Literature

SAMPLER

INCLUDING

Chapter 8: Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985)
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By Brian W. Shaffer

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Reading the Novel in English 1950–2000
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Chapter 8

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985)

I am thirty-three years old. I have brown hair. I stand five seven without shoes. I have trouble remembering what I used to look like. I have viable ovaries. I have one more chance.

Offred, in *The Handmaid's Tale*[1]

Tota mulier in utero (Woman is nothing but a womb)

Old Latin saying

I

In equal measure social satire and feminist dystopia, *The Handmaid's Tale*, by Canadian author Margaret Atwood, is a tour de force in the tradition of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. *The Handmaid's Tale* is set in the late twentieth-century Republic of Gilead (formerly the US) that follows a right-wing religious-political coup. The chief goal of this theocratic government, which claims to base its laws on "biblical precedents" (305), is to increase the population in a society where man-made ecological disasters have reduced fertility rates to dangerously low levels. With the exception of three epigraphs and an epilogue, Atwood's novel is narrated in the first person by a 33-year-old "Handmaid," Offred.[2] Through her eyes we learn of her own past and present life and of the feats of social engineering achieved by the Gilead regime, which has its capitol in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Ironically, the headquarters of this totalitarian regime is what was once the campus of Harvard University, Offred's (and Atwood's) alma mater and a center for critical inquiry in the service of a once open and democratic society.

Although the novel depicts both futuristic technological developments and retrogressive puritanical practices, it is best regarded as addressing contemporary social reality. Despite having a narrative frame set in 2195, *The Handmaid's Tale* is not really "about the future but about the present";[3] like other dystopic satires it portrays an "exaggerated version of present evils" in the hope of bringing "about social and political change."[4] Indeed, like all political satires, dystopian novels possess a "social-political message, a didactic intent to address the Ideal Reader's moral sense and reason as it applies to the protagonist's – and our own – place in society and in history."[5] In this case the catalyst for Atwood's dystopia was the resurgence in the US of the vocal religious right of the early 1980s. As in Orwell's *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, in *The Handmaid's Tale* "There's not a single detail in the book that does not have a corresponding reality, either in contemporary conditions or historical fact."[6] As Atwood herself admits, "I didn't invent a lot" in *The Handmaid's Tale*. "I transposed" material "to a different time and place, but the motifs are all historical motifs."[7] In this sense, Atwood's "genius," like that of the Gilead regime she constructs, lies in "synthesis" (307).

Although largely a dystopian satire, Atwood's novel also has the feel of an elegy, a nostalgic lament for an idealized past. At many points in the narrative Offred reminisces over her days as a college student, during which time quotidian freedoms, such as the right to question gender roles and the right to associate with people of her own choosing, could be taken for granted. These memories clash profoundly with her present, straitened circumstances, in which compulsory sex with her assigned Commander – a monthly rape of sorts – is the mandatory focus of her schedule. Handmaids such as Offred are directed to pray, as she puts it, for "emptiness, so we would be worthy to be filled: with grace, with love, with self-denial, semen and babies" (194). The novel proceeds by, and gains its eerie power from, Offred's ironic juxtaposition of her imprisoned present and comparatively self-determined past.

Offred's powerful yet understated narrative, told in sparse yet poetically evocative language (Atwood began her career as a poet), depicts a government that claims to take the Book of Genesis at its word, with devastating consequences for the women of Gilead. I say "claims" to follow the Bible because, in fact, "the men of Gilead appropriate the text of the Bible" merely "to fit their political, social, and sexual goals."[8] Moreover, "sexual relationships are regimented and supervised by the ruling elite, ostensibly in the interest of producing the maximum number of children for the state but actually . . . to eliminate chances of forming personal relationships and private loyalties"[9] that could counter the regime's authority. Sex in Gilead is understood to be for purposes of procreation only, as it was understood by the Puritans in Massachusetts centuries earlier. In Gilead "Anatomy is destiny";[10] Handmaids

who do not become pregnant have no value to the society. "The handmaid's situation," writes one critic, "lucidly illustrates Simone de Beauvior's assertion in *The Second Sex* about man defining woman not as an autonomous being" but merely as of value "relative to him."[11] Offred's name in Gilead – a patronymic "composed of the possessive preposition and the first name [in her case, Fred]" of her Commander (305), but also suggesting "afraid," "offered," and "off-read" (misread)[12] – is a linguistic emblem of the regime's misogynistic social system. By contrast, the use of Offred's pre-Gilead name (her "real" name, which we never learn) is now "forbidden" and must remain "buried": "I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I'll come back to dig up, one day" (84).

In Gilead it is not only sexual rights that are denied to women; most personal liberties, including the right to hold property (178), choose a mate (marriages are now arranged [219]), and read and write are banned to most females, insuring that wealth and knowledge – and therefore power – remain decisively out of their reach. The price to women of transgressing Gilead's rules (or of being infertile) is high: the ever-present threat of being declared "Unwoman" and sent to the Colonies beyond the pale (where Offred's mother has been sent), in effect to die while working in a toxic dump or radiation spill (248) clean-up squad. As Offred's friend Moira puts the regime's use of these squads,

> They figure you've got three years maximum . . . before your nose falls off and your skin peels away like rubber gloves. They don't bother to feed you much, or give you protective clothing or anything, it's cheaper not to. Anyway [the people in the squads are] mostly people they want to get rid of. (248)

Gilead's toxic waste problem is the result of such ecological catastrophes as "nuclear-plant accidents," "leakages from chemical and biological-warfare stockpiles and toxic waste disposal sites," and "uncontrolled use of chemical insecticides, herbicides, and other sprays" (304), all of which explain the society's low birthrate and rationalize its sexual and social engineering (and the social hierarchy that supports such engineering). Although less commented on than the novel's status as a "feminist *Nineteen Eighty-Four*,"[13] the novel also functions as an "environmentalist *Nineteen Eighty-Four*."

II

Margaret Atwood was born in Ottawa, Canada in 1939. She attended Victoria College of the University of Toronto, graduating in 1961 with honors in

English. In this same year Atwood published a chapbook, *Double Persephone*, for which she won the prestigious E. J. Pratt Medal for Poetry, and entered a graduate program at Radcliffe College of Harvard University, graduating in 1962 with an MA in English. She then accepted a series of instructorships in English departments at various Canadian universities, during which time she started writing a novel and continued her work in verse; in 1967 she published *The Circle Game*, which won Canada's highest literary prize, the Governor General's Award. Her third volume of poems, *The Animals in that Country*, followed in 1969, as did her first novel, *The Edible Woman*. In a burst of artistic productivity, a volume of poetry, *Power Politics* (1970), a work of nonfiction, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972), and a novel, *Surfacing* (1973), then followed, the latter two while Atwood was Writer-in-Residence at the University of Toronto. These works solidified her reputation as among the most prolific and intellectually wide-ranging of Canadian authors.

Numerous novels (eleven), poetry collections (fifteen), short fiction collections (five), non-fiction and edited volumes (nine), and children's books (four) emerged in the next three decades. In particular, her novels *Bodily Harm* (1981), *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985; filmed in 1990 by the German filmmaker Volker Schlondorff with a screenplay by Harold Pinter), *Cat's Eye* (1988), *The Robber Bride* (1993), *Alias Grace* (1996), *The Blind Assassin* (2000; winner of the Booker Prize), and *Oryx and Crake* (2003) assured Atwood's standing as the most celebrated late-twentieth-century Canadian poet-novelist (writer Alice Munro has this standing in the short story category). Collectively, her novels – which explore among other things the socially-constructed nature of gender, male–female and female–female power relations, and "the notorious victim positions Canadians have adopted to survive in the face of domination by imperial powers"[14] – have been translated into thirty-five languages. The author has received sixteen honorary degrees (from universities in Britain, Canada, and the US) and her work has been recognized by numerous awards in addition to the Booker Prize: two Canadian Governor General's Awards (the second for *The Handmaid's Tale*), the Norwegian Order of Merit, the French Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Arts at des Lettres, the Welsh Arts Council International Writer's Prize, and a Guggenheim Fellowship. The author presently resides in Toronto.

Just where to place *The Handmaid's Tale*, generically speaking – it has been called a "dystopia," a "political satire," and a "postmodern subversion"[15] – has been much debated. Indeed, one critic, electing not to choose among the various possible options, has called the work a "dystopian-science fiction-satirical-journal-epistolary-romance-palimpsest text."[16] The question of the novel's generic affiliations is all the more vexing when one notes that Offred's story, which is narrated on cassette tapes that have been discovered and

transcribed in the year 2195 by a male scholar, is flanked by other texts. Beforehand are three prefatory epigraphs (one from Genesis, one from Swift's "A modest proposal," and one a Sufi proverb),[17] and after it are the "Historical notes" of scholars in 2195. These notes constitute "not just a history of patriarchy but a metahistory, an analysis of how patriarchal imperatives are encoded within the various intellectual methods we bring to bear on history."[18] Indeed, the novel's narrative strategy – which we encounter in various incarnations in novels by Coetzee, McCabe, Rhys, and Swift – is postmodern to the extent that it is "designed to call attention to the acts of reading and interpretation."[19]

Although the genetic emphasis of *The Handmaid's Tale* is reminiscent of Huxley's *Brave New World*,[20] it is largely Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* – with its emphasis on social engineering in the service of a nefarious totalitarian regime – that stands behind Atwood's dystopia. As Jocelyn Harris writes, *The Handmaid's Tale* is "recognizably Orwellian" in both "structure" and in "minute detail."[21] Specifically, in Atwood's novel, as in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, spies, secret police agents, and crack troops – "Eyes," "Angels," and "Guardians" – penetrate all dimensions of the society. In Orwell's novel denizens of Oceania are constantly reminded that "Big Brother is Watching You,"[22] while in Atwood's a standard greeting between two Handmaids is "Under His Eye" (45). In both novels manipulative neologisms and slogans are deployed by the state in order to control not just the behavior but the thought of its citizens. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* "The Principles of Newspeak"[23] and such party slogans as "War is Peace," "Freedom is Slavery," and "Ignorance is Strength" (examples of "doublethink") are everywhere to be found, while in *The Handmaid's Tale* such public events as "Prayvaganzas" and "Salvagings" and such expressions as "God is a natural resource" (213) are commonplace. "Unpersons" populate Orwell's novel, "Unwomen" Atwood's.

In both dystopias the regime in question places the population on a constant war-footing and on food rationing (in Atwood's novel we read that "the war seems to be going on in many places at once" [82] and that "They only show us victories, never defeats" [83]) and seeks to control the present by altering the past. In Orwell's novel, for example, the party recognizes that "Who controls the past . . . controls the future: who controls the present controls the past";[24] and in Atwood's novel the regime works to erase accurate recollections of the past (the "Aunts," armed with cattle prods, attempt to condition the Handmaids to believe that their lot is actually better now than in pre-Gilead days).

In both novels the state manipulates emotion and rouses "bloodlust" through public spectacles, and uses scapegoats and public violence as "steam valves" (307) to defuse hostility to state oppression. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* this takes

the form of "two minutes of hate" and "Hate Week"; in *The Handmaid's Tale*, in the "Prayvaganzas" and "Salvagings," Handmaids actually take part in the brutal murder of state "traitors" (who turn out to be subversives). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, in both novels "sexual repression assists" the government in maintaining "social control."[25]

Winston Smith's utter resignation at the end of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, when he realizes that he has "won the victory over himself" and at last loves "Big Brother,"[26] is the forerunner of Offred's startling realization near the end of her tale:

> I'll stop complaining. I'll accept my lot. I'll sacrifice. I'll repent. I'll abdicate. I'll renounce. I know this can't be right but I think it anyway . . . I don't want pain . . . I want to keep on living, in any form. I resign my body freely, to the use of others. They can do what they like with me. I am abject. I feel, for the first time, their true power. (286)

Both Orwell's and Atwood's originally free-thinking protagonists, then, are eventually coerced into submission by the state. Although they may do so for different reasons, both finally surrender themselves up to the state, in body, mind, and soul.

That said, as one reader remarks, "For all the parallels to that powerful precursor *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *The Handmaid's Tale* is a work with an entirely different scope and feel."[27] Specifically, while the earlier text focuses on "the design" and mechanics of dystopian social engineering, the latter one focuses on "the experience of living under it," as such knowledge of the totalitarian society's ways and means can be taken for granted, having become "part of the readers' cultural and generic awareness."[28] Seen in this light, *The Handmaid's Tale* both "participates in and extends the dystopian genre"[29] that was pioneered by Orwell and others in the mid-twentieth-century.[30]

To the extent that it may be regarded as a feminist dystopia, *The Handmaid's Tale* is "a clever appropriation of a predominantly male literature for feminist purposes."[31] That said, a little-acknowledged feminist precursor to Atwood's novel can be identified: Charlotte Perkins Gilman's satire "The yellow wall-paper." Like the female protagonist of Gilman's 1892 novella, one whose situation harkens back in turn to that of Bertha Mason, the madwoman in the attic of Charlotte Brontë's 1847 *Jane Eyre*, Offred is a prisoner of a patriarchal domestic tyranny, and passes the time, like her predecessor in the Gilman story, who also keeps a secret journal, doing whatever she can in the straitened circumstances of her bedroom-prison. She recalls wishing to explore her bedroom slowly:

> I didn't want to do it all at once, I wanted to make it last. I divided the room into sections, in my head; I allowed myself one section a day. This one section I would examine with the greatest minuteness: the unevenness of the plaster under the wallpaper, the scratches in the paint of the baseboard and the windowsill, under the top coat of paint, the stains on the mattress . . . (51)

Another moment of Offred's life that is strongly reminiscent of Gilman's "The yellow wallpaper" occurs somewhat later, when she is lying on her bed:

> I would like to rest, go to sleep, but I'm too tired, at the same time too excited, my eyes won't close. I look up at the ceiling, tracing the foliage of the wreath [around the missing chandelier, which Offred's predecessor used to commit suicide]. In a minute the wreath will start to color and I will begin seeing things. That's how tired I am . . . (128)

Toward the end of her narrative Offred feels the "presence" of this predecessor, this "ancestress" and "double,"

> turning in midair under the chandelier . . . a bird stopped in flight, a woman made into an angel, waiting to be found . . . How could I have believed I was alone in here? There were always two of us. Get it over, she says . . . There's no one you can protect, your life has value to no one. I want it finished. (293)

Similarly to Gilman's protagonist (and for that matter Brontë's Bertha), then, Atwood's contemplates suicide and imagines her double in a domestic prison of her "husband's" making.[32]

III

Glenn Deer observes that *The Handmaid's Tale* faces a challenge that is typical of satiric dystopias: "to portray the mechanisms of oppression as credible enough, as sufficiently powerful and seductive, to represent a believable evil, not an irrelevant or farfetched one."[33] This is a challenge that the novel handily meets. Everything from Offred's sense of space (she wears "white wings" around her face, "blinkers" that are "prescribed issue" and keep her from "seeing" and "being seen" [8]), to time ("There's a grandfather clock in

the hallway, which doles out time" [9]), to speech ("Blessed be the fruit," Ofglen greets Offred; "May the Lord open," Offred answers [19]), is controlled by the Gilead regime. It is no surprise that Offred succumbs to fatalism, admitting, "I try not to think too much" (8).

While the Gilead regime claims that its social system is designed to "protect women," this system's "actual purpose is to control them and reinforce the notion that their biology is their destiny."[34] Lucy M. Freibert lays out the many-tiered female hierarchy of Gilead:

> The blue-clad Wives of the Commanders preside over their homes and gardens, and attend public functions . . . Sexual duties fall to the red-clad Handmaids, drilled in self-denial and renunciation and reduced to fertility machines. The green-clad Marthas clean and cook. The Econowives, married to upper-level menials, combine the functions of the other groups and consequently wear striped blue/red/green dresses. At the Rachel and Leah Center, the Aunts use electric cattle prods to keep the Handmaids in line. The black-clad widows, a rapidly diminishing group, live in limbo. The gray-clad Unwomen, those who refuse to cooperate with the system, work in the Colonies . . .[35]

Despite the widespread acceptance of this social hierarchy, the Wives of husbands with Handmaids remain uncomfortable with the monthly coupling ceremony and therefore view Handmaids as necessary evils. "I am a reproach to her," Offred imagines of the childless Serena Joy, her Commander's wife, but also "a necessity" (13).

This monthly event is the centerpiece of the Handmaid's life; it is her chief "duty" (95) and the focus of her schedule:

> I lie on my back, fully clothed . . . Above me, toward the head of the bed, Serena Joy is arranged, outspread. Her legs are apart, I lie between them, my head on her stomach, her pubic bone under the base of my skull, her thighs on either side of me. She too is fully clothed. My arms are raised; she holds my hands, each of mine in each of hers. This is supposed to signify that we are one flesh, one being. What it really means is that she is in control, of the process and thus the product . . . My red skirt is hitched up to my waist, though no higher. Below the Commander is fucking. What he is fucking is the lower part of my body. I do not say making love, because this is not what he's doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and only one is involved . . . What's going on in this room . . . is not exciting. It has nothing to do with passion or love or romance . . . It has nothing to do with sexual desire . . . (93–4)

It goes without saying that this most "serious business" of the Handmaid's monthly calendar dehumanizes her, so completely is she determined – like the "hands" in Dickens's *Hard Times* – by the service her body performs for her master (63). Her worth is wholly bound up with whether or not she is a "worthy vessel" (65) and can fulfill her promise as a "natural resource" (65). "We are containers," Offred observes of the role of Handmaids; "it's only the inside of our bodies that are important" (96). "We are for breeding purposes: we aren't concubines, geisha girls, courtesans," she later concludes. "We are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (136). Success or failure hinges exclusively on whether pregnancy ensues. "Each month I watch for blood, fearfully, for when it comes it means failure. I have failed once again to fulfill the expectations of others, which have become my own" (63). Worse than even this, however, would be for Offred to become sick: Handmaids who succumb to illness and therefore cannot bear children are regarded as "terminal" cases (155). As one critic puts this state of affairs, Atwood's novel "gives a new and ominous meaning to the phrase 'the body politic'."[36]

The regime's assault on intellectual freedom and its bid to colonize the minds of its subjects ("The Republic of Gilead," said Aunt Lydia, "knows no bounds. Gilead is within you" [23]) is perhaps best symbolized in the regime's closing of the universities and in its use of Harvard's buildings as a center for "the Eyes" (166). Ironically, the wall around Harvard yard, which at one time delineated a place of intellectual freedom, now functions as a part of the state's prison apparatus.[37] This red-brick wall is "hundreds of years old," Offred muses, "and must once have been plain but handsome. Now the gates have sentries and there are ugly new floodlights mounted on metal posts above it; and barbed wire along the bottom and broken glass set in concrete along the top" (31). The past and present function of Harvard's buildings are in even starker contrast, in that the dead bodies of murdered enemies of Gilead are typically hung from the wall for all to see. "It's the bags over the heads that are the worst, worse than the faces themselves would be," Offred comments of the corpses; "It makes the men look like dolls on which the faces have not yet been painted; like scarecrows, which in a way is what they are, since they are meant to scare" (32). Needless to say, the educational glory of Harvard's former days is over, to be replaced, for the Handmaids in Gilead at any rate, with a curriculum of "Gyn Ed" (117) at the Rachel and Leah Re-education Center.

Linda Kauffman is correct to argue that "*The Handmaid's Tale* functions as an anatomy of ideology, exposing the process by which one constructs, psychologically and politically, subjects of the state, and then enlists their cooperation in their own subjection."[38] This is particularly true of Gilead's use of women to enforce their own victimhood, to help release pressure built up

by their oppression, and to spy on each other (19). The Gilead regime understands that the "best and most cost-effective way to control women for reproductive and other purposes" is through the women themselves, and that no "empire imposed by force or otherwise" ever succeeded without the "control of the indigenous by members of their own group" (308).[39]

Take, for example, the "crack female control agency known as the 'Aunts'," who are motivated by the logic that, "When power is scarce, a little of it is tempting" (308). The Aunts help oppress the Handmaids by monitoring their behavior generally and by presiding over such events as "Salvagings," aimed at eliminating the regime's "political enemies" (307), and "Particicutions," "steam valve[s] for the female elements in Gilead" (307). Women's Salvagings (such ceremonies are always single-sex events) take place at what was once Harvard University, again highlighting the intellectual freedoms that have been lost. "We take our places in the standard order," Offred describes one such event, "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" (273). Two Handmaids and one Wife are to be executed on this occasion. As always, the event involves the participation of the entire audience: when the women accused of committing crimes against the state are hung on the stage, the assembled women lean forward and touch the rope placed in front of them and then place their hands on their hearts to signify their "unity with the Salvagers," "consent" to the murder, and "complicity in the death" of the victim (276).

Particularly ingenious are "Particicutions," in which Handmaids en masse murder a Guardian or other male former regime functionary who is accused of rape or the like. In one such Particicution, the victim is supposedly a Guardian who has "disgraced his uniform." "He has abused his position of trust," Aunt Lydia charges, citing the Bible; and "The penalty for rape, as you know, is death. Deuteronomy 22: 23–9" (279). On this occasion even Offred is moved, against her better judgment, by the accusation: "It's true, there is a bloodlust; I want to tear, gouge, rend. We jostle forward . . . our nostrils flare, sniffing death" (279). Just when the man, who is reduced in this ceremony to an "*it*" (280), begins to contest the charge against him, the crazed and enraged Handmaids "surge forward"; in this moment they are "permitted anything and this is freedom." They violently assault their scapegoat-victim, kicking him, punching him, ripping out clumps of his hair (280). Although the women do not really know anything about their victim – and the reader knows that they would be wise to distrust the information furnished them by the Aunts – the abused women are eager to blame anyone they can get their hands on for their misery. Temporarily, at least, the Handmaids have the opportunity to

violate a male in retaliation for being violated by one. Such male scapegoats are useful to the regime, then, in that the Handmaids, who are "so rigidly controlled at other times," at least have the opportunity "to tear a man apart with their bare hands every once in a while" (307–8). Only with such a safety valve could the risk of rebellion at some unexpected time be avoided. Later, we learn that their victim on this occasion was not a rapist at all but "a political," and that the Handmaids, ironically, butchered someone who was working on their behalf and against the state. After the event, like Lady Macbeth in Shakespeare's tragedy, Offred wants to wash her guilty hands of their complicity in the murder of this innocent victim: "I want to go back to the house and up to the bathroom and scrub and scrub, with the harsh soap of pumice, to get every trace of this smell [of the warm tar of the rope] off my skin. The smell makes me feel sick" (281).

A further example of the regime's use of individuals to further their own oppression can be found in the phenomenon of the "Soul Scrolls" (nicknamed "Holy Rollers"): five different pre-recorded prayers – "for health, wealth, a death, a birth, a sin" – that can be purchased from the state by the denizens of Gilead. "You pick the [prayer] you want, punch the number, then punch in your own number so your account will be debited, and punch in the number of times you want the prayer repeated" (167). The machines "run by themselves," and "Once the prayers have been printed out and said, the paper rolls back through another slot and is recycled into fresh paper again" (167). Ironically, then, citizen-purchasers of prayers subsidize the state's infringement of their choice, freedom, and power while being given precisely the illusion of choice, freedom, and power.

In another cruel and ironic twist, the Gilead regime claims to adhere to a feminist philosophy in its treatment of women and paints a picture of a utopian future in which female society will at last become the sorority it was formerly prevented from being. Aunt Lydia preaches to her Handmaids-in-training that sacrifices in the present will justify social achievements in the future, "Women united for a common end!" Eventually "women will live in harmony together, all in one family," and there will be "bonds of real affection" among them. "Your daughters will have greater freedom [than you]," Aunt Lydia continues, "But we can't be greedy pigs and demand too much before it's ready, now can we?" (162–3). As we have seen in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the patriarchy in Gilead embraces the paradox of protection-in-imprisonment: the more imprisoned the woman is, the safer she is; the less imprisoned she is, the less safe she is. Unlike today, runs the official Gilead line, "Women were not protected" in the past (24). "There is more than one kind of freedom," Aunt Lydia explains, "Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy [before], it was freedom to. Now you are being given

freedom from. Don't underrate it" (24). The Commander similarly justifies the ways of Gilead to Offred by claiming that in the new order of things women will be "protected" and will at last be able to "fulfill their biological destinies in peace." He then adds, in an appeal to nature that rings hollow in Offred's ears, that all that Gilead society has done between the sexes is to return "things to Nature's norm" (219–20).

The net effect of this oppression is that Handmaids are reduced to the agency-less level of children, dolls (16, 124, 182), and animals in a cage: to objects, in other words, of another's subjectivity. Offred interprets the anchorman on state-run television, for example, as encouraging viewers to "trust" the regime. "You must go to sleep, like good children" (83). She remembers, "They used to have dolls, for little girls, that would talk if you pulled a string at the back; I thought I was sounding like that, voice of a monotone, voice of a doll" (16). Another time, she likens one Handmaid she knows to "a puppy that's been kicked too often, by too many people, at random: she'd roll over for anyone, she'd tell anything, just for a moment of approbation" (129). And when considering the death of her predecessor in her Commander's house, Offred muses: "If your dog dies, get another" (187). "A rat in a maze is free to go anywhere, as long as it stays inside the maze" (165), she also observes. And Offred is tattooed (65) – like livestock, like a Holocaust victim – so that she can be identified and processed. Atwood's implication is clear: children, dolls, and domesticated animals share a lack of self-determination and agency that epitomizes the plight of Handmaids.

There is little escape from the state of affairs that Offred must endure save for that which memory can afford. In this way, memory, which is capable of assessing Gilead's social structure from a critical distance, is subversive of and threatening to that structure. It is for this reason, among others, that the regime seeks to suppress it. As one critic notes, time in Gilead "is carefully manipulated so that all remnants of the past, pre-Gilead reality are obliterated: there are no dates after the 1980s [and] all historical documents are destroyed."[40] Offred nevertheless remembers the days "before," commenting, "I'm a refugee from the past, and like other refugees I go over the customs and habits of being I've left or been forced to leave behind" (227). She reminisces over her earlier days with her mother, her college friend Moira (whom she later runs into in the "present" of the novel), her husband Luke ("We thought we had such problems. How were we to know we were happy?" [51]), and, most poignantly, her daughter whom she has not seen for three years (since the regime came to power) and who would now be 8 years old: "She fades, I can't keep her here with me, she's gone now" (64). "Sometimes," however, Offred's reminiscences are involuntary, and "these flashes of normality come at [her] from the side, like ambushes. The ordinary, the usual, a

reminder, like a kick" (48). Such reminiscences, which also come to her at times in dreams, are especially painful.[41]

Although resistance to the Gilead regime mainly takes on such a mental and nostalgic dimension, there are indications that an organized resistance exists. The first hint of the existence of such resistance is the Latin inscription, *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum* (52) ("Don't let the bastards grind you down" [187]), which Offred discovers scratched lightly into the floor of her bedroom by her predecessor (apparently, this predecessor, an eventual suicide, could not keep the regime from grinding her down). Offred then comes to believe in the existence of an organized resistance on philosophical grounds: "Someone must be out there, taking care of things. I believe in the resistance as I believe there can be no light without shadow; or rather, no shadow unless there is also light" (105). She finally learns from another Handmaid, Ofglen, that there is in fact such a group, the members of which identify themselves with the distress signal "Mayday" (from the French *M'aidez*) (202). This Mayday underground is quasi-military and has a connection with another group, the "Underground Femaleroad" (246), a "rescue operation" (309) that helps Offred's friend Moira, then a Handmaid-in-training, to escape temporarily from the clutches of the regime. As one critic observes, the "underground Femaleroad" clearly alludes to "the Underground Railroad by means of which the runaway slaves of the American South" entered Canada.[42] Ofglen is finally found out by the regime and is forced to hang herself ("She saw the van coming for her" [285]), and Moira is recaptured and sent to work as a prostitute in an illicit sex-club for Commanders. But this does not diminish the likelihood that such organized resistance, comprised of both male and female members (even Nick, the chauffeur of Offred's Commander, was probably "a member of the shadowy Mayday underground" [309]), has a potentially negative impact on Gilead's hold on power.

On the other hand, Offred's belief that an organized resistance exists does not ensure that she can successfully resist the regime's hegemony. As Linda Kauffman observes, despite "Offred's efforts to remember her prior existence, she has begun to take on the perception the regime wants her to have of herself."[43] For example, toward the end of the novel, when Ofglen offers to help Offred escape if ever she is in immediate danger, Offred no longer wishes "to leave, escape, cross the border to freedom" and instead wishes to remain in Gilead with Nick (271), with whom she is having an affair (and by whom she may be pregnant). She justifies her change of heart in terms of both love and expedience: "I have made a life for myself, here, of a sort" (271). As Kauffman points out, Offred "repossesses her body by making love with Nick, an act for which she could be executed," and in telling Nick her real name, "she unburies the body, the voice, the self that the regime sought to

annihilate."[44] It is nevertheless also the case that Offred feels relief when she hears about Ofglen. Ofglen, the only person outside of her household with the knowledge to betray her, has committed suicide, which means that Offred can maintain the status quo, at least for the time being:

> So she's dead, and I am safe, after all. She did it before they came [to get her]. I feel a great relief. I feel thankful to her. She has died that I may live. I will mourn later. (286)

That said, what is true about Winston Smith and Julia in Orwell's novel is true about Offred and Nick in Atwood's: their forbidden relationship (and illicit sex) constitutes "a political act."[45]

Despite the lack of immediate success for the resistance, a careful look at Gilead society does reveal cracks in its edifice. For example, illicit and deceptive activities committed by officials are rife. As Celia Floren observes of Gilead society, a "Lack of freedom and strong restrictions" encourage a "circle of deceit":

> [T]he Commander deceives his wife; he sees the handmaid in secret . . . and even smuggles her into an unofficial brothel for high-ranking officers; Serena Joy, the wife, deceives the Commander, as she helps the handmaid meet their chauffeur, Nick, in secret, hoping that he will make the latter pregnant; Nick cheats the Commander, when he complies with Serena's wishes and makes love to the handmaid, and his wife as he helps the Commander see the handmaid, and take her to the brothel. The handmaid deceives both the husband and the wife with Nick and the Commander, respectively; Nick and the handmaid deceive their masters. The handmaid, with the help of another handmaid Ofglen, deceives them all, trying to connect with the underground network.[46]

Offred's illicit relationship with her Commander, who is apparently at the very top of the Gilead power structure, is the most interesting of these deceptions. It is especially ironic, given their obligatory monthly sex, that Offred becomes her Commander's "mistress" at all (163). For another, their secret trysts in his office involve not sex but the playing of Scrabble, during which time Offred engages in the forbidden pleasure of forming words, an emblem of what one critic calls the novel's focus on the "political nature of language use" and on "the self-liberating potential of an individual's act of storytelling."[47] Their affair takes another strange turn when the Commander brings Offred to an illicit Bunny Club of sorts, where Commanders, other male senior officials, and trade delegations (237) are entertained and provided with sexual favors by former prostitutes, political prisoners, and a few women who

prefer this sort of work to the alternatives (238). Although the activities that take place at the club are "strictly forbidden," the Commander hypocritically affirms, violating his own repressive sexual and social codes, that "everyone's human, after all" (237). Offred imagines that such a transgression of the rules is a power-trip for her Commander: "He's breaking the rules, under their noses, thumbing his nose at them, he's getting away with it" (236). Although Offred, when at the club, feels like "used glitz" (254) and "an evening rental" (233) – and is even purple-tagged around the wrist, "like the tags for airport luggage" – she at least takes pleasure in being "no longer in official existence" (233) as a Handmaid. Indeed, Offred justifies going along with the Commander out of her desire for "anything that breaks the monotony, subverts the perceived respectable order of things" (231). At the Club she runs into Moira, who earlier was caught trying to escape from Gilead, was sterilized, and was sent to serve a term in the club. In Moira's view, Commanders bring women to the club against the rules just for kicks: "It's like screwing on the altar or something" (243). The evening ends with the Commander and Offred retreating to a private room for sex, which the latter finds even more objectionable and depressing than the Commander's officially sanctioned monthly attempts at impregnating her (255).

When Serena Joy (an ironic name for one neither serene nor joyful) learns of Offred's and the Commander's affair, she accuses Offred of being like her predecessor, "A slut. You'll end up the same [a suicide]" (287). Just exactly what happens to Offred at the end of her narrative – the black van with a white eye painted on the side comes to pick her up, and Nick convinces her to go quietly (he claims that the van is staffed not by members of the regime but by members of "Mayday" ["Trust me," he tells her] [293–5]) – we cannot know for sure. Her narrative proper ends on a note of ambiguity: "Whether this is my end or a new beginning I have no way of knowing: I have given myself over into the hands of strangers, because it can't be helped. And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light" (295). It therefore lacks a telos or "closure."

Atwood's recent lecture collection, *Negotiating with the Dead*,[48] might well be the subtitle of the present novel, for this is precisely what the academics in 2195, in resurrecting her narrative, attempt to do with Offred. Indeed, the entire meaning of Offred's story is altered by the thirteen-page appendix "*Historical notes on* The Handmaid's Tale." As Atwood reminds us, the last chapter of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is in fact the eleven-page "Appendix: The principles of newspeak," which functions in the same way as the "Historical notes" to *The Handmaid's Tale*: it suggests a future in which the totalitarian regime in question is no more.[49] In both cases, then, the epilogue retrospectively influences our reception of the main body of the narrative.

In this connection, although Atwood may dismiss the classification "postmodernist," she is clearly problematizing the "modernist, open-ended narrative" by seeming to offer two "endings" while actually providing none.[50] Offred's narrative proper, which does not (and cannot) detail her fate, simply stops (rather than ends); and the "Historical notes," which suggest that she survived long enough to narrate her story (onto 30 cassette tapes), throws into doubt the degree to which the meaning of Offred's narrative has been grasped by the scholars.[51] After all, the narrative is a transcription and hence an interpretation of a spoken text arranged and titled by its editors, who resorted at points to "guesswork" (310). And the novel "resists closure," leaving readers "with disturbing questions rather than soothing answers."[52] "*The Handmaid's Tale*," one critic concludes, is thus a "highly daunting, ambitious, postmodernist metafictional novel," in which the "form" is very much "part of the content."[53] To be sure, the novel's epilogue embroils Atwood's readers "in complex author-narrator-reader interrelationships."[54]

The appended "Historical notes" – comprising "a partial transcript of the proceedings of the Twelfth Symposium on Gildean Studies" held in the year 2195, chaired by Maryann Crescent Moon, Professor of "Caucasian Anthropology" at the University of Denay, Nunavit, and keynoted by Professor James Darcy Pieixoto, Director of Cambridge University's "Twentieth- and Twenty-first-Century Archives" (299) – has a parodic feel yet establishes how Offred's "private record has become a public document."[55] The "Historical notes" are also a version of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century preface rationalizing the discovery of a lost manuscript.

Although this transcript of Gildean Research Association proceedings provides "comic relief from the grotesque text of Gilead," it is at the same time "the most pessimistic part of the book":[56] the academics, who condescend to their object of study and take their job to be to "understand" rather than to "censure" Gildean society (302), seem bound to repeat many of Gilead's indiscretions. Debrah Raschke, in addressing the novel's three systems of language and representation, puts this problem well:

> The first is the Gilead system, a fixed system dominated by empirical realism, rigid binary oppositions, and implacable boundaries. The second system of representation (the narrator's) threatens to disrupt Gilead's patriarchal power by a slippery poststructuralist refusal of fixity and truth. The third, the academic rhetoric of the closing "Historical Notes," poses an open, liberated discourse, but, in effect, in its insidious insistence on univocal representation, is a repetition of Gilead. Thus, the narrator's method of representation functions not only as a challenge to Gilead, but to the Academy as well.[57]

Put another way, while the "Historical Notes" provide a gloss on the "social, historical, and political origins of Gildean society," they also serve to satirize the academics as "trivializers of history" who have turned "Gilead into a matter of textual authentication"[58] and a means of securing professional advancement. Offred's politico-sexual victimage at the hands of the regime is reduced by the assembled "historians, archeologists, and anthropologists" to "a source of quaint curiosity."[59] As Amin Malak concludes, "The entire 'Historical Notes' at the end of the novel represents a satire on critics who spin out theories about literary or historical texts without genuinely recognizing or experiencing the pathos expressed in them: they circumvent issues, classify data, construct clever hypotheses garbed" in "jargon, but no spirited illumination ever comes out of their endeavors."[60] As such, these scholars, again ironically, furnish readers "with an example of how not to read Atwood's novel."[61] The keynote speaker of this academic conference acknowledges that

> [T]he past is a great darkness, and filled with echoes. Voices may reach us from it; but what they say to us is imbued with the obscurity of the matrix out of which they come; and, try as we may, we cannot decipher them properly in the clearer light of our own day. (311)

Yet his analysis of Gilead belies his own testament to the limitations of historical interpretation.

Offred, by contrast, is a sensitive and self-conscious narrator, who is aware of the inherently problematic and fictive nature of all narratives. She is keenly aware of the extent to which her fears, desires, and lapses of memory necessarily impinge upon her ability to paint a comprehensive picture of her experiences. Although she "will try" against all odds "to leave nothing out" of her story (268), she nevertheless acknowledges:

> This is a reconstruction. All of it is a reconstruction. It's a reconstruction, now, in my head . . . [I]f 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 . . . (134)

At times Offred fills out the details of a conversation herself because she cannot "remember exactly" what was said (243); at others she admits to wishing to be able to tell a different story than the version she offers us (250, 267,

273), but that her powers of imagination are not vivid enough to fabricate a more palatable version:

> 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'm sorry there is so much pain in this story. I'm sorry it's in fragments, like a body caught in crossfire or pulled apart by force. But there is nothing I can do to change it. (267)

At times she even takes to revising her story midstream, offering us a series of versions of what might have occurred, as when she describes her illicit sexual encounters with Nick: "I made that [last part] up. It didn't happen that way. Here is what [really] happened" (261). Lois Feuer concludes that while Offred's narrative strategy is an expression in part of the "now-familiar twentieth century obsession with the unreliability of language and narrative, part of the self-reflexivity of the novel in our time," it is also about the "distrust of certainty" and the "cherishing" of "ambiguity" – those "multiple meanings" and "alternate possibilities" – "that the regime is ultimately unable to control."[62]

With this in mind, the fact that Offred narrates her story at all is a challenge to the regime's authority. Although it is true that the yarn she narrates keeps her busy and gives her a sense of purpose, as the Wives' knitting of yarn for scarves for "Angels at the front lines" is designed to do, Offred's "story" also allows her to theorize a sympathetic audience and an alternate reality to the one Gilead forces upon her:

> I would like to believe this is a story I'm telling. I need to believe it. I must 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. (39)

She later adds: "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," Offred continues in a tweaking of the foundation of Cartesian philosophy, "I tell, therefore you are" (268).

The novel's title also speaks to the misogynistic tenor of the scholars in 2195. This title was appended to Offred's tapes, Professor Pieixoto explains in the "Historical notes," by one of his colleagues, "partly in homage to the great Geoffrey Chaucer" but also as an intentional pun on "the archaic vulgar signification of the word *tail*; that being [the] bone, as it were, of contention,

in that phase of Gildean society of which our saga treats" (301). As one critic explains, "The dual effect of the double-entendre in the pun on the word *tale*, as literary creation and anatomic part," combines "humor and denigration" and is an emblem of the "conflict between the protagonist and the society that regards her as a sexual object."[63] Similarly, Professor Pieixoto, in "bracketing" Offred's tale, "reiterates the tension between Offred's words and [the] patriarchal control of her story," which is the very crux of the novel's meaning.[64] Like Gilead's "computer prayers" that "fall upon deaf ears," Offred's "voice falls upon deaf ears, unheard [in her own time] or misheard [in Pieixoto's]."[65] As in Dickens's *Hard Times* – which ends with the narrator's entreaty to readers of the novel to alter the state of social affairs for the better – in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* it falls to the novel's readers to "hear" what was apparently inaudible both to Offred's contemporaries and to Pieixoto's colleagues 200 years later.

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Does the Book Have a Future?

Angus Phillips

> Old media don't die; they just have to grow old gracefully.
>
> (Douglas Adams 2001)

From the beginning of the digital revolution, commentators have examined the prospects for the book and wondered whether it can survive alongside new technologies. In an age when text can be accessed all over the world through a variety of devices, and when the book competes with many other forms of entertainment, is it a dated and outmoded technology or a reliable and robust companion? What sort of future can we see for the book?

If the book has had its day, what would be the test? When readers are avid followers of fiction on their mobile phones? When children study using tablet computers and are leaving behind the use of print resources? When only 5 percent of people named the book when asked which single media device they would miss the most if it was to be taken away? When only half of all adults in the world's largest economy read literature? When travelers shun print guidebooks and choose to consult user-generated content on websites for information and advice?

This is the world now, and if some of these trends continue, the future of the book in its traditional sense is certainly under question. Yet if we apply other tests – for example, the number of books published each year or the success of individual writers such as George R. R. Martin or J. K. Rowling – the book remains resilient in the face of changes in technology, culture, and society. Indeed the world

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going digital is helping to keep the book alive, with books now available to download in a few seconds, anywhere in the world.

Gone Digital

If we examine the production of books, the *process* of publishing books has gone thoroughly digital – from the delivery of the text from authors by e-mail through to page design on computer and the electronic delivery of files to the printer. The concept of "create once/publish many" has led to print being only one of the formats employed by publishers, alongside web, audio, and e-book. Educational, reference, and professional publishing have adopted digital publishing as a central part of their activities, and the arrival of e-books has transformed the world of fiction sales. For those keen to declutter their house, they can hold all their music on their computer, watch films on demand rather than on DVD, and abandon their print collection of books in favor of a digital library.

In scholarly publishing, online access is the dominant mode of delivery for journals. There is also a trend toward the digital publication of academic monographs. Oxford Scholarship Online, launched in 2003, delivers monographs to libraries, using titles published by Oxford University Press. The average print run of research monographs has continued to decline, and it is likely that their publication will be switched over to primarily digital editions. Educational publishing in many parts of the world is moving further toward the development of digital resources. For example, the aim of the Fatih project in Turkey is to provide all school students in the country with tablet computers alongside the provision of digital texts and interactive whiteboards in the classroom (Akkoyunlu and Baskan 2015).

Two decades ago, the novelist E. Annie Proulx said that the information highway was meant for "bulletin boards on esoteric subjects, reference works, lists and news – timely, utilitarian information, efficiently pulled through the wires. Nobody is going to sit down and read a novel on a twitchy little screen. Ever." (*New York Times*, May 26, 1994). Today e-books of novels are available to read on dedicated readers and mobile devices, and both classic novels and self-published works can be downloaded for free. Many readers are comfortable reading in both print and digital formats. By 2014, in the United States, the proportion of adults who had read an e-book had risen to "28%, up from 23% at the end of 2012. At the same time, about seven in ten Americans reported reading a book in print, up four percentage points after a slight dip in 2012, and 14% of adults listened to an audiobook" (Pew Research Center, January 16, 2014).

Dedicated electronic devices – e-book readers specifically designed to store books and display them with the clarity of the printed page – have become commonplace in the book markets of the United States and United Kingdom. In 2006, Sony launched

a lightweight reader with a memory that could support up to eighty titles. The arrival of the Kindle device from Amazon, which was launched in the United States in 2007, going into several generations of development, created a mass market for e-reading, in particular, of genre fiction.

The British writer Fay Weldon believes that authors should adjust their style to meet the needs of a digital audience. Literary authors should consider writing two versions of the same book: one longer, more contemplative, and suitable for reading in print and the other, shorter, plot heavy and character rich, and perfect to be read quickly in electronic form. "Short, in this the day of the galloping e-reader, is best. Writers need to envisage readers not turning the page as the maid draws the curtains and brings a glass of wine, but on the train or bus on the way to work, eating a sandwich, or standing in the queue for coffee" (Weldon 2014).

Reading of fiction on mobile phones, originally popular in Japan (the *keitai shousetsu*, or cellphone novel), is now widespread in China, where new forms of genre fiction have developed online such as time travel and grave robbery. "The prices may be low but the potential readership for this kind of writing is huge. There are 100m active users of Reading Base, the mobile platform run by China Mobile. For authors the rewards from the mobile phone audience may be greater than from conventional publishing. For example, whereas a print book has a limited number of pages, an online or mobile novel can carry on in the manner of a soap opera. A reader may end up paying 350 yuan (£35) for a large number of chapters – around 10 times the price of a print book. Whilst they are paying by the chapter, they are not as sensitive to the overall price" (Phillips 2014: 14).

The linking of mobile and global positioning system (GPS) technologies offers further opportunities for the book: for example, to revolutionize travel publishing. As the cost of using mobile data while traveling declines to an acceptable level, a range of possibilities open up. Although guidebooks are available as apps or e-books, they are not yet easily linked to the user's location, offering local cultural or restaurant tips. There is the potential to offer a range of novels or travel literature suitable to the reader's destination: for example, the tourist in Paris could have a downloadable copy of Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, or Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, with the relevant text highlighted.

Society and Culture

The book competes with a variety of other entertainments, and most people are now accustomed to alternative ways of acquiring information. The newspaper industry has had to adapt to competition from television and the web. In 2004, the *Times* of London went tabloid. Editor Robert Thomson quoted the web as an influence on the paper's new design: "The traditional broadsheet involves what you might call scanning skills,

but for an increasing number of people, especially young people who are used to internet presentation, they have developed scrolling skills. Interestingly enough, those scrolling skills work a lot better in the compact format than they do in a broadsheet" (Greenslade 2004).

The primacy of print has been challenged, undermined by the ease of access to the Internet and a new generation brought up without the same unequivocal respect for the book. For those who have a mobile device, Google is the first port of call in the search for information, replacing the reference shelf by the desk. Schoolchildren are encouraged by their teachers to surf for background for their homework rather than use an encyclopedia. Universities struggle to teach the virtues of citing a range of sources, and students see little wrong in adapting the words of others or relying on web resources.

For adults, reading for pleasure has to be fitted into busy lifestyles. In Ian McEwan's novel *Saturday*, Henry Perowne, a highly intelligent neurosurgeon, persists with fiction recommended by his daughter, but remains cautious of this other world:

> Henry never imagined he would end up living in the sort of house that had a library. It's an ambition of his to spend whole weekends in there, stretched out on one of the Knole sofas, pot of coffee at his side, reading some world-rank masterpiece or other, perhaps in translation … But his free time is always fragmented, not only by errands and family obligations and sports, but by the restlessness that comes with these weekly islands of freedom. He doesn't want to spend his days off lying, or even sitting, down. (McEwan 2005: 66)

We could never catch up with our reading in any case. The Mexican writer Gabriel Zaid, in his playful treatise *So Many Books*, points out that a new book is produced every thirty seconds: "Books are published at such a rapid rate that they make us exponentially more ignorant. If a person read a book every day, he would be neglecting to read four thousand others, published the same day" (Zaid 2003: 22).

In England, in 2010/2011, the most commonly reported free-time activity was watching television (88 percent of adults aged 16 and over), followed by spending time with friends or family (84 percent) and listening to music (74 percent); reading scored high as well with 65 percent (Seddon 2012: 22). Yet time-use data reveals a large gulf in the time spent on reading compared to our television and Internet usage. In 2014, UK adults watched an average of two hours and fifty nine minutes of live television each day, with a further forty minutes for recorded programs and an additional thirty seven minutes devoted to DVDs and on-demand viewing (Ofcom 2014). Between 2005 and 2014, the time UK adults spent online each week doubled, rising from nine hours fifty four minutes to twenty hours thirty minutes (Ofcom 2015). Many people are also active on mobile devices while watching television, the practice of media meshing.

Diary studies suggest the mean time spent each day reading books varies between countries, but in Europe the top countries (Estonia and Finland) only average 16 and 12 minutes, respectively (Harmonised European Time Use Survey 2007). When UK adults were asked which single media device they would least like to lose, only 5 percent chose the book (the same proportion opted for radio), most opting for television (37 percent), mobile phone (32 percent), or computer (13 percent) (Ofcom 2015). Between 2003–4 and 2013–14, the number of books borrowed from UK libraries declined by 27 percent and the active lending stock fell by 20 percent; the number of active borrowers fell from 14.8 to 9.8 m (LISU 2015).

In the United States, the National Endowment for the Arts has been producing regular reports into reading. Closely monitored has been the proportion of the US adult population reading literature (novels, short stories, plays, and poetry). While a long-term decline seemed to have been halted – from 1982 to 2002 the figure had fallen by 10 percentage points – by 2008 the proportion was still only 50 percent. The proportion reading any kind of book continued to decline by 2017, down from 57 percent in 2002 to 53 percent (National Endowment for the Arts 2018).

To those horrified by these statistics, it is important to consider what went before. As Umberto Eco wrote, "We can complain that a lot of people spend their day watching TV and never read a book or a newspaper, and this is certainly a social and educational problem, but frequently we forget that the same people, a few centuries ago, were watching at most a few standard images and were totally illiterate" (Eco 1996: 297).

Some fear that our society will become highly dependent on visual cues and information, leaving text behind. Yet, as a writer for *Forbes* notes, the Internet has in fact given text a central place in our lives:

> It seems to me that we currently live in a culture that is more heavily text based than any other time in history. People read all day long. Google, Twitter, and Facebook deliver words. People can't peel their eyes from the smartphone – essentially a text and information distribution mechanism. We actually have trouble NOT reading. Folks are always checking their email and their text messages. Sometimes it is hard to pull away from this matrix of letters. (Shapiro 2014)

Facing competition from all directions, the book industry is likely to continue to see erosion of their base readership. In highly developed nations, as more television is watched, as social media is browsed for news and gossip, or for updates on friends and family, is there not an inevitability about the decline in time spent reading books?

How can the publishing industry reach out to a new audience? What kind of titles do light buyers and non-buyers of books want? Boyd Tonkin wrote: "The book market certainly needs to expand. What it requires is creative innovation, not mad downmarket plunges. For a start, publishers have to think harder about how to

reach the hordes of critical consumers of film, TV, internet and pop culture who should be reading books as sharp and savvy as all the shows, sites and bands they adore" (Tonkin 2005).

Does it, in the end, matter what type of books people read? The arrival of the e-book may have led to surging sales not of literary fiction but of romantic novels and self-published works, but if people are reading books surely that is a good thing? The debate echoes concerns from an earlier era, as Edward Tenner notes: "Even in the golden age of print culture from the 1880s to the 1930s, literary men and women were appalled by most Americans' indifference to book buying and by what they saw as the masses' preference for trashy and sensational reading" (Tenner 2004).

Aside from the Harry Potter phenomenon, a great stimulus to sales of books has been connections with other media. Sales of the *Hunger Games*, the dystopian trilogy by Suzanne Collins, received a massive boost from the film adaptations: "The importance of movies to teen book-buying habits cannot be overstated. Teens reported that among the most important factors that made them aware of particular titles involved either seeing a movie based on a book or having seen a book trailer at a movie theater" (Milliot 2014).

To stimulate a wider sector of the population to read, could the publishing industry to be less elitist in its approach and more imaginative in its workings with other media? Publishing recruits the same personnel to make up its readership, as has been repeatedly highlighted: "Publishers love to hype ethnic minority writers such as Zadie Smith and Monica Ali. But, behind the scenes, publishing offices are overwhelmingly white, middle class and, in the top jobs, male dominated." (*Guardian*, March 12, 2004) Could representatives of a wider cross section of the population produce books that more people want to read, with content more appropriate to their interests? The success of *manga* (Japanese comic books) is an example of more visual material that can encourage reading among young people who are attracted to online entertainment and games rather than books.

The concentration of production in the publishing industry looks certain to continue, as seen in the 2014 merger of Penguin and Random House (Clark and Phillips 2019). The larger houses strive to maintain branding and innovation by keeping smaller imprints alive within the larger business, but there are concerns that the industry is now dominated by the larger players in both publishing and bookselling.

How can a reader find new authors and titles? The dominant Internet retailer, Amazon, has an amazing range of titles on offer but only a few on their front page. Smaller bookshops have given up trying to compete against the discounting of the chains, the Internet, and the supermarkets, either going out of business or becoming more specialist in the type of stock they offer. The shrinkage among bricks and mortar stores offers the challenge of discoverability for publishers and readers alike. If books are less visible on the high street, the presence of authors and books on the web and social media is ever more important.

Free Culture

Lawrence Lessig's book *Free Culture* (2004) is subtitled "How big media uses technology and the law to lock down culture and control creativity." Lessig argues that "A free culture supports and protects creators and innovators. It does this directly by granting intellectual property rights. But it does so indirectly by limiting the reach of those rights, to guarantee that follow-on creators and innovators remain as free as possible from the control of the past" (Lessig 2004: xiv).

The development of the Internet has led to new ways of thinking about intellectual property (IP) and the rights of copyright holders and users. The web provides tremendous opportunities for collaborators to develop software, create multimedia projects, and write stories together. One example is *Wikipedia*, the free online encyclopedia whose entries anyone can edit. Yet the rules surrounding IP remain rigid. When readers share a book – a novel passed round a family or set of friends – they are not penalized for those further uses, and copies can be bought and sold secondhand without royalties being payable to the copyright holder. By contrast, passing on the digital file of an e-book is rarely allowed by the terms of purchase (usually under a license), and controls in the software would most likely prevent this.

If the music industry has become more relaxed about music downloads, should not the publishing industry be more open to new ways of thinking about the copyright environment? In the area of academic journal publishing, there has been debate about how the Internet changes the rules. Without the costs of print, journal publishing potentially becomes more profitable. Publishers would contend that they still have the editorial and quality assurance costs (articles are normally peer reviewed), but challenges from the Open Access movement have led to many journals becoming freely available to users. Some would also argue that publishers ought not to profit from information whose creation has been paid for by the government and research institutions. Should critical research in medicine not be available gratis to anybody? Open Access is having a large impact on the journal industry, and its appeal to research bodies and governments has grown. If research monographs were also to migrate online, publishers would have to work ever harder to justify their existence.

Another initiative is the Creative Commons (CC), based at Stanford Law School, which provides a set of IP licenses for authors to use. For example, a photographer could publish a photo on the web and allow others to use it on their websites as long as it is properly attributed. CC was founded on the notion that not everybody wants to exercise all their IP rights:

> If you want to give people the right to share, use, and even build upon a work you've created, you should consider publishing it under a Creative Commons license. CC gives you flexibility (for example, you can choose to allow only non-commercial uses) and protects the people who use your work, so they don't have to worry about copyright infringement, as long as they abide by the conditions you have specified. (Creative Commons 2015)

While the content found on the Internet is often criticized, it is where people go to find much information, and the expectation is that it is free. Sites such as TripAdvisor and the movie database IMDb rely on user-generated information, and their business models include revenues from advertising and sales referrals. Rather than buy a DIY or gardening manual in print, hobbyists will now play a video on YouTube that offers practical advice.

The trend toward free or inexpensive media content presents a concern for those authors who need to make a living out of their writing. They are already questioning their share of the proceeds from digital delivery. The instinct of publishers is to apply the same thinking as with print, that is, a basic percentage of the proceeds goes to the author. As the print cost disappears, authors wonder why they cannot receive a larger share, perhaps equal to the publisher's income. Arguments over the share paid to the author or bookseller, over the pricing of e-books, and the differentials around print and digital pricing have exercised the industry since the mass market for e-books developed. Yet, as Russ Grandinetti, Senior Vice President at Amazon, points out, the fundamental issue is perhaps rather different:

> The real competition here is not, in our view, between the hardcover book and the ebook. TV, movies, web browsing, video games are all competing for people's valuable time. And if the book doesn't compete we think that over time the industry will suffer. Look at the price points of digital goods in other media. I read a newspaper this morning online, and it didn't cost me anything. Look at the price of rental movies. Look at the price of music. (Ken Auletta 2010)

The Book's Digital Future

Advances in technology have produced a range of devices on which a book can be read, from an e-book reader to a tablet or phone. E-books have the advantages that a reader can take a sizeable selection when traveling, read backlit text, and enlarge the type size to suit. The book exists in both printed and digital form, as p-book and e-book.

Digital technology has also revolutionized the production of printed books. Digital printing, as opposed to traditional offset printing, enables genuine print on demand (single copies to order) as well as short runs (say, 50 copies). This facility has less relevance to the world of mass-market paperbacks, where large print runs mean that the benefits of offset printing still apply, but it is of great interest to most publishers and those who want to self-publish. Publishers are no longer forced to put books that are selling only a few hundred copies a year out of print; they can build up orders and reprint, or use systems at wholesalers and the digital printers to supply copies on demand within a few days. Digital printing and e-books have stimulated a boom in self-publishing. The author of a memoir unlikely to be taken on by a

mainstream publisher can at low cost have it published by a third-party press or publish it themselves for free on Amazon.

A logical extension of print on demand at large production facilities is the development of cheap point-of-sale machines. Jason Epstein forecast a new order in which books will be printed and bound on demand by machines that "within minutes will inexpensively make single copies that are indistinguishable from books made in factories" (Epstein 2002: 178). These machines could be placed anywhere in the world, in bookshops, libraries, and universities, with access to an unlimited catalogue of titles over the Internet. An example of this technology is the Espresso Book Machine, which went on trial in 2006 at the World Bank's InfoShop in Washington. The machine can print and bind a 300-page paperback in three minutes. By 2015, more than 60 were up and running in libraries and bookstores around the world.

What has truly revolutionized the distribution of books is the arrival of the vanilla e-book, a flowable version of the print edition. The selection of titles has expanded fast since the launch of the Kindle and many new titles are available to download in seconds at the touch of a screen. If you fancy reading the latest best-selling thriller or the sequel to the novel you have finished late at night, or want to take a handful of books with you for the holiday, there is no need to venture into your local bookstore or await the delivery of a parcel through the mail. For some fiction titles the proportion of e-book sales can reach or surpass 40 percent, although digital sales have made less of an impact in nonfiction.

There has been experimentation around enhanced e-books, with the addition of audio and video, and the creation of apps. But few have been successful in the marketplace – book apps are competing directly with games, where the business model may work around a low-priced or free version. Income comes from the purchase of new versions and levels once the player is hooked.

The Resilience of the Book

In the early 1990s, the book appeared to be facing a terminal crisis, viewed as "a noble anachronism crushed between televised entertainment and burgeoning electronic information sources" (Tenner 2004). Famously, Steve Jobs declared that "it doesn't matter how good or bad the product is, the fact is that people don't read anymore" (*New York Times*, 15 January 2008). But the book has proved to be resilient in the face of challenges from other media, confounding the predictions of those who saw its replacement (Phillips and Bhaskar, 2019).

Meanwhile, digital technology is providing mechanisms that enhance our ability to produce and distribute both p-books and e-books. The number of new titles published continues to grow in the larger publishing economies, reaching by 2015 a total of 470,000 titles for China, 338,000 in the United States, and 173,000 in the United

Kingdom. An astonishing 458,000 titles were self-published in the United States in 2013.

There has been much press coverage of the growth of e-book sales, but digital remains a minority interest in many markets. Sales figures for traditionally published and self-published titles are not revealed by Amazon, the market leader, but we can see trends from the sales declared by publishers. By 2014, sales of e-books in the United States made up 26 percent of the total market (by volume); in the United Kingdom by 2017, digital revenues had reached 15 percent of the total market and 29 percent of the fiction market (*Bookseller*, 1 June 2015; Publishers Association 2018). But these markets remain unusual: "In all … non-English speaking countries, the market share of ebooks within the trade segment of the book market, is below 10%, ranging from as little as 1 or 2%, to 4.3% in Germany, with growth showing signs of flattening out across the board." (Wischenbart 2015: 23)

Some publishers have switched to other modes of delivering texts. LexisNexis, part of Elsevier, sold off its print operation in the area of law and delivers a fast and reliable service to its customers online. Large reference works such as the *Oxford English Dictionary* and the *Dictionary of National Biography* (*DNB*) have moved online, offering superior search facilities and regular updating, giving access to an evolving title rather than a static edition. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* abandoned door-to-door selling of print volumes in favor of offering a free service over the web, trusting that advertising revenues would support its operations. Those wishing to avoid the advertisements could take out a subscription.

Print remains important, however, because there is a continuing demand from consumers, and it offers a model of publishing that publishers understand and know how to make work. They are comfortable with the physical book: the sale of a physical item yields a return against a predictable cost. A digital product can be highly creative, but since there are no set boundaries, there are uncertainties over the costs involved and profitability is more difficult to control. What is striking is the success of the e-book in vanilla form, while enhanced e-books and apps have had mixed success in the market and have often lost money for publishing houses.

It is correct that there are anxious debates over the long-term decline in reading in many countries. How can this trend be reversed? Is it right to head downmarket? How can we encourage children to read books? Should the industry reduce the number of titles published and reduce the clutter in the consumer's mind? Yet, as print runs diminish, title output continues to rise as everybody works a bit harder to maintain the value of the market.

Expectations that digital content is inexpensive or free are being fueled by developments in other media and the growth in low-cost self-published titles. In turn, this is having an effect on the financial returns of both authors and publishers. Books have become less visible in our lives as bookstores disappear and readers declutter their homes. A secondhand bookseller in Oxfordshire closed his physical store in 2015,

ruing that "everyone is buying everything off the internet and our internet sales overtook the bookshop about a decade ago … People are not creating libraries in the same way they used to …" (*Oxford Mail*, 8 April 2015).

Does the book have a future? As a portable and durable item of technology, it remains in good shape. The printed book can be taken most places, read in bed or in the bath, and passed around friends with ease. As Umberto Eco commented, "The book is like the spoon, scissors, the hammer, the wheel. Once invented, it cannot be improved." (Carrière and Eco 2011: 4).

The production standards of the average paperback are not high, but it can be sold at a highly competitive price. Faced with the low pricing of e-books, there has been renewed interest in higher production values for the printed book, from quality design and typography to a revival of the craft of letterpress printing. As a simple storage device, the p-book remains highly functional. You may not have the equipment to play a vinyl record from the 1960s or an eight-track from the 1970s, but you can still pick up Shakespeare's First Folio and read it. Print solves the archiving problem of the modern age, when formats change with great rapidity, and the pages of websites alter or disappear overnight.

For an author, appearing in print remains preferable to being published on the web. There is an affirmation of one's worth as a writer, and receiving a beautifully printed hardback of your work is an undeniable pleasure. For readers, print holds out the prospect of disappearing into another world, away from screens, into a rich landscape of discovery and imagination.

The book remains for some a status item, to be displayed prominently at home or carried around in public. The success of book clubs or reading groups reveals reading to be a social activity: we like to read, share, and discuss. The distinction can be drawn between "lean forward" technologies like the Internet, which are becoming the primary means to access information for work and education, and the "lean back" technology of the book, still important for enjoyment and relaxation (Adams 2001).

The book can also work with and alongside other media: for example, through cooperation with television shows that recommend titles. In virtual reading groups and fan fiction sites, readers discuss authors and offer up new plot directions for their favorite titles. Published books may have their origins in blogs, college textbooks (many students still prefer print over digital) offer added value on associated websites, and authors provide extra content on their own websites. Readers would welcome the bundling of print with an e-version that could be accessed on the morning commute.

If the digital revolution poses challenges to the book, it also offers fresh opportunities. The choice available on Amazon dwarfs that in any terrestrial bookshop, and new features on the web enable browsing inside books as well as among the selection of titles available. The web has stimulated the secondhand market in books, and some shops that could not make a profit as physical entities have been able to find a new lease of life online. Books no longer need to go out of print, as they can survive as an

e-book or through print on demand. How about customization to the customer's specification? This is possible with e-books, where you can choose your font and type size – why not in print? You could have your copy of *Pride and Prejudice* in the font, type size, or binding of your choice.

In the 1990s, Umberto Eco looked forward to a time when people could communicate directly without the intermediation of publishing houses:

> A great many people do not want to publish; they simply want to communicate with each other. The fact that in the future they will do it by E-mail or over the Internet will be a great boon for books and for the culture and the market of the book. Look at a bookstore. There are too many books. I receive too many books every week. If the computer network succeeds in reducing the quantity of published books, this would be a paramount cultural improvement. (Eco 1996: 301)

In fact, more books are published than ever before, and there has been a boom in self-publishing. For those with a novel or memoir bursting to be written, there is now a mechanism to help you reach an audience. As Gabriel Zaid muses, if "our passion for writing goes unchecked, in the near future there will be more people writing books than reading them" (Zaid 2003: 9).

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