

CARNIVAL AND POSTMODERNISM IN ATWOOD'S THE HANDMAID'S TALE

THE HANDMAID'S TALE: MARGARET ATWOOD'S
USE OF
CARNIVAL AND THE POSTMODERN

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines Margaret Atwood's novel The Handmaid's Tale with the purpose of showing that her combination of carnivalesque and postmodern writing enhances the reader's understanding of the social bonds between people of unequal power (authority). The use of the narrator/icon that relates to an oral culture and the juxtaposition of various scenarios in which women participate highlight the sources of power that particularly affect women.

The introduction establishes the tale as a fantasy whose grotesque realism is rooted in medieval carnival. Chapter I describes the literary devices of carnival as they apply to The Handmaid's Tale. Chapter II focuses on the polyphonic narrator/icon and the *chanson de geste* form of the tale. Chapter II part (b) discusses the postmodern technique which allows inclusion of the historical material that relates past and present.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Chapter One	16
Chapter Two (Part A)	49
Chapter Two (Part B)	82
Conclusion	106
Notes	119
Works Cited	121

Introduction

The good want power, but to weep barren tears.
The powerful goodness want: worse need for them.
The wise want love; and those who love want wisdom;
And all best things are thus confused to ill.
Shelley¹

The desire for power over one's self or over others
is always a dominant factor in the structure of any society.

Shelley's words in the epigraph above illustrate the complexities of power and note the resulting confusion of good and ill when one facet of that complexity takes precedence. The relationship between the individual and social authority is a theme that has fascinated playwrights and novelists since earliest times. The twentieth-century writer is no exception. Glen Deer suggests that the innovative technique of the experimental novelist enhances the reader's ability to gain insight "into the social bonds between people of unequal power (i.e. authority)" (Deer 2). Among the works Deer chooses to support his thesis that the writer's technique is instrumental in revealing this relationship is Margaret Atwood's novel The Handmaid's Tale. In this study I propose to show that Atwood's innovative use of carnivalesque writing does indeed enhance the reader's ability to gain insight into the relationship between the individual and social authority; that this technique highlights the sources of power that particularly affect women; and further, that The Handmaid's Tale does not adhere to any traditional structure of the novel but is experimental and

postmodern in its form.

The Handmaid's Tale transports the reader to a different culture than the one we, as North Americans, presently know. Yet the novel does not trouble the reader with alien geography or incredible beings. The terrain resembles an area of the United States of America. The inhabitants, quite recognizably human, might be Americans. But time is not coincidental with that of the present culture. It is a culture set beyond us, some time in the future, one that has flourished and died before the year 2195. In place of the democratic power structure, with which North Americans are presently familiar, Gilead, an authoritarian state based on puritanical fundamentalism, rigidly orders every aspect of the daily lives of all but those in the most privileged positions. Numerous biblical references, especially the use of the biblical word 'Gilead', evoke a Christian or Calvinist fundamentalism but allusions to other world religions suggest that Gilead's fundamentalism could be Islamic, Hebraic, or even Buddhistic in origin.

Recounted by a female narrator, the story focuses on the handmaids. These are women selected by the state for their potential ability to bear children at a time when infertility is high and live births have reached dangerously low levels. Assigned to Commanders whose wives are infertile, these women submit to a monthly fertility ritual

that recalls the biblical lines in Genesis which Atwood uses as an epigraph for her book:

And when Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children,
 Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, Give me
 children, or else I die.
 And Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel; and
 he said, Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld
 from thee the fruit of the womb?
 And she said, Behold my maid Bilhah, go in
 unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees,
 that I may also have children by her. (30:1-3)

The phrase 'she shall bear upon my knees' is a curious one and does not specifically describe how it is that Rachel might actually have children by her maid, Bilhah. However, the previous phrase, the instruction that Jacob 'go in unto her' (Bilhah), leaves no doubt as to how Rachel intends to acquire the child she so desires. She will take as her own the child sired by her husband since, in biblical times, the maid, as well as any issue, would be the property of master or mistress. Thus, in accordance with this biblical precedent, the Commander attempts to impregnate the handmaid while she lies at the knees of the Commander's wife. (The handmaid has only a two year period in which to become pregnant. If she does not, she will be assigned to the household of another Commander and allotted a new period of time. If attempts to become pregnant by three different Commanders all fail, the handmaid is declared an "Unwoman" and sent to the Colonies. Here, along with other old, unfit or unwanted women, she is assigned to picking up radioactive waste, literally relegated to the

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trash heap.

It is through the eyes of Offred, the narrator handmaid who has known a previous culture, that we come to know the state of Gilead. This mythical name, meaning "hard, uneven ground" is mentioned in Genesis 31: 21,23,25, as well as in various other books of the Bible. While it is said to be a country in Transjordan, "the territory indicated by the name can differ" (Odelain and Segueanu 138). Atwood's use of the name thus suggests no specific place but one we may all encounter, where the going is rough, as in the Gilead she portrays. It is the telling of the handmaid's experiences in Gilead that evokes a whole range of feminist and ecological issues, pertinent to and prevalent in, the present culture. Allusions to job loss, lack of access to personal funds or education, marriage, divorce, and childbirth raise such feminist issues as equality in the workplace, education, reproductive technology and the right to control one's personal destiny. Allusions to high technology, nature, the scarcity or disappearance of plant and animal life and deformed fetuses suggest the ecological issues with which the present culture must now deal. Atwood exposes, in a novel way, the lines of power that permeate these issues. Using an imaginary situation, she makes the reader aware of connections, alliances and dilemmas that exist for women on a universal scale. The work is neither sedition nor revolutionary,

yet, through her particular use of carnavalesque writing,
 the author produces a cautionary tale.

As do most critics, Glen Deer labels The Handmaid's Tale as "dystopian." R.W. Chambers points out that, in contrast to "utopian," a term which in the modern sense signifies "something visionary and unpractical...an easy-going paradise, whose only fault is that it is too happy and ideal to be realized"(149), "dystopian" connotes an anti-utopia, a bad or unlucky place. Ironically, even Sir Thomas More's famous work Utopia is, by these standards dystopian, since it is a place where "few of us would feel quite happy" (149). It depicts a "sternly righteous and puritanical state"(149) as does Atwood's novel about Gilead, a place whose borders, like the biblical Gilead, are unknown.

A dystopian novel within the Canadian tradition is James De Mille's A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder. Written in the mid-nineteenth century, it has several features in common with The Handmaid's Tale. Both novels are, of course, printed texts, but each is a narrated monologue and has a distinctly oral component. In each, nature "less terrible than man"(De Mille 37) is something to be cherished, not conquered. There are allusions to night and darkness, to knowledge and to the historic past. Both novels exude a satiric wit and both end abruptly. De Mille's story returns to his own time frame; Atwood's tale ends with an imagined future time.

Both Glen Deer and Amin Malak compare The Handmaid's Tale to other twentieth-century works such as Zamyatin's We, Huxley's Brave New World, and Orwell's 1984. In order to distinguish Atwood's novel from these classics within the dystopian tradition, Malak articulates some of their salient features. He notes that "dystopias ^{政治, 经济都一增, 控制, 恐怖} essentially deal with power: power as the prohibition or permission of human potential; power in its absolute form"(10). They reveal conflicts that arise for the individual when confronted with any of a long list of binary oppositions such as emotion and reason, creative imagination and logic, love and power, good and evil, which Malak terms dialectical dualities(10). They may take the form of dream-nightmare, fantasy or reality. Dystopian characters tend to be two-dimensional and the societies in which they exist are associated "with fear of the future" (11). Quintessentially ideological novels, dystopias, Malak suggests, fall into the category of a Roman à thèse and thus carry a message. Beyond these basic dystopian features, Malak ascribes the added elements of irony and feminism to The Handmaid's Tale. Based on the fact that Atwood presents a society with a highly advanced technology that exists some two hundred years beyond the present, many critics see it as futuristic.² But there are those, like Malak, who also note its resemblance to science fiction or fantasy.³ The novel clearly evinces traits of fantasy as well as elements of grotesque realism.

Rosemary Jackson defines fantasy as a literary mode. While she acknowledges a debt to Tzvetan Todorov who seeks to discover a pattern, "a principle operative in a number of texts rather than what is specific about each of them" (Todorov 3), she disagrees with his mainly structural analysis that points to fantasy as a genre. She suggests that fantasy belongs to mode, a broader more inclusive category out of which genre develops. Mode, in this case the fantastic mode, resembles language (langue) that takes various forms (paroles). From these forms stem such genres as romance literature or the marvellous (fairy tales, science fiction), fantastic literature (Poe, Maupassant, Kafka) and "related tales of abnormal psychic states, delusion, hallucination, etc.." (7). The metaphysical and aesthetic elements that distinguish such individual works Todorov regards merely as organic characteristics. Jackson, on the other hand, sees the need "to consider the social and political implications of literary forms" (6). She notes that, like any text, literary fantasy is produced from within, and determined by, its social context. She cites William Irwin's definition: "A fantasy is a story based on and controlled by an overt violation of what is generally accepted as possibility; it is the narrative result of transforming the condition contrary to fact into 'fact' itself" (quoted in Jackson 14). This definition of fantasy which coincides with Malak's notion of dystopian fantasy is

the one applied here to The Handmaid's Tale. Jackson cautions that, while the violation of dominant assumptions inherent in this definition threatens to subvert rules and conventions taken to be normative, such violation "is not in itself a socially subversive activity...It does, however, disturb 'rules' of artistic representation and literature's reproduction of the real"(14). She recalls that Dostoevsky saw fantastic literature as the "only appropriate medium for suggesting a sense of estrangement of alienation from 'natural' origins"(17). Jackson also notes Sartre's observation that fantasy, which manifested human power to transcend the human, fulfilled an escapist function only as long as religious faith prevailed. But in the "secularized, materialistic world of modern capitalism", fantasy serves a different function. Although it retains its function as a pressure against hierarchical systems,

it does not invent supernatural regions, but it presents a natural world inverted into something strange, something 'other'. It becomes domesticated, humanized, turning from transcendental explorations to transcriptions of a human condition.(Jackson 17)

This is surely the fantasy world of The Handmaid's Tale, where we find the natural world inverted, the strange world of Gilead that transcribes the human condition into something "other." With the opening words "We slept" and by entitling the first chapter "Night," Atwood sets the stage for a dream fantasy. The point of entry is the school gymnasium, an area familiar in one way or another to almost

any reader. The setting evokes thoughts and images for the narrator. In turn, the narrator's projection of those images evokes for the reader a similar time of life. The images are wide ranging and suggest progressive generational change as well as various social situations. Thus the reader, like the narrator and the spectators, participates in a kind of carnival of life which the novel reveals. While clearly marking the boundaries between reality and fantasy, Atwood simultaneously draws her reader along with the narrator into the world of fantasy. Again, before the short first chapter is complete, she reinforces the difference between reality and fantasy: "We still have our bodies. That was our fantasy"(14).

Fantasy, Jackson notes, can be traced back to carnival art(95). Its roots are found in the menippea, a traditional form of fantastic art, characterized by the same subversive function which, as indicated above, "disturbs the rules of artistic representation" in literary fantasy. The menippea allowed movement between this world, an underworld and an upperworld; it combined past, present and future and often contained states of hallucination, eccentric behaviour or other extraordinary situations. Jackson draws on Mikhail Bakhtin's definitions of the menippea and his discovery of similar features in the works of Rabelais, Swift, Sterne, and others to introduce the qualities of fantastic texts. Jackson says:

Bakhtin points toward fantasy's hostility to static discrete units, to its juxtaposition of incompatible elements and its resistance to fixity. Spatial, temporal and philosophical ordering systems all dissolve; unified notions of character are broken; language and syntax become incoherent. Through its 'misrule', it permits 'ultimate questions' about social order, or metaphysical riddles as to life's purpose. Unable to give affirmation to a closed unified, or omniscient vision, the *menippea* violates social propriety. It tells of descents into underworlds of brothels, prisons, orgies, graves; it has no fear of the criminal, erotic, mad, or dead.(15)

All of these menippean concepts are, according to Bakhtin, embodied in the rituals of carnival. In Rabelais and His World Bakhtin contends that carnival is a "world inside out" (à l'envers) a topsy-turvy world that celebrates a temporary liberation from established order(11).

Similarly, the grotesque realism evident in Atwood's novel has its roots in carnival. Bakhtin points out that the material bodily principle with images of the human body and "its food, drink, defecation, and sexual life, plays a predominant role" in the work of Rabelais (Rabelais 18). For this, Rabelais has been accused of "gross physiologism", "biologism" or "naturalism." Bakhtin explains, however, that the images of this material bodily principle in Rabelais's work are the heritage of the culture of folk humour expressed in the Middle Ages through carnival ritual and spectacle. They are "that peculiar type of imagery...that peculiar aesthetic concept which is characteristic of this folk culture and which differs sharply from the aesthetic concept of the following

ages"(Rabelais 18). This aesthetic concept Bakhtin labels "grotesque realism." Its essential principle is degradation, "the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity"(Rabelais 19).

Bakhtin thus concludes that many Latin parodies of the Middle Ages are "nothing but a selection of all the degrading, earthy details taken from the Bible, the Gospels and other sacred texts." Parody, laughter, and all other forms of grotesque realism "degrade, bring down to earth, turn their subject into flesh." This process of degradation depicts the earth as an element that "devours, swallows up (the grave, the womb) and at the same time an element of birth, renascence (the maternal breasts)"(Rabelais 20,21). It concerns itself with

the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy and birth; it has not only a destructive negative aspect, but also a regenerating one...Grotesque realism knows no other lower level; it is the fruitful earth and the womb. It is always conceiving.(Rabelais 21)

The regenerating, ambivalent aspect of grotesque realism makes medieval parody unique, not at all like the "purely formalist literary parody of modern times, which has a solely negative character"(Rabelais 21). The following parody from Atwood's novel reveals the same ambivalent aspect of grotesque realism found in medieval parody:

The Commander's Wife hurries in, in her ridiculous white cotton nightgown, her spindly legs sticking out beneath it. Two of the Wives in their blue dresses and veils hold her by the arms, as if she needs it; she has a tight little smile on her face, like a hostess at a party she'd rather not be giving. She must know what we think of her. She scrambles onto the Birthing Stool, sits on the seat behind and above Janine, so that Janine is framed by her: her skinny legs come down on either side, like the arms of an eccentric chair. Oddly enough, she's wearing white cotton socks, and bedroom slippers, blue ones made of fuzzy material, like toilet-seat covers. But we pay no attention to the Wife, we hardly even see her, our eyes are on Janine. In the dim light, in her white gown, she glows like a moon in cloud.

She's grunting now with effort. "Push, push, push," we whisper. "Relax. Pant. Push, push, push." We're with her, we're the same as her, we're drunk. Aunt Elizabeth kneels with an outspread towel to catch the baby, here's the crowning, the glory, the head, purple and smeared with yoghurt, another push and it slithers out, slick with fluid and blood, into our waiting. Oh praise.(135)

This grotesque realism and the elements of fantasy, both of which are prevalent in Atwood's novel and are rooted in carnival, suggest carnivalesque writing which takes on the rich idiom of forms, symbols and language found in carnival.

Bakhtin describes carnival as a time of feasting, of comic play, that celebrates a temporary liberation from established order. It delights in the grotesque humour of a "monde à l'envers", a world upside-down, whose images of bodily life are "fertility, growth, and a brimming-over abundance"(Rabelais 19). All hierarchies of rank and privilege, and all prohibitions are suspended. The atmosphere is one of gaiety in which the individual, from serf to king, has the right to speak and be heard. As in

life or in the market place, carnival has no stage; it is a folk world where everyone participates and even the onlooker is a part of the scene.

While the pre-Romantic period, with its narrow concept of popular character and folk lore, did not accommodate this "peculiar culture of the market-place and of folk laughter with all its manifestations" (Rabelais 4), it was an important feature of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. "A boundless world of humourous forms and manifestations opposed the official and serious tone of medieval ecclesiastical and feudal culture" (Rabelais 4). A variety of folk festivities, comic rites and cults, clowns and fools, giants, dwarfs, jugglers and "the vast and manifold literature of parody" (Rabelais 4) all belong to one culture of folk carnival humour which Bakhtin divides into three distinct forms. While all of these forms are present in The Handmaid's Tale, the reader quickly discerns its air of alienation and repression, its lack of gaiety and abundance, the absence of personal freedom. If not to create the liberating ambience, the festive atmosphere of carnival, why then, has Atwood availed herself of the literary devices inherent in carnivalesque writing?

The Handmaid's Tale is primarily the story of one young woman's experience. It is not a love story, nor an epic tale of great deeds; it is simply a life situation in which the handmaid is enmeshed. However, to relate such an

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experience in the intimate detail of biographical form, sometimes very intimate detail, without social comment would seem tasteless and serve no purpose. To do so with comment, even for a didactic purpose, risks a biased presentation. A commentary or discussion by several commentators that offers various points of view, as is the case in De Mille's A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder, merely debates an experience, told after the fact from only one perspective, that of the manuscript writer. None of the commentators could be certain that the tale was neither myth nor hoax. All they had to rely on was the impersonal text of the manuscript found in a copper cylinder floating at sea. In contrast, The Handmaid's Tale is recounted in such a way that the reader inhabits the same carnival space as the narrator, and is, consequently, privy to her experience. What makes the tale of interest is the ⁴³anonymity of the narrative voice and the ability of that voice to express the societal relationships of women not only in the present but in the historic past and in the future.

The polyphony of carnival, its cyclical nature and its images of bodily life allow us to look at the past; they permit a grotesque projection of the future based on events with which we are familiar in our present culture. The reader participating in the carnival that Atwood portrays becomes aware of things and relationships from the characters' point of view as they understand it, "in their

spirit and their tone. The author as carrier of his own idea does not come in contact with a single thing; he comes in contact only with people" (Bakhtin, Dostoevsky's Poetics 99). Through carnivalesque writing Atwood presents the 'facts of life' for women without the bias created by a single point of view. Without the mask of carnival it would be difficult to portray such an unbiased and panoramic view of women's status.

Chapter one will explore the carnival forms in detail to show that Atwood establishes her fantasy in a Medieval style of folk culture that permits the use of the grotesque realism found in carnival and that this carnivalesque writing allows her to incorporate literary and historical traditions that delineate social bonds between people of unequal authority. Chapter two will show that this combination of fantastic and carnivalesque writing results in a postmodern work.

Chapter 1

Carnival, Bakhtin says, is,

the place for working out, in a concretely sensuous, half-real, half-play-acted form, a new mode of interrelationship between individuals, counterposed to all the all-powerful socio-hierarchical relationships. (Dostoevsky's Poetics 123)

In The Handmaid's Tale, Margaret Atwood begins this "working out" with the ambivalence that derives from two worlds, the natural and the fantastic. The gymnasium scene which begins the opening chapter is familiar and real to all. It serves as the threshold or point of entry for this carnivalesque dream fantasy that recognizes both worlds, a fantasy filled with extremes of passion which Sherrill Grace says, "shatter the individual's epic or tragic wholeness"(120). As I noted in the introduction, the first chapter of the first section opens with the words "We slept" and is entitled "Night." These words allow the possibility of a dream fantasy and the notion is reinforced by the statement, "We still have our bodies. That was our fantasy"(14). The natural world is often evoked throughout the fantasy, but, lest the reader confuse the real with the fantastic, s/he is reminded regularly that the tale is a fantasy. The text, divided into fifteen sections, has six that are entitled "Night," and each of these begins with a situation favourable to fantasy. Section III begins: "The night is mine, my own time, to do with as I will, as long as I am quiet"(47). The sentence "All this is pure speculation" reinforces and continues the fantasy. The opening of section VII evokes a

feeling of eerie tenseness that joins it to the fantasy world of the text as well as the natural world it goes on to discuss. Section IX depicts another setting prone to fantasy and reinforces the idea with such words as "illusion of depth" and "Perspective is necessary"(153). In section XI the ominous darkness of night and eerie light are evoked; a pun on the words "Night falls" augments the world of fantasy (201). Section XIII with its discussion of heat at night and its reference to "phosphorescence" and "dull gray infrared"(271) induce the notion of mirage or fantasy. The opening words of the last section number XV, which is also the last chapter, leave no doubt that the tale is a fantasy: "I sit in my room, at the window waiting. In my lap is a handful of crumpled stars...Yet it isn't waiting, exactly. It's more like a form of suspension"(303). Fantasy is, of course, a kind of suspension.

The ambivalence of both worlds is embodied in the main character, the narrator. It is she who belongs to the natural world, she who, like the hallucinating subject of modern fantasy (Jackson 16), becomes isolated from her community, the natural world evoked in the opening scene. It is she who experiences the carnivalesque fantasy. Her isolation is reinforced by the fact that Offred, as narrator, while mentioning the names of husband Luke and friend Moira in her former community, never divulges her own former name. Anonymous, she remains distinct from that community as she, as well as the reader, enters her fantasy of Gilead. Here she is identified only by the name Offred

that links her with the Commander of her household.

Although the single narrative voice is the vehicle that expresses the narrator's original culture and the fantasy world of Gilead, that voice is, in effect, a collective one. It is this singular/collective nature of the narrator's role that relates it to carnival.

Linked through name and sexual union to a man in both worlds (to Luke in her former world, to the Commander in Gilead) Offred, as narrator, operates as a collective voice in both. In the very short first chapter (one and a half pages), Atwood uses the first person plural pronoun "we" fourteen times. The first person singular pronoun "I" is used only four times, just often enough to establish the narrating "I." Four is visibly a part of fourteen both numerically and orthographically. Just as four is an integral part of fourteen so is the single "I" an integral whole part of the collective "we." This single voice that transcends the narrator's culture and speaks from that of her fantasy links both; yet the person behind the voice is anonymous. As part of the collective "we" in the original culture, no individual personal or physical details are given. The voice has no discernible identity, no name. Within the fantasy, the same voice becomes that of one of the many handmaidens, whose former name has been obscured: "My name isn't Offred, I have another name which nobody uses now because it's forbidden"(94). The name Offred only identifies the narrator handmaid as belonging to Fred, the given name of the Commander to whose household she is

assigned. Other handmaids are similarly identified.

Except for occasional outings when they are accompanied by another handmaid, unknown to them and from another household, the handmaids are cloistered within the walls of their Commander's dwelling. Clothed identically in a red costume fashioned like a nun's habit, they also wear a winged headdress that obscures their faces from public view: "What they must see is the white wings only, a scrap of face, my chin and part of my mouth. Not the eyes"(38). All traces of personal identity are obliterated. This lack of individual characterization serves a twofold purpose. Because there are no distinguishing features, no particular persona or placement in the hierarchy of the narrator's original culture, and because she is faceless, one of many dressed in red within the fantasy, the reader's attention must be focused directly on the voice and what it is saying. Second, this voice is polyphonic. As part of the collective "we," it speaks for the other voices, other women. Polyphony, one of the literary devices intrinsic to carnivalesque writing, is evident in the repetition of the pronoun "we" fourteen times. Similarly, the author repeats four times the semantically polyphonic pronoun "they" which refers to the Aunts who guard and train the handmaids for their specific reproductive role. These aunts are the representatives of the Gilead hierarchy that has power over, that controls the lives of the handmaids. Thus the narrating female voice, the polyphonic "I," representative of other women, establishes a we/they dichotomy that

continues throughout the novel. This dichotomy is, of course, a condition of carnival. As in Bakhtin's model of folk culture, it reveals a fundamental high/low binarism that locks the official and unofficial together. "Bakhtin's use of Carnival centers the concept on its doubleness" (White 16). There must be prior expression of the official or at least its possibility before there can be any expression of the unofficial. The narrator's voice expresses the unofficial. The we/they binary opposition confirms the presence of the official.

Although the single narrative voice makes the text a monologue, its dialogic nature, that is, its double-voicing or discourse that has "an orientation toward someone else's discourse" (Bakhtin, Dostoevsky's Poetics 199), reflects the voices of others. The single voice that recounts the events of Gilead and of the previous culture echoes the norm, the ideology of those cultures. Consequently, it reflects and expresses the official. The same voice, however, through the parody, laughter and indecent language of carnival, debases the norm and thus expresses the unofficial. A narrating voice that presents only the official norm risks the reader's false adhesion to that norm because it offers no other perspective. The dialogic nature of the handmaid's discourse in Atwood's tale reflects a being who communicates both the official and the unofficial. "To be," Bakhtin writes, "means to communicate...To be means to be for another, and through the other, for oneself" (Dostoevsky's Poetics 287). To look inside oneself as the narrator does

in her fantasy is, then, to look "into the eyes of another or with the eyes of another" (Dostoevsky's Poetics 287). Thus, while the narrator's dialogic discourse results in an ongoing dynamic relationship rather than a dialectical one, the reader still becomes aware of perspectives other than the norm.

This single voice, which describes for us the mores and customs of Gilead, is mindful of the voice that operates in an oral tradition. Throughout the novel the author constantly reminds us of the orality of the handmaid's tale. The orality and the dialogic nature of discourse are emphasized as the narrator handmaid begins her story. The situation demands the full attention of both speaker and listener in order to communicate: "We learned to lip-read, our heads flat on the beds, turned sideways, watching each other's mouths. In this way we exchanged names from bed to bed"(14). The lack of reading or writing material of any kind stresses the orality of original communication. Offred says: "Tell, rather than write, because I have nothing to write with and writing is in any case forbidden"(49). Offred can only record events in her memory and pass them on orally, just as the poet or chronicler transmits the epic of an oral culture where no written text exists.

Before the advent of the written text, the task of relating stories and traditions fell to those who could recall events and who had the skills to articulate them, to voice them for an audience. According to Joseph J. Duggan, such were the men and women who created the epic in France;

these were the chroniclers, troubadours, and jongleurs, itinerant performers who composed something known as the *chanson de geste*, or who performed the lyric poetry of northern France and also "juggled, did acrobatic tricks, exhibited trained animals, played instruments and staged mimes and other entertainments"(Duggan 18). The chronicler or jongleur is, then, a part of that medieval folk culture, the carnival world of which Bakhtin speaks. Duggan explains that jongleurs were illiterate and belonged to the lowest level of medieval society:

Female jongleurs, for example, were routinely assumed to engage in prostitution. Since literacy was confined almost entirely to the clergy and the higher nobility in the period in which the *chansons de geste* flourished, it appears that most jongleurs were illiterate...in medieval iconography jongleurs are never seen using books in their performances(Duggan 18).

Aided by an "improvisational technique that has been solidly documented in other preliterate cultures," the jongleurs could perform epic tales or *chansons de geste* ranging in length from eight hundred to thirty-five thousand lines(Duggan 19). Orally composed and orally transmitted, the tales are nearly all anonymous. It is into this kind of carnival folk culture that Offred, the narrator handmaid, fits. She is anonymous and like the chronicler/ jongleur of medieval carnival she has an epic tale to tell, which, when recorded in print, amounts to some three hundred and seven pages in length. She lives in a society that relegates her to "the colonies," the lowest level of society, unless she

produces a child for the state. Any sexual activity other than that related to procreation is considered to be prostitution. When the Commander's wife discovers that Offred has had an unscheduled and forbidden assignation with the Commander, she equates Offred to a prostitute: "Just like the other one. A slut. You'll end up the same"(299). Offred herself is not illiterate because the culture to which she once belonged was literate and education was open to women. She does, however, live in a strictly oral society. She can only recall from memory what she has previously learned because women in Gilead are forbidden to read; they have no access to books. Eventually, all but a very few, like the Aunts who help police the women, will be illiterate:

Are they old enough to remember anything of the time before, playing baseball, in jeans and sneakers, riding their bicycles? Reading books, all by themselves? Even though some of them are no more than fourteen...still they'll remember. And the ones after them will, for three or four or five years, but after that they won't. They'll always have been in white, in groups of girls, they'll always have been silent.(231)

Offred's status as a storyteller is thus similar to that of the medieval chronicler and she relates her story in a similar manner; she speaks directly to her audience. As listeners, the chronicler's audience would have been able to participate, to question, add to, or even put a stop to the tale by refusing to listen. The reader, on the other hand, participates only if the text provides such an opportunity.

Atwood's text does this through allusion and the parody of carnivalesque writing.

Although the reader, in fact, does not hear but rather reads the handmaid's tale, the reader is unusually conscious of the orality of the text because of the narrator's numerous references to the telling of a story such as the fairy tale she mentions(19); or "I'm too tired to go on with this story"(138); or "it was only a story"(154); or "When I get out of here, if I'm ever able to set this down, even in the form of one voice to another"(144). Also, the reader is aware that the story had been voiced over on music tapes and was therefore originally oral, not written: "There were some thirty tapes in the collection altogether, with varying proportions of music to spoken word"(314). The notion of orality is heightened by the fact that everything is filtered through an anonymous, impersonal voice. Without other means of information the reader is forced to concentrate only on the voice and thus "hears" what the voice is saying. The sense of orality is further reinforced because the narrator presumes an audience: "But if it's a story, even in my head, I must be telling it to someone. You don't tell a story only to yourself. There is always someone else. Even when there is no one"(49).

By creating a marketplace or carnival atmosphere in which the handmaid can tell her tale, Atwood brings narrator

and reader together in the same textual/textural space. Having established The Handmaid's Tale as fantasy in Section I, a section comprised entirely of the very short first chapter, Atwood entitles Section II "Shopping." This section describes the household where Offred lives, and marks out the boundaries of the territory to which she has access. As handmaid to the household, Offred is commissioned to buy provisions. The shopping trip which puts her into a marketplace setting also portrays the carnival symbols of a crude slum naturalism which, Bakhtin explains, are the adventures of truth on earth which "take place on the high road, in brothels, in the dens of thieves, in taverns, marketplaces, prisons, in the erotic origins of secret cults, and so forth"(Dostoevsky's Poetics 115). Chapter five, which is foregrounded in chapter four through the idea of a "black market"(27), tells of Offred's visit to stores without names that advertise what they do not have: "places are known by their signs alone"(35). The wooden sign at one shop shows "three eggs, a bee, a cow," which suggests to Offred "milk and honey." But there is no land flowing with milk and honey here. Offred can only buy the few eggs for which she has tokens. The oranges she covets are unavailable to her. Similarly, at "All Flesh...marked by a large wooden pork chop hanging from two chains"(37), the choice is limited because "meat is expensive, and even the Commanders don't have it every day"(37). With this

marketplace atmosphere as venue, Offred presents her story in a form that emulates the *chanson de geste* of medieval times.

The Handmaid's Tale, as noted earlier, is a monologue. Among the various literary forms that a monologue may take is a rather elaborate one, close to a ballad or song (Pavis 260). Such a monologue is composed of stanzas or strophes regularly built on the same model of rhyme and rhythm and spoken by the same person, usually alone on stage. Each stanza ends with a fall that marks a stage in the speaker's thought. The well rounded stanza is that which embraces a single idea and which ends with that idea (Pavis 382). The *chanson de geste*, also a monologue, is divided into "laisses" or stanzas of varying lengths which have a single assonance or rhyme. The lines have ten or twelve syllables and each has a caesura or pause. Treatises report that the entire story was sung to a chant like melody and accompanied by a musical instrument known as a "vielle" (Duggan 19). This elaborate form is the basis of Atwood's novel. It parodies the complex epic tale that is the *chanson de geste*.

The laisses or stanzas of the monologue that is The Handmaid's Tale are the fifteen sections that make up the text. Like the stanzas of the *chanson de geste*, they are of varying lengths. Those entitled "Night" comprise only one short chapter, never more than five pages in length. While

each of these serves to renew the notion of fantasy, their main function is that of a mnemonic device which helps to organize the material and aids in the advancement of the tale. Embedded in each of these sections is a word or concept that prompts or reminds the narrator of the words or actions needed to continue. The first section entitled "Night" establishes the narrator as part of the collective we; constant repetition of the pronoun "we" also establishes the narrator and the women who are "we" as the subject of the tale. The ensuing section entitled "Shopping" acquaints the reader/listener with the various aspects of the subject's milieu. The next section entitled "Night," (no.III) uses a play on the words "lie" and "lay" to evoke the material for the sections that follow it. The double meaning of the verb "lie" suggests either untruth and therefore fantasy or it suggests a flat or prone position of the body. The latter meaning, extended in the pun through the principle parts of the verb, lie, lay, and laid and the words "I'd like to lay her"(47), a common vernacular expression attributed to men, recalls the physical relationship possible between men and women in love, in rape, or in marriage, and on which the narrator expands in the sections "Waiting Room," "Nap," and "Household." The next "Night" section (no.VII) begins: "I lie in bed"(113). While it still turns on the word "lie," the pun of the previous "Night" section, this section expands to include

the probable result of physical union -- pregnancy, whether effected through love, rape or marriage. The ensuing section, "Birthday," therefore, deals with numerous facts of reproduction. The twice repeated word "perspective," "What I need is perspective...Perspective is necessary"(153) in the following "Night" section(no.IX), prompts the narrator to discuss different perspectives on the physical relationship between men and women depending on the context: "Context is all"(154). The ensuing section, "Soul Scrolls", thus presents this relationship from the viewpoints of the concubine or reproductive organism, wife, lover, or mistress. The next "Night" section(no.XI) puns on the verb "to fall": "Night falls. Or has fallen...night falls instead of rising...you can see night rising not falling" (201). This play on words is the device that recalls for the narrator the fall into temptation, "the temptations of our own flesh"(201). Possibly this punning on the word "fall" also alludes to the fall from grace of Eve in the Garden of Eden, since the mention of a garden -- "the scent from the garden rises like heat from a body" (201) -- is foregrounded in the previous sentence with the word temptation. The concept is reinforced again with the repetition, three times in short succession, of the word temptation used within the context of a parody on the Lord's Prayer. That there are various perspectives on such temptation and desires is again recalled by the comment

"Context is all"(203). These perspectives are filtered through the context of a brothel, under cover of night, in those chapters included in the section "Jezebel's." The next "Night" section (no.XIII) perpetuates both the darkness of night and the heat of desire discussed in the previous sections. It begins: "The heat at night is worse than the heat in daytime"(271). It ends with the concept of betrayal which results in condemnation and revenge, themes of the ensuing chapters in "Salvaging" (section no.XIV). The last section (no.XV) entitled "Night" retires the fantasy. The word "wait" and the oft repeated word "waiting" as the chapter opens, stress the pregnant silence that usually occurs when something ends abruptly and without resolution. Here, as in the previous "Night" section, there is a reference to the garden, but this time, "There's nobody in the garden"(303) so there can be no fall from grace. Repetition of the word "waiting" prompts the narrator to speculate at length on the various avenues of action open to her. None of these is palatable. Having taken stock of the situation and armed with the knowledge that she is not alone -- "Behind me I feel her presence, my ancestress, my double"(305) -- she waits to act. Accordingly she steps up, either "into the darkness within; or else the light"(307). Thus, as a result of key words or mnemonic devices contained therein, the sections entitled "Night," which begin and end the fantasy, also operate throughout the text as a refrain

that loosely structures the other chapters or stanzas.

Most of the "Night" chapters or stanzas conform to the definition of a well-rounded stanza in that they embrace a single idea and they end with the same idea. The complete text or group of stanzas that make up the *chanson de geste* begins with night, a concept which is sustained throughout and with which the narration ends. The plural concept "we" opens section I, is maintained throughout the section and terminates it. Similarly, sections III and VII center on the concept of belief. Both end with that same concept. Usually stanzas of the *chanson de geste* are made up of lines that rhyme, are ten to twelve syllables in length and manifest a single assonance. The stanzas of The Handmaid's Tale are not so constructed. Instead they take, as shown above, an alternate form of stanza which is made according to thought as well as form, and which more nearly resembles prose (Holman/Harmon 481). Rather than a specific metre, one finds a recurrence, with variations, of phrases and images that have syntactical patterns. The prose has a rhythmic cadence which suggests free verse and the verse has definite assonance. Scattered throughout the text are paragraphs like the one below, that display a particular assonance; in this case, of the vowel [o]:

I sit in my chair, the wreath on the ceiling
floating above my head, like a frozen halo, a
zero. A hole in space where a star exploded. A
ring on water where a stone's been thrown. All
things white and circular. I wait for the day to
unroll, for the earth to turn, according to the

round face of the implacable clock. The geometrical days, which go around and around, smoothly and oiled. Sweat already on my upper lip, I wait, for the arrival of the inevitable egg, which will be lukewarm like the room and will have a green film on the yolk and will taste faintly of sulphur.(210)

The assonant [o] sound lends force to diction which itself emphasizes the aimless circularity of a path that always returns to the same starting point. Words such as "wreath", "halo", "zero", "hole", "ring", "circular", "turn", "clock", "around and around", all express within a few sentences, the notion of circularity. Words like "sit", "frozen", "floating", "space", "exploded" and "implacable" suggest, in turn, lack of motion, lack of cohesion and lack of change. As well as assonance, alliteration and onomatopoeia are found in the free verse of Atwood's tale:

"Head for the back," Ofglen murmurs at my side. "We can talk better." And when we are kneeling, heads bowed slightly, I can hear from all around us a susurration, like the rustling of insects in tall dry grass: a cloud of whispers. This is one of the places where we can exchange news more freely, pass it from one to the next. It's hard for them to single out any one of us or hear what's being said. And they wouldn't want to interrupt the ceremony, not in front of the television cameras.(226)

While the stanzas of the narrator's tale are not marked off in the metred lines of ten or twelve syllables usually found in the *chanson de geste*, its free verse does have a staccato rhythm which derives from the predominant use of one-syllable words in quite short sentences. Like the lines of the *chanson*, the short free verse lines are

often marked by punctuation that effects a pause or caesura as in this example:

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 difference 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.(47)

All of the features described above, the stanzas of varying length, the free verse, the rhythm, the assonance and the caesura are features that mark The Handmaid's Tale as a *chanson de geste*. But the greatest similarity between the two is the fact that both have a chant-like quality and both are accompanied by music. Apart from assonance and the staccato effect of one-syllable words intrinsic to chanting, in each of the novel's sections there is constant repetition of particular words within a short space of one another that adds to the sensation of chanting. This example repeats the word "things" five times:

No wonder those things used to happen. Things, the word 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.(65)

Other such words are:

faith (3 times, 67)
room (9 times, 89)
butter (9 times, 107)
egg, eggs, or egg-cup (17 times, 121)
smile (4 times, 148)
now (6 times, 149)

The chanting sensation which emanates from such repetition is not surprising since the narrator handmaid is herself often involved in chanting. When speaking of an event which she attended in pre-Gilead times she says: "Some of them were chanting"(48). As Offred arrives for the birth of Janine's child she can "hear the chanting of the women who are already there"(126). During the birth she notes the "soft chanting" and "the chanting women"(133). The words "we chant" are twice repeated(133) and the chanting is made obvious with words repeated in sequence: "Pant! pant! pant! we chant" (134) or "Push, push, push" we whisper. "Relax. Pant. Push, push, push." The construction of parallel phrases throughout the text continues the notion of chanting. Paragraphs in chapter eighteen begin variously: "Here is what I believe. I believe...I believe this. I also believe...I also believe...The things I believe. But I believe..."(14). Chapter thirty five employs three similarly structured phrases: "Who knows what they do on their own or with other men? Who knows what they say or where they are likely to go. Who can tell what they really are"(238). This complete sentence found in chapter four is repeated verbatim in chapter nine: "They also serve who only stand and wait"(28,62). The notion of chanting is sustained through the use of biblical passages like the one from the Beatitudes that constantly repeats the word "Blessed"(99). The chanting is also sustained in parodies

that emulate universally-known prayers. One is the parody of the Hebrew man's prayer: "Oh God, King of the universe, thank you for not creating me a man"(204). Another is that of the Lord's Prayer: "My God. Who Art in the Kingdom of Heaven, which is within..."(204). Diction such as "litanies"(120), "pray", "prayed"(204) "music", "song", and "singing"(3, 26, 50, 64, 96, 291) also enhances the "chanting" of the text.

Although Offred says, "There isn't much music in this house..."(64), the suggestion of music is there in the background. It begins with the opening paragraph: "the music lingered, a palimpsest of unheard sound... ." There is reference to Gospel music(26), to music like "an old love song"(50) to the secular music of television(64), to "a rock concert"(291), to "singing"(92, 96, 128) and to chants that are songs: "Come to the Church in the Wildwood"(92), "Amazing Grace" and "I feel so lonely, baby"(64). There is even an allusion to a lute, that stringed instrument popular in the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries used to accompany singers much as the vielle was used to accompany the *chanson de geste*(201). All of this "music" accompanies the voice of the narrator as she tells her tale. The epilogue entitled "Historical Notes" informs us that there actually is musical accompaniment throughout the story, since the recording of the handmaid's story has been achieved by "the superimposition of voice upon music

tape"(315). Thus, it appears that The Handmaid's Tale is vested with many of the characteristics of the *chanson de geste* or song of great deeds. Although Atwood's tale does not evoke traditional ideas about heroes and their great deeds, it does honour the handmaid in her heroic efforts to bear children for a state whose population has been decimated. Like the *chanson de geste*, whose heroes' deeds "are set in the context of their kinship, alliances"(Duggan 20), the handmaid's story, set in the context of reproduction, does emphasize kinship and lineage. As Joseph Duggan points out, "geste signifies not only 'deeds' and 'tale about a hero's exploits' but also 'lineage' and cycle of songs about lineage"(20).

Throughout this *chanson de geste* which Atwood dubs The Handmaid's Tale, there is frequent use of carnivalesque diction that suggests the tale is recounted in a carnival spirit. Already noted is the fact that the marketplace is a frequent location for carnival and is the venue for the narrator handmaid. Certainly the story begins with a remembered festival atmosphere:

a balcony ran around the room, for the spectators, and I thought I could smell, faintly like an afterimage, the pungent scent of sweat, shot through with the sweet taint of chewing gum and perfume from the watching girls, felt-skirted as I knew from pictures, later in mini-skirts, then pants, then in one earring, spiky green streaked hair. Dances would have been held there; the music lingered, a palimpsest of unheard sound, style upon style, an undercurrent of drums, a forlorn wail, garlands made of tissue paper flowers, cardboard devils, a revolving ball of

mirrors, powdering the dancers with a snow of light.(13)

Later, the narrator describes the "Prayvaganza," a women's event which she attends as "a form of entertainment, like a show or circus"(225). For an outing with the Commander, she dons a costume and a carnival mask: "It's a disguise," he says. "You'll need to paint your face too"(243). Pleased with neither the costume nor the risk involved should she be unmasked, Offred still agrees to the ruse because she is tired of her monotonous situation: "I want to go anyway. I want anything that breaks the monotony, subverts the perceived respectable order of things"(243). The Commander persuades her: "it's as if we're dressing for a party" (243). At Jezebel's, other partygoers "wear make up...their mouths too red, too wet, blood dipped and glistening; or on the other hand too clownish... It's like a masquerade party"(247). Offred notes that the moulting pink feathers of her own costume "are tawdry as carnival dolls and some of the starry sequins have come off"(265). The same carnival-esque diction is used to describe another less pleasant event, a salvaging. Offred tells of the three hanging bodies beneath whose dresses,

the feet dangle, two pairs of red shoes, one pair of blue. If it weren't for the ropes and the sacks it could be a kind of dance, a ballet, caught by flash-camera: mid-air. They look arranged. They look like show-biz.(289)

Not only does this diction imply a carnival atmosphere, it confirms the use of Bakhtin's concept of carnival within the

text. Like the carnival folk culture of medieval times with its "monde à l'envers," its upside down world, The Handmaid's Tale "subverts the perceived respectable order of things"(243); it achieves its end through the use of writing that manifests the folk culture humour which Bakhtin divides into three distinct forms:

1. Ritual spectacle: carnival pageants, comic shows of the marketplace.
2. Comic verbal compositions: parodies, both oral and written, in Latin and in the vernacular.
3. Various kinds of billingsgate: curses, oaths, popular blazons. (Rabelais 5)

Ritual spectacles and ceremonies in the text are numerous. A good example is the "prayvaganza" that celebrates a mass wedding. Atwood debases the sanctity of this official rite by riddling it with unfavourable commentary on the conditions of marriage as imposed in the state of Gilead. The description of the Angels or grooms, "newly returned from the fronts, newly decorated, accompanied by their honour guard marching one-two, one-two, into the central open space. Attention, at ease"(230), evokes the notion of a military elite, aggressive, and primed for battle. In contrast, the brides, portrayed as sheltered and demure with little life experience, suggest a poorly matched coupling:

There girls haven't been allowed to be alone with a man for years. ...Are they old enough to remember anything of the time before, playing baseball, in jeans and sneakers, riding their bicycles? Reading books, all by themselves? Even though some of them are no more than fourteen -- START THEM SOON is the policy, THERE'S NOT A

MOMENT TO BE LOST -- still they'll remember. And the ones after them will, for three or four or five years, but after that they won't. They'll always have been in white, in groups of girls, they'll always have been silent.(231)

The marriages are arranged and the brides, naive and untutored in both the ways of men and life, are likely to remain silent, able to do only the bidding of the Angels, the war machines they marry. A discussion of the merits of arranged marriages, an adverse commentary on the invocation to the brides during the ceremony and a lewd joke about love, reduce the sacred ceremony to a parodic piece of nonsense. Other such spectacles are the funeral procession for an aborted foetus(54), the ritual impregnation ceremony (134,135), the Women's Prayvaganza(225), Jezebel's(247) and the District Salvaging for women(284). Alluding to similar rituals and ceremonies relevant to her life before Gilead, the narrator mentions "the spectacles women used to make of themselves...in public..."(65), the "TAKE BACK THE NIGHT" march(129), "the abortion riots"(190), and, in the "Historical Notes," the author continues with a parody on that well-known ritual of Academia, the "symposium"(311). These spectacles maintain the carnival atmosphere, keep it in the public eye because, as Bakhtin says, "carnival belongs to the whole people, it is universal, everyone must participate in its familiar contact"(Dostoevsky's Poetics 128).

Bakhtin's second form of folk humour, comic verbal

compositions such as parodies and puns in Latin and the vernacular, abounds in the novel. Readily discernable is this parody of the Lord's Prayer.

My God. Who Art in the Kingdom of Heaven which is within... I have enough daily bread... Now we come to forgiveness... keep the others safe... Don't let them suffer too much... provide a Heaven for them... Temptation comes next... Deliver us from evil... Then there's Kingdom, power and glory.
(204,205)

Here, Atwood puns on the words "tale" and "tail." By including in the same sentence a reference to Chaucer, she not only suggests the "archaic vulgar signification of the word tail," she also evokes a fourteenth-century style of verse known as tail rhyme, used by Chaucer and a school of minstrels who wrote tales or romances (Holman and Harmon 498):

The superscription "The Handmaid's Tale" was appended to it by Professor Wade, partly in homage to the great Geoffrey Chaucer; but those of you who know Professor Wade informally, as I do, will understand when I say that I am sure all puns were intentional, particularly that having to do with the archaic vulgar signification of the word tail; that being to some extent, the bone, as it were, of contention, in that phrase of Gileadean society of which our saga treats. (Laughter, applause.).
(313)

Other puns and parodies are found throughout the novel. According to Bakhtin, to introduce such parodic and polemical elements into the narration is "to make it more multi-voiced, more interruption-prone, no longer gravitating towards itself or its referential object" (Dostoevsky's Poetics 226). Added to this is literary parody, which

strengthens the element of literary conventionality in the narrator's discourse depriving it even more of its independence and finalizing power in relation to the hero...intensif[ies] greatly the direct and autonomous signifying power of the hero and the independence of the hero's position. (Dostoevsky's Poetics 226)

Atwood intensifies the signifying power of the handmaid by introducing into the narration what Bakhtin calls "a conventionalized discourse, stylized or parodic" (Dostoevsky's Poetics 227) which neutralizes the usual monologic orientation.

As I have shown, the tale itself is a modern literary parody of the medieval and oral *chanson de geste*; but also included in the fantasy is a literary parody of a fairy tale -- a grotesque one, a literary parody of the universally known "Little Red Riding Hood" with its big bad wolf. Very early in the story, we learn of the handmaid's market duties. Totally clothed in red, her face "hooded" with the white wings to keep her "from seeing but also from being seen"(18), Offred picks up the shopping basket and puts it over her arm. Viewing herself in a mirror as she descends the stairs she sees herself in it "like a distorted shadow, a parody of something, some fairy tale figure in a red cloak"(19). The ailing grandmother figure of the fairy tale is portrayed here by the Commander's wife: "Perhaps she's sewing, in the sitting room, with her left foot on the footstool, because of her arthritis"(22). It is this grandmotherly figure who invites the red-robed girl into her

home, a figure the girl wants to turn "into an older sister, a motherly figure, someone who would understand and protect me"(26). But Red Riding Hood finds no protection here. This is also the domain of the wolf, the Commander:

There's someone standing in the hall, near the door to the room where I stay...it's the Commander, he isn't supposed to be here... He is violating custom...he's looking at me, what does he want...it could mean attack, it could mean parley, it could mean the edge of something, a territory. The signals animals give one another: lowered blue eyelids, ears laid back, raised hackles. A flash of bared teeth, what in hell does he think he's doing? Nobody else has seen him. I hope. Was he invading? Was he in my room?(59)

Through this parody, the author clearly identifies the Commander as the big bad wolf.

In The Uses of Enchantment, Bruno Bettelheim tells us that the form and structure of fairy tales suggest images to children that help them structure their day dreams and give better direction to their lives. The child who confronts the concepts of good and evil through the fairy tale learns that crime does not pay, a more effective deterrent than that of punishment or the fear of it. Another important message the child learns is that

...by forming a true interpersonal relation one escapes the separation anxiety which haunts him... The fairy tale is future oriented and guides the child - in terms he can understand in both his conscious and his unconscious mind - to relinquish his infantile dependency wishes and achieve a more satisfying independent existence(Bettelheim. 11)

By introducing the concept of Little Red Riding Hood into her fairy tale-fantasy Atwood helps the reader confront both

the good and the evil of Gilead so that s/he may recognize the wolf whether he is dressed in Grandma's clothes or those of the Commander who represents the dominant culture or hierarchy that also metes out punishment. Just as the fairy tale does for the child, the images in the fantasy that is Gilead help the reader to structure a different future, one based on true personal relationships rather than on the dependent relation based on the sexual act.

The third form of folk humour that Bakhtin associates with carnival is oaths and popular blazons. These we find liberally scattered throughout the text. Alma cautions Moira, "Don't swear"(228). Moira pays no heed and Offred observes "There's something powerful in the whispering of obscenities about those in power"(234). There are slogans such as "Take Back the Night"(129), biblical blazons such as "I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children"(124) and spiritual ones like:

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
 Could save a wretch like me
 Who once was lost but now am found
 Was bound, but now am free.(64)

The parody and oaths of folk humour, Bakhtin explains, are the means of evoking laughter, of poking fun at official ideology and ritual. The Latin parody in comic literature of the Middle Ages was widespread. It appeared in "sacred parody...parodies of Gospel readings of the most sacred prayers (the Lord's Prayer, the Ave Maria), of

litanies, hymns, psalms and even Gospel sayings"(Rabelais 14). As we have seen, such parody exists in The Handmaid's Tale. Although these parodies are not written in Latin, there are numerous references to Latin and the Latin aphorism, "Nolite te bastardes carborundorum" itself the parody of a Latin phrase(196), appears at intervals throughout the text(62, 101, 102, 156, 196, 304).

For the most part, official rites and feasts of the Middle Ages merely sanctioned the existing pattern of things and reinforced it. Monolithically serious, few contained any element of laughter and did not lead the people out of the existing world order, did not create a second life. In contrast, the unofficial feast or carnival rite celebrates a temporary liberation from prevailing truth and established order(Bakhtin, Rabelais 10). The temporary suspension of hierarchical rank creates, during carnival time, "a special type of communication impossible in every day life"(10). Bakhtin observes that the carnival atmosphere which creates this new type of communication inevitably results in "new forms of speech or a new meaning given to the old forms" (Rabelais 10). As well as new forms of speech, special forms of gesture evolve. When hierarchical distinctions dissolve, friendly relations that permit greater familiarity in speech and gesture are established. Thus "two friends may pat each other on the shoulder and even on the belly (a typical carnival gesture)"(Rabelais 16). Verbal etiquette

is relaxed; indecent words and expressions are used. Long a part of ancient comic cults, language which mocks the deity contributes to the creation of a free carnival atmosphere. Ambivalent, such language humiliates and mortifies but it also revives and renews (Rabelais 16). Profanities and oaths which found no place at official feasts or rites because they broke the norms of official speech, were eventually transferred to the sphere of the marketplace. Here, they too "acquired the nature of laughter and became ambivalent" (Rabelais 17). These special forms construct a second world of folk culture; they parody to a certain extent the extra-carnival life; they are a "monde à l'envers," a world upside-down. This half-forgotten idiom with its carnival spirit penetrated the belles lettres and utopias of Renaissance writing which often adopted its forms and symbols (Rabelais 11). Atwood situates her narrator in this carnival atmosphere and imbues her with the carnival spirit. Thus, the narrator handmaid reflects all the idiom of carnival including its discourse, orally "heard" yet textually written.

Last, two other essential components of carnival, laughter and a sense of abundance, are evident in The Handmaid's Tale. Laughter, like parody and all other forms of grotesque realism, brings the subject down to earth, turns it into flesh; it "degrades and materializes." In grotesque realism the hierarchy is thus brought "downward,"

toward earth, ("upward" is heaven). Bakhtin explains that this kind of degradation means

contact with the earth as an element that swallows up and gives birth at the same time... To degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy and birth. Degradation digs a bodily grave for new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one. (Rabelais 21)

This is the grotesque realism, the laughter of the people linked since time immemorial with the lower body stratum, that we hear from Offred (Rabelais 20). Although she finds something hilarious about her official sexual encounter with the Commander, she does not dare laugh in his presence, in the presence of the hierarchy. But alone in her room, after an evening of scrabble with the Commander, Offred finds "the laughter boiling like lava in her throat." She says: "My ribs hurt with holding back. I shake, I heave, seismic, volcanic, I'll burst. Red all over the cupboard, mirth rhymes with birth, oh to die of laughter"(156). Similarly there is laughter as Offred remembers a time before Gilead, when she was at college with Moira: "I'm laughing. She always made me laugh. But here? I say: Who'll come? Who needs it? You're never too young to learn she says. Come on it'll be great. We'll all pee our pants laughing"(312). Of the more than fifty references to jokes, smiles, joy, gaiety, and laughter, the great majority are to laughter, but it is the laughter of reported speech, contained in and

confined to the word itself. Always, the laughter is modified or repressed, heard from behind closed doors or remembered from another time. Thus the word laughter appears in parentheses after several statements, as in the Historical Notes: "and I expect none of us wants to miss lunch as happened yesterday.(LAUGHTER)"(312). In consequence, the laughter, reduced in the text to a reedy echo that emanates through the medium of the narrator's voice, appears divorced from the body of the people. But the laughter does exist. Although alienated and repressed, as are the handmaids themselves, it reflects the female part of the people which Offred represents and which is indispensable in the process of regeneration and birth.

Abundance, the other element essential to carnival is, like the element of laughter, quite restrained in The Handmaid's Tale. In Gilead, abundance is usually associated with the hierarchy. When Offred, along with other handmaids, visits the home of another Commander to celebrate the birth of a child, there is evidence of a feast but one in which they will not partake:

...inside I can see the long table, covered with a white cloth and spread with a buffet: ham, cheese, oranges -- they have oranges! -- and fresh-baked breads and cakes. As for us, we'll get milk and sandwiches, on a tray, later. But they have a coffee urn, and bottles of wine, for why shouldn't the Wives get a little drunk on such a triumphant day? First they'll wait for the results, then they'll pig out.(126)

Whatever the handmaids enjoy over and above their allotted

portions must be acquired surreptitiously: "Someone has spiked the grape juice. Someone has pinched a bottle from downstairs. It won't be the first time at such a gathering; but they'll turn a blind eye. We too need our orgies"(135). Yet, in a time before Gilead abundance for all is implied in this litany: "Sole, I remember, and haddock, swordfish, scallops, tuna; lobsters stuffed and baked, salmon pink and fat, grilled in steaks"(173). Certainly the desire for feasting and the notion of abundance exist in the text. It is not, however, the "brimming-over abundance"(Bakhtin, Rabelais 19) usually associated with carnival. Rather, as with Offred's hunger for love, her physical desire to feast, it suggests, in oxymoronic fashion, both abundance and lack:

I want to go to bed, make love, right now.
I think of the word relish.
I could eat a horse.(293)

These two features of carnival, laughter and abundance, as an expression of folk culture rather than of the hierarchy, usually dominate a carnivalesque work. However, in The Handmaid's Tale, they are inverted so that they appear subliminal, filtered as they are through the medium of the narrator's voice. To discard them entirely would deprive the text of its carnivalesque nature. To feature them openly in raucous gaiety would make light of the vital and serious subjects of procreation and regeneration, the themes of the text. Atwood uses the carnivalesque to present the issues that surround

procreation in a broad perspective. Since the narrator is part of the folk culture, she must portray all the carnival idiom including laughter and abundance. Although subverted, these elements, which remain latent in the text, retain their carnival function as symbols of degradation and regeneration. Atwood thus cleverly preserves the dignity which her theme demands.

The Handmaid's Tale is, then, a carnivalesque work. The author employs both a narrator and a milieu compatible with the carnival of folk culture. The inclusion of ritual spectacles, parody, oaths, reference to the lower body stratum and even laughter and feasting, all essential to the carnival idiom, expand the carnival experience to create an upside-down world, a world that temporarily suspends the hierarchy of the present culture and gives us the dystopic world she calls Gilead. As noted earlier, to reiterate or treat the rites and ideals of officialdom tends merely to sanction and reinforce the existing pattern. In order to explore the existing patriarchal pattern in which women are enmeshed, Atwood uses the language that emanates from carnival to communicate to her listener/reader just how perilous women's situation really is, as long as the pattern remains undisturbed. Thus she sets those issues that concern women in a context that deranges the perceived pattern of present culture, evokes questions and sets up a dichotomy that clearly reveals hierarchical power.

Chapter 2 Part (a)

Most of the features that comprise a carnivalesque work, as I have shown in Chapter I, reside in The Handmaid's Tale. An anonymous voice that links the present culture and Gilead is the carnival vehicle. That voice, which belongs to a many-faceted icon⁴, is representative of women from the past, the present and the future. This complex icon or narrator handmaid, in her role as chronicler, reveals the mores and traditions of the past; as is customary in oral history she updates these traditions to meet the needs of the culture in which the tale is being told.⁵ Although the icon speaks in the first person singular, the narrating "I," embedded in the collective "we" (Chapter I, 18), is advantageous because it speaks for other women of Gilead who are similarly confined and relates their stories from their different perspectives. The icon thus reflects the lives of diverse women and fits into almost any scenario where women are involved. Equally advantageous is the fact that such an icon merely reflects the characteristics of certain women. Without distinct physical features or family connections, the character remains anonymous and cannot be personally connected to or accused of any particular polemic or political policy. The icon arises from the narrating voice that speaks of the present culture. Barely established at the outset of the tale, the notion of the present culture

quickly gives way to the fantasy world of Gilead. Because the narrating voice of the icon continues directly from one to the other, the reader is not alerted to this subtle change. Ordinarily, laughter and abundance, two features of carnival usually prominent in such a work, would soon demonstrate the mockery that derides and debases the hierarchy of the present culture. Atwood grossly understates these features, allowing only a wry tongue-in-cheek humour to permeate the text. As a result, the present culture becomes a remote background. The dominant hierarchy of Gilead appears instead, to be the controlling feature of the tale. Thus highlighted, Gilead's hierarchy and all that it manifests, along with its handmaid icon, serve to expose the social bonds that exist between people of unequal power or authority.

The existence of a hierarchical system within the fantasy is confirmed by a profusion of religious and military diction which connotes the two hierarchies most familiar to organized society, that of the state, and that of God, or at least, that created by man in the name of God. The use of the capitalized word "Commander" for the chief male character suggests a very high rank in a hierarchy that deals with state affairs. The emphatic repetition of the word "army" suggests a militarized state:

The army was there and everything...Then I remembered something...It wasn't the army. It was some other army...And when it was known that the police, or the army, or whoever they were, would

open fire almost as soon as any of the marches started, the marches stopped...But you couldn't ever be sure of who was doing it. It could have been the army, to justify the computer searches and the other ones, the door-to-doors.(189)

The obviously rigid control of public action and the swift reprisals against offenders, evidenced by bodies hung daily from the town wall, certainly suggest some kind of police state.

That the non-violent, non-military man is capable of becoming violent when he gains the necessary power is suggested by the Commander's reply to Offred's query about his background: "Oh, I was in market research to begin with... After that I sort of branched out"(195)! Offred knows he is a Commander, that he is at "the very top"(221), but she does not "know what he's Commander of"(195). While his position of power allows the Commander a great deal of latitude it also subjects him to that same power. There are other Commanders who also understand that the guiding force of the military, or any hierarchy, is preservation of the system; it metes out its own summary justice to all and nothing else is of consequence. Whatever the hierarchy, such a lofty position with its high visibility implies that the holder possesses exemplary traits, that he is intelligent, educated and above all, is a patriarch of the system and its laws.

Publicly, the Commander officiates at the women's prayvaganzas, ceremonies where nuns renounce their celibacy

or where young brides marry in mass weddings. On these occasions the Commander intones the biblical precepts laid down for women and exhorts them to obey, in order that they may be saved through procreation for the state: "And Adam was not deceived, but the woman was in the transgression. Notwithstanding she shall be saved by childbearing, if they continue in faith and charity and holiness with sobriety"(233). It is through such discourse and biblical parody that we learn the tenets of Gilead's ideology which the Commander is required to uphold. At home, the Commander dutifully sets the standard of worship and participates in the required fertility rite that he may fulfil his duty to the state.

Allegiance to the state is, however, only one facet of the Commander's character. Designed to reflect various male traits, the Commander, like the handmaid, is an icon. Apart from his status or position of power within the hierarchy, he is a male endowed with the same physical attributes, the same desire and libido as any other male of the species. Imbued with the range of values that exist in Gilead, as well as those of a previous culture, he also possesses those male characteristics commonly found in human nature. He is a figurehead, an icon for males, just as the handmaid is an icon for females, past, present and future.

As his title suggests, the Commander is representative of and empowered by the hierarchy. The

handmaid, on the other hand, is allowed no power, no authority of any kind in the governing of Gilead. Her role is strictly subservient and social. Although unequal in hierarchical power, the Commander and the handmaid, in their natural roles of male and female, meet on social ground, the carnival social ground that is Gilead. Here, in various scenarios, they actualize those sexual roles of men and women usually considered too intimate, too vulgar, or too pornographic to be freely discussed in public. In Bakhtin's concept of carnival, an upside-down world revels in the laughter and mockery which debase the hierarchy as well as ideological and cultural customs. Carnivalesque writing, therefore, which not only allows but revels in the grotesque parody of human bodily activity, is an appropriate vehicle to express these basic facts of human nature and their social repercussions without being either pornographic or offensive.

In the grotesque image of carnival, body orifices such as the mouth and nose are exaggerated. For example, the portrait of a body will emphasize orifices (mouth, anus) and protuberances (nose, belly), those parts that relate to the exterior (absorption, elimination, coupling or communication). Body orifices and protuberances occupy a prominent place in The Handmaid's Tale. Particularly important is the mouth. Present from the beginning of the text, it is that orifice which opens to project the voice and make it

audible, or closes to silence it. One easily imagines the exaggeration of mouth movements in an effort to communicate through lip-reading when speech is forbidden: "We learned to lip-read, our heads flat on the beds, turned sideways, watching each other's mouths. In this way we exchanged names from bed to bed"(14). Conversely, the concept of silence is accentuated by these images of the mouth on the hooded 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.(42)

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.(43)

The notion of silence in the latter quotation is doubly stressed by the pun derived from the word "tulips" which evokes the image of the mouth, and from the word "comment," which connotes the voicing of an opinion. Tulips are, as we know, voiceless.

Reference to protuberances such as the nose and the belly is also common. Polyphony heavily emphasizes the belly as a protuberance in this evocation of a ship's sail: "Big bellied sails, they used to say, in poems. Bellying. Propelled forward by a swollen belly"(104). Routinely present as a result of the procreation theme is the concept

of the extended belly of the pregnant female. The handmaids covertly regard each other, "sizing up each other's bellies..."(69). The concept becomes concrete in the description of Janine's body as she is about to give birth. Someone "pours baby oil onto her mound of a stomach(127). She is inflated but reduced, shorn of her former name"(126).

In keeping with Gilead's paucity, its lack of love, its depleted sources of food and materials, Atwood forgoes, for her hierarchical characters, the trait of corpulence, the universal and carnivalesque metaphor which suggests abundance and fertility. In this portrait of the Commander she deflates the expected image of corpulence due to aging of the body and privileged access to abundance:

He sits up, begins to unbutton. Will this be worse, to have him denuded, of all his cloth power? He's down to the shirt; then, under it, sadly, a little belly. Wisps of hair.(266)

Likewise, the wife of Janine's Commander displays no sign of the expected corpulent image that might reflect Janine's full-term pregnancy:

A small thin woman, she lies on the floor, in a white cotton nightgown, her greying hair spreading like mildew over the rug; they massage her tiny belly, just as if she's really about to give birth herself.(126)

In contrast to the pregnant fullness and fecundity of Janine, these unexpected and reverse images of the hierarchy reflect their sterility, their lack of bodily life in the ever-changing cosmic world.

The image of the nose as an actual protuberance is

not noticeably present but its function is. The sense of smell is particularly evident where it concerns bodily functions as in this paragraph which begins the text:

I thought I could smell, faintly like an afterimage, the pungent scent of sweat, shot through with the sweet taint of chewing gum and perfume from the watching girls...(13)

or, in this paragraph that draws attention to the nose with repetition of the word "smell" and, indirectly, through the word matrix, draws attention to the birth orifice:

The room smells too, the air is close, they should open a window. The smell is of our own flesh, an organic smell, sweat and a tinge of iron, from the blood on the sheet, and another smell, more animal, that's coming, it must be, from Janine: a smell of dens, of inhabited caves, the smell of the plaid blanket on the bed when the cat gave birth on it, once, before she was spayed. Smell of matrix.(133)

Also important in Atwood's portrait of the grotesque body are absorption, elimination, coupling and communication, all related to the exterior of the body. Absorption is represented by the numerous references to eating but especially to the food absorbed by Offred, the narrator/handmaid:

...on the tray are a glass of apple juice, a vitamin pill, a spoon, a plate with three slices of brown toast on it, a small dish containing honey, and another plate with an egg cup on it, the kind that looks like a woman's torso, in a skirt. Under the skirt in the second egg...(120)

Direct reference to elimination occurs in such statements as: "Bodily functions at least remain democratic. Everybody shits, as Moira would say"(263) or, they occur in other scurrilous remarks such as this: "Women took

medicines, pills, men sprayed trees, cows ate grass, all that souped-up piss flowed into rivers"(122). Since communication is the stated aim of the handmaid's tale ("because after all I want you to hear it..."(279)), the complete text depicts this aspect of the grotesque body.

The final aspect, that of coupling, is, of course, related to the theme of procreation and is automatically implied in the natural process of human reproduction. Specifically depicted is the ritual coupling of the Commander and the handmaid:

My red shirt 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. I do not say making love, because that is not what he is doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and only one is involved. Nor does rape cover it: nothing goes on here that I haven't signed up for. There wasn't a lot of choice but there was some, and this is what I chose.(105)

Although, as I noted earlier (page 52), carnival sanctions a relaxed etiquette and permits the use of indecent expressions, Atwood keeps this aspect of her writing to a minimum. The expressions used are technically definitive as the author so notes in the quotation above. They refer to the normal functions of the lower body, especially those having to do with birth and copulation, pertinent to the procreation theme.

In referring to acts of sexuality related to desire rather than procreation, Atwood resorts to allusions which culminate in the carnivalized scene at Jezebel's(247).

Entirely removed from familial quarters, this area, once a hotel, is now reserved for those males in the hierarchy who can afford to indulge their sexual desires. In contrast to wives and handmaids, always fully robed, the women here appear in various styles and stages of dress and undress, designed to appeal to the male libido, as in a house of prostitution. The Commander has spirited Offred, scantily clad in a tattered costume, into Jezebel's, which he refers to as "our little club"(248) and which is normally off-limits to wives and handmaids. Here, Offred sees her old friend Moira "dressed absurdly in a black outfit of once-shining satin...a wad of cotton attached to the back...a tail. Attached to her head are two ears...She has a black bow around her neck and is wearing black net stockings and black high heels"(251). Offred comments:

The whole costume, antique and bizarre, reminds me of something from the past, but I can't think what. A stage play, a musical comedy? Girls dressed for Easter in rabbit suits. What is the significance of it here, why are rabbits supposed to be sexually attractive to men? How can this bedraggled costume appeal?(251)

The costume and the comments evoke the image of the infamous Bunny Clubs, popular in America during the 1960's and 1970's. These images emphasize desire as well as procreation and suggest the relationship between the two.

The contrast in dress and sexual roles of wives and handmaids with those of the women at Jezebel's widens the perspective on human sexuality. These images elicit the

concept of desire in nature, a dimension beyond mere procreation. Although desire is officially forbidden by the state, the Commander acknowledges desire as a part of nature: "everyone's human"(248); "you can't cheat nature... it's part of the procreation strategy. It's nature's plan"(249). Yet, in their role as breeders, women of Gilead are required to suppress desire of any kind. Paradoxically, in a setting like Jezebel's, where the fulfilment of desire, not procreation, is the sole concern, the bunny costume, meant to attract sexually, symbolizes the rabbit, an animal universally known to be a prolific breeder. Atwood thus recalls that desire and procreation are not mutually exclusive. At the same time, she emphasizes the patriarchal tendency to differentiate and to separate the two, to the disadvantage of the female, who, as in the case of the handmaid, is not allowed to choose between desire and procreation. In condoning Jezebel's, Gilead appears to uphold the concept of desire, but the suppression of that same desire in the female effectively thwarts "nature's plan." Having made this point, Atwood does not belabour it with the kind of diction often used to describe sensual and erotic physical acts which could offend the reader. She merely alludes to such acts, and labels them as pornographic:

Sometimes the movie would be an old porno film...(128)

The porno marts were shut, though, and there were no longer any Feels on Wheels vans and Bundle Buggies circling the square.(183)

...Porny corner, it was all over the place, they even had it motorized.(221)

Thus, in The Handmaid's Tale, as in carnival, the lower part of the body occupies an essential place, as do birth and death, the portals of life.

One of the fundamental tendencies of the grotesque bodily image, Bakhtin explains,

is to show two bodies in one: the one giving birth and dying, the other conceived, generated and born. This is the pregnant and begetting body or at least a body ready for conception and fertilization, the stress being laid on the phallus or the genital organs. From one body a new body always emerges in some form or other. (Rabelais 26)

This single body, the icon/narrator that represents women past, present and future, unfinished because it is at one and the same time dying, bringing forth and being born, is cosmic, not separated from the world. It "represents the entire material bodily world in all its elements. In the literary sphere, "the entire medieval parody is based on the grotesque concept of the body"(Rabelais 27). Thus Atwood's narrator/handmaid, whose style and presentation parody the medieval concept of the grotesque body, aptly reflects the carnivalesque mode as well as the text's theme of procreation. The handmaid/icon is also, as I will discuss in part (b) of this chapter, a vehicle suitable to carry this concept across later literary eras, even up to the

postmodern.

The grotesque concept employed throughout The Handmaid's Tale is especially prominent in the official rites of Gilead which are portrayed through the narrator handmaid's personal experience. Her ongoing tale of life in Gilead provides the listener/reader with an overview of Gileadean culture. At the same time, through flashback and use of the words "I remember"(79, 154, 189), a comparison is made between Gilead and its predecessor, that is, the present culture, the society we now live in. Basic to both societies is the procreation of children. This fundamental fact which determines the continuance of any society is therefore the focus of Atwood's novel.

In Gilead, a dangerously low birthrate results in the enforced use of those women who still have viable reproductive organs as child bearers regardless of their personal needs or desires. The execution and/or success of Gileadean society is based on fundamental thought which takes its cue from biblical precedent or even other patriarchal societies which are not Christian that honour women only for their breeding capabilities. The author alludes to Islam in this passage:

It was after the catastrophe, when they shot the President and machine-gunned the Congress and the army declared a state of emergency. They blamed it on the Islamic fanatics at the time.(183)

The Aunts, the enforcers of Gilead's patriarchal laws who patrol the centre for handmaids, "electric cattle prods

slung on thongs from their leather belts"(14), are suggestive of Moslem women of Iran under Khomeini. In Female Warriors of Allah, Minou Reeves tells of Shia women militants, dressed from head to toe in the long robes of the chador, who carry guns and "are engaged in a systematic program of ideological indoctrination and re-Islamization of Iran"(27). These women, Reeves notes, bears witness against the "corrupting influence of the West and capitalism... Beyond that it entails taking up arms in the name of the holy cause and not shrinking from bloodshed"(23). And, in Gilead's method of punishment for women who do not conform -- "They didn't care what they did to your feet and hands, even if it was permanent"(102) -- there is, perhaps, an allusion to Asian/Confucian societies known to have crippled women's feet so they could not stray from their masters.

In keeping with biblical precedent, Gilead prescribes for its handmaids a monthly fertility rite that follows the words of Rachel to Jacob: "Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her"(Genesis 30:1-3). The handmaid's description of the actual ceremony in Gilead revitalizes and gives meaning to the biblical words passed down from a society some two thousand years old. Reset into the context of Gileadean society, the ceremony reflects the true nature of the situation in all its emotional and physical reality for all its participants, men as well as

women. Central to the ceremonial rite is the act of copulation which so often overrides the needs or desires of the female. The focus on this act thus brings into question a whole array of issues that particularly affect women.

Using the literary devices of carnivalesque writing to recall or allude to the many possible scenarios that can issue from the act of copulation, Atwood introduces the sexual mores established under patriarchy and highlights the effects on those involved. She juxtaposes various points of view that focus on a specific act or object and draws attention to them through the repetition of a particular word or phrase as in this example, where the narrator uses the imperative to address her audience and emphasize the several attributes of power: "But remember that forgiveness too is a power. To beg for it is a power and to withhold or bestow it is a power, perhaps the greatest"(144). This juxtaposition of viewpoints Bakhtin calls "syncrisis." The repetition of words, which he calls "anacrisis," is simply the provocation of the word by the word rather than by means of plot situation; it enforces the reader's participation in the immediate subject and invites opinion(Dostoevsky's Poetics 110). Syncrisis and anacrisis thus evoke various qualities of meaning as though the discourse of several people were a contributing factor. They serve not only to emphasize a particular idea; "they dialogize thought, they carry it into the open, turn it into a rejoinder, attach it

to dialogic intercourse among people"(Dostoevsky's Poetics 111). Through these literary devices, anacrisis, syncrisis, ritual spectacles, parody and indecent language, all aspects of carnivalesque writing, the author presents, in graphic style, the numerous scenarios that reflect the social bonds between people of unequal power. In particular, these scenes portray societal issues that arise for women, either as the direct result of sexual union or from society's attitude toward the circumstances of that act. Examples of sexual union or coupling in The Handmaid's Tale that illustrate the significance of such social bonds are those that occur within lawful marriage, in adultery, or in rape.

The Commander and Serena, members at the top of Gilead's hierarchy, are partners in legal matrimony. Serena, married and female, enjoys no power in the affairs of Gilead. The only domain over which she has any control is her home and the servants within it. The handmaid, whom she must abide in her home if she ever hopes to have a child, is not of her choosing. Her power over the handmaid is limited to the interpretation and/or manipulation of regulations set down for all handmaids in Gilead. Her status in the community, as the wife of a Commander, is assured (there is no mention of divorce in Gilead). Beyond her wifely status, she wields no other power. There is allusion to a singing career in pre-Gilead times. On the "Growing Souls Gospel Hour" she had been the lead soprano

with a voice that "lifted through its highest notes, tremulous, effortless"(26). A good speaker, she made speeches about the sanctity of the home, "about how women should stay home"(55). Her own failure to stay at home was presented as a sacrifice for the good of all. Now,

She doesn't make speeches any more.
She has become speechless. She stays in
her home, but it doesn't seem to agree
with her. How furious she must be
now that she's been taken at her word.(56)

In Gilead "there isn't much music," only the tuneless humming of a kitchen maid or whatever emanates from television. Sometimes, there is

the thin sound of Serena's voice
from a disk 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.(64)

Unable to use her talents in Gilead, Serena knits or gardens or fills her time in the company of the other wives at social events, like "birth days," "prayvaganzas" or "salvagings."

Also portrayed is the marriage of Luke and the female narrator we know as Offred, the handmaid. Before Gilead's inception the two had been lovers. Their marriage was a commitment to each other, a sharing of responsibility, economically and for the child born of their love. Deprived of her job, Offred, like Serena, becomes totally dependent on Luke, her husband and partner. Although they still have

each other, she feels the imbalance in their relationship, that they "are not each other's any more...Instead [she is] his"(191). Knowing this to be "Unworthy, unjust, untrue" (192), she also realizes that with no other means of livelihood she could not afford to lose him. Now, as a handmaid in Gilead, not only must she cooperate with a wife who resents her presence, she is as dependent on the male as she had been in her former marriage. She is dependent on the Commander for her very survival, for food and shelter and for the impregnating sperm that will give her status as a mother who has fulfilled her duty to the state. Although she is "washed, brushed, fed, like a prize pig"(79), unlike Serena, she is allowed no pastimes, not even reading, which is forbidden. She can only wait.

In depicting these two marriages, Atwood juxtaposes the happiness and fulfilment that derive from a woman's freedom to choose her career in or out of the home, with the ennui that results from any enforced confinement, be it procreation or merely for use as erotic symbols of male desire. Although this contrast may seem a trifle obvious, it serves to highlight the fact that many present-day societies neither condone nor respect a woman's choice to enter into sexual union or to have children if she is not married. In the opinion of many people, sexual union is only permissible within the bonds of marriage, and divorce or remarriage is not acceptable. In the passage cited

below, the narrator's reference to the boredom experienced by women in harems parallels her own. The use of anacrisis or word repetition to evoke and emphasize the theme of boredom is particularly noticeable:

There's time to spare. This is one of the things I wasn't prepared for -- the amount of unfilled time, the long parentheses of nothing. Time as white sound. If only I could embroider. Weave, knit, something to do with my hands. I want a cigarette. I remember walking in art galleries, through the nineteenth century: the obsession they had then with harems. Dozens of paintings of harems, fat women lolling on divans, turbans on their heads or velvet caps, being fanned with peacock tails, a eunuch in the background standing guard. Studies of sedentary flesh, painted by men who'd never been there. These pictures were supposed to be erotic, and I thought they were at the time; but I now see what they were really about. They were paintings about waiting, about objects not in use. They were paintings about boredom.

But maybe boredom is erotic, when women do it, for men.(79)

The comment that the paintings were made "by men who'd never been there" suggests that men have little understanding of such situations because they are never so confined. The statement that the paintings "were supposed to be erotic," suggests that they are images created, not from reality, but out of male desire, a desire that caters to the notion that women, i.e. "objects not in use," wait only to please men.

When emasculated and confined to the harem, the eunuch can no longer function in the male world. Similarly, when procreation or eroticism is the sole criterion for their existence, women are deprived of their usefulness in other walks of life. Atwood alludes to this waste of human

resources by contrasting (syncrisis) the lives of women slated for procreation and eroticism with those women like Moira and Offred's mother who had chosen otherwise.

Offred's longstanding and continued friendship with Moira, a lesbian, projects the more enlightened view on variant modes of living held by some segments of present-day society. The parochial view held by others, which insists on the procreational or erotic function with the opposite sex, is evoked by allusion to punishment for non-conformity. Janine, who would not acknowledge that being gang-raped at fourteen was her own fault, is ridiculed in front of her peers and humiliated to the breaking point. Incontinence, even in a single instance, brings severe punishment for Dolores: "Two Aunts hauled her away, a hand under each armpit. She wasn't there for the afternoon walk, but at night she was back in her usual bed. All night we could hear her moaning, off and on"(82). Moira, who desperately wants no part of the handmaid's fate, manages to escape but is eventually caught and punished:

They took her into a room that used to be the Science lab. It was a room where none of us ever went willingly. Afterwards she could not walk for a week, her feet would not fit into her shoes, they were too swollen. 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.(102)

Considered too dangerous to be returned to the center for

handmaids, Moira chooses prostitution at Jezebel's rather than heavy farm labour or cleaning up toxic waste in the Colonies:

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 chances, and incorrigibles like me. Discards, all of us. They're sterile of course. If they weren't that way to begin with, they are after they've been there for a while. When they're unsure, they do a little operation on you, so there won't be any mistakes. I'd say it's about a quarter men in the Colonies, too. Not all those Gender Traitors end up on the Wall.(260)

In the passage above, the reference to men in the "Colonies" and "Gender Traitors" suggests that homosexuals as well as lesbians are punished for their chosen way of life. Punishment for other types of non-conformists is evoked through references to "Baptists" that were smoked out,(29) or to "five members of the heretical sect of Quakers"(95) that were arrested or to the body on the Wall marked with a "J" that could mean "Jew" or perhaps "Jehovah's Witness" or "Jesuit"(211). The reference to "old women" suggests Offred's mother, who would be a candidate for the Colonies. Long past the age of childbearing, her body would no longer be erotic, not even useful for Jezebel's. Described as "wiry, spunky, the kind of old woman who won't let anyone butt in front of her in a supermarket line"(130), she had chosen, at thirty-seven, to be a single mother. Her philosophy evokes the image of a radical feminist who finds little or no place in her life

for men, those humans who make up the other half of our species:

A man is just a woman's strategy for making other women. Not that your father wasn't a nice guy and all, but he wasn't up to fatherhood. Not that I expected it of him. Just do the job, then you can bugger off, I said, I make a decent salary, I can afford daycare. So he went to the coast and sent Christmas cards. He had beautiful blue eyes though. But there's something missing in them, even the nice ones. It's like they're permanently absent-minded, like they can't quite remember who they are. They look at the sky too much. They lose touch with their feet. They aren't a patch on a woman except they're better at fixing cars and playing football, just what we need for the improvement of the human race, right?(131)

Couplings outside of marriage such as adultery and rape are considered illegal in the eyes of the church and state. Both involve the theft and use of property not rightly one's own, the former by mutual consent of the adulterous couple, the latter by force on the part of one partner. In the case of rape it is the female who usually bears the burden of proof. In both adultery and rape, as noted above in Janine's case, there is always the inference that the female has seduced the male; the result is therefore her own fault. Traditionally, if proven, adultery and rape are punishable by law. Atwood emphasizes the general attitude toward these crimes through the severity of the punishment inflicted on the three women to be salvaged, two handmaids, one wife:

The first one, the one they're now raising from her chair, black-gloved hands on her upper arms: reading? No, that's only a hand cut off, on the third conviction. Unchastity, or an attempt on

the life of her Commander? Or the Commander's Wife, more likely. That's what we're thinking. 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 shears, or knives purloined from the kitchen, and especially not when we are pregnant. It could be adultery of course. It could always be that.(287)

To balance the picture, the author portrays a "particution" where whole groups of women, most of whom neither know nor know anything about their male victim, participate in his destruction. Falsely accused of rape in order to serve some other political purpose, he is literally kicked to death. When Offred sickens at the sight of Ofglen delivering a telling blow to the helpless man she is warned: "Don't be stupid. He wasn't a rapist at all, he was a political. He was one of ours. I knocked him out. Put him out of his misery. Don't you know what they're doing to him?"(292). Emphasized in these scenes is the punishment, the illegality of the couplings.

Atwood does not, however, neglect to note the emotional toll inflicted on all parties involved, nor the jealousy and rage they experience. These words reveal the anger and despair of Luke's first wife, whom Offred never sees: "only pictures and a voice on the phone, late at night, when she was calling us, crying, accusing, before the divorce"(84). Noted also is the mutual jealousy and anger of wives and handmaids. As a result of her friendship with the Commander as well as their intimacy, Offred now views

his wife Serena Joy in a new light:

Once I'd merely hated her, for her part in what was being done to me; and because she hated me too and resented my presence, and because she would be the one to raise my child, should I be able to have one after all. But now, although I still hated her, no more so than when she was gripping my hands so hard that her rings bit my flesh, pulling my hands back as well, which she must have done on purpose to make me as uncomfortable as she could, the hatred was no longer pure and simple. Partly I was jealous of her; but how could I be jealous of a woman so obviously dried up and unhappy? You can only be jealous of someone who has something you think you ought to have yourself. Nevertheless I was jealous.(170)

Although her affair with the Commander came about at his will and pleasure, Offred, recognizing the element of betrayal in it, feels guilty about Serena:

I felt I was an intruder, in a territory that ought to have been hers. Now that I was seeing the Commander on the sly, if only to play his games and listen to him talk, our functions were no longer as separate as they should have been in theory. I was taking something away from her, although she didn't know it. I was filching. Never mind that it was something she apparently didn't want or had no use for, had rejected even; still it was hers, and if I took it away, this mysterious "it" I couldn't quite define -- for the Commander wasn't in love with me, I refused to believe he felt anything for me as extreme as that -- what could be left for her?(170)

Betrayal is, in fact, a major theme in the book. The handmaid's discourse that relates her feelings about the actions of others as well as her own, subtly comments on the concept of betrayal. There is the betrayal of Janine by the other handmaids who fall into the pit of hysterical mass agreement because none of them "wanted to look like that, ever"(82). For the same reason, fear of bodily harm, there

is, as mentioned above, betrayal and destruction of the man falsely accused of rape. Offred's agreement to Serena's suggestion that she have sexual relations with Nick, the chauffeur, is the epitome of betrayal. This coupling portrays, most of all, the betrayal that arises out of fear, greed, desire, and/or human frailty. There is fear on the part of Offred for her survival if she doesn't become pregnant; greed on Serena's part because she will go to any lengths to gain a child; sexual desire on the part of both Nick and Offred; human frailty on the part of all to face their situations and to control their desires. The Commander who is, in all probability, infertile, is betrayed by Nick and by Serena Joy as well as by Offred in the attempt to impregnate the handmaid. Betrayed in turn is Luke, the man Offred still loves, her legal husband before Gilead. "This is a betrayal"(275), Offred realizes, not because of "the thing itself"(275), but because of her own response, her sexual desire for Nick, no different than that portrayed in the Commander. His sexual desire, however, is not confined to any chosen mate, i.e. his wife. The latin epigram *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*(196) serves to connect him with previous handmaids. It is he who explains its meaning to Offred. She had discovered it in the bedroom closet scrawled by the previous handmaid, who had hung herself. The Commander's instruction to Nick, "On the hour, as usual"(245) and Moira's comment that she had "had

him"(255), inform us of his frequent use of prostitutes at Jezebel's. Ultimately it is the Commander who, in the betrayal of his wife and handmaids, betrays all women. Women are urged to trust and believe in him, the patriarch and representative of Gilead's ideals. In condoning Jezebel's he disregards his own (the state's) laws and, as an icon of men, past present and future, he demonstrates his potential as a betrayer of women. Fortunately, not all men fulfil their sexual desires in this manner. As the narrator comments: "Not every Commander has a handmaid: some of their wives have children. From each, says the slogan, according to her ability; to each according to his needs"(127).

Apart from the obvious burden of pregnancy, the female also bears the burden of other issues that result from coupling and in which, according to Gilead's mandate, she has no option. The issue of abortion is evoked in Offred's discourse about the bodies left hanging on the Wall:

The men wore white coats, like those worn by doctors or scientists. Doctors and scientists aren't the only ones, there are others, but they must have had a run on them this morning. Each has a placard hung around his neck to show why he has been executed: a drawing of a human foetus. They were doctors, then, in the time before when such things were legal.(42)

Janine, who had had an abortion after she had been gang-raped, is punished for the abortion as much as for inciting rape. Legal in pre-Gilead times, abortion is not performed

in Gilead for any reason -- not even in the case of rape or a deformed foetus. The woman has no choice but to complete the pregnancy: "You can't have them taken out; whatever it is must be carried to term"(122). These images bring to mind the continuous struggle, in present-day America, for women to have access to legal abortion, to choose, to have control over their own bodies.

Gilead's tenet that women bear children naturally, i.e. without anaesthetic, raises another present-day issue, the legalisation of midwives. Births in Gilead are attended only by other women, the traditional care-givers throughout the ages. Modern medicine which mainly excludes the midwifery profession is shunned by Gilead. Doctors are no longer in charge. "Once they drugged women, induced labour, cut them open, sewed them up"(124). On the other hand, Gilead's sweeping acceptance and reliance on midwives alone and the exclusion of doctors, forgo the miracles modern medicine can achieve when it cooperates with and assists nature in childbirth. The exclusion of men -- "The Commander is nowhere in sight. He's gone wherever men go on such occasions, some hideout"(126) -- deprives the male of the birth experience and leaves the female alone at a time as intimate as the coupling itself. Offred remembers Luke standing beside her holding her hand when their daughter was born and his being unable to sleep that night "he was so high"(136).

In Gilead the patriarchal system rigidly espouses the biblical decree: "I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children"(Genesis 3:16). Gilead's stubborn adherence to coupling as the only method of procreation along with the narrator's allusions imply the complicated controversy that attends the issue of reproductive technology in today's society. The relentless desire of some infertile women to obtain and rear a child of their own is portrayed in various ways. Outright theft is suggested by Luke's and Offred's experience in the supermarket where a woman lifted their child from the buggy and ran off with her(73). The plight of mothers who give up their babies because they have no other option is implied by Offred's desire to get information about her daughter although she is fully aware that she has been adopted by a needy couple(240). The surrogate mother or woman who couples with the male partner of an infertile woman is amply portrayed by Gilead's handmaids. The fact that some surrogates reject their contract to cede the child to the sponsoring couple is revealed by Offred's comment about Janine that some handmaids resist giving up the child they have nurtured and given birth to: "unless there's been a fight over the baby; which happens more often that you'd think. Once she had it, she may have resisted giving it up"(226). The use of a sperm donor where the male partner is infertile is implied

in the suggestion that doctors have the opportunity to be sires for their patients and, of course, in the coupling of Nick with the handmaid because the Commander is infertile. The story of Offred's mother recalls another instance where a sperm donor is used. A single mother, she wants a child and is able to provide for it but does not want to marry or commit herself to a relationship. She needs the male only to become pregnant.

As the listener/reader digests the information given by the handmaid, another technical reproductive possibility comes to mind -- ectogenesis or in vitro fertilisation. This procedure requires no coupling, no love, no marriage, no commitment on the part of either partner. Only the sperm and ova are necessary. Mechanically removed from the human donors, they are fertilised in a laboratory receptacle and then transplanted to the uterus of a host woman, any woman, not necessarily that of the mother.

The Commander's defence of Gilead's philosophy contrasts present-day situations with those of Gilead(231). The importance of love, which Offred notes is missing from the philosophy, is emphasized through repetition of the word "love" seven times(231,232), and the juxtaposition of Gilead's ideas with those of the present culture. The Commander summarily dismisses Offred's depiction of love: "Those years were just an anomaly, historically speaking, the Commander said. Just a fluke. All we've done is return

things to Nature's norm"(232). A description of Gilead's marriage ceremony which immediately follows quickly erases any notion of the mutual love and responsibility in marriage that the present culture idealizes. The woman must learn, as the Commander intones, "in silence with all subjection" (233). She is not to teach, "nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence"(233). She is no more than a commodity. This idea of the female as a commodity is alluded to throughout the text in many ways: the handmaid's reference to her kind as breeders -- "We are for breeding purposes...We are two-legged wombs..."(146); the simile, "like a queen ant with eggs"(145), which defines Offred's role as a handmaid; eggs (ova) are often discussed as a commodity; one discourse repeats the word "egg" at least seventeen times(120); for Gilead's purpose (breeding) "your feet and your hands are not essential"(102); Offred's comment when she discovers the previous handmaid had hung herself, "If your dog dies, get another"(197); the women in the harem, "objects not in use"(79), waiting. The title "Salvaging" for chapter XIV seems incongruous. What could be salvaged from the hangings, from the dead women's bodies, unless it is the recovery of organs for transplant? Or, considering the theme of procreation, it is more likely the suctioning off of the thousands of unfertilized ova each woman carries from the time of her birth. This is the procedure used when eggs are needed for in vitro

fertilization. As a commodity, the eggs can be frozen for future use. There is no need for coupling; as Offred says, "nobody dies from lack of sex. It's lack of love we die from"(113). In Gilead there is only "Old love; there's no other kind..."(61).

The female alone, like the male, is a separate entity. In a patriarchal culture like Gilead's, where the female is little more than a commodity, she wields no political power. Her sole power lies in her potential ability to breed. To this end she is isolated from the male hierarchy. However, in order to breed, she must couple with a male. This creates social bonds which know no limits and cross all hierarchical barriers. The Commander, at the "very top," couples in marriage with Serena who produces no offspring. A handmaid or surrogate mother replaces her. When the Commander is judged to be infertile, his wife bribes the handmaid to couple with Nick the chauffeur, a servant who ranks very low on the totem pole of authority. When the Commander couples with prostitutes at Jezebel's he also creates social bonds between the highest and the lowest. Thus, through the scenarios presented in a carnivalesque fantasy mode, The Handmaid's Tale graphically reveals the social bonds created between people of unequal power. The many comparisons made between Gilead and pre-Gilead society show that such social bonding between those of unequal power is also prevalent in our present culture.

The inception of Gilead, which, like any patriarchal culture, controls its women through morality and marriage, occurred at a time when women like Offred were choosing a career as well as marriage and children. Like Offred's mother and Moira, they were opting for lifestyles away from the community of women traditionally connected with home and marriage. Patriarchal control was slowly being eroded. In the present culture heterosexuality is being separated from reproduction. Male control over reproduction in the traditional ways is being threatened. In her article, "Transforming Consciousness: Women and the New Reproductive Technologies", Jalna Hanmer writes:

Despite the power of individual men, morality and marriage are no longer effective controllers of the expression of sexuality and thereby biological reproduction. The dominant mode of control is changing hands from the individual male through marriage to men as a social category, through science and technology...(103)

Hamner suggests that "as women make a sustained attack on male sexuality as a form of colonization of women...the present wave of the women's movement is helping to tear up the deal, i.e. lifelong service to men in exchange for limited pregnancies and births"(105). Modern technology, while aiding women's sexual expression with better methods of birth control, safer childbirth and abortion, breeds its own problems. As Hamner notes,

The state directly shapes and supervises the "fit mother" as concept and individual through the personal social services, social security, housing, the health service, education, law and

the legal system... There is no corresponding "fit father role".(103)

Nor can modern technology erase the human sexual desire and weakness at the root of the problem. However, knowledge and awareness of how the patriarchal system operates, that it is based on social bonding and fear, erases some of its glamour and mystery. Atwood's icon, the narrator handmaid, reflects the many perspectives of the various liaisons and their consequences. The vivid images created by the handmaid's discourse bring into focus the often hidden relationships between acts and issues. Such images help women to destroy the myths, to make different choices and to believe in their own worth.

Chapter 2 Part (b)

The Handmaid's Tale, as stated at the outset of this study, is not only carnivalesque, it is postmodern. Although the carnival grotesque found in medieval folk culture would seem to have little in common with late twentieth-century postmodernism, the two do share a number of features.

In carnival, Bakhtin notes, the determining traits of the grotesque image are its relation to time and its ambivalence. Within this image are "both poles of transformation, the old and the new, the dying and the procreating, the beginning and the end of the metamorphosis"(24). This archaic concept concerns only the cyclical time of natural and biological life as seen in the "changing of the seasons: sowing, conception, growth, death"(Rabelais 25). Broadened and deepened during the Renaissance to include social and historic phenomena, the purely cyclical character of the concept is

superseded by the sense of historic time. The grotesque images with their relation to changing time and their ambivalence become the means for the artistic and ideological expression of a mighty awareness of history and of historic change which appeared during the Renaissance. (Rabelais 25)

Although this new historic sense imparts new meaning to the images, it retains the traditional elements of the grotesque: copulation, pregnancy, birth, growth, old age,

disintegration and dismemberment. Noncanonical by nature, the grotesque imagery of folk culture does not conform "in the narrow sense of a specific group of consciously established rules, norms, and propositions in the representation of the body"(Rabelais 30). In contrast, the literary and artistic canons of antiquity and the Renaissance perceive the body as one of "self-sufficient individuality." It is presented "apart from its relation to the ancestral body of the people"(Rabelais 29). Throughout history, these canons continue to incorporate and reflect the grotesque image in various forms, but the original concept of the body as part of the totality of natural and biological life has diminished and changed. Not subject to the popular festive culture, the literature of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries excluded the grotesque as it is related to folk culture. Having lost its living link and "transmitted now as a purely literary tradition"(Rabelais 34), the grotesque carnival image was formalized to become, eventually, a literary mode known simply as "the grotesque." With the Romantic movement of the late eighteenth century, the grotesque became the expression of a "subjective individualistic world outlook very different from the carnival folk concept of the previous ages"(Rabelais 36). Romantic grotesque (one variety is the Gothic or black novel) acquired "a private chamber character. It became... an individual carnival marked by a

vivid sense of isolation"(Rabelais 37). Modernized, the grotesque of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is a negative rhetorical satire. Its satirical laughter holds no element of the creative regenerating laughter found in folk carnival. Later twentieth-century grotesque reveals two lines of development. "The modernist form, (Alfred Jarry) connected in various degrees with the Romantic tradition... evolved under the influence of existentialism"(Rabelais 46). The second form, the realist grotesque of writers like Thomas Mann and Bertolt Brecht, is "related to the tradition of realism and folk culture and reflects at times the direct influence of carnival forms"(Rabelais 46).

As I have shown in the previous chapters, the grotesque realism of The Handmaid's Tale vividly reflects these carnival forms. In fact, the novel embodies and reflects the literary grotesque in its various forms throughout the cycles of history, up to and including present literary forms. It is this aspect of the novel that makes it postmodern.

Postmodernism, writes Catharine Stimpson,

submits two schemata to cognitive therapy: those old binary oppositions and the more modern focus, at once political and scientific, on the apparently isolated object. Post-modernism prefers to sense patterns, connections, relationships. It responds to ironies, ambiguities, open ends, multiple perspectives. The post-modernist can see, simultaneously on a split screen, pictures of New York State territory on the Richter Scale, in a Hudson River valley School painting, on a TV

program about riverine pollution, and in a Sally Ride photograph taken from a space shuttle. The post-modernist also realizes that this paragraph is but one image of post-modernism.(xix)

In The Politics of Postmodernism Linda Hutcheon, too, remarks on the numerous images or definitions of postmodernism. For her, it is a "phenomenon whose mode is resolutely contradictory as well as unavoidably political"(1). Hutcheon refers to the logic of Brian McHale in pointing out that "every critic 'constructs' postmodernism in his or her own way from different perspectives, none more right or wrong than the others. The point is that all are 'finally fictions'"(11). They are fictions because each perspective, of necessity, carries its own view of the possible, its own politics. Since no single definition of postmodernism is free from such politics nor one more correct than another, postmodernism is perhaps best defined as an attitude which has

the capacity to fuse and celebrate what had been previously separated; that is, narrative from textual process, pleasure from scientifically established assertions, representations from non-representational elements.(Bayard 4)

Because postmodernism fuses and celebrates such contradictory ideas, "its commitment to doubleness, or duplicity"(Hutcheon 1), is one of its main features. The connections and presuppositions it installs and reinforces are at the same time challenged, undermined and subverted. Hutcheon explains that it "juxtaposes and gives equal value to the self-reflexive and the historically grounded: to

that which is inward-directed and belongs to the world of art (such as parody) and that which is outward-directed and belongs to 'real life' (such as history)"(2). The presentation of these opposites within the same context compromises the politics of each but it is "their compromised stance which makes those politics recognizable and familiar to all of us"(Hutcheon 2). The criticism that arises in the light of such compromised politics is, then, a complicitous one that also includes the viewer or reader, because the criticism is "for the most part our own" (Hutcheon 2).

The aim of the postmodern is

to de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life; to point out that those entities that we unthinkingly experience as "natural" (they might even include capitalism, patriarchy, liberal humanism) are in fact "cultural"; made by us, not given to us. Even nature, postmodernism might point out, doesn't grow on trees.(Hutcheon 2)

Parody, the literary device used to activate such a de-naturalization, is considered "central to postmodernism, both by its detractors and its defenders"(Hutcheon 93). It is this device, this parody as well as the duality of postmodernism, that relates it to the carnival grotesque. As we have seen, parody and ambivalence are major features of carnival. These features, common to both the carnivalesque and the postmodern, create in The Handmaid's Tale a picture of women's status that is not unlike Catharine Stimpson's simultaneous split-screen picture

mentioned above. To create such a picture requires the ambivalence and duality of contrasting perspectives, a break from the norm of the traditional picture created within a single frame. Like the carnivalesque, postmodernism does not conform to a specific group of consciously established rules or norms. It debases those norms, "works to 'de-doxify' our cultural representations and their undeniable political import"(Hutcheon 3). Postmodernism is not nostalgic(Hutcheon 93). It is always critical, as is the upside-down world of carnival that dispenses with hierarchy and allows all, from serf to king, to speak.

As I have noted above, during the Renaissance the concept of the grotesque image took on a new historic sense, yet retained its traditional elements. The body concept in this image is seen as part of the totality that is the cosmic world. This image of the body is not presented, "apart from its relation to the ancestral body of the people"(Bakhtin, Rabelais 29) as it is in the grotesque realism of later centuries that holds no element of the creative regenerating laughter found in folk carnival. These same elements, an awareness of historic time and a regenerative quality, also factors in the postmodern, result from the use of parody. "The postmodern is said to involve a rummaging through the image reserves of the past in such a way as to show the history of the representations their parody calls to our attention"(Hutcheon 93). As in carnival,

the regenerative aspect of postmodernism occurs because it makes us less certain about our view of history and forces us to rethink our acceptance of the historical perspective. Thus, as Hutcheon says, "postmodern parody is both deconstructively critical and constructively creative, paradoxically making us aware of both the limits and the powers of representation -- in any medium"(98).

In The Handmaid's Tale Margaret Atwood uses the images and parody of folk carnival from the past to show us the history of women's status. These images presented alongside those of the present culture in a postmodern text evoke different perspectives of both past and present and in turn become a part of the future. Postmodern imagery, through its parody, reflects both past and present methods and ideology and consciously seeks, at the same time, new and different forms and perspectives. The narrator/handmaid's discourse is a good example of this mixture of past, present and future:

"It's like walking into the past," says the Commander. His voice sounds pleased, delighted even. "Don't you think?"

I try to remember if the past was exactly like this. I'm not sure now. I know it contained these things, but somehow the mix is different. A movie about the past is not the same as the past.
(247)

Both the handmaid and the Commander have experienced the past, but their images or memories of it are different; each, therefore, has a different perspective. Likewise, "a movie about the past is not the same as the past," but the

ideas on the film, no matter the perspective, can be a part of the future as well as the present and the past. Atwood infuses her work with this regenerative aspect of postmodernism and carnival by incorporating allusions that reflect the various historical eras of the literary canon and the oral tradition.

The author begins her "rummaging through the image reserves of the past"(Hutcheon 93) with biblical allusions which serve to establish the presence of the literary canon by reminding us of the written word that still influences our present society. These allusions (notably the one the author uses as an epigraph to her book and on which the conceit that is Gilead turns) evoke the events of antiquity. These events, established as gospel throughout history, serve to heighten the conceivability of a state such as Gilead. Similarly, through the use of a narrator that emphasizes the orality of discourse, Atwood recalls the existence of an oral tradition. This narrator/icon, as I described in Part (a) of this chapter, is designed to fit into any era, any scenario, where women are present. As such, the icon is a narrator equally suitable for the events of antiquity or those of postmodernism. As we will see, the handmaid's narration touches on and recalls images from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance when the traditions and experiences of women were still related by women in a mainly oral society. The narration also recalls images from the

eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries where writing supersedes the oral tradition. Since writing and the literary canon were, until more recently, primarily the prerogative of men, the traditions and experiences of women, if told at all, were recounted from a male perspective.

While the biblical era is recalled through allusion, the nature of the narrator's discourse and her physical disposition recall the folk carnival of medieval times. The tale or discourse resembles that of a *chanson de geste* sung at carnival time by an itinerant female performer, a jongleur or chronicler. Like the handmaid of The Handmaid's Tale, who has no access to books or formal education, the chronicler is illiterate. Like the handmaid, accused of being a prostitute, the chronicler or jongleur of medieval times was also considered a prostitute. These similarities evoke the notion of continuance in an oral tradition. The notion of an oral tradition is further increased through discourse:

You'll have to forgive me. 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 me...(239)

and

Or, a quaint expression you sometimes hear, still, from older people: I hear where you're coming from, as if the voice itself were a traveller, arriving from a distant place. Which it would be, which it is.(21)

These features, which suggest the medieval carnival, imply, as well, the folk culture of medieval times. This folk

culture perceived the body not as an isolated individual, but as part of the totality of natural and biological life. On the other hand, the literary canon of the same period perceives the body "apart from its relation to the ancestral body of the people"(Bakhtin, Rabelais 29). Atwood evokes this concept and the literary canon of the Middle Ages with her reference to Chaucer. The pun on the word tale/tail and these words, "the superscription The Handmaid's Tale was appended to it by Professor Wade partly in homage to the great Geoffrey Chaucer"(313), strongly suggest Chaucer's Canterbury Tales. One of these, "The Wife of Bath's Tale," embodies both body concepts -- that of folk culture and that of the literary canon. Indicative of the body concept held in medieval folk culture is the wife's notion of herself as part of the cosmos:

For certes I am al Venerien
In feeling, and myn herte is Marcien:
Venus me yaf my lust, my likerousnesse
And Mars yaf me my sturdy hardinesse.
Myn ascendent was Taur and Mars therinne(11. 615-619)

The literary canon, evident in the listing of diverse authors (Ptolemy, Dante, biblical), reveals a body concept that is separate from the rest of nature, that can be held as a possession. In these lines virginity is a prize to be won: "The dart is set up for virginity: Cacche whoso may, who renneth best lat see"(11 81-2). Here, the pronoun "it" refers to a wife as something to be purchased: "I was about to wed a wif: allas, What sholde I bye it on my flessch so

dere?"(ll 172,173). And these lines, where the body is associated with worldly goods, suggest a concept of the body apart from any relation to the ancestral body of the people: "Thou shalt nought bothe, though thou were wood Be maister of my body and of my good..."(ll 319,320).

In The Handmaid's Tale, the literary canon of the Renaissance, a time of great change and ambivalent thought, is evoked by the author's many references to the tolling of a bell. John Donne, one of the foremost Renaissance writers, captures the medieval concept of the body in his Meditations XVI and XVII from Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions:

No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were. Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

(Meditation XVII)

Donnes's work relates the life of the people to the ringing of the bells that tell time and regulate lives. Donne notes "the religious orders should ring to prayers first in the morning; and it was determined that they should ring first that rose earliest"(Meditation XVII). Atwood too, alludes to this method of marking time: "The bell that measures time is ringing. Time here is measured by bells, as once in nunneries"(18). She alludes, in these lines, to the fact that we are not always aware of the tolling of the bell: "I

didn't hear the bells. Perhaps I've become used to them"(43) and "Somewhere else a bell rings, unheard by me"(70). Donne also treats of this notion:

Perchance he for whom the bell tolls may be so ill
as that he knows not it tolls for him; and
perchance I may think myself so much better than I
am as that they who are about me and see my state
may have caused it to toll for me, and I know not
that.(Meditation XVII)

Donne emphasizes the daily presence of bells in these lines:

I have lain near a steeple in which there are said
to be more than thirty bells and near another
where there is one so big as that the clapper is
said to weigh more than six hundred
pounds...(Meditation XVI)

Atwood, too, notes the presence of the bells in the lives of the handmaids. "The bell is tolling; we can hear it from a long way off"(284) and "To the tolling of the bell we walk along the paths once used by students, past buildings that were once lecture halls and dormitories"(284). In both Donne and Atwood the tolling of the bell signifies death. For Donne "this bell tolling softly for another says to me, thou must die"(Meditation XVII). The tolling of the bells makes both authors aware of their mortality. In Atwood, "the bell stops tolling"(286) at the point that three women, "two handmaids, one wife"(285) are to be "salvaged" (hung). The handmaids and other women assembled to watch the proceedings are aware of their own danger and take their own deaths into contemplation: "A collective murmur goes up from us. The crimes of others are a secret language among us. Through them we show ourselves what we might be capable

of, after all"(287). The symbol of the tolling bell connotes death as a part of life and thus reveals the medieval concept of the body in Donne's work. Donne was, however, living in the seventeenth century. Obviously aware of what Bakhtin calls the loss of a "living tie with folk culture"(Rabelais 34) and its concept of the ancestral body, Donne records the ambivalence of the era in his work. In a poem entitled "The Anatomy of the World" he reveals the presence of a new concept which portrays the body as completely individual and self-sufficient:

Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone;
 All just supply and all relation:
 Prince, subject, father, son, are things forgot,
 For every man alone thinks he hath got
 To be a phoenix, and that there can be
 None of that kind, which he is, but he.
 (ll. 213-218)

The death of another, as it does for Donne, also concerns Atwood in The Handmaid's Tale. When Offred, along with other handmaids, participates in a "Particution" (the neologism suggests participation in an execution), she feels "shock, outrage, nausea, Barbarism"(292) as she watches her market partner Ofglen literally kick a man to death. The smell of death sickens Offred but it makes her hungry, aware of her own life: "Death makes me hungry. Maybe it's because I've been emptied; or maybe it is the body's way of seeing to it that I remain alive, continue to repeat its bedrock prayer: I am, I am, I am still"(293). This death of another and the demise of Ofglen, her partner and

confidante, heighten her awareness of her own proximity to death: "Now that Ofglen is gone I am alert again, my sluggishness has fallen away, my body is no longer for pleasure only but senses its jeopardy"(296).

Like Donne, Atwood too is aware of the century in which she lives. She questions the concept that treats the individual as a separate entity rather than as an integral part of the cosmic totality. The author uses an icon that embraces a bodily concept which belongs to the ancestral body of the people. The icon/narrator's awareness of death that makes her hungry and therefore reliant on earth's bounty, makes the bodily connection to earth, as does the preponderance of references to earth's ecology and its images of flora and fauna, always in some connection with the handmaid. A sampling of the first one hundred pages reveals these references:

flowers(13, 17); blue irises(17); daffodils(22, 90); garden(22); tulips, willow, bulb seeds(22); roses in a basket(24); dried flower petals(61); Lily of the Valley(90); leaves of the lilies(67);

forest(18); fall foliage, snow melting in hardwood(61); trees, water, river(40); swinging like Tarzan from a vine(48); grapevine(63); bowls of fruit(61); honey(71); healthy food(75); butter(76); carrots, oranges, milk and honey(57); Blessed be the fruit(29);

trained pig(29); eyes of a dog, spaniel not terrier(31); meat, chicken, pork chops(37); sheep(40); ducks(48); animals, flash of bared teeth(59); mice, cat(65); prize pig, caged rats, pigeons(79); new born mouse(82); genital organs of plants(91); slug's eye(98).

All these references made by or in relation to the

handmaid/icon in whom the concept of individual as part of a cosmic totality is inherent, override and dispute that which has prevailed since the Renaissance -- the concept which presents the image of the body as individual and self-sufficient.

By adding the two-letter prefix "un," meaning not, to the word women, Atwood evokes the attitude and philosophy of eighteenth-century literature. In accordance with the concept of the body as separate and individual, women are viewed as separate entities, undeserving of the same rights and privileges as the male. While eighteenth-century literature embodies an attitude toward women which exalts them for their tender qualities as helpmates, wives and mothers, for their "natural" or biological role, it generally denies their sexuality and their ability to perform in other walks of life. This view of womanhood that persists even into the twentieth century is reflected in Atwood's novel which opens in an era not unlike that of today's culture where women have achieved a great deal of autonomy within society. Many are highly literate and take their place alongside men in a variety of trades and professions. However, with the inception of Gilead, the only role considered worthy for women is that of wife and mother. Their biological functions, their ability to have children, to reproduce, is all that assures women's rightful place in society. The term "Unwomen" denotes certain women

as something other, not women, because they neither meet nor adhere to the perceived qualities of womanhood in Gileadean society. The notion that women who do not reproduce for one reason or another are "Unwomen" appears early in the text: "He could fake the tests, report me for cancer, for infertility, have me shipped off to the Colonies, with the Unwomen"(71). A movie called an "Unwomen documentary" depicts as evil the choices made by those who elected, in the pre-Gilead period, to follow careers other than motherhood(128). Women like Janine who actually give birth are never classed as "Unwomen": "She'll never be sent to the Colonies, she'll never be declared Unwoman. That is her reward"(137). This attitude toward women who do not conform to the proclaimed norm is a theme explored by the eighteenth-century writer Jean-Jacques Rousseau. His novel, Julie ou La Nouvelle Héloïse, portrays a utopian vision of life in which nature and the elemental forces are preferable to life in high society and in which chastity overrules sexuality. Rousseau's novel, as does Atwood's, bears all "The key utopian traits (self-sufficiency, utilitarianism, as well as the tendency toward collectivization and the definite totalitarian aspects including manipulation and control of the sex lives of the inhabitants)"(Jones 87). As Madelyn Gutwirth writes in Civil Rights and the Wrongs of Women, the great charge against women of the era, "lent daunting force by Rousseau, was that women's participation

in society was an aberration, and that those who sought to play the game of society with men simply unwomaned themselves"(561).

Atwood evokes the similar philosophy found in the images of nineteenth-century literature with her allusion to a "Tennyson garden"(161). As England's poet laureate, one whose life spanned most of the nineteenth century, Tennyson brought to his work "a fusion of character, spirit, and landscape which expresses a sense of hypnosis, entrapment and annulment"(Sanders 354). More than any other work of its era, his poem In Memoriam represents "the chief Victorian conflict of science and faith"(Magill 408). This same conflict is central to another of Tennyson's works told in a garden setting and which reflects the new concern for the higher education of women. A tale with a medieval setting, The Princess tells of a university for women only, where knowledge takes precedence over all other considerations including the biblical view that exalts marriage and motherhood. But Princess Ida, the university's president, eventually succumbs to that Victorian ideal, marriage. She becomes a wife, a ministering angel whose heaven is her home. The Victorian angel is, however, according to Nina Auerbach, "defined by her boundaries... Heaven is women's prison as well as her sphere"(72). The allusion to a Tennysonian garden in The Handmaid's Tale links the passage in which it occurs with Tennyson's

expression of hypnosis, entrapment and annulment as well as with Auerbach's notion of the Victorian home as prison for the female. Serena's garden, within the sphere of her home, is also Offred's sphere. The lush and beautiful garden is, nevertheless, "heavy with scent, languid..."(161). To walk through it makes Offred's head swim. The notion of entrapment in that garden where Offred is herself a flower of womanhood by virtue of her biological function, is evoked by the recollection of her encounter with a young male guard the previous day: "Did the sight of my ankle make him light headed, faint, at the checkpoint yesterday, where I dropped my pass and let him pick it up for me? No handkerchief, no fan, I use what's handy"(162). But the garden is also a reminder of Offred's own entrapment, a sphere from which she would like to escape. In her role as handmaid, Offred's sexuality, her desire, is repressed just as the sexuality of the tulips in the garden is repressed when Serena snips off the seed pods with a pair of shears: "...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"(161). Thus, 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.(161)

The garden reminds Offred of her own repressed sexuality, her own desire that clamours to be heard, that made her try

to provoke the male guard in an erotic way. Abruptly, the lingering sensuousness of desire is annulled, erased, by the notion of winter: "Winter is not so dangerous. I need hardness, cold, rigidity, not this heaviness, as if I'm a melon on a stem, this liquid ripeness"(162).

The author also calls attention to nineteenth-century literature with images typical of the Romantic grotesque. As noted earlier, nineteenth-century grotesque became an individual carnival marked by a vivid sense of isolation(Bakhtin, Rabelais 37). Atwood makes manifest this sense of isolation in the lives of the handmaids, their segregation from the mainstream of life, their confinement to their chambers like the princess of some fairy tale locked up in a tower. She utilizes features of the Romantic grotesque such as satirical laughter, fear, the mask, the tragic doll, ambivalence and darkness which Bakhtin describes in his book on Rabelais(37-41), to create certain images in The Handmaid's Tale. Laughter in the Romantic grotesque loses its gay and joyful tone, is "cut down to cold humour, irony, sarcasm"(Bakhtin, Rabelais 38). Offred's laughter which she tries to stifle as she sits on the floor of her closet is the gay, joyful belly laughter of carnival: "I shake, I heave... I'll burst... mirth rhymes with birth, oh to die of laughter"(156). But, as noted earlier in this discussion, most of the laughter in the text is reduced to a thin, tongue-in-cheek humour. Ambivalent,

it offers a sharp contrast to the regenerative laughter of carnival. Without this regenerative power, the Romantic grotesque reveals something frightening about the world we live in and makes it alien. Whereas the images of folk culture are "absolutely fearless and communicate this fearlessness to all"(Bakhtin, Rabelais 39), the images of the Romantic grotesque tend to inspire the reader with fear. Moira's exploits in The Handmaid's Tale project the folk culture image of fearlessness and, as Offred tells us, inspires the others:

Moira was our fantasy. We hugged her to us, she was with us in secret, a giggle; she was lava beneath the crust of daily life. In the light of Moira, the Aunts were less fearsome and more absurd. Their power had a flaw to it. They could be shanghaied in toilets. The audacity was what we liked.(143)

The image of fear, on the other hand, is fully expressed in Janine who eventually breaks down under Gilead's pressure system. Moira slaps her to keep her from "slipping over the edge," to keep her from infecting the others with fear: "That stuff is catching"(229).

The mask that suggests "the joy of change and reincarnation"(Bakhtin, Rabelais 39), and which is related to transition and metamorphoses in folk culture, is, in Atwood, only a partial mask. The handmaid's wing-like mask shades the major features of the face, the eyes and nose from the view of others; by the same token, it prevents the handmaid from seeing much of the world around her. Thus the

mask, like that in Romantic grotesque, "hides something, keeps a secret, deceives... loses almost entirely its regenerating and renewing element... A terrible vacuum, a nothingness lurks behind it"(Bakhtin, Rabelais 40). The narrator/handmaid expresses this nothingness in these words: "There's time to spare. This is one of the things I wasn't prepared for -- the amount of unfilled time, the long parentheses of nothing. Time as white sound..."(79). The theme of the tragic doll places emphasis on "the puppet as the victim of alien inhuman force which rules over men by turning them into marionettes"(Bakhtin, Rabelais 40). Reminiscent of this tragic doll or marionette is Offred's description of her Jezebel costume, "tawdry as carnival dolls"(265). The same notion appears in her description of the three bodies of the women, hanging on the wall: "Beneath the hems of the dresses, the feet dangle, two pairs of red shoes, one pair of blue. If it weren't for the ropes and the sacks it could be a kind of dance... They look like showbiz"(289). Finally, darkness, typical of the Romantic grotesque, is a feature of the novel. Seven out of fifteen sections are entitled "Night." The book begins in darkness with a "Night" section. Although the last section is entitled "Night" there is also an ambivalent note which suggests the regenerative power of folk culture carnival: "And as I step up, into the darkness within; or else into the light"(307).

As I discussed earlier (page 93), Atwood's novel, with its allusion to the tolling of the bells, evokes John Donne's Meditations which show concern for other human beings and reflect the folk culture vision of the body as part of a cosmic totality. The same allusions, of course, also evoke Ernest Hemingway's novel For Whom The Bell Tolls. This novel embraces the concept of man as part of a cosmic whole ("no man is an island entire of itself"(Meditation XVII)). The title derives from Donne's words which Hemingway uses as an epigraph for his novel about the Spanish Civil War. While Hemmingway's hero, Jordan, dies for the benefit of his fellow man, his death accomplishes little for Maria, his lover and his comrade in war. Jordan had offered marriage to Maria after the war but his death deprives her of the only womanly status of which society seemingly approves. Without the protective mantle of marriage to Jordan, Maria must return to a society that respects neither her personhood nor her womanhood, a society in which she has already been beaten, robbed, starved and raped. Thus we see the Victorian ideal of women, so aptly praised in the works of Tennyson, still persists even in the twentieth-century novel. Although two world wars, which of necessity brought women out of the isolation of the home into a much larger sphere have helped to shatter the Victorian ideal, marriage is still the revered and most often prescribed career for women. Atwood invokes the

politics that surround male/female relationships by using images from history in such a way that the reader becomes aware of double or conflicting values within the prescribed patriarchal standards, as well as control through marriage and procreation that s/he may not have previously entertained.

Each of the tales discussed above, from Chaucer's The Wife of Bath's Tale to Hemingway's For Whom The Bell Tolls evokes images that suggest women's struggle to live and work according to their own choice. Each reveals a patriarchal society that suggests marriage is the only suitable choice for women. In a postmodern image she calls The Handmaid's Tale, Margaret Atwood fuses these conflicting ideas. Although her novel embodies many of the features and ideas of earlier literary forms, it does not conform to any particular one. Rather, it is a medley of several and offers no recognizable consistency. Even the narrator apologizes for its fabric: "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"(279) and "I'm sorry there is so much pain in this story. I'm sorry it's in fragments"(279). Atwood's arrangement of images recalls Stimpson's image of the postmodern. As though on the split screen of television, one watches the contrasting and contradictory images of The

Handmaid's Tale. Atwood's use of a narrator that embodies the regenerative aspects of carnival along with her postmodern arrangement of images that install, reinforce and, at the same time, challenge and subvert, makes the text, as Hutcheon says of the postmodern, "deconstructively critical and constructively creative"(98).

Conclusion

Both carnival and the postmodern operate in a way that disturbs and distorts the perspective, that "perceived, respectable order of things" (Atwood 243) which we, as readers, bring to any text. In a novel that employs both of these, Margaret Atwood succeeds in presenting, in a non-traditional way, a tale that essentially recalls and updates the history of women's status. Historically, women's status has been linked to the issues of desire and procreation. As The Handmaid's Tale reveals, the sexual coupling that occurs, either out of desire or for procreation, invariably establishes the social relationships between men and women. As well, it variously affects social relationships among women. Considered too personal, too private or too pornographic, the sexual act has become over the centuries, a taboo subject, most often relegated to the confines of marriage. Rarely regarded simply as a normal body function related to desire or to procreation, [as part of nature's regenerative cycle, society imposes on this function a multitude of restrictions and prohibitions. These restraints prompt a form of sexual barter which particularly affects the female's relationship to authority in the social structure. Amid the politics that emanate from various viewpoints on issues that directly concern and involve women (marriage, adultery, rape, abortion, etc.) the fact that the

sexual act equally involves male and female, that each gender is of equal value in the procreation of the human species, is usually disregarded or forgotten. Atwood, however, uses this essential fact as the focus of her novel. As I have shown in my analysis, she presents images that delineate the social relationships which stem from it and carefully traces their existence in history from antiquity to the present, by using the devices of carnival and post-modernism. As we have seen, The Handmaid's Tale features ambivalence, parody, polyphony, abundance, laughter -- the literary devices of carnival. Each of these devices, especially laughter, in a purely carnivalesque work, operates to show how the people, male and female alike, debase and dethrone the political hierarchy. In The Handmaid's Tale, however, where the hierarchy is exclusively male, to debase and dethrone it completely would be to condemn all males -- one half of the human race. This would merely uphold the radical feminist view that prefers to exclude males. Such a limited view coming from all the people (carnival includes all) would herald a future without men and the eventual extinction of the human race. In order to avoid this conception, Atwood establishes women's collective voice in a narrator that evokes the carnival body as a cosmic whole. At the same time, through the collective narrative voice, she juxtaposes in the postmodern manner, images of women in other historical eras. Because the

author does not delete the necessary laughter and the abundance but only suppresses them, the narrator/icon retains its regenerative carnivalesque quality. However, because the laughter is suppressed, escaping only as a wry, tongue-in-cheek humour, the icon also reflects the rejection and repression of the carnival body in later literary eras. This ambivalence or duality inherent in carnival and post-modernism significantly enhances the potential of the narrator/icon. Its chameleon-like quality allows the narrator to tell her story in a manner that recalls the medieval *chanson de geste* and its female jongleur or chronicler. The icon also evokes similar tales where the collective voice of women is silenced and woman's story is told from a male perspective as in Chaucer, Tennyson or Hemingway. Finally, the use of the medieval *chanson de geste* form for The Handmaid's Tale not only revives the regenerative aspect of the carnival body in the twentieth century, it restores woman's voice in the expression of her own story.

The *chanson de geste* form of story telling is an oral method of recounting historical deeds. Like a camera that captures but one frame at a time, the chronicler also recounts only one scene at a time. By choosing to describe the various scenes that trace the social relationships of men and women and reveal the sources of power over women, the narrator of The Handmaid's Tale illuminates woman's

desire and participation in those scenarios. Thus, by simply recounting history, Atwood presents both sides of the story without attributing blame to either gender. As Glen Deer notes, "she is well aware of the connections...she is simply withholding her comments"(198). The horror that is Gilead arises not from the individual scenes but from the effect of having them placed side by side in the story, all under one roof as it were, and then viewing them, grossly magnified in the grotesque light of carnival. As Atwood herself has commented, "there is nothing in the book that has not already happened, somewhere, sometime"(Nischik 139) but, seeing them ranked together in the same context, the reader, perhaps for the first time, realizes the chain of betrayal that accompanies sexual bartering and its relation to power and authority over women. Gilead portrays the treatment of women under a patriarchal system as moderately benevolent to those who accept their assigned role and keep strictly within its laws. Women who disobey or are no longer useful to the state, even for reasons beyond their control, are put to death or cast aside with access only to the barest necessities of life. Many of the issues portrayed in Atwood's fantasy about Gilead that deal with work, marriage, adultery, rape, abortion and childbirth reflect the attitude of some segments of society in our present culture. These attitudes are frightening and destructive of women's lives. Apart from the fact that they deny women the same

freedom as men to choose their own way of life, they tend to alienate and ghettoize women so that they will not be exposed to rape or other unwanted sexual advances. With so few avenues of work open to them many women are dependent on their mates or partners in marriage for their very survival. As Atwood's tale suggests, to become a bride is the one goal, the only acceptable option for a majority of young women. They are not educated for anything else and few ever learn to become solely responsible for themselves.

The fantasy that is The Handmaid's Tale reveals the issues of marriage, adultery, abortion, rape, etc. in the social context of their occurrence rather than as a discussion of any single issue. The author thus temporarily frees them of the controversy that presently rages around them. The tale merely adds the base of a wider perspective to whatever knowledge the reader already possesses about the issues. It does not judge or weigh evidence. (The fantasy is a reflection, however distorted in the carnival mirror, of many of today's issues on women's rights.) Atwood alludes to this fact as she terminates her fantasy in a culture familiar to the reader, albeit one further advanced in time. Throughout the novel the constant use of anacrisis, the repetition of a word in various contexts that exposes other meanings or connotations, habituates the reader to allusion through the semiotic or signifying power of words. Although the last chapter "Historical Notes on The Handmaid's Tale"

(311) does not dwell on anacrisis, it perpetuates the idea of alternate meaning through the use of emphasis and diction that create allusions. It is through these allusions and equivocations that Atwood connects the ideology of Gilead to that of present culture. Atwood emphasizes a familiar name from Gilead in this passage: "Luke" and "Nick" drew blanks, as did "Moirra" and "Janine." There is a high probability that these were, in any case, pseudonyms, adopted to protect these individuals should the tapes be discovered"(318). The word "Nick" emphasized with quotation marks, in association with the words "discovered" and "tapes" suggests the discovery of tapes made by the American President Richard Nixon in the famous Watergate scandal of 1973. Similar emphasis on "the element 'Fred': Frederick R. Waterford and B. Frederick Judd"(319) suggests the name of Nixon's Watergate lawyer J. Fred Buzhardt. A water ford is, of course, similar to a water gate; both allow passage through water. The same prefix and similar meaning in the word "Waterford" evoke and emphasize the word Watergate. To further pun on the word "Waterford" is to note that it contains the name "Ford," the surname of Nixon's Vice-President Gerald R. Ford. Other diction such as "Commander," "President's Day Massacre," "tactics," "C.I.A.," "Congress," "Constitution," used in a political parody that follows the allusion to "Nick" and the discovery of tapes, only serves to heighten the allusion to Nixon and

Watergate. While Watergate itself has little to do with The Handmaid's Tale, the Nixon 'era', the time just previous to Gilead, does. ERA, or the Equal Rights Amendment, was passed by both houses of the American Congress under President Nixon in 1972. This amendment which deals with the same women's issues as those portrayed in Gilead "would have amended the Constitution to prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex" (Ehrenreich 144). Never ratified, it was finally defeated in 1982, ironically as the result of a STOP-ERA campaign begun in 1973 by an influential woman author and member of the Nixon administration. Phyllis Schlafly saw ERA as a threat to the family and "masterfully raised the spectre of women drafted for combat, of unisex bathrooms and homosexual marriages, of demonic abortionists" (Ehrenreich 343), all those things Atwood exposes under the grotesque light of carnival and to which Gilead is so adamantly opposed. Anti-feminist leaders like Schlafly "are also ranking functionaries in America's New Right, for whom the issues of marriage and male responsibility share space on a list that includes... impos[ing] the values of seventeenth-century Puritanism on a sinfully errant mass culture" (Ehrenreich 152).

Among this New Right is another author, a male intellectual who is reminiscent of Atwood's Professor Pieixoto and could well be her inspiration for Gilead. To his surname "Gilder," one need only substitute the letter

"a" for the "r" and then transpose the final letters "e" and "a" to sit between the letters "l" and "d" in order to form the word GILEAD. Certainly his extremist view matches that of Gilead's, for he sees men as brutes unable to control their sexual drives and by nature given to rape and pillage. In contrast, "female sexuality...is diffuse and undemanding" (Ehrenreich 166), expressed through the pregnancy, childbirth and nurturing so highly-valued in Gilead. George Gilder has published in high-brow magazines and has taught at Harvard. Like Pieixoto, he pays lip service to the work of feminists -- "he befriended feminists and absorbed the literature of the human potential movement" -- but "his nineteenth-century Victorian social theory" centers on the biological aspects of male and female (Ehrenreich 165,166).

Atwood creates an allusion to the unbending patriarchal attitude of the church with the curious name she attaches to the equally unbending patriarch of Academia, the keynote speaker and authority on the handmaid's tale, Professor Pieixoto. In order to pronounce the name one must separate it into three syllables: PIE/IX/OTO. In so doing one recognizes the French terminology that refers to Pie neuf or Pius the ninth, the nineteenth-century pope who created the modern papacy. Strong-willed and insensitive, he "centralized the government of the Roman Catholic Church and demanded uncompromising obedience to the person of the pope" (Barker 227). Like Atwood's Pieixoto, he was known for

"his extensive publications"(312). In a trend away from any intellectualism toward an introspective devotionism, Pius IX announced the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, declaring the Virgin Mary free from all taint of original sin from the moment of her conception"(Barker 227). Thus the name "Pieixoto," affixed to the academic authority on Gilead, labels him with the dogma of the Virgin Mary and the notion of the infallibility that is the basis of the Commander's authority in Gilead. Not incidentally, the French word "pie" also has the meaning "magpie" or "chatterbox". Added to the suffix "oto", meaning ear (O.E.D.), whichever meaning one chooses for "pie" suggests that Professor Pieixoto is a man who either will not hear the more liberal proposals of other intellectuals or is such a chatterbox, involved in his personal ideals that he cannot hear what the voice on the handmaid's tapes is really saying. The allusion to "Nick" that evokes the defeated Equal Rights Amendment and to "Pieixoto," the academic authority who still entertains the notion of nineteenth-century dogma and infallibility even in the twenty-second century, suggests that women's lives, in spite of twentieth-century enlightenment, are doomed to be defined by tradition and the seventeenth-century Puritanism upheld by America's New Right. Other such allusions abound in the text but the aforementioned will suffice to show that the fantasy has a solid foundation in present culture.

As well as allusion, symbolism, images and metaphors of all kind suggest the politics that surround each of the women's issues that is projected through the telling of the tale. Colours like the red of the handmaid's robe evoke more than the fairy tale image of Little Red Riding Hood. The flora and fauna inscribed in the background of the story also have their connotations, like the blue irises(17) that hint of the Greek goddess of the rainbow, the Kore, Virgin or female soul(Walker 450). And there is the ecology which the author so closely links with women's issues. All of these are themes beyond the scope of this work. My concern here has been to show that the postmodern and carnivalesque devices Atwood uses enhance the reader's perception and awareness of the social relationships that affect women's issues. I have shown above that the issues in the fantasy are those of the present culture. The narrator/icon admits no race, creed or colour. The space she inhabits is imaginary, of no specific country. She is, therefore, like the issues that surround her, universal. In both the fantasy and the present culture, women's complicity in or passive acceptance of these issues are major factors in their non-resolution. Atwood's innovative use of carnival and the experimental techniques of postmodernism distances the issues, removes them from their usual context to reveal the chain of complicity and betrayal that perpetuates them. The impersonal handmaid/icon, alienated and isolated from

society as we know it, who deals with these universal issues, divests the reader of any emotional or political involvement. The narrator/icon creates the carnival space that allows the reader to accompany the handmaid personally, to experience with her the issues as they arise at their most basic level. Thus the reader learns as the handmaid does, by experience. Once armed with her experience and knowledge, the handmaid must make a choice. Either she accepts the status quo with all its crippling limitations or she accepts the consequences of her actions against the hierarchy. For her crime of knowing -- "All I did was know"(297) -- she forfeits the prestige and security of her position as handmaid. But the handmaid's experience and knowledge give her the power to act. As suggested by the parody on the Lord's Prayer, knowledge is power:

Knowing was a temptation. What you don't know won't tempt you, Aunt Lydia used to say.

Maybe I don't really want to know what's going on. Maybe I'd rather not know. Maybe I couldn't bear to know. The Fall was a fall from innocence to knowledge...

Deliver us from evil.

Then there's Kingdom, Power, and glory.(205)

The power of knowledge enables the handmaid to act. She must now personally face the consequences that arise from her knowledge and the resulting action. Forfeiting her position as handmaid, she is eligible no longer for the protection of the state or even that of the Commander's household. Now, totally responsible for her own welfare, her future is uncertain. Thus, she steps up "into the

darkness within; or else the light"(307).

In the American New Right's vision of the world, for the woman like the handmaid who chooses the unknown in place of marriage and security, the future can only bring a permanent state of war. It would be a battle of the sexes where "the most intimate relationships must be used as instruments of a larger coercive scheme"(Ehrenreich 168). "This anti-feminist and right-wing vision" of society, says Ehrenreich, is "a "fragile dystopia" because "if single men were all by nature disposed to criminality, drugs and violence, no woman would marry one"(168). This right-wing vision is the "fragile dystopia" that Atwood presents as The Handmaid's Tale. Because it affords, through the strategies of postmodernism and carnivalesque writing, an opportunity for the reader to gain insight into the relationship between the individual and social authority, it makes the reader aware of the status of women in patriarchal societies, especially where the women's right to choose is continually being eroded. In creating a carnival space, Atwood, an author who likes "the reader to participate in the writing of the book"("Speaking of Margaret" Spectator C2), provides the means of participation. The reader experiences life in Gilead along with the handmaid. When the reader refuses or opts for the status quo, s/he chooses, as the handmaid does, either the darkness, the "Night" that is Gilead, or, s/he chooses an enlightened world that affords women the same

opportunities and the same respect as men in their chosen way of life. Barbara Ehrenreich's book, The Hearts of Men, that tells of the social relationship between men and women in today's North American culture, reminds one of Gilead. The author herself notes that her "book can be read as a story of mounting perfidy" (168). Yet she is optimistic about the future because, among other reasons, she sees that "the possibility of honest communication between the sexes has been increased"(170). In spite of the horror that is Gilead Atwood, too, reveals a note of optimism. Although it operates, like the words MAY DAY injected at intervals throughout the text, as an international distress signal for women, The Handmaid's Tale offers some hope for the future. Its narrator/icon belongs to the carnival body and therefore is of a reviving, regenerative nature. Toward that end, the tale offers the reader, as it does the handmaid, a "reconstruction"(144). Like the fairy tale images that help children structure their day dreams, the images in Atwood's "fantasy" reveal the dangers of a right-wing anti-feminist society and encourage the reader to structure a more equitable world for women.

Notes

1 Lines 625-628, Act I Prometheus Unbound.

2 Patricia Kane sees Atwood's tale as a future world (9-10). Alden H. Turner notes: "Atwood's satiric recreation of fiction and history in the futuristic theocracy of Gilead is a fulfilment of earlier colonial new world histories 'pious imitation' of scripture..."(87). Reingard M. Nischik suggests that "the futuristic or fantastic aspects of the situation described lie in the system of social relationships not in technological development"(143).

3 Judith Timson states that it is a "compelling fable"(56). Linda W. Wagner-Martin claims it is "science fantasy"(4). Alden H. Turner places it within the "American documentary tradition of fiction found in fact" noting that it derives from the puritan sense of fiction which gave rise to fictive neutral territory "somewhere between the real world and fairy-land"(86). Nischik thinks it comes close to science fiction(143). Glen Deer remarks on the "nighttime series of fantasies" in the novel. He also comments on the ambiguity in Atwood's rhetorical style, noting certain paradoxical aspects, "certain incongruous elements that suggest the work is "not quite unified"(191). David Halliday appears to agree with this notion; he perceives "no gravity, no landscape, no weight" in the novel but does allow it is written in the Utopian tradition and mentions a structure

and make up that "could have been used with telling effect"(52).

4 Icon is used here in that sense given in A Handbook to Literature eds. Holman and Harmon: "A verbal or aesthetic icon both says and shows what it means: it states a case and also embodies or enacts the case"(247).

5 Oral cultures, according to Susan Schibanoff, "constantly 're-read' these 'texts'; each re-telling of a narrative is slightly different than a previous one, and there is a built-in, unconscious procedure of updating oral tradition over the years... The implication is that orally composed, aurally perceived, narratives reflect a society's present cultural values; what fails to harmonize with these values is forgotten or altered"(89).

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