever the truth is, I will be ready for it” (Atwood 116). Offred intentionally believes contradictory realities, subverting O’Brien’s idea of Doublethink. She never forgets the process of believing contradictions, but employs the process to take control of the outcome of her story.

In fact, Offred tells this story not only to help with her own survival, but also to keep those from whom she has been separated—Luke, her daughter, her mother, and Moira—alive in her mind. Offred admits that she fills in the gaps to a large extent. When she tells the story of what happened to Moira after her first escape, she says, “This is the story of what happened to Moira. Part of it I can fill in myself, part of it I heard from Alma, who heard it from Dolores, who heard it from Janine. Janine heard it from Aunt Lydia” (Atwood 138-139). Later, when she hears the story of Moira’s second escape from Moira herself at Jezebel’s, she says,

This is what she says, whispers, more or less. I can’t remember exactly, because I had no way of writing it down. I’ve filled it out for her as much as I can: we didn’t have much time so she just gave the outlines. Also she told me this in two sessions, we managed a second break together. I’ve tried to make it sound as much like her as I can. It’s a way of keeping her alive. (Atwood 255-256)

It is significant that she says she may not remember it correctly because she “had no way of writing it down.” She has no way of writing down this entire story. Offred goes out of her way to let the reader know that she is an unreliable narrator. She also constructs multiple possibilities for Moira’s eventual fate:

Here is what I'd like to tell. I'd like to tell a story about how Moira escaped, for good this time. Or if I couldn't tell that, I'd like to say she blew up Jezebel's, with fifty Commanders inside it. I'd like her to end with something daring and spectacular, some outrage, something that would befit her. But as far as I know that didn't happen. I don't know how she ended or even if she did, because I never saw her again. (Atwood 262)

Oral stories change as they are being told over and over again; this one changes as she is telling it. Unable to convey her true feelings about her encounter with Nick, and also trying to cope with being unfaithful to Luke, she constructs different versions of the liaison, saying, "I made that up. It didn't happen that way. Here is what happened" (Atwood 273), and "It didn't happen that way either. I'm not sure how it happened; not exactly. All I can hope for is a reconstruction: the way love feels is always only approximate" (Atwood 275).

However honest she may be in confessing that her story can only approximate truth, she is certain that telling it is essential: "But people will do anything rather than admit that their lives have no meaning. No use, that is. No plot" (Atwood 227). Life has a narrative quality, and life's meaning can be found in its plot. At several points, when her story becomes quite painful, she says, "I don't want to be telling this story" (Atwood 237, 285). When she contemplates the alternative, she says, "I don't have to tell it. I don't have to tell anything, to myself or to anyone else. I could just sit here, peacefully. I could withdraw. It's possible to go so far in, so far down and back, they could never get you out" (Atwood 237). Abandoning her story would mean the loss of agency. With no plot, she would lose her sense of self, her sanity.

So, she must live with her story, whatever shape it may take. She is aware of its limitations and makes plain to the reader her wish to change it:

I wish this story were different. I wish it 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. I wish it had more shape. I wish it were about love, or about sudden realizations important to one's life, or even about sunsets, birds, rainstorms, or snow. (Atwood 279)

What she wishes to change here is not only her narrative, but herself, which underlines the fact that what she is composing here is not a story but herself. Offred mentions several possible genres here: serious literature, adventure story, romance, coming of age narrative, landscape poetry. These stories which her story is not come with certain expectations, expectations which her story subverts.

Apologizing to the reader, she says, "I'm sorry there is so much pain in this story." She compares it to "a body caught in crossfire or pulled apart by force" and explains that the constant retelling of it is painful:

Nevertheless it hurts me to tell it over, over again. Once was enough: wasn't once enough for me at the time? But I keep on going with this sad and hungry and sordid, this limping and mutilated story, because after all I want you to hear it, as I will hear yours too if I ever get the chance, if I meet you or if you escape, in the future or in Heaven or in prison or underground, some other place. What they have in common is that they're not here. 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 279)

It is at this point that Offred comes closest to identifying her intended audience as Luke. Read as an address to an audience in general, however, it is an attempt to achieve intimacy with an audience that there is no guarantee of reaching. Atwood, through Offred, also addresses the relationship between writer and audience by acknowledging the pain involved in the process of composition and apologizing for the pain that the narrative is likely to cause in the reader. What is interesting is that Offred seems to be using her narrative to create an audience, much in the same way that D-503 "populated his pages" with his intended audience. So, then, for the isolated protagonist on his or her



heretical journey in dystopia, the composition of a text results not only in the creation of the self, but in the attempt to reach an unknown (D-503's Vesuvians) or perhaps unknowable (Offred's Luke) other.

### The Gendered Pen

In both *We* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, the connection between the pen and sexuality is evident from the very beginning. The pen is power, both ideologically and sexually, and both protagonists at some point discuss the power of "the phallic pen." Margaret Wise Petrochenkov states that "Zamyatin associated artistic potency with physical potency" (252), and apparently, so too does D-503. Upon first putting pen to paper, he apparently lacks virility: "My pen, accustomed to figures, is powerless to create the music of assonance and rhyme" (Zamyatin 4). New to writing, he feels a lack of poetic agency. In light of my earlier discussion of the poetry of OneState, however, one could argue that all poets in this society lack agency (except perhaps those who are vaporized for writing heresy).

In the Commander's office, Offred sees the pen as a symbol of the power that she lacks when she is briefly permitted to use the forbidden object: "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 Centre 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" (Atwood 196). This is obviously an ironic play on words: the phrase "penis envy" is hidden in the phrase "Pen Is Envy." Vevaina S. Coombi advises us to take this in the literal sense rather than in the Freudian (79). Offred certainly has

pen envy, and the pen between her fingers seems to be a much more potent tool than the Commander's actual penis, in which she does not seem to have much faith or interest. The pen is described as a sensual object because it is forbidden, and she certainly would like to have some of the power that goes with it, the power of script that is denied her in this regime.

If Offred has penis envy of a kind, then D-503 initially has what Petrochenkov calls "womb envy," becoming "pregnant with his text" (252). He feels his pen to be powerless, so he feminizes the artistic process by describing art as a masculine fantasy of conception and birth:

This is probably like what a woman feels when she first senses in her the pulse of a new little person, still tiny and blind. It's me and at the same time it's not me. And for long months to come she will have to nourish it with her own juice, her own blood, and then—tear it painfully out of herself and lay it at the feet of OneState. (Zamyatin 4)

Writing here is described as a markedly female experience. As Cooke comments, "Artists commonly speak of their works as their offspring, as we noted with Zamyatin; artistic creation is often confused with biological reproduction" (183). However, male anxiety underlies this textual pregnancy: there is also a violence in this image that is associated with D-503's concerns about his potency; it is "an image of birth as castration, violent birth that sunders mother from child" (Petrochenkov 251).

As he grows accustomed to wielding the pen, D-503 soon begins to feel textually potent, and sees himself no longer as a womb for his textual creation but as a godlike progenitor on a massive scale, creating not only his text but his audience: "And maybe you're all nothing but my shadows. Wasn't I the one that used you to populate these pages, which only a little while ago were white quadrangular deserts? Without me,

would you ever have been seen by any of those that I am going to lead along behind me down the narrow paths of these lines?" (Zamyatin 115). This is a turn away from the maternal impulses as he takes a paternalistic attitude towards his reader, which accompanies his several direct references to the reader as backward, primitive, and less developed than he and his society. The text itself is no longer a foetus within a womb but an instrument with which he creates and fertilizes.

However, D-503 does not feel invincible. As he begins to feel textual potency, his fear of creative castration is greater. When he is finally forced to undergo the Great Operation, which is more or less a lobotomy, a removal of the lobe in the brain apparently responsible for the imagination, he undergoes a castration that divorces him from the intimacy he had previously had with his text:

Could it be that I, D-503, actually wrote these 225 pages? Could it be that I ever actually felt this—or imagined that I did?

It's my handwriting. And it goes on, in the same hand, but fortunately only the handwriting is the same. No delirium, no ridiculous metaphors, no feelings. Just the facts. Because I'm well, I am completely, absolutely well. I'm smiling—I can't help smiling: they extracted a kind of splinter from my head, and now my head is easy and empty. (Zamyatin 224)

His diary is the measure of his increasing subjectivity, and he links the fear of losing that subjectivity with fear of losing his virility: "for D-503, the destruction of his creative capacity is equivalent to the destruction of his sexual potency, and therefore, any threat to his imagination and to his ability to exercise his imagination in writing is perceived as a potential castration" (Petrochenkov 251). Now that the imagination has been castrated, he can no longer claim creative potency, nor can he even imagine how it is that he once could.

## Language and Subversion

D-503's first foray into the world of language, what he intended to be an affirmation of his allegiance to OneState, led him not only to individuality and awareness of self, but also along a path of subversive behaviour: "the very activity of putting pen to paper brings about spontaneous subversive consequences"(Cooke 181). In describing his society to beings he assumes to be ignorant and backward, he is forced to look through new eyes at that which he had always taken for granted as obvious:

Unintentionally, D-503 commits himself to continual estrangement from major facets of the Single State. In his effort to be a proper tour guide, he is forced to imagine how a complete newcomer would look at his society, stripped of all preconceptions. [. . .] In other words, he can no longer take for granted what he has been taking for granted; this serves to open up his eyes. (Cooke 177)

He takes his task seriously, and he eventually places his duty as a writer before his duty as a number: "And so, in obedience to what strikes me as my authorial duty, I took an aero today at 16:00 and set off once again for the Ancient House" (Zamyatin 114). His authorial task often becomes an excuse to behave subversively; like many good journalists, he is willing to break laws to get a good story.

Offred is plunged into a pre-literate world. Although the language she speaks has been largely taken away (not only in the form of writing, but in the lost ability to speak freely), she delights in language, and uses it as a gauge of her psychological awareness and her grip on the past. She meditates on wordplay, on multiple word meanings, and on connotations and denotations:

The night is mine, my own time, to do with as I will, as long as I am quiet. As long as I don't move. As long as I lie still. The differences between *lie* and *lay*. Lay is always passive. Even men used to say, I'd like to get laid. Though sometimes they said, I'd like to lay her. All this is pure speculation. I don't really know what men used to say. I had only their words for it. (Atwood 47)

This kind of thinking is a very interior activity, the only kind of thing she can really do with her “free time” that is so limited by immobility. This passage serves to show her awareness of the slipperiness and fluidity of language, and how it can be used to uphold misogyny. She is also aware, as is evidenced by the last sentence, that language is a suspect medium for conveying knowledge.

Offred’s thinking has become that of someone who has a lot of spare time in seclusion, like a prisoner or a nun. In a sense she is both, and these kinds of word games become associative meditative prayers: “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. None of these facts have any connection with the others. These are the kinds of litanies I use, to compose myself” (Atwood 120). Offred’s focus on the multiplicity of word meanings underlines the fact that the dystopian regime’s project of controlling language is an impossible task. Alan Kennedy addresses the flaw behind the Newspeak project in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Newspeak is a systematized attempt to control the individual through language: “The purpose of Newspeak is to limit consciousness (and therefore power) by limiting words and concepts—by fixing language so that the meaning will be ‘in the words’” (Kennedy 80). He deconstructs this supposition, however, by illustrating the multiplicity and slipperiness of meaning:

Words change meanings figuratively [. . .] and they also change function and meaning by changing position in the sentence: transitive becomes intransitive, subject becomes object, noun can be verb. Unless we assume that Big Brother will outlaw syntax and therefore the structural possibilities of ambiguity as well as all tropes, then we cannot expect him to be successful. (Kennedy 80-81)

Kennedy goes on to point out that Big Brother is unaware of problem, since he allows

metaphors and double meanings to enter Newspeak, like Syme's "duckspeak" (81). Offred keeps a keen watch for such ambiguity in language, thereby resisting the state's attempt to control language and thus her consciousness.

Offred notices writing wherever it has slipped past the guard. First of all, there is the overlooked cushion with the "petit-point cover: FAITH, in square print, surrounded by a wreath of lilies" which she recognizes as an anachronism: "I can spend minutes, tens of minutes, running my eyes over the print: FAITH. It's the only thing they've given me to read. If I were caught doing it, would it count? I didn't put the cushion here myself" (Atwood 67). While watching films at the Rachel and Leah Re-education Centre, Offred notices that some writing has not been blacked out on protest signs:

The camera pans up and we see the writing, in paint on what must have been a bedsheet: TAKE BACK THE NIGHT. This hasn't been blacked out, even though we aren't supposed to be reading. The women around me breathe in, there's a stirring in the room, like wind over grass. Is this an oversight, have we gotten away with something? Or is this a thing we're intended to see, to remind us of the old days of no safety? (Atwood 129).

Already the act of reading is recognized as a forbidden act which causes an excited stirring. This is an intriguing oversight, because one would suspect that the regime does not want to remind the Handmaids of the association between writing and protest.

Offred's most cherished written message is the Latin phrase that she finds scratched onto the corner of her closet floor: "*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum.*" She knows that it was left by the previous Handmaid and that it was intended for her (Atwood 62). She comforts herself in the fact that this forbidden communication was successful:

It pleases me to ponder this message. It pleases me to think I'm communing with her, this unknown woman. For she is unknown; or if known, she has never been mentioned to me. It pleases me to know that her taboo message made it through, to at least one other person, washed itself up on the wall of my cupboard, was opened and read by me. Sometimes I repeat the words to myself. They give me a

small joy. (Atwood 62)

However, when she takes this message into the Commander's office for translation, it loses some of its charm: "I print the phrase carefully, copying it down from inside my head, from inside my closet. *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*. Here, in this context, it's neither prayer nor command, but a sad graffiti, scrawled once, abandoned" (Atwood 196). Ironically, when Offred discerns a more realistic connection between herself and her predecessor, specifically that they both spent time "in this context" visiting the Commander, the written message seems less like a victory and more like a prophesy:

I force a smile, but it's all before me now. I can see why she wrote that, on the wall of the cupboard, but I also see that she must have learned it, here, in this room. Where else? She was never a schoolboy. With him, during some previous period of boyhood reminiscence, of confidences exchanged. I have not been the first then. To enter his silence, play children's word games with him. (Atwood 197)

If the message is "Don't let the bastards grind you down" (Atwood 197) and the sender of the message hung herself while walking the same path that Offred now walks, Offred is forced to consider what the message may portend for her.

Offred certainly pays more attention to incidental writing than she would have before. Something as benign as initials scratched into a desk excite in Offred the feelings of an anthropologist who has stumbled across ancient script:

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. They seem to me incredibly ancient. The desk top is of blonde wood; it slants down, and there is an armrest on the right side, to lean on when you were writing, on paper, with a pen. Inside the desk you could keep things: books, notebooks. (Atwood 123)

Not only does she appreciate this sign from the past and engage in a sort of reverie of the

times when she had access to books, but she also recognizes how her own perceptions and reactions are beginning to change in accordance with current social norms merely because of the sheer strangeness of things she used to take for granted:

These habits of former times appear to me now lavish, decadent almost; immoral, like the orgies of barbarian regimes. *M loves G.*, 1972. This carving, done with a pencil 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 123)

Language, rare and forbidden, is becoming exotic and erotic. She even makes romantic word associations when thinking about Serena Joy's "Tennysonian garden" that have a sensual effect: "The willow is in full plumage and is no help, with its insinuating whispers. *Rendezvous*, it says, *terraces*; the sibilants run up my spine, a shiver as if in fever" (Atwood 161).

The most blatant association between language and sexuality is in the Scrabble games between Offred and the Commander, which are "charged with eroticism" (Coombi 81). Expecting to be asked to perform kinky sexual favours when asked to enter his office, Offred finds that the Commander wants to play word games. This act takes on a new significance within this context: "Now of course it's something different. Now it's forbidden, for us. Now it's dangerous. Now it's indecent. Now it's something he can't do with his Wife. Now it's desirable" (Atwood 149). Offred recognizes the fetishism in the benign request: "To be asked to play Scrabble, [. . .] as if we were an old married couple, or two children, seemed kinky in the extreme, a violation too in its own way. As a request it was opaque" (Atwood 163). These games become a parody of the sex act as the Commander assumes the role of the experienced but patient initiator to Offred's shy and inexperienced virgin: "The Commander was patient when I hesitated, or asked him



for a correct spelling. We can always look it up in the dictionary, he said. He said *we*. The first time, I realized, he'd let me win" (Atwood 164). This indulgent patience is also patronizing and condescending, which is not out of place with the role the Commander is playing.

However, Offred does not become aroused by the Commander; it is the experience of playing with words, with the letters themselves in which she indulges and revels:

We play two games. *Larynx*, I spell. *Valance*. *Quince*. *Zygote*. I hold the glossy counters with their smooth edges, finger the letters. The feeling is voluptuous. This is freedom, an eyeblink of it. *Limp*, I spell. *Gorge*. What a luxury. The counters are like candies, made of peppermint, cool like that. Humbugs, those were called. I would like to put them into my mouth. They would taste also of lime. The letter C. Crisp, slightly acid on the tongue, delicious. (Atwood 149)

As both Offred and the Commander begin to feel more comfortable on these visits, they engage in a sort of playful adolescent experimentation: "Sometimes after a few drinks he becomes silly, and cheats at Scrabble. He encourages me to do it too, and we take extra letters and make words with them that don't exist, words like *smurt* and *crup*, giggling over them" (Atwood 220). It is not reading too much into these Scrabble games to suggest that they are a sexual surrogate. More than that, though, these games allow Offred and the Commander to break two taboos, casual sex and the written word, in one fell swoop and therefore move beyond the mores of Gilead. When Offred considers what Nick's thoughts about these evenings might be, she makes the association between kinky sex and the written word explicit: "Because he has no idea what really goes on in there, among the books. Acts of perversion, for all he knows. The Commander and me, covering each other with ink, licking it off, or making love in stacks of forbidden newsprint. Well, he wouldn't be far off at that" (Atwood 191). What makes these

evenings spent playing board-games erotic is, again, the fact that Offred and the Commander are involved in a complicit and secret liaison. Even though what they are doing, with the exception of the Commander's request to be kissed upon her departure and their evening out at Jezebel's, is technically innocent, they know they are guilty because they are involved in forbidden activity: "Kick in the door, and what did I tell you? Caught in the act, sinfully Scrabbling. Quick, eat those words" (Atwood 191).

Their "word games" do not stop at Scrabble. The Commander eventually condescends to allow Offred to read on her visits. Another forbidden act, this becomes for Offred an obviously auto-erotic activity, and for the Commander watching her read is tantamount to live pornography:

On these occasions I read quickly, voraciously, almost skimming, trying to get as much into my head as possible before the next long starvation. If it were eating it would be the gluttony of the famished, if it were sex it would be a swift furtive stand-up in an alley somewhere.

While I read, the Commander sits and watches me doing it, without speaking but also without taking his eyes off me. This watching is a curiously sexual act, and I feel undressed while he does it. [ . . . ] As it is, this illicit reading of mine seems a kind of performance. (Atwood 194)

Offred, her head in a book, becomes a peep-show attraction for the Commander. So then, engaging in language, which was for Offred a secret and subversive, sometimes empowering activity, when placed within the context of the Commander's office, becomes an erotic show put on for his benefit.

### The Power of a Name

Along with the ability to use and control language goes the power of a name in defining a sense of individuality. In Zamyatin's dystopia, the sense of individuality is subordinated to a position within the collective. Citizens think of themselves as

Numbers, not as people or individuals. As Cooke explains, Zamyatin has hit upon one of our modern anxieties:

To treat people as if they really were statistics is commonly received as dehumanizing. Each of us desires to be seen as special, unique, in some respects. With characters named D-503, R-13, I-330, and S-4711, Zamyatin reminds us of our own resistance to the application of Social Security numbers and other means of serializing human populations. (Cooke 20)

OneState's policy of assigning numbers instead of names would seem also to diminish individual differences and to serve the purpose of making the population homogeneous. However, one striking differentiating factor stands out in the alphabetic prefixes to the numbers: all males have consonants prefixed to their numbers, and females vowels. This would seem to contradict the state's policy of neutralizing gender differences. Is Zamyatin possibly suggesting that gender differences are inevitable, even essential? There do seem to be gender stereotypes in OneState. At first glance, I-330 is the femme fatale; O-90 is the frumpy housewife. However, my argument in Chapter Four will reveal that these characters are actually more complex, which suggests that Zamyatin is flexible with gender representation. Perhaps what Zamyatin resists is any state attempt to control or eradicate the expression of perceived gender differences.

In contrast to Offred, D-503 has never had a "real" name which he can claim for his own and long for as his subjectivity increases. These characters do not go as far as their numerically-labelled counterparts in Ayn Rand's *Anthem*, who actually rename each other upon falling in love and discerning each other's individuality. However, when he does begin to develop a sense of the individuality of the Numbers around him, D-503 begins to label them by using symbolic descriptions of features unique to them. For example, I-330 is often depicted by her white teeth or the X on her face, O-90 by her

round pink mouth, and S-4711 by his protruding ears. I will examine Zamyatin's use of synecdoche more closely in Chapter Four.

Offred, however, once had her own name, and has been renamed by the regime. Atwood's dystopia also incorporates the dehumanizing effects of de-naming: "And to have your name taken away from you, and be assigned a number [. . .] is a deeply depersonalising thing to do to someone" (Atwood *Interview* 16). Atwood's protagonist has been given, for the duration of her residency in her current position, the patronymic "Offred," meaning "of Fred," her Commander. Handmaids hold these names only as long as they reside at any given post: "'I am Ofglen,' the woman says. Word perfect. And of course she is, the new one, and Ofglen, wherever she is, is no longer Ofglen. I never did know her real name. That is how you can get lost, in a sea of names" (Atwood 295). Offred aptly comments on the invisibility and lack of subjectivity that is imposed on the Handmaids by this naming system; not carrying the same name from post to post makes it more difficult to trace or track individual women. Also, the conferring of a name is an act that is symbolic of ownership or responsibility. The assignor of names wields the power in this society. Handmaids, nameless, do not have the power to name their offspring: "The Wives are here to bear witness to the naming. It's the wives who do the naming, around here" (Atwood 136). This makes it clear to whom the offspring of these ceremonial threesomes will belong.

Offred does not reveal her real name to the reader, or listener, of her story, but she discusses its significance to her psychological survival:

My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden. I tell myself it doesn't matter, your name is like your telephone number, useful only to others; but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter. I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I'll come

back to dig up, one day. I think of this name as buried. This name has an aura around it, like an amulet, some charm that's survived from an unimaginably distant past. I lie in my single bed at night, with my eyes closed, and the name floats there behind my eyes, not quite within reach, shining in the dark. (Atwood 94)

As Howells states, Offred “guards her lost name as the secret sign of her own identity and as guarantee of her hopes for a different future” (132). She reveals her name to Nick as a token of their secret intimacy: “I tell him my real name, and feel that therefore I am known” (Atwood 282), and at the end of the story he uses it perhaps to convince her that he is saving her: “He calls me by my real name. Why should this mean anything?” (Atwood 305).

In an interview, Atwood comments on the importance of names and language to personal narrative and the composition of identity:

We are the animal with syntax. We have the past tense, we have the future tense, we have the ability to put together subordinate clauses and qualifying phrases. So that seems to be at the centre of who we are. Language is therefore very important. And the *real name* of someone—their I, their ego—is very much attached to what kind of language they find themselves embedded within. [. . .] In a way, you could say that each one of us is composing a narrative, composing ‘the story of my life’ at every stage of that life. That you are your narrative. (Atwood *Interview* 15)

And Offred does compose herself in that very sense. Denied her real name, and her real identity (to whatever extent that can be said to exist) she composes for herself protective personae of invisibility which are meant to allow her to survive.

## Conclusion

In OneState and in Gilead, writing is denied most of the population because it is a vehicle for power, subjection and individuality. Citizens in both societies are required to deny individuality and submit to strict collectivism. Failure to do this will challenge the

authority and stagnation of the novels' respective political regimes, so restrictions on writing are strictly enforced. In *We*, citizens are permitted to read, but only state sanctioned propaganda. Poets and journalists exist, but may only write in a very prescribed and authorized fashion. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, reading and writing is much more strictly denied to all but men within the elite class. Even there, censorship rules, excepting the contraband that is accessible to those in power.

By having D-503 write a heretical diary, Zamyatin addresses the loss of autonomy that a male subject may suffer under totalitarian rule and the restrictions on language that come with it. He recognizes that totalitarian regimes in the real world wield control of the populace by taking control of language and literature in an attempt to thwart before they begin any rebellious tendencies in the individual. By having Offred compose an oral diary, Atwood shows that many dystopian writers have ignored female subjection, but she also makes an ironic comment on the restrictions on writing and language use that already exist for women. Gilead's attempt to plunge women into an illiterate reality reflects the history of women's denied access to education and power. Ultimately, both writers show in different ways how repressive regimes attempt to control expression and communication through writing, but also that using language illegally and for seditious purposes is a central element of the protagonists' subversive journeys.

## Chapter Five: Synecdoche and Symbolism:

### Imagery, Imagination and the Dystopian Protagonist

Zamyatin and Atwood have both written dystopian novels in which the populace is controlled in part through sex and in which a protagonist navigates alienation through writing/composing. Zamyatin and Atwood also share an affinity for language and the poetic image. Both authors rely heavily on metaphor and symbolism rather than on detailed comprehensive description to render the disoriented protagonist in his or her dystopian world. It is in their use of poetic language and imagery that Zamyatin and Atwood are most similar, and this chapter undertakes to explore and compare several shared image systems that exist throughout the novels. Often they employ this imagery to different ends, but several striking similarities must be noted.

In this chapter, I will explore Atwood's and Zamyatin's shared tendency to use synecdoche in characterization and in the revelation of the consciousness and perspective of the protagonist. I will then turn to repeated images of dismemberment, mutilation, and fragmentation that are used to reveal the nature of dystopian regimes and their effect on individuals. I will provide a considerable examination of the significance of floral imagery in both dystopias. I will then explore the eye/gaze as a metaphor for connections in worlds where connections are prohibited, and finally my discussion will turn to mirrors in the way that they allow the protagonist to apprehend himself or herself in a society where faith in the knowledge of oneself is slippery at best.

## Synecdoche and Detail

As soon as D-503 begins to recognize individuality in himself and others, he immediately focuses on a key feature of the individual. In this way, he uses synecdoche as a way to move beyond the uniformity of OneState. As Ray Parrott explains, “These image-metaphors are the salient feature of the writer’s synecdochical style of characterization [. . .] wherein an important part of the whole signifies the whole and usually is the part most associated with the subject in question” (106). Upon first meeting I-330, after just having asserted that “We’re so identical” (Zamyatin 8), D-503 notices the differences between himself, I-330, O-90, and S-4711 and says, “We were all different” (Zamyatin 9).

D-503 finds I-330 to be a dangerous yet compelling character. He focuses on features that seem threatening and sharp. From his first sight of her he describes her in anti-mathematical terms. Her face contains an “odd irritating X” that he “couldn’t express in numbers” (Zamyatin 8):

I saw a strange configuration: her dark eyebrows pulled up high toward her temples, they made a sardonic sharp triangle, and the two deep lines running from her nose to the corners of her mouth made another, this time with the point up. And these two triangles somehow canceled each other out, made an unpleasant, irritating X on her face, like a cross. Her face was crossed out. (Zamyatin 52)

In algebra, “X” stands for a variable or an unknown quantity (Hoisington 86, T.R.N. Edwards 65), and I-330’s mysterious quality is what first compels and confounds D-503. Not only is she an unknown variable, but she is “crossed out” like an error. He asserts that the X is “something that made me lose all patience” (Zamyatin 28). In other references D-503 not only describes her thus, he refers to her by these features; D-503 employs synecdoche when he refers to her as “A mercilessly sharp triangle, black on white” (Zamyatin 178).



D-503 often refers to I-330 by her smile and her teeth. He refers to “Unbearably sweet lips” (Zamyatin 56) and “sharp burning lips” (Zamyatin 178), which are conventional enough images. But then he refers to her by “that incisive smile, those sharp white teeth” (Zamyatin 28), “her smile-bite” (Zamyatin 73). Owen Ulph observes that I-330’s “sharp, vampire-like teeth, ever ready to bite, haunt the timid D-503 throughout the narrative” (82). D-503 sees this mouth as a compelling threat: “Her smile was a bite, and I was its target” (Zamyatin 18). Edwards points out that “D- is certainly the passive, masochistic partner here” (66). Certainly her sexuality is dangerous to the state as she uses it to entice others into subversive activity. She has masculine qualities, and her sexual ambiguity is made obvious in the following image: “Sweet, sharp, white teeth. Then, a smile. In the opened cup of the chair she was like a bee—she had both honey and a sting” (Zamyatin 127). D-503 makes it explicit that her smile is a dangerous weapon: “I-330 laid her hand on the back of my armchair and, looking over her right shoulder, smiled at the other woman with nothing but her teeth. I would not like to have that smile aimed at me” (Zamyatin 155). Not all critics agree that she is a femme fatale, however. Hoisington points out that, on the contrary, “I-330’s sensuality [. . .] proves to be liberating rather than destructive” (83). She asserts that I-330 is not simply the gender stereotype of the dangerous woman: “I-330 defies easy categorization. In this sense she is markedly different from the conventional female protagonists in the modern dystopias of George Orwell and Fritz Lang” (81). Hoisington goes on to say that “I-330 [. . .] takes on mythic qualities traditionally reserved for male heroes and yet retains her own identity” (81-82). She concludes that “in Zamyatin’s novel the traditional confines of gender are challenged, violated, and ultimately transcended” (88). With her masculine

and feminine qualities, I-330 defies simplistic gender stereotypes.

D-503 refers to I-330 in other ways as well. During sexually charged encounters, he sees “two pointed tips that glowed pink like coals seen through ashes” and “knees [that] were tender, round” (Zamyatin 54). He also uses sound imagery, referring to her voice in a mathematical graph: “I saw the curve of that laugh, ringing, steep, resilient, and lively as a whip” (Zamyatin 30). Hoisington points out that the whip is “sexually provocative,” but also that it is associated “with irony, sarcasm, and satire” (84). Even her eyelashes, “sharp, immovable javelins” (Zamyatin 215) are dangerous. She resembles her letter designation, as she is often depicted in phallic shapes: “She was to my right—slender, sharp, tough, and springy as a whip” (Zamyatin 8-9). She takes on supernatural qualities when she takes flight in the Integral: “All of them in winged headphone helmets. She looked a head taller than usual, winged, gleaming, flying—like one of the ancient Valkyries—and there seemed to be huge blue sparks overhead, on the radio antenna: This came from her, and so did the faint whiff of ozone, lightning” (Zamyatin 193). During the entire flight he refers to her as a “radio-valkyrie,” an image that combines mythology with technology. For D-503, I-330 is dangerous insofar as a soul, an imagination, and a sense of individuality is dangerous in OneState.

In contrast to I-330, O-90 is depicted in terms of her safe, pink lips that are associated with the pink tickets of their state-sanctioned sexual relationship (Christopher Collins 58): “She gave me her pink lips—and her pink ticket. I tore off the stub, but I couldn’t tear myself away from her rosy lips until the very last second” (Zamyatin 20). As Collins points out, “Pink is the only variation of red that appears regularly in, and is sanctioned by, the state. [. . .] pink suggests a passionless physical healthiness” (57).

These lips represent the safe, unthreatening vagina in which D-503 could find comforting self-affirmation prior to his initiation into subversion. In D-503's estimation, the same principle applies to her mind: "'Now, she's got a simple round mind,' I thought. 'Just what I needed. She'll understand me and support me'" (Zamyatin 36). D-503's relationship with O-90, initially, is safe and legitimate, and there is nothing threatening in the synecdoche surrounding her "cheeks taking on the tender, exciting color of our Sex Day tickets" (Zamyatin 41). As Collins observes, "The circular mouth (like the vagina to which it obviously refers) keeps D-503 in a state of entropy" (57). In fact, O-90 resembles her letter designation in more than just her mouth: "Dear O! It always struck me that she looks like her name: about ten centimeters shorter than the Maternal Norm, and therefore sort of rounded all over, and the pink O of her mouth, open to greet every word I say" (Zamyatin 6). However, O-90 breaks out of this entropy as she becomes a procreative criminal, illegally conceiving a child and escaping the walls of OneState. Though she may not initially be counted as a rebel with the likes of I-330, Booker states that "one of *We's* most powerful images of rebellion against authority [. . .] involves motherhood" (*Dystopian Impulse* 34).

D-503 refers to himself, when he is looking into a mirror, by his eyebrows: "My broken, distorted eyebrows are in the mirror" (Zamyatin 106) and otherwise by his "horrible, ape-like hand[s]" (Zamyatin 51). He clearly feels self-conscious about them; he admits early in his narrative: "I can't stand people looking at my hands. They're hairy, shaggy, some kind of stupid throwback. I stuck out my hands and said with as steady a voice as I could manage: 'A monkey's hands'" (Zamyatin 9). These hands signify to D-503 the ancient instincts and the unknown elements that are contained within

him: “Or is it my own paws bothering me, the fact that they’ve been in front of my eyes so long, these shabby paws? I don’t like talking about them. I don’t like them. They’re a holdover from the savage era. Can it really be true that I contain . . .” (Zamyatin 23). This association between his hairy hands and his primitive ancestry is confirmed when he sees the hairy creatures that inhabit the space outside the Green Wall.

R-13, the poet, is recognized by his “African lips” (Zamyatin 21) that spew sounds and words: “R-13 chokes with excitement when he talks and the words come bursting out of him, out of those thick lips, in sprays. Every *p* is a fountain. The word *poets* is a real fountain” (Zamyatin 40). Even though D-503 seems to be able to reference pre-OneState history in any given intellectual diatribe, one must wonder at his capacity to use the term “African” as a descriptor.<sup>8</sup> Since Africa, like any other continent, must be meaningless in OneState, if only because no attention is paid to world geography or anything that is outside the green wall, is this tendency to associate features with race likely in a person who lives 1000 years after the obliteration of twentieth century geopolitical and racial realities? Race, like gender differences, seems to slip into dystopian worlds. A good example is the Savage Reservations of *Brave New World*. If this racial awareness is unlikely to come from D-503, perhaps it is authorial. It could be that Zamyatin is unwittingly revealing the attitudes of his own time. More likely, though, like other features that differentiate characters, Zamyatin is revealing the flaws inherent in OneState’s attempt to standardize the gene pool through eugenics. Perhaps that which OneState ignores will inevitably find its expression in the population. Collins identifies R-13, based on his features and his profession, with the poet Pushkin (75-76). R-13 is a

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<sup>8</sup> In earlier translations, the term “Negroid” is used instead of “African.” This clearly makes it a racial rather than geographical term. It is therefore difficult to judge whether Zamyatin was referring to geography or race. This descriptor is in any case a feature of the translation.

state poet, but he has a seditious association as he admits to D-503 that he is acquainted with I-330. Perhaps this tendency to spew words in the form of spray comes from his forced self-censorship as a state-poet: “His lips smacked, he sprayed you, the words welled up in him” (Zamyatin 61). Petrochenkov observes that “The spray from his lips is a metaphorical reference to his poetic creativity, and connotes sperm” (248n). As far as synecdoche applies to R-13, his words and sounds take on a life of their own: “(Wet B) Bounced out” (Zamyatin 63). Again, his possible association with I-330 and the underground movement sometimes make his depictions similar to hers: “R bared his white, African teeth, splashed some word in my face, dived downward, and vanished” (Zamyatin 140).

S-4711, the subversive associate of I-330 whom D-503 believes to be a Guardian for most of the novel, is depicted as a “double-bent figure” (Zamyatin 19) and also resembles his letter designation. He has “the curve of a head bent over, a curved back, double curved, the letter S” (Zamyatin 35). He also smiles “a double smile” (Zamyatin 36) signifying his duplicity. He is characterized by his “pink ear-wings” (Zamyatin 116) that protrude and “waving pink winglike arms” (Zamyatin 123). He is often associated with shadows and his eyes are “steel-gray drills” (Zamyatin 85). These features become synecdoche because D-503 comes to refer to him not by his name but by these features: “Down below, past the stage, slipping above the gleaming glass, rushed the pink ear-wings; the body reflected there was the dark double-looped letter S” (Zamyatin 136). Again, gestures involving the features take on a life of their own. One of the most intriguing images from the novel involves S-4711: “I saw a smile slip out of his eyes, slide down his face, and, with a flick of its tail, take a seat on the right side of his mouth”

(Zamyatin 161). The snake-like imagery associated with this smile underlines S-4711's manipulation of D-503.

The complicit and collusive doctor, whom D-503 especially fears, has more dangerous features. He is "extremely thin, [. . .] like something cut out of paper, and no matter which way he turned, he was nothing but profile, sharp and chiseled. His nose, a flashing blade; his lips—scissors" (Zamyatin 72). He is also depicted by "his paper-thin hand" (Zamyatin 72). The imagery extends to his speech: "he speaks with scissors" (Zamyatin 95). When he utters words that are threatening, D-503 narrates thus: "the scissors snipped" (Zamyatin 87); and "his scissor-lips clicked" (Zamyatin 95). When D-503 confesses his dreams to the doctor, he describes the admission as a sort of self-inflicted impalement: "I threw myself toward him as though we were relatives, right onto the scissors, muttering something about insomnia, dreams, a shadow, a yellow world. The scissor-lips flashed a smile" (Zamyatin 86). Of course, to admit his unorthodox activity to someone whom he believes to be an authority figure and commit himself into the hands of OneState justice would be suicidal behaviour.

Associated with the doctor, but not a subversive, is his horned colleague: "One, shortish, with legs like mileposts, used his eyes as though they were horns to toss the patients" (Zamyatin 86). Upon hearing part of D-503's confession, he "stamped out of his consulting-room on his milepost legs and tossed me and my thin doctor on the horns of his eyes" (Zamyatin 88). Again, synecdoche is used to portray actions as well as features.

U, the older female clerk in D-503's apartment building, is often depicted by her sagging cheeks. He repeatedly expresses his dislike for this particular feature. He often

refers to her simply by her “pinkish-brown gills” (Zamyatin 51), again employing synecdoche in order to refer to and differentiate characters. He refers to her smiles as a healing plaster: “And when the familiar brownish-pink gills turned up in my room, I was very glad, I’ll be honest about it. She sat down, modestly arranged the fold of her yuny that had fallen between her knees, quickly plastered her smiles all over me, one for each hurt place, and I felt wonderful, held tight” (Zamyatin 118). She plays a maternal role for D-503, and he accordingly vacillates between feeling her motherly comfort and revulsion at the thought of a physical relationship with her.

The old woman who sits as guardian of the Ancient House, which is close to the Green Wall, is associated with mossy overgrowth: “At the glass door was an old woman, wrinkled all over, especially her mouth: nothing but wrinkles, pleats, her lips already gone inside, her mouth kind of grown over” (Zamyatin 26). This association is no doubt due to her proximity to the outside world and possibly with her subversive status; I-330 loves the old woman “maybe for her mouth” (Zamyatin 27). The old woman seems to materialize directly out of the landscape: “At the entrance the old woman was dozing in the sun, like a plant. Once more I was surprised that her mouth seemed to appear out of some undergrowth and produce speech” (Zamyatin 31-32), and again “Same dear, sunken mouth, with wrinkles like rays. Probably sunken all these days, and only now opened up and smiled” (Zamyatin 72).

Zamyatin’s system of synecdoche is extensive. For D-503, it is used to differentiate individuals in a uniform society as he begins to break away from accepted conformity and collectivism. He has been used to seeing everyone as identical. As he begins to recognize his own and others’ individuality, he uses a fractured language of

synecdoche as he lacks the realistic, descriptive language to describe himself and others in individualistic terms. Atwood's use of synecdoche also suggests the protagonist's fractured vision. For Offred, synecdoche results from a lack of perspective:

What I need is perspective. The illusion of depth, created by a frame, the arrangement of shapes on a flat surface. Perspective is necessary. Otherwise there are only two dimensions. Otherwise you live with your face squashed against a wall, everything a huge foreground, of details, close-ups, hairs, the weave of the bedsheet, the molecules of the face. Your own skin like a map, a diagram of futility, crisscrossed with tiny roads that lead nowhere. Otherwise you live in the moment. Which is not where I want to be. (Atwood 153)

Offred is living in the moment, in a two-dimensional existence. She is experiencing a limited perspective in an alien and unfamiliar world in which her survival is tenuous. This limited perspective results from her social position and her constant struggle for survival. It is literally often the result of the white wings and the proscribed head-down aspect she is forced to assume. In her first physical description of herself as a Handmaid, she focuses on her hands and feet, which seem to operate as independent entities, and on her white wings:

I get up out of the chair, advance my feet into the sunlight, in their red shoes, flat-healed to save the spine and not for dancing. The red gloves are lying on the bed. I pick them up and pull them onto my hands, finger by finger. Everything except the wings around my face is red: the colour of blood, which defines us. The skirt is ankle-length, full, gathered to a flat yoke that extends over the breasts, the sleeves are full. The white wings too are proscribed issue; they are to keep us from seeing, but also from being seen. (Atwood 18)

Offred is defined by the colour red, and she describes herself thus. Her attention to detail often has the effect of portraying her loneliness; we get the impression that she is describing details in order to amuse herself and fill the time. The wings, which limit her vision, also obscure the whole to anyone who is observing Offred, and thus they are instruments of synecdoche where her own image is concerned.



Of course, Offred's focus on details is also in part a survival mechanism. She is not free to lingeringly observe people or scenes in certain situations, especially the Wife of her new station:

She waited until the car started up and pulled away. I wasn't looking at her face, but at the part of her I could see with my head lowered: her blue waist, thickened, her left hand on the ivory head of her cane, the large diamonds on the ring finger, which must once have been fine and was still finely kept, the fingernail at the end of the knuckly finger filed to a gentle curving point. It was like an ironic smile, on that finger; like something mocking her. (Atwood 24)

Thus Offred is often forced to take in partial details. To look someone in the face can be dangerous. This partial description of Serena Joy is reminiscent of *We*, particularly the mocking fingernail smile. She uses these details in an attempt to know and understand her adversaries, to determine weaknesses. Another of Offred's descriptions of Serena Joy, in which she does look into a portion of her face, makes her strikingly similar in appearance to I-330: "Her face was not fat but it was large. Two lines led downwards from the corners of her mouth; between them was her chin, clenched like a fist" (Atwood 25). This description is reminiscent of the lower half of I-330's "X" face. It is the Commander who shares I-330's threatening teeth: "The signals animals give one another: lowered blue eyelids, ears laid back, raised hackles. A flash of bared teeth" (Atwood 59).

Offred also tends to focus on lip imagery: "Here and there are worms, evidence of the fertility of the soil, caught by the sun, half dead; flexible and pink, like lips" (Atwood 27). A repeated image is that of the bodies that hang on the wall:

But on one bag there's blood, which has seeped through the white cloth, where the mouth must have been. It makes another mouth, a small red one, like the mouths painted with thick brushes by kindergarten children. A child's idea of a smile. This smile of blood is what fixes the attention, finally. These are not snowmen, after all. (Atwood 42)

Offred chooses the bloody smiles to represent the violence and horror that have been

committed against these bodies hanging on the wall. This blood smile is echoed in the painted faces of the women at Jezebel's: "All wear makeup, and I realize how unaccustomed I've become to seeing it, on women, because their eyes look too big to me, too dark and shimmering, their mouths too red, too wet, blood-dipped and glistening; or, on the other hand, too clownish" (Atwood 247). The blood-dipped mouth is strikingly similar to that of I-330. This image suggests that the women of Jezebel's are experiencing a slower kind of violent execution than those on the wall. Where Zamyatin exaggerates one particular feature to call attention to individuality, Atwood does the same to achieve a grotesque effect.

Sometimes, however, Offred's attention to detail allows her still to find occasional beauty in her two-dimensional life. When her breakfast arrives, she contemplates a sunlit egg:

The first egg is white. I move the egg-cup a little, so it's now in the watery sunlight that comes through the window and falls, brightening, waning, brightening again, on the tray. The shell of the egg is smooth but also grained; small pebbles of calcium are defined by the sunlight, like craters on the moon. It's a barren landscape, yet perfect; it's the sort of desert the saints went into, so their minds would not be distracted by profusion. I think that this is what God must look like: an egg. The life of the moon may not be on the surface, but inside.

The ebb is glowing now, as if it had an energy of its own. To look at the egg gives me intense pleasure. (Atwood 120)

Offred's limited perspective, her observing of details but not the whole, her two-dimensional perception sometimes gives her an aesthetic appreciation and a tendency to linger over details that might normally go unnoticed. She therefore creates systems of recurring images; the egg image will be repeated as a symbol of fertility. It is associated with the moon, a conventional image of fertility, and she contemplates it just before the birthmobile comes: "our eyes are on Janine. In the dim light, in her white gown, she

glows like a moon in cloud” (Atwood 135). White that glows is fecundity, like the egg.

Offred’s attention to detail seems at times unintentional; it is as if these images that float into her field of vision are carrying messages, often reminders of her former life. She sometimes seems quite powerless to resist the shock of familiarity in a mundane or benign object:

The dishtowel is white with blue stripes. Dishtowels are the same as they always were. Sometimes these flashes of normality come at me from the side, like ambushes. The ordinary, the usual, a reminder, like a kick. I see the dishtowel, out of context, and I catch my breath. For some, in some ways, things haven’t changed that much. (Atwood 58)

Sometimes Offred seems intentionally to linger over details in an attempt to find those glimpses or echoes of her former life:

I’m looking down, at the sidewalk, mesmerized by the women’s feet. One of them is wearing open-toed sandals, the toenails painted pink. I remember the smell of nail polish, the way it wrinkled if you put the second coat on too soon, the satiny brushing of sheer pantyhose against the skin, the way the toes felt, pushed towards the opening in the shoe by the whole weight of the body. (Atwood 39)

Her attention to feet is not surprising; she spends most of her time spent in public walking with her head down. When Nick surreptitiously touches her foot during the prayer service before the Ceremony, her foot comes alive: “I feel my shoe soften, blood flow into it, it grows warm, it becomes a skin” (Atwood 91).

Offred also remembers Moira’s feet, rendered lungs, after they have been beaten: “what I am seeing is Moira’s feet, the way they looked after they’d brought her back. Her feet did not look like feet at all. They looked like drowned feet, swollen and boneless, except for the colour. They looked like lungs” (Atwood 102). Her fading memories, in fact, take on a synecdochical quality:

I try to conjure, to raise my own spirits, from wherever they are. I need to

remember what they look like. I try to hold them still behind my eyes, their faces, like pictures in an album. But they won't stay still for me, they move, there's a smile and it's gone, their features curl and bend as if the paper's burning, blackness eats them. A glimpse, a pale shimmer on the air; a glow, aurora, dance of electrons, then a face again, faces. But they fade, though I stretch out my arms towards them, they slip away from me, ghosts at daybreak. Back to wherever they are. Stay with me, I want to say. But they won't.

It's not my fault. I am forgetting too much. (Atwood 203)

As Offred's memories, or "spirits," fade, she catches fleeting glimpses of features but she cannot retain the entire image. Again, for Offred synecdoche is a symptom of limited perspective that reflects a fracturing psyche that is struggling for survival. This passage reminds us of D-503's comments about his memories of his disorienting experience outside the Green Wall: "After that, all I retain are a few scattered sharp remnants" (Zamyatin 102). It is not unlikely for memories to become fractured; one of the objects of dystopian regimes is to cut the subject off from history and memory.

Offred's attention to detail is often the result of extreme stress or the attempt to remember a particularly painful event, like the moment when her daughter was torn from her: "close to my eyes there's a leaf, red, turned early, and I see every bright vein. It's the most beautiful thing I've every seen" (Atwood 85). Earlier that same day, when she and her family were in their car trying to escape Gilead, her husband used a typical cliché to describe her:

You're white as a sheet, he says.

That is how I feel: white, flat, thin. I feel transparent. Surely they will be able to see through me. Worse, how will I be able to hold on to Luke, to her, when I'm so flat, so white? I feel as if there's not much left of me; they will slip through my arms, as if I'm made of smoke, as if I'm a mirage, fading before their eyes. (Atwood 95)

Offred takes this offhand remark and uses it in a synecdochical fashion to express her fear and powerlessness. She extends this common descriptor into a powerful image as

she uses the part of her, her white face, to represent her whole being at that moment. This image is also two-dimensional, which accords with the theme of two-dimensional existence already discussed. Offred uses synecdoche and attention to detail as a result of her limited perspective, as a survival mechanism, and as a bid to retain a sense of her former self. Her observations and memories take on a fractured quality that is synecdochical. Both D-503 and Offred use synecdoche, the former in an attempt to recognize for the first time individuality where he had been accustomed to uniformity, and the second as a result of limited vision in a new society that tries to strip her of her individuality.

#### Dismemberment/Mutilation/Fragmentation

The tendency to employ synecdoche, to have a part stand for the whole, sometimes leads to the amputation of parts in these two novels. Some of the most strikingly similar imagery in *We* and *The Handmaid's Tale* involves dismemberment, mutilation, and fragmentation. D-503, suddenly feeling himself an individual where he has always seen himself as part of a collective, uses images of dismembered body parts as a metaphor for alienation from the whole:

Picture this: a human finger, cut off from its body, its hand . . . a separate human finger, running hopping along, all hunched over, on a glass sidewalk. I am that finger.

And what is strangest of all, most unnatural of all, is that the finger hasn't got the slightest desire to be on the hand, to be with the others. (Zamyatin 100)

In this instance D-503 expresses no desire to be reunited with the collective. However, he fluctuates throughout the novel between desiring and rejecting his new self-consciousness. When feeling less confident, he uses images of disease and infection to

signify his status as an individual:

So here am I, in step with everyone else, and yet separate from all of them. [. . . ] I feel myself. But it's only the eye with a lash in it, the swollen finger, the infected tooth that feels itself, is conscious of its own individual being. The healthy eye or finger or tooth doesn't seem to exist. So it's clear, isn't it? Self-consciousness is just a disease. (Zamyatin 124)

In this excerpt, D-503 asserts that a sense of individuality will not exist in a healthy member of the collective body; the eye is normally unaware of itself until it is invaded by a foreign body. He repeatedly attributes his new awareness to his imagination or soul which he views as an infection: “what I feel there in my brain is just like . . . some kind of foreign body . . . like having a very thin little eyelash in your eye” (Zamyatin 33).

D-503's references to women often involve images of mutilation. Taking the synecdoche a step further, he tends to focus on I-330's lips as having been cut and dripping with blood: “On the corner in the white fog. Blood. Cut with a sharp knife. It was her lips” (Zamyatin 70). D-503's focus on lips indicates an actual focus on vaginas, so he figuratively mutilates women and reduces them to that body part: “I looked silently at her lips. All women are lips, nothing but lips. Some are pink, subtle, round—a ring, a tender shield against the whole world. And then these: a second ago they didn't exist, and now suddenly, made by a knife, the sweet blood still dripping” (Zamyatin 70). The first pair of lips is O-90's. Again, she has the benign, unthreatening vagina. The second pair of lips, signifying the threatening vagina, is I-330's. As Collins points out, “O-90's sexuality is licit, gentle, healthy, limiting, pink. I-330's sexuality is illicit, violent, mad, slashing, and red” (58). I would point out that these are D-503's characterizations of these women; as I have already discussed, these characters are more complex than they seem. D-503 also describes a blade of light falling across I-330's throat: “and then this

cruel flashing blade falls on I-330's open, naked throat . . . and I find this so horrible that I can't stand it, I scream . . . and once more I open my eyes" (Zamyatin 97), perhaps signifying a fantasy of violent decapitation.

I-330's threatening nature for D-503 signifies his fear of castration, as Petrochenkov discusses. He reduces I-330 and O-90 to vaginas—one which threatens castration, and one that would protect him from castration—because of this fear. That castration comes finally not from I-330 but from the state in the form of the great operation which removes his imagination: "Because I'm well, I am completely, absolutely well. I'm smiling—I can't help smiling: They extracted a kind of splinter from my head, and now my head is easy and empty. Or I should say, not empty, but there's nothing strange there that keeps me from smiling" (Zamyatin 224). And finally the infecting foreign body, his imagination, is removed. This is the ultimate dismemberment.

Physical encounters between D-503 and I-330 are described as the collision of body parts that have a life of their own: "Suddenly her arm crept round my neck, lips touched lips, went deeper, things got even scarier" (Zamyatin 56). This may be an attempt on D-503's part to claim lack of control or agency in these encounters. It is like body parts are making out, not people. One of the nicer images of contact between them, however, is of their shoulders touching: "Closer—she leaned against me with her shoulder, and we made one, she blended into me—and I knew: This is how it has to be" (Zamyatin 70). Given the context, a romantic cliché takes on new meaning: "Her lips met mine" (Zamyatin 72).

Images of dismemberment abound in *The Handmaid's Tale*, even in a benign

object such as a chicken bought at market: “The chicken lies there, headless and without feet, goose-pimpled as though shivering” (Atwood 57). Gilead has effectively vivisected its population of women into different parts, so it is not surprising that images of dismemberment and mutilation are frequent. Handmaids are merely wombs, so women are reduced to a particular body part as we have seen in *We*. Not only body parts, but communication between women is amputated: “If you can call it talking, these clipped whispers, projected through the funnels of our white wings. It’s more like a telegram, a verbal semaphore. Amputated speech” (Atwood 211). This amputation also applies to Serena Joy, whose life is unfulfilling: “And sometimes from the front sitting room there will be the tin sound of Serena’s voice, from a disc made long ago and played now with the volume low, so she won’t be caught listening as she sits there knitting, remembering her own former and now amputated glory: *Hallelujah*” (Atwood 64). Essentially, images of dismemberment and mutilation exist where it is impossible for individuals to live full and multidimensional lives.

The most blatant example of dismemberment is in Offred’s visit to the doctor. She is symbolically decapitated for her examination: “When I’m naked I lie down on the examining table, on the sheet of chilly crackling disposable paper. I pull the second sheet, the cloth one, up over my body. At neck level there’s another sheet, suspended from the ceiling. It intersects me so that the doctor will never see my face. He deals with a torso only” (Atwood 70). The dismemberment goes further, however, as the doctor’s body parts perform the examination seemingly independently: “A cold finger, rubber-clad and jellied, slides into me, I am poked and prodded. The finger retreats, enters otherwise, withdraws” (Atwood 70). Passive sentence structure is employed as the



examination continues: “My breasts are fingered in their turn, a search for ripeness, rot” (Atwood 70). Even the doctor’s face is fragmented as he makes a sexual advance towards her: “He lifts the sheet. The lower part of his face is covered by the white gauze mask, regulation. Two brown eyes, a nose, a head with brown hair on it. His hand is between my legs” (Atwood 70). It seems that in both dystopias, the doctor is dangerous and capable of mutilation. This reduction of women to body parts is not a feature of the regime that is completely new. Offred describes a book burning that took place in her youth: “I threw the magazine into the flames. It riffled open in the wind of its burning; but flakes of paper came loose, sailed into the air, still on fire, parts of women’s bodies, turning black ash, in the air, before my eyes” (Atwood 48-49).

Offred’s body is similarly fragmented when she is performing the ritual with the Commander: “My red skirt is hitched up to my waist, though no higher. Below it the Commander is fucking. What he is fucking is the lower part of my body” (Atwood 104). This fragmentation is not only physical, but necessarily psychological: “One detaches oneself. One describes” (Atwood 106). Offred is not the only one for whom it is necessary to undergo such a detachment: “I would steel myself. I would pretend not to be present, not in the flesh. This state of absence, of existing apart from the body, had been true of the Commander too, I know now” (Atwood 169). Given the bizarre context of these activities, a religiously-sanctioned threesome with a middle-aged couple, spiritual amputation is necessary.

## Floral Imagery

In *We*, nature is antithetical to the city and kept beyond the Green Wall. OneState is therefore supposed to be free of flowers. Somehow, though, pollen seems to blow into the city. From the beginning, D-503 associates this pollen with the irrational, or at the very least sees it as something that distracts him from his mathematical view of reality:

It's spring. From beyond the Green Wall, from the wild plains out of sight in the distance, the wind is carrying the honeyed yellow pollen of some flower. This sweet pollen dries the lips—you keep running your tongue over them—and every woman you meet (and every man too, of course) must have these sweet lips. This somewhat interferes with logical thought. (Zamyatin 5)

Pollen, a fertilizing agent, puts D-503 in touch with his natural instincts. This is in keeping with D's preoccupation with lips. Yellow is a symbolic colour in this novel, but its significance is ambiguous: "Yellow is, paradoxically, both the color of sunlight and life and also the color of death and decay" (Collins 58). Yellow pollen, then, is associated with spring and renewal of life, and yet it calls attention to the mortal and the finite. Carl F. Proffer points out that "The pollen is a symbol of freedom and natural vitality; and it is associated with the colour yellow, as well as with women (subdued rationality here) and with the absence of rational thinking" (100). The wind has the same effect as the pollen: "The forward window was raised, the wind dried your lips so that you kept running your tongue over them, which made you constantly think about lips" (Zamyatin 26). It seems then that nature is associated with the kind of impulsive or instinctual physicality that the Green Wall and pink ticket system are meant to shut out.

Another by-product of the natural world enters the city during autumn. It is more difficult to identify the "threads [that] are unusually numerous if you go near the Green Wall" (Zamyatin 163), but they clearly come from the natural world and they are as

distracting and disconcerting as the pollen: “There are thin, mysterious, almost invisible threads in the air. Every fall they blow in here from over there, beyond the Wall. They float slowly. Suddenly you feel you’ve got something strange, that you can’t see, on your face, and you try to brush it off, but no, you can’t, there’s no way to get rid of it” (Zamyatin 163). These threads are mentioned again a few pages later: “the invisible threads float slowly past, settle on your face, and you can’t brush them off, there’s no way to get rid of them” (Zamyatin 166). Again, anything that blows in from the other side of the wall, that is not clear or functional, or that hints of imperfection is associated with the irrational that blows in from nowhere and interferes with D-503’s comforting notion of collectivism.

The pollen is later associated with I-330 and the effect that she has on D-503: “I’m alone. All that’s left of her is a slight hint of something that reminds me of the sweet, dry, yellow pollen of certain flowers on the other side of the Wall” (Zamyatin 129). Of course, that first reference to spring is closely followed by our first meeting of I-330 and of O-90. Where O-90 is concerned, D-503 associates spring with her feminine nature in rather misogynist terms: “There. How’s that for you? Spring. She’s right away on spring. Women. I didn’t say a word” (Zamyatin 6). It is significant that O-90, who wants an exclusive relationship with D-503 and a baby of her own, notices spring and pollen, these things which D-503 finds annoying and distracting. O-90 even makes the romantic gesture of bringing D-503 a bouquet of flowers: “And I was just going to bring you this bunch of lily-of-the-valley from the Botanical Museum” (Zamyatin 37). D-503, partly under the stress of his recent encounter with I-330 at the Ancient House and his more-recent dream which that visit inspired, launches into an annoyed tirade that

is in part his justification for wanting to go to the spies:

“Why ‘And I’? Where do you get that ‘And’? Just like a woman!” I grabbed her flowers (angrily, I admit it). “Okay. Take your lily-of-the-valley, okay? Have a smell. Nice, right? Now please try to follow just this little bit of logic, all right? Lily-of-the-valley smells nice . . . agreed. But you cannot say about smell—I’m talking about the concept *smell*—that it is good or bad, right? That you cannot, repeat NOT, do, right? There’s the smell of lily-of-the-valley, and then there’s the nasty smell of henbane: They’re both of them smells. There were spies in the ancient state, and we have spies. That’s right, spies; the word doesn’t scare me. But what is clear is this. Their spies were henbane, ours are lily-of-the-valley. That’s what I said: lily-of-the-valley!” (Zamyatin 37)

This bizarre and seemingly irrelevant outburst convinces both of them that D-503 ought to visit the Medical Bureau. D-503 has this type of reaction several times when he finds himself plagued by the irrational thoughts that surface as he becomes more aware of his subconscious mind. Flowers, then, and their by-products, represent forces that will be neither contained nor shut out. D-503 often associates unclear thoughts and unclear logic with the natural world: “I looked for it but I found no way out of this wild logical thicket. This was a tangle every bit as unknown and terrifying as that behind the Green Wall” (Zamyatin 98).

O-90 finds a way to give D-503 a hint by leaving a lily stem in his bed, and he clearly finds the flower unpleasant (Zamyatin 38). D-503 makes another association between the Guardians and flowers: “And the ‘Thorns,’ that classical image. The Guardians are the thorns on the rosebush, protecting the gentle State Flower against all rude contact” (Zamyatin 67). This time, however, the flower is OneState.

Flowers turn up in other strange places in OneState, such as state executions. There is a lingering ancient hue to this ceremony, as has been discussed briefly in Chapter Two. Flowers are usually a sign of fertility or a reference to genitalia. Even though the state intends for this society to be genderless, women and flowers play a

seemingly incongruous role: “Up above, lined up in front of Him, were ten female Numbers with flushed faces, their lips partly open with excitement, their bouquets of flowers blowing in the wind. According to the old custom, the ten women decorated with flowers the Benefactor’s yuny, which was still damp from the spray” (Zamyatin 48). The sexual connotations are clear here: the women seem to be in an aroused state, particularly regarding their lips which, as I have discussed, are often linked with vaginas in D-503’s narrative. Symbolically, the Benefactor is the most potent male in OneState. He has after all just unleashed a most powerful weapon: his execution machine. Apparently with this gesture, the female Numbers are giving their sexuality to the Benefactor, which is an apt gesture considering that the state controls sexuality. There are other references that link flowers and the justice system, such as “the terrible, blood-red beauty of the “Flowers of Judicial Verdicts” (Zamyatin 67).

Flowers, and nature in general, are associated with the irrational, the unordered, and by extension with the subconscious element that would interfere with the rational. The locus of this kind of irrationality in *We* is the green thicket outside the Green Wall. Close to this other world, as well as a portal to it, is the Ancient House: “Soon you could see in the distance the cloudy green spots—over there, beyond the Wall. Then your heart jumps into your throat, nothing you can do about it, and you sink down, down, down, like a steep fall downhill, and you’re at the Ancient House” ( Zamyatin 26). Visits to the Ancient house typically involve descents, which represent the archetypical descent into the subconscious. I-330 leads D-503 to that unknown outer world through a subterranean passage that leads from the Ancient House outside the Green Wall. The natural world that he finds outside this wall represents an awakening to the unknown:

And the trees were like candles sticking right up to the sky, or like spiders squatting on the ground with crooked legs, or like silent green fountains. . . . And all this was crawling about on all fours, shifting and buzzing, and out from under my feet some kind of shaggy tangle of something came slipping, and I . . . I was riveted to the spot, I couldn't move . . . because I wasn't standing on a surface, you see, not a surface, but something disgustingly soft, yielding, alive, green, springy. (Zamyatin 148-149)

It would be an understatement to say that the protagonist finds this disordered and irrational world unsettling, just as he is unsettled by the contradictory and irrational thoughts that have been awakened in him. Of course, this is a temporary visit; the hijacking of the Integral is meant to effect a permanent escape to this unknown world: "And tonight . . . where'll we be tonight, you and I? On the grass, maybe, on dry leaves" (Zamyatin 193).

D-503 later explicitly associates the blooming of flowers with the awakening of his new consciousness:

They say there are flowers that bloom only once every hundred years. Why shouldn't there be some that bloom only once every thousand, every ten thousand years? Maybe we just haven't heard about them up to now because this very day *is* that once in a thousand years.

So here I am, drunk with joy, going down the stairs to the duty desk, and before my very eyes, quickly, silently, thousand-year buds are popping open all around me, everywhere, and armchairs are blossoming, and shoes, golden badges, lightbulbs, someone's dark long-lashed eyes, the faceted columns of the banisters, a handkerchief lost on the stairs, the table of the one on duty, and above the table the gentle cheeks of U, brown with spots. It's all unusual, new, tender, pink, moist. (Zamyatin 125)

This passage focuses on the awakening of the previously unknown, but in this instance D-503 is not afraid or unsettled, but intoxicated with this new perspective of the world. This confidence in his newfound vision is not consistent, however. Closely following this, he says, "I'm not sensible, I'm sick, I have a soul, I'm a microbe. But isn't blooming a sickness? Doesn't it hurt when the bud bursts open?" (Zamyatin 126).

Cooke comments on the apparent absence of flowers in *We*. Speaking of dystopian societies, he says,

The object, after all, is to convince the reader that she or he does not want to live there. It rarely is difficult. Although we are a species possessed of extraordinary behavioral flexibility, we are able to live virtually everywhere only because we are also able to continually recreate the environment that evolution shaped us for. As one example, we carry nature into our domiciles, often in the form of flowers. Even artificial flowers, painted *nature mortes*, and flowered wallpaper will sometimes suffice. Flowers of any kind are alien in the Single State. (Cooke 20)

The same is true of *Brave New World*, where children are conditioned to abhor flowers. Although flowers are intended to be absent from OneState, we find that they do find their way in. Pollen blows into the city, the Benefactor's Yunny is decorated with flowers in an ancient rite, and there is a Botanical Museum which is probably similar in function to the Ancient House. Cooke is referring to the fact that as a general rule, people do not tend gardens and keep flowers in vases, nor is there any wallpaper. However, flowers of this kind are not at all absent from Atwood's dystopia; in fact, they abound, even in the form of flowered wallpaper: "The bathroom is beside the bedroom. It's papered in small blue flowers, forget-me-nots, with curtains to match" (Atwood 72). In fact, the homebound wives make their gardens a principal occupation. This is another subtle subversion of dystopian motifs on Atwood's part. In many ways this society looks normal. In many ways it looks like a place where we would want to live. There are well-manicured gardens and lawns. However, we still recognize Gilead as a world in which we don't want to live.

What roles do flowers play in *The Handmaid's Tale*? The architects of Gilead have instituted many changes from the previous society, but flowers are not outlawed, as Offred explains: "On the wall above the chair, a picture, framed but with no glass: a print

of flowers, blue irises, watercolour. Flowers are still allowed” (Atwood 17). We must remember that this is Offred’s recreation, and we do not know to what extent she invents or exaggerates the presence of flowers in Gilead: “I’ve tried to put some good things in as well. Flowers, for instance, because where would we be without them?” (Atwood 279). In any case, flowers are an important part of the symbolism of this narrative in which the lives of all citizens are so preoccupied with fertility.

Gardens in Gilead are well-ordered and weeded, just like society: “I go out by the back door, into the garden, which is large and tidy: a lawn in the middle, a willow, weeping catkins; around the edges, the flower borders, in which the daffodils are now fading and the tulips are opening their cups, spilling out colour. The tulips are red, a darker crimson towards the stem, as if they had been cut and are beginning to heal there” (Atwood 22). Red tulips are repeatedly mentioned; their chalice-like shape and colour make them potent images of fertility and genitalia: “The tulips along the border are redder than ever, opening, no longer winecups but chalices; thrusting themselves up, to what end? They are, after all, empty. When they are old they turn themselves inside out, then explode slowly, the petals thrown out like shards” (Atwood 55). Offred associates tulips with the empty wombs that echo in the consciousness of Gilead, and also with the role of the Handmaids. She does, after all, call Handmaids “ambulatory chalices” (Atwood 146) and refers to the Handmaid’s explicitly as flowers: “such is the soil in which we grow” (Atwood 178). She also refers explicitly to her encounters with the Commander as an “act of copulation, fertilization perhaps, which should have been no more to me than a bee is to a flower” (Atwood 170).

There is violent imagery or wound imagery usually surrounding tulips as in the



two examples just cited and in one of Offred's imagined versions of Luke's outcome: "there's a scar, no, a wound, it isn't yet healed, the colour of tulips, near the stem end, down the left side of his face where the flesh split recently" (Atwood 114-115). Similarly, images of fertility are often mixed up with images of death. Offred tries to distinguish between the red tulips and the red blood-smiles of the bodies hanging on the wall:

I look at the one red smile. The red of the smile is the same as the red of the tulips in Serena Joy's garden, towards the base of the flowers where they are beginning to heal. The red is the same but there is no connection. The tulips are not tulips of blood, the red smiles are not flowers, neither thing makes a comment on the other. The tulip is not a reason for disbelief in the hanged man, or vice versa. Each thing is valid and really there. It is through a field of such valid objects that I must pick my way, every day and in every way. I put a lot of effort into making such distinctions. I need to make them. I need to be very clear, in my own mind. (Atwood 43)

For D-503, flowers were something alien to his consciousness that represent that which is unknown and beneath the surface, thus, flowers are associated with his increasing awareness of his subconscious and irrationality. For Offred, however, flowers are nothing foreign; she is consciously aware of flowers and focuses on them as a means of resisting the fracturing of her psyche as she lives in an extremely stressful situation that would make her question reality.

If red tulips are associated with Handmaids and also with violence, then the Wives, who are in control of the gardens, also attempt to control the Handmaids. There is a scene in which Offred comes upon Serena Joy as she amputates the tulips' seed pods:

Spring has now been undergone. The tulips have had their moment and are done, shedding their petals one by one, like teeth. One day I came upon Serena Joy [. . .] . She was snipping off the seed pods with a pair of shears. I watched her sideways as I went past, with my basket of oranges and lamb chops. 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 swelling genitalia of the flowers? The fruiting body. To cut off the seed pods is supposed to make the bulb store energy. (Atwood 160-161)

This violent rending reminds us of the psychological violence that the Handmaids undergo in this society by being forced to serve merely as wombs. Serena's garden is a symbol of Gilead, and she tends it just as the elite tend the state. This image also contains within it the violent frustration and hatred that Wives feel towards the Handmaids. Pregnant women, the "fruiting bod[ies]" of Gilead, are aptly associated with fruit, the result of fertilized flowers: "The pregnant woman's belly is like a huge fruit" (Atwood 37).

Tulips are not the only flowers in Gilead. Like D-503 who is aware of spring and autumn because of pollen or strands that float in on the breeze, Offred is aware of the seasons through their connection with flowers: "Then we had the irises, rising beautiful and cool on their tall stalks, like blown glass, like pastel water momentarily frozen in a splash, light blue, light mauve, and the darker ones, velvet and purple, black cat's-ears in the sun, indigo shadow, and the bleeding hearts, so female in shape it was a surprise they'd not long since been rooted out" (Atwood 161). The association of flowers and genitalia is explicit here. Offred monitors the cycles of different flowers, their blossoming and fading away, which mimics her own fertility cycle: "Today there are different flowers, drier, more defined, the flowers of high summer: daisies, black-eyed Susans, starting us on the long downward slope to fall. I see them in the gardens, as I walk with Ofglen, to and fro" (Atwood 282).

Of course, the garden is Serena Joy's domain, and as such it takes on another dimension. Besides being a symbol for the state, it is also like a surrogate for the family that she does not have: "Many of the Wives have such gardens, it's something for them to

order and maintain and care for” (Atwood 22). The gardens are manifestations of the Wives’ social positions, and they represent what has been taken away from Offred as a Handmaid: “I once had a garden. I can remember the smell of the turned earth, the plump shapes of bulbs held in the hands, fullness, the dry rustle of seeds through the fingers” (Atwood 22). As proprietor of her garden Serena Joy has an agency, however limited, which Offred no longer has.

Serena’s control over her garden cannot be maintained indefinitely. At night, when its perfumes reach Offred through her open window, it has an unintended power: “Nothing moves in the searchlight moonlight. The scent from the garden rises like heat from a body, there must be night-blooming flowers, it’s so strong. I can almost see it, red radiation, wavering upwards like the shimmer above highway tarmac at noon” (Atwood 201). This, of course, suggests that the elite cannot indefinitely maintain its control of the state. Following this Nick appears at her window in conventional literary form: “I have no rose to toss, he has no lute. But it’s the same kind of hunger” (Atwood 201). For Offred then, at certain times, the garden becomes a locus of play, uncontrolled fertility and dissidence:

There is something subversive about this garden of Serena’s, a sense of buried things bursting upwards, wordlessly, into the light, as if to point, to say: Whatever is silenced will clamour to be heard, though silently. A Tennyson garden, heavy with scent, languid; the return of the word *swoon*. Light pours down upon it from the sun, true, but also heat rises, from the flowers themselves, you can feel it: like holding your hand an inch above an arm, a shoulder. It breathes, in the warmth, breathing itself in. To walk through it in these days, of peonies, of pinks and carnations, makes my head swim. (Atwood 161)

Whether the garden is a symbol for the state or a surrogate family under the Wives’ control, there is something beyond controlling in this image. No matter how well Serena tends her garden, the flowers emanate their own heat, have their own existence and

mandate that are beyond her ministrations. This passage suggests the possibility of the underground Mayday movement, Offred's fertility which may not be controllable, and subconscious elements in general. Flowers here perhaps come closest to what they mean for D-503. For him, flowers were associated with the Mephi and represented the disturbing awakening of his unknown consciousness and subconscious; for Offred in this instance flowers are an affirmation of the underground, both social and psychological, that she longs to believe in.

Serena's garden is capable of inspiring for Offred a subversive ecstasy that is filled with the clichés of romance:

The willow is in full plumage and is no help, with its insinuating whispers. *Rendezvous*, it says, *terraces*; the sibilants run up my spine, a shiver as if in fever. The summer dress rustles against the flesh of my thighs, the grass grows underfoot, at the edges of my eyes there are movements, in the branches; feathers, flittings, grace notes, tree into bird, metamorphosis run wild. Goddesses are possible now and the air suffuses with desire. Even the bricks of the house are softening, becoming tactile; if I leaned against them they'd be warm and yielding. (Atwood 161-162)

An underground mythology still exists in Gilead. It therefore becomes a site of play and possibility. Atwood is clearly making a tongue-in-cheek reference to the typical dystopian escape, however temporary, into nature, and this is the same escape that I-330 strives for and that O-90 eventually achieves.

Serena's well-ordered garden, then, is also sensuous and fertile. However, inside the house, Serena's other domain, the floral imagery is stale and dry: "There's a dried flower arrangement on either end of the mantelpiece, and a vase of real daffodils on the polished marquetry end table beside the sofa" (Atwood 90). The fireplace in Serena's parlour is never lit; this room is a far cry from the fiery and erotic apartment in the Ancient House. Even these fresh flowers, when brought into the house, die prematurely:

“The daffodils will soon be thrown out, they’re beginning to smell. Along with Serena’s stale fumes, the stench of her knitting” (Atwood 109). This staleness, then, is associated with Serena herself, who is infertile. In this house flower imagery takes on unconventional forms: “The stains on the mattress. Like dried flower petals. Not recent. Old love; there’s no other kind of love in this room now” (Atwood 61). The link between flowers and sex is clear here, but this is again an image of staleness and sterility.

Serena Joy tries to appropriate the power of flowers, fertility and youth by surrounding herself with flowers and their scent:

The room smells of lemon oil, heavy cloth, fading daffodils, the leftover smells of cooking that have made their way from the kitchen or the dining room, and of Serena Joy’s perfume: Lily of the Valley. [. . .] It’s the scent of prepubescent girls, of the gifts young children used to give their mothers, for Mother’s day; the smell of white cotton socks and white cotton petticoats, of dusting powder, of the innocence of female flesh not yet given over to hairiness and blood. (Atwood 90)

It is noteworthy that Serena’s scent is the same one that D-503 associates with government agents. Serena is clearly trying to recapture her youth and avoid the reality of her lack of fertility: “She’s in one of her best dresses, sky-blue with embroidery in white along the edges of the veil: flowers and fretwork. Even at her age she still feels the urge to wreath herself in flowers. No use for you, I think at her, my face unmoving, you can’t use them any more, you’re withered. They’re the genital organs of plants. I read that somewhere, once” (Atwood 91). Serena has arrayed herself thusly for the ceremony, significantly.

Floral imagery also applies to children in Gilead. At the birth of Janine’s baby, Offred comments: “The Commander’s Wife looks down at the baby as if it’s a bouquet of flowers: something she’s won, a tribute” (Atwood 136). Offred sometimes associates wildflowers with children, which are largely absent from Gilead:

Not a dandelion in sight here, the lawns are picked clean. I long for one, just one, rubbishy and insolently random and hard to get rid of and perennially yellow as the sun. Cheerful and plebeian, shining for all alike. Rings, we would make from them, and crowns and necklaces, stains from the bitter milk on our fingers. Or I'd hold one under her chin: *do you like butter?* Smelling them, she'd get pollen on her nose. (Or was that buttercups?) Or gone to seed: I can see her, running across the lawn, that lawn there just in front of me, at two, three years old, waving one like a sparkler, a small want of white fire, the air filling with tiny parachutes. *Blow, and you tell the time.* All that time, blowing away in the summer breeze. It was daisies for love though, and we did that too. (Atwood 224)

This reference to the absence of wildflowers reminds her of her absent daughter. This imagery is not consistent, however. Offred sees a dandelion on the lawn at the Salvaging that is in no way connected with children, except that she links the colour of the flower with the yellow yolk of an egg (Atwood 286).

### The Eye

Both novels contain imagery of the eye as an implement of penetration, and therefore as a phallus, and also as an orifice through which one can be penetrated. The dual function of the eye has been expounded upon by Ray Parrot: "From a strictly physiological point of view the eyes are perhaps the human being's most expressive receivers and senders of direct sense impressions" (107). He goes on to note that in *We*, "eyes [. . .] are metaphorical 'corridors' to the inner Self, or Selves; 'corridors' which serve to reveal, guard, or conceal the inner Self as occasion warrants and which, when closed, provide the Self with a means of escape from the rational strictures and encroachments of the Only State" (107). So then, when one penetrates through the eyes it is the true inner self that is being apprehended. At the Ancient House, D-503 penetrates I-330: "There were only the dear, sharp, clenched teeth, there were the golden eyes opened wide on me, and through them I slowly penetrated inside, deeper and deeper" (Zamyatin 73). He also incorporates

her into himself with his own eyes: “I bent over I-330 and, for the last time, took her in with my eyes” (Zamyatin 73). During another visit to the Ancient House, he penetrates her eyes-as-vagina: “Her eyes opened to me—wide open—I entered” (Zamyatin 95). This only happens, however, when I-330 allows him to see into her. Unlike the lip-vaginas, which D-503 seems able to peruse at his will, I-330 can “lower the blinds” of her eyelids and prevent penetration.

He is easily able to penetrate O-90 in such a way since her openness is a given: “Her round blue eyes open wide to me, those windows into the core of her being, and through them I enter in, nothing in my way, since there is nothing there—nothing, that is, strange or useless” (Zamyatin 36-37). O-90 is, however, able to lower her lids as well. Clearly D-503 is penetrating these eyes with his own eyes, his own gaze as phallus. D-503 makes it clear that he considers his eyes to be a useful implement: “Get the paper quick, maybe it’s there. . . . I read the paper with my eyes (that’s no mistake: My eyes are like a pen now, or a calculator, something you hold in your hand, something you feel is not you—a tool)” (Zamyatin 187). In other instances, I-330 is the penetrator: “Then very, very slowly I-330, thrusting her sharp sweet needle deeper and deeper into my heart, pressed against me with her shoulder, her arm, her whole body, and we went, she and I, she and I, two as one” (Zamyatin 96).

If in *We* the eye is sometimes a phallus, then in *The Handmaid’s Tale* the penis is robbed of its phallic power and depicted as a blind eye. It follows from my discussion on amputation that Offred reverses her reduction to womb and reduces the Commander to his primary function in the relationship in an ironic and tongue-in-cheek empathetic moment:

To have them putting him on, trying him on, trying him out, while he himself puts them on, like a sock over a foot, onto the stub of himself, his extra, sensitive thumb, his tentacle, *his delicate stalked slug's eye*, which extrudes, expands, winces, and shrivels back into himself when touched wrongly, grows big again, bulging a little at the tip, travelling forward as if along a leaf, into them, avid for vision. To achieve vision in this way, this journey into a darkness that is composed of women, a woman, who can see in darkness while he himself strains blindly forward. (Atwood 98, emphasis mine)

By reducing the Commander to a penis she diminishes his power. This pathetic description of a blind groping digit undercuts conventional ideas of penetration as a demonstration of power. Atwood is suggesting that even this symbol of male power, when we get right down to it, enters an engulfing unknown. This tired old man is a far cry from the all-powerful Benefactor. One of the key differences between the Handmaid's tale and other dystopias, in fact, is in the reduced power and ambiguous status of the Commander. This interior monologue occurs while the Commander is reading from the Bible before the Ceremony. Offred makes it clear that at this point, he is in their gaze: "But watch out, Commander, I tell him in my head. I've got my eye on you" (Atwood 99).

Offred does, however, find herself in the Commander's gaze while she is visiting him in his study:

While I read, the Commander sits and watches me doing it, without speaking but also without taking his eyes off me. This watching is a curiously sexual act, and I feel undressed while he does it. I wish he would turn his back, stroll around the room, read something himself. Then perhaps I could relax more, take my time. As it is, this illicit reading of mine seems a kind of performance. (Atwood 194)

To be within the gaze in Gilead is to be penetrated, and Aunt Lydia makes this explicit: "I also know better than to say Yes. Modesty is invisibility, said Aunt Lydia. Never forget it. To be seen—to be *seen*—is to be—her voice trembled—penetrated. What you must be, girls, is impenetrable. She called us girls [sic]" (Atwood 39). Her advice is true in a



state where there is constant surveillance; to be in the gaze is especially dangerous. It is necessary to protect oneself from this kind of penetration, so Offred protects her eyes. “I look down at the sidewalk, shake my head for *No*. What they must see is the white wings only, a scrap of face, my chin and part of my mouth. Not the eyes. I know better than to look the interpreter in the face. Most of the interpreters are Eyes, or so it’s said” (Atwood 38). Similarly, the lens is also a penetrating gaze from which the women of Gilead must be protected: “The interpreter turns back to the group, chatters at them in staccato. I know what he’ll be saying, I know the line. He’ll be telling them that the women here have different customs, that to stare at them through the lens of a camera is, for them, an experience of violation” (Atwood 39). In two dystopian novels where surveillance is such a prominent theme it is not surprising that the eye is such a potent image. Similarly, the eye is used as a penetrating device and as a site of penetration in societies where the state attempts to eradicate communication and bonds between individuals.

### Mirrors

Mirrors are also recurring images in the novels here in question. In *We*, mirrors offer a reflection, if you will, of D-503’s growing autonomy as he begins to recognize himself as an individual. Early in the novel, he sees his reflection in I-330’s eyes: “What I saw there was my own reflection. But it was not natural and it did not look like me (apparently the surroundings were having a depressing effect). I felt absolutely afraid, I felt trapped, shut into that wild cage, I felt myself swept into the wild whirlwind of ancient life” (Zamyatin 29). D-503’s frightening sense of individualism and growing sense of isolation from his

society is sparked by his first encounter with I-330, so it is not surprising that when he sees himself in her eyes it is a new unknown self. He is beginning to see himself in more than two dimensions.

Later, D-503 regards himself in the mirror, and in a real sense begins to appreciate his own subjectivity:

I'm in front of a mirror. And for the first time in my life, I swear it, for the very first time in my life, I get a clear, distinct, conscious look at myself; I see myself and I'm astonished, like I'm looking at some 'him.' There I am—or rather, there he is: He's got straight black eyebrows, drawn with a ruler, and between them, like a scar, is a vertical crease (I don't know if it was there before). Gray, steel eyes, with the circle of a sleepless night around them; and behind that steel—it turns out I never knew what was there. And from that 'there' (a 'there' that is here and at the same time infinitely far away)—I am looking at myself, at him, and I am absolutely certain that he, with his ruler-straight eyebrows, is a stranger, somebody else, I just met him for the first time in my life. And I'm the real one. I AM NOT HIM. (Zamyatin 59)

This is a potential Lacanian mirror stage moment, when “the child, at an age when he is for a time, however short, outdone by the chimpanzee in instrumental intelligence, can nevertheless already recognize as such his own image in a mirror” (Lacan 1). D-503 is individuating from the mother, in this case the state which has kept him in a dependent and infantilized state, and for the first time he is seeing himself as an other: “D-503 eventually struggles to break out of the womb, the security of the mother, and to be born as an independent individual” (Collins 62). Lacan gives a name to this other D-503 which he discerns: “We have only to understand the mirror stage *as an identification* [. . .] namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image—whose predestination to this phase-effect is sufficiently indicated by the use, in analytic theory of the term *imago*” (Lacan 2). D-503 describes the physical qualities of his reflection but then he moves beyond the surface and looks into his own eyes, penetrating

himself, into what he previously did not know was there. What he sees beyond the “steel eyes” is multidimensional. At this stage he recognizes this other, however, as an alien element and tries to deny it. He rejects the *imago* in the mirror; he resists individuation at this point because he fears the new dimensions of himself of which he is becoming aware.

I have already discussed the use of synecdoche in D-503’s narrative. D-503 focuses on certain features when he looks into his mirror. “The way my mirror was hung, I could see myself in it only across the table. From where I was sitting in the armchair, all I saw was my forehead and eyebrows” (Zamyatin 63) and later: “A second’s glance in the mirror. I see my broken, distorted eyebrows” (Zamyatin 106). D-503 focuses on different features for different characters. The fact that he sees his forehead and eyebrows suggests an alarming intensity and single-mindedness in his aspect.

D-503 vacillates between rejecting and accepting his new individual self and the new world that has been opened up to him throughout the novel. We have just seen him reject the new D-503 in the mirror, but in other instances he seems to accept it. D-503 uses the mirror as a metaphor for the depth that has gone unnoticed. The mirror is a two-dimensional surface that reflects a scene that is three-dimensional. The scissor-lipped doctor, in explaining to D-503 the effects of having a soul, takes this a step further, however, supposing that the surface of the mirror can be penetrated:

take a flat plane, a surface, take this mirror for instance. And the two of us are on this surface, see, and we squint our eyes against the sun, and there’s a blue electric spark in the tubing, and—there—the shadow of an aero just flashed by. But only on the surface, only for a second. But just imagine now that some fire has softened this impenetrable surface and nothing skims along the top of it any longer—everything penetrates into it, inside, into that mirror world that we peer into with such curiosity, like children—and I assure you, children aren’t so dumb. The plane has taken on mass, body, the world, and it’s all inside the mirror, inside

you: the sun, the wash from the aero's propeller, and your trembling lips, and somebody else's too. And, you understand, the cold mirror reflects, throws back, while this absorbs, and the trace left by everything lasts forever. (Zamyatin 87)

In actual fact, mirrors are flat and they reflect a reality that has depth. In the doctor's analogy there is an ironic reversal: the world in which D-503 lives is flat but the mirror image could afford some kind of depth. Furthermore, the penetrated mirror world would add depth to the real world as it reflects. Looking at himself as an individual, looking beneath the surface, will add depth and dimension to D-503's reality.

Mirrors are an important part of the imagery as well in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Handmaids are discouraged from looking into mirrors and they are largely unavailable, but a few round distorting mirrors have survived in the Commander's house, one on the landing of the stairs and one above the mantel in the parlour. What Offred sees in the mirror is something other than what she believes to be her true self as well. The image is distorted, because what she sees in the mirror is the Handmaid's garb in which she barely recognizes herself:

There remains a mirror, on the hall wall. If I turn my head so that the white wings framing my face direct my vision towards it, I can see it as I go down the stairs, round, convex, a pier-glass, like the eye of a fish, and myself in it like a distorted shadow, a parody of something, some fairytale figure in a red cloak, descending towards a moment of carelessness that is the same as danger. A Sister, dipped in blood. (Atwood 19)

What D-503 sees in the mirror is his unknown, conscious self. However, what Offred sees is a spectre of what she is now supposed to be, not her former conscious self. She sees "a distorted shadow, a parody of something." Gilead has distorted Offred's image of herself and this is reflected in the distorting mirror.

Offred never gets a good look at herself in the Commander's house. She sees her face as "distant and white and distorted" (Atwood 58), herself as "a brief waif in the eye

of glass” (Atwood 89) and “a wraith of red smoke” (Atwood 219). However, when she descends covertly in the night to steal something, the wings and red habit removed, she says, “I can see my white shape, of tented body, hair down my back like a mane, my eyes gleaming. I like this. I am doing something, on my own. The active tense. Tensed” (Atwood 108). So, when she is committing a subversive act, she sees something more familiar to her sense of self; she has agency.

Offred sees herself reflected in other characters, like Nick and Ofglen, in subversive situations.<sup>9</sup> When she meets Nick at night in Serena’s parlour, she says “He too is illegal, here, with me, he can’t give me away. Nor I him; for the moment we’re mirrors” (Atwood 109). When Serena Joy surreptitiously leads Offred to Nick’s flat for their illegal encounter, she says, “I see the two of us, a blue shape, a red shape, in the brief glass eye of the mirror as we descend. My-self, by obverse” (Atwood 271). After leaving Ofglen, Offred says, “She’s like my own reflection, in a mirror from which I am moving away” (Atwood 54). Offred describes the moment of revelation between herself and Ofglen, when they reveal to each other their unorthodoxy, thus:

She holds my stare in the glass, level, unwavering. Now it’s hard to look away. There’s a shock in this seeing; it’s like seeing somebody naked, for the first time. There is risk, suddenly, in the air between us, where there was none before. Even this meeting of eyes holds danger. Though there’s nobody near. (Atwood 176)

Ironically, it is in reflection, an indirect kind of vision, that these two Handmaids are able to get their first direct look at each other and see beyond the uniforms. To look directly into someone’s eyes and hold a gaze in this society is a subversive act. This reflection in glass allows Offred and Ofglen to know something of the other in this complicit gaze.

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<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of how marginal characters and mirrors play into Offred’s progressive narcissism in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, see Chapter Four in *Margaret Atwood’s Power: Mirrors, Reflections and Images in Select Fiction and Poetry* by Shannon Hengen.

Unlike in the rest of Gilead, mirrors are not absent from Jezebel's. Hengen comments that in Gilead "Male reaction to women who had exacerbated their pathology by refusing to value male potency, especially highly trained and independent professional women and lesbians, are imprisoned in a Gilead whorehouse where mirrors abound" (Hengen 100). Offred gets an honest, lingering look at herself when she is put in such a position:

Now, in this ample mirror under the white light, I take a look at myself.

It's a good look, slow and level. I'm a wreck. The mascara has smudged again, despite Moira's repairs, the purplish lipstick has bled, hair trails aimlessly. The moulting pink feathers are tawdry as carnival dolls and some of the starry sequins have come off. Probably they were off to begin with and I didn't notice. I am a travesty, in bad makeup and someone else's clothes, used glitz. (Atwood 265-266)

Offred is, again, looking into this mirror under subversive circumstances. Even though it is the closest thing she has had to a protracted examination of herself in Gilead, she is still looking at her self in a guise that has been imposed upon her by a powerful man for his own pleasure.

### Conclusion

The specific use of imagery, then, is paramount and comparable in *We* and *The Handmaid's Tale*. Zamyatin and Atwood employ synecdoche: the first as a means for D-503 to name and differentiate character and to acknowledge individualism, and the latter to demonstrate the skewed perspective through which Offred is forced to view a new and terrifying world. This tendency towards synecdoche often leads to images of dismemberment, mutilation, and fragmentation which evidence the fears of the protagonists and also serve to demonstrate the functional dismemberment and mutilation

of society. The synecdoche and mutilation imagery carry through into the floral imagery of both novels. Flowers stand for the natural world that won't be kept out of the city, for the subterranean life force that must break through the surface, and for the subconscious desires that won't be entirely inhibited. A particularly relevant image is that of the eye, which can stand both for phallus or orifice, and which demonstrates the power of the gaze both to discover inner-truth and to control/exert power. Finally, the mirror image, an extension of the theme of gaze and penetration, is used throughout the novels as the protagonists attempt to recognize the strange within the familiar in themselves.

The similarity in the imagery employed in these novels makes the strongest case for the comparability of these particular dystopian novelists. They share in common a concern for the individual in a collectivist society that affords him or her no rights or agency. They also share a poetic sensibility and a tendency to use fractured imagery. They both show innovative and creative uses of traditional figurative language in order to portray the psychological stress under which their protagonists live. Zamyatin's and Atwood's use of synecdoche and floral imagery, in particular, reveals their central concern with gender in the dystopian world. Zamyatin uses imagery to suggest that gender cannot be stamped out by state-enforced uniformity and androgyny, and Atwood uses imagery to underline the psychological violence and damage that accompanies the strict imposition of gender roles. Ultimately, both novelists see the expression of gender as something that should be left open to the individual and not co-opted by the state.

## Chapter Six: Conclusion

Dystopian novels show that individualism can often be at odds with the state apparatus in a totalitarian system. Dystopias reveal the concerns of the society in which they were written; they comment on topical concerns by projecting a speculative future scenario that is intended to alarm the reader. I have examined the milieu in which each of the novels in question was written. Even though *We* and *The Handmaid's Tale* were written in two very different times and places, they have much in common, as dystopian novels tend to have certain universal themes. A central concern of the dystopian novelist is the balance between private agency and collective governance. The dystopian protagonist suffers the absence or loss of privacy within the collective, and he or she embarks on a journey of resistance and discovery of individuality.

We like to believe that some of the most private issues in society are the ways in which we express gender, engage in sexual relations, engender children, and organize families. These issues are, however, played out publicly; it would be erroneous to say that these matters are entirely private. Our choices in such matters are surely influenced and limited by social mores and the media. However, in a dystopian novel, these spheres are removed *completely* to the public domain. The expression of gender is controlled: in *We* the outward signs of gender are removed as the population is gender-neutralized, and in *The Handmaid's Tale* gender is expressed in strictly prescribed ways as people act out rigidly pre-determined gender roles. Sexual relations are controlled: in *We* all sexual contact is bureaucratized through the pink ticket system during prescribed personal hours, and in *The Handmaid's Tale* sexual contact is limited to those who are legally bound to procreate either in state-recognized marriages or in biblically-inspired threesomes. The



engendering of children in *We* is completely controlled by the state and limited eugenically to those who meet certain norms, and in *The Handmaid's Tale* the engendering of children is controlled by the state as fertile women are torn from their own families and compelled to act as surrogate mothers for other families. Finally, family organization in *We* is non-existent. Children are brought up and educated in state-run facilities. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, families are organized so that all children are delivered to those who have power and status.

Since sexuality is so closely controlled and in some cases repressed, resistance against the state will inevitably involve sexual rebellion. The protagonist in each dystopia engages in private activity as he or she becomes more aware of his or her individuality. It is therefore fitting that the reclamation of privacy would involve illegal sexual activity. In D-503's case, he has non-sanctioned relations with I-330 that involve contraband such as lingerie, alcohol, and cigarettes, and he illegally impregnates his old partner, O-90. Offred is lured into a non-ceremonial relationship with the Commander that also involves similar contraband. She also has an affair with Nick the chauffeur for the purpose of impregnation. D-503's affair with I-330 initiates him into a subversive society, and Offred's resistance is more passive; she navigates between these two affairs in a self-distracting survival strategy.

I have attempted to distinguish between terms like dystopia and anti-utopia that have not been used consistently by critics. Aldridge sees utopian satire and anti-utopia as earlier forms of the twentieth century dystopia. Walsh points out that the dystopian novels of the twentieth century make not mere political comments, but that they focus on humanity's perversity and dark vision. Morson acknowledges that canon formation is

arbitrary and based canon formation on the critic's purpose. This has been a useful starting point for explicating my purposes in this project: to explore the portrayal of gender and sexuality in two dystopian texts that have previously received little comparative scholarship. I have justified my decision to compare *We* and *The Handmaid's Tale* alone by reviewing the comparative scholarship that exists between these novels and others like *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Brave New World*, by reviewing the criticism of sex and gender in dystopia, and by summarizing the brief criticism that already exists between *We* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, showing that there is a need for detailed comparison of the use of gender and sexuality between the two novels.

Close comparison of the social organization of the novels in question reveals many obvious differences but also many similarities. In both societies, the claim is that sexuality is controlled in order to rule out competition and jealousy. Public surveillance is also a necessity in both dystopias: in *We* they live in glass houses, in *The Handmaid's Tale* they take their walks in pairs, and of course spy agencies are an obvious presence in both novels. The theme of freedom versus happiness is explored in both novels with passages that are quite similar. Both D-503 and Aunt Lydia link freedom with crime and distinguish between positive freedom and negative freedom or between freedom to and freedom from. Both authors make it clear, however, that this distinction with regard to freedom is a logical fallacy when it is obvious that the population is living under oppression and no one is free from the crimes of the state.

I have explored the ways in which so-called justice is used as an integral mechanism in the state control of the population in each novel. Vices are made taboo in order to create the illusion that the individual is being taken care of for the sake of the

greater good. This places individuals in a child-like position with respect to the state. Both OneState and Gilead stage large public executions that are meant to serve the purpose of state solidarity, communal complicity in the administration of justice, desensitization to horror and deterrence from further crime. D-503 gives his consent as he sits mildly by and describes the beauty of an execution as he is clearly aroused by the power of the Benefactor. However, Gilead's Salvagings show the perversity of which repressed people are capable when given an outlet; these women participate in large measure out of displaced rage and not merely out of coercion.

I have also discussed the milieu in which each novel was written. It seems that utopianism informs each novel. Zamyatin was reacting to the attempt to create a perfect society after the Russian Revolution and predicted many features of Stalinist Russia. Atwood's dystopia is set in the eastern United States whose Puritan beginnings were an attempt at utopia. She is also concerned, however, with religious conservatism in the 1980s that sought to create a so-called better society by repressing and questioning the rights of certain groups such as women and homosexuals. Atwood and Zamyatin, then, expose the coercive means that have and could be used to implement attempted utopia in the real world. I have also considered gender in terms of what is utopia and what is dystopia for men and women. While *We* is clearly a dystopia, perhaps O-90 was able to find utopia outside the Green Wall, which is ironic since the wall was meant to shut in a utopia. In Gilead, although Aunt Lydia and the Commander both claim to have created a women's utopia, it is obvious to the reader that this is not the case.

I have discussed the nature of sexual resistance and rebellion in both novels. In *We*, sexual rebellion is initiated by women for different reasons: for I-330 it is to further

the cause of her underground organization, and for O-90 it is to fulfill personal desires of motherhood. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, deviant sexuality is initiated by those in power: first by the Commander and then by Serena Joy. In both novels, one by-product of sexual rebellion is the conception of a child that would have had to have been surrendered to the state but that may have escaped that fate.

I have explored the theme of composition in both novels. D-503 and Offred are both diarists. What the texts they produce have in common is that in both cases the diary is the text: for D-503 it is an intended treatise on OneState that becomes an account of his subversive behaviour, and for Offred it is an oral recording of her experience in Gilead. In both societies, what is written and what is read is controlled by the state in an attempt to ensure stability and rule out rebellion. The dystopian state's hope is that those who cannot use language for their own purposes cannot express themselves. For D-503, his text accompanies his increasing subjectivity, for Offred storytelling is a survival strategy as she attempts to retain her fractured sense of individuality. In Gilead, it is women especially whose access to language is restricted. Offred engages in subversive activity by reading and writing, even holding a pen, and playing word games with the Commander. Both protagonists, as they compose their journals, also compose their "selves," which illustrates the connection between language and identity. As D-503 becomes increasingly disconnected from society, he identifies more and more with his text. Offred must compose herself in two senses, to control her reactions and appearance, and to quietly resist the state's attempt to rewrite her. The text is not only important, however, to the composition of self, but both protagonists attempt to create an audience in an attempt to bridge isolation.

Recognizing the power that writing has, Offred has “pen envy” even if she does not have penis envy as she holds a pen in the Commander’s office. According to Petrochenkov, D-503, as he begins to write, seems to have womb envy as he fantasizes about giving birth to his text. This underlines the connection between sex and language and between the protagonists’ sexual and literary/linguistic rebellion. Ultimately, though, D-503 sees his imagination as a phallus and he fears its castration. Offred refuses to allow language or text to be definitive: she provides multiple narratives, contradictions, and delights in multiple meanings as she celebrates the fluidity of language, resisting its connection to the phallus and male power. Offred eroticizes language both as she finds it in incidental forbidden forms and in her scrabble sessions with the Commander.

Along with the controlling of language in a dystopia goes the controlling of names. In *We*, names are replaced by numerical designations that are supposed to be meaningless. However, men’s numbers are prefixed with consonants and women’s with vowels. This practice reveals the admission of gender differences. However, as D-503 begins to discern individuality, he describes people by focussing on prominent features. In Atwood’s novel, Handmaids’ names are stripped away and they are temporarily named for the Commanders to whom they are attached. Power in Gilead belongs to those who can name: Wives, not Handmaids, name the children of Gilead’s triple trysts.

I have explored the similarities in Zamyatin’s and Atwood’s use of language, imagery, and symbolism. I have already alluded to D-503’s focus on features. He uses synecdoche, a part that stands for a whole, as a creative way to avoid the state’s imposition of uniformity and androgyny. This allows for a terse form of characterization that avoids lengthy description yet is effective. Offred’s use of synecdoche as she tells

her narrative results from a limitation of perspective. Denied a vision of the whole, she is forced to see things only in parts but to focus on those parts as she attempts to find familiarity in everyday objects within a strange and unfamiliar world.

*We* and *The Handmaid's Tale* also share images of dismemberment, mutilation, and fragmentation. D-503 uses dismembered body parts as metaphors for alienation, but he also reduces women to lips and vaginas. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, images of dismemberment mirror the fractured existences within the regime as well as the roles into which women have been divided.

Both *We* and *The Handmaid's Tale* share floral imagery as well. Where flowers are alien in OneState, they abound in Gilead. In *We*, flowers stand for the elements of nature and elements in the subconscious that will not be controlled and which will eventually blow in. Blooming is associated with the awakening of the individual. In Gilead, flowers mirror society's focus on reproduction and genitalia. Gardens can serve as metaphors for the state but also for the elemental forces of nature and the psyche that operate outside the state's control.

The eye is a prominent image in both novels as well. In *We*, the eye is both a phallus and a site of penetration, and in *The Handmaid's Tale* the penis is a blind eye when it is inside a woman. This undercuts the traditional association of phallus and power. The eye in Atwood's novel is also involved with the avoidance of being seen (penetrated) and the theme of surveillance in Gilead. Finally, I have explored the mirror imagery in both novels. All dystopias seem to have mirrors, as self-perception is so crucial to the protagonist. D-503, on his subversive journey, begins to see something in the mirror, and therefore in himself, that is alien to his former vision of himself. Offred,

on the other hand, sees in the mirror only a spectre of her former self as she attempts to hold on to her fracturing sense of individuality.

This study has given comprehensive consideration to two dystopian novels that have previously received little comparative criticism. I have shown, however, that a Russian male revolutionary writing in the 1920s and a Canadian feminist writing in the 1980s have many of the same concerns about gender and individualism in the face of totalitarian and conservative political forces. I have also pointed out some previously unrecognized similarities in style and imagery that, I think, make it certain that Zamyatin was as much an influence on Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* as any other twentieth century dystopian writer. Much previous scholarship has focused on the political aspects of dystopia and on genre classification. This study observes that for Zamyatin and Atwood, gender and genre are flexible, and that stylistic elements can be the focus in a genre that some would characterize as polemical, topical, and political. Dystopias are thought to be imbedded in a particular political milieu, but this study shows that there are certain qualities and themes that are common to the genre, no matter when or where the dystopia is written or set. One suggestion for future study would be to examine recent literature with utopian or dystopian elements that challenges gender and genre assumptions, like Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*. I have shown that it is not only possible but fruitful to compare, in terms of gender and genre assumptions, an earlier with what has become a later classic dystopian novel.

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