

version of it.” The incursions from the margins, the dedications and epigraphs which pressing upon the text, the Historical Notes which rewrite the tale from a future time add “further and implosive level[s].”

LOIS FEUER ON  
*THE HANDMAID’S TALE AND 1984*

Because Orwell’s work is the best known in this series, it is to 1984 that *The Handmaid’s Tale* has most frequently been compared.

The resemblances are many, and perhaps inescapable given the totalitarian regimes under which both protagonists live. In both, we have the distinctively modern sense of nightmare come true, the initial paralyzed powerlessness of the victim unable to act. Paradoxically, given this mood of waking nightmare, both novels use nighttime dreams and memory flashes to recapture the elusive past through which their protagonists try to retain their individual humanity. But individual humanity is, of course, undesirable in the society-as-prison; as in Kafka’s emblematic penal colony, language (books for women in *The Handmaid’s Tale*; connotative, reflective speech in *1984*) is restricted and controlled as an instrument of power; in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Harvard itself, bastion of reasoned discourse, has become the site of torture and mutilation of the regime’s enemies.

As Oceania both was and was not the postwar London of Orwell’s time, Gilead both is and is not the United States we know. Serena Joy, the Commander’s wife, bears an ironic resemblance to Phyllis Schlafly, taking a public position that women should not take public positions.<sup>4</sup> This referential topicality exists because both authors envision the future by extrapolating from tendencies in the present; as Blake points out, a prophet is one who tells us that if we keep on doing x, y will be the result. Both novels envision a society in which perpetual war is used as a rationale for internal repression. The ease with which the authorities in *1984* switch

the identity of the enemy makes it clear, long before Winston reads Goldstein's confirmatory analysis, that the "enemy" is a pretext; the epilogue to *The Handmaid's Tale* makes explicit the secret agreement between the superpowers that enabled them to concentrate on subjugating their own people (388). Both are societies purged of diversity and individuality, based on sexism, racism, and elitism, in which private relationships between friends and lovers become-or become seen as-subversive acts.<sup>5</sup>

Thus Atwood gives us all the hallmarks of a totalitarian society set forth in 1984 (Hadomi 209-17) and originated by Zamiatin in *We*: public spectacle as means of control, the two-minute hate and Hate Week, and the Salvaging and Prayvaganza. The fear of spies and betrayal are constants: Handmaids part with the phrase "Under His Eye," just as Oceanians knew that Big Brother was watching. Lack of privacy and constant surveillance are common features; thus the eye is a continuing image in *The Handmaid's Tale*, from the name of the secret police to the symbol tattooed on Offred's ankle.<sup>6</sup> This threat of betrayal-Winston suspects Julia as Offred does Nick-has already begun to destroy Offred's relationship with her husband Luke before he is (presumably) shot while they are trying to escape to Canada (232, 236). Despite this threat, both societies have-or have rumors of-an underground resistance network; at the open-ended conclusion of Atwood's novel, it is ostensibly this network, of which Nick is a member, that enables Offred to escape to the safe house in Maine where she dictates the tapes of which the novel purports to be a transcription.

In both works, loss of identity is an ever-present threat, this submersion of the self represented by color-coded uniforms denoting the status of the wearer, whether Inner or Outer Party member or Commander, Guardian, or Handmaid. The danger is real: Offred at times becomes subsumed by her category and thinks of herself as "we" (203), and Atwood uses the motif of the double throughout the novel to represent this threat. Describing another Handmaid walking away, Offred says, "She's like my own reflection, in a mirror from which I

am moving away” (59; also 25, 31, 213). The motif of the double is a continuing one in Atwood’s work, easily seen, for example, in the titles of two collections of poetry, *Double Persephone* (1961) and *Two-Headed Poems* (1978);<sup>7</sup> here it suggests the loss of individuality that is the totalitarian regime’s goal. (...)

The assaults on the individuality of the protagonists reinforce in both the desperate need to make contact; Winston reaches out to Julia and, fatally, to O’Brien, as the Handmaids (again, significantly, at night) reach out between their cots in the gymnasium to touch hands and exchange names. This need to make contact with others leads Offred’s predecessor to carve out the hidden schoolyard-Latin message of hope (*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*: don’t let the bastards grind you down). The contact itself is a window to a world outside the prison of one’s loneliness; Atwood describes it as like making a peephole, a crack in the wall (28–29, 176). The regime works in a variety of ways to sever these ties; “love is not the point,” says Handmaid trainer Aunt Lydia (285), aware of the subversion inherent in private relationships. But love is indeed the point for Offred as it was for Winston. It is through Offred’s affair with Nick, as through her friendships with other Handmaids, that her re-created self desires and rebels.<sup>10</sup>

### Notes

4. Cathy Davidson (24) notes the connection between Serena Joy and Phyllis Schlafly.

5. For love as a subversive force in both novels, see Barbara Ehrenreich, 34–36, especially 34.

6. See, for example, the images of eyes on pages 9, 29, 65, 78, and 84. David Ketterer (209–17) links the eye imagery to that of mirrors in the novel; I myself would be inclined to see the mirror imagery, which renders Offred as only a “distorted shadow,” as part of the motif of the double, the danger of losing the self in a world of enforced conformity.

7. Sherrill Grace looks at mirror images, doubles, dualities, and polarities in Atwood’s pre-*Handmaid* work.