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Through the Lens of Trauma: Analyzing Narrative Voice in The Handmaid's Tale

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HONORS THESIS

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Approved by:

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Josh Doty". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial 'J'.

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Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) depicts a dystopian future where after a religious-political uprising, the United States has been replaced by the totalitarian regime of Gilead. Gilead reinforces traditional gender roles, favoring men as the superior gender and oppressing female independence and autonomy. Riddled with environmental pollution and radiation, Gilead suffers from an infertile, declining population. This led to the creation of the titular Handmaids, a new role in society for fertile women convicted of committing gender-based or religious-based crimes. Handmaids are given to a wealthy household to be impregnated by the man in the stead of his wife. If the Handmaids conceive a child, they are forced to give birth, and afterwards be separated from their baby to be transferred to a new household, where they will commence the process again. After three healthy births, the Handmaids will be rewarded, though the reward is not explicitly discussed. Handmaids are merely objects in the eyes of society. Their movements are restricted, and they are not allowed contact with friends or family. Handmaids' names are erased; their new name is assigned by their household. The new name is a conglomeration of the word "Of" and the first name of their head of household. The narrator of *The Handmaid's Tale* lives in a household ruled by a Commander named Fred. Therefore, her name is Of-Fred: Offred.

The Handmaid's Tale is told through the eyes of Offred, a thirty-two-year-old woman thrust into the role of Handmaid. Enslaved as a Handmaid after attempting to escape Gilead with her husband and daughter, Offred has been stripped of her identity and forced to live a highly restrictive, traumatizing life, one where her new purpose is to be impregnated by a man she didn't choose. Offred tells her story in the form of audio tapes, recorded as she's in the

midst of trying to escape Gilead. As Offred recounts her story as a Handmaid, she actively reconstructs its events. She interweaves memories from her past life with her current imprisonment. She intersects her narrative with multiple versions of events, leaving it up to the audience to decide which, if any, hold true. She narrates her story in a mixture of past and present tenses, causing confusion regarding the setting. The reveal that the entire book is an audio recording only comes at the very end with the historical notes section of the book.

Narrative unreliability plagues *The Handmaid's Tale*, and it begins with our narrator, Offred. Through readings of medical-humanity and cognitive literary theory, this thesis examines the manner in which trauma alters Offred's narrative voice in *The Handmaid's Tale*. I argue that Offred's narration is a trauma response to her oppressive environment and is motivated by an attempt to reclaim her lost agency.

This thesis draws upon a methodology informed by the Medical Humanities field, specifically Arthur Frank's *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics* (1995). This book explores the complex relationship between identity, illness, and storytelling. Ill people's stories have primarily been told through the perspective of their medical examiners. They are treated as an amalgamation of symptoms and disorders discussed in medical terminology often too advanced for the ill person themselves to understand. Traditionally, when a person becomes ill, they stop being people and turn into patients (Frank 10). Frank discusses an account in which a man with advanced mouth cancer went through extensive reconstructive surgery and was featured in a medical journal. This article, however, revolved solely about the man's disease and his treatment, and barely included any of his own personal story (10). Frank saw a need for the inclusion of ill people's stories through their own eyes and voices. This book is then framed

by the personal experiences of the ill, featuring narratives centering on the ill person themselves. This includes narratives in which the ill person discusses their life story, including their illness, but does not revolve entirely around it. It establishes that illness does not have to be the topic of the story, merely the condition through which it is told. The story is told through a “wounded body”, but it does not have to be solely about wounds or illnesses (Frank 3).

Similarly, Offred’s story in *The Handmaid’s Tale* isn’t solely about trauma, but is a story told through the voice of a traumatized narrator.

The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics establishes the importance of storytelling among the ill. It attests that wounds imbue us with narrative power. Telling their story allows the ill person to reconnect with themselves and regain their sense of identity. Becoming a storyteller “recovers the voices” thought silenced by illness (Frank xii). Using this power to create stories from wounds promotes healing among both the storyteller and the listeners. By telling their story, the person becomes more than their illness alone, reclaiming “their own experience of suffering” (Frank 18). Wounded storytellers turn their suffering into testimony, using it to frame their lives and recover their sense of self.

Wounded storytelling culminates in the form of a “self-story”, a story that involves illness but prioritizes the identity of the ill person (Frank 55). The story of the self is the focus. The ill person repairs the damage they have suffered by creating a space for their own positive and negative emotions regarding their story. They reacquaint themselves with their sense of self by transforming their suffering into a story, which can be shared with others. Self-stories allow them to digest what they’ve undergone and renew their identity. Although *The Wounded Storyteller* primarily addresses narratives with physical illnesses, it allows for the adaptation of

self-stories to other forms, such as trauma caused by captivity, abuse, or war (Frank 69). This makes self-stories an applicable interpretation of Offred's unreliable narration. Offred's unreliability as a narrator is molded/designed both as a trauma response and as a self-story. Similarly, although *The Wounded Storyteller* only includes real life accounts of people who are ill, there is value in adopting this framework in interpreting fictional characters such as Offred. People who identify with Offred's character can utilize her story as a form to advance their own healing journey.

The framework from *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics* is particularly apt in analyzing Offred's character because of its perspective on unreliable narratives. Whereas other frameworks might dismiss unreliable narration as inherently false, this one posits that it's a version of the truth. The unfiltered narration is one so devastating that the teller couldn't bear to share it fully, so much so that the teller was forced to alter it in order to continue their story. The evasion of the truth is still "the truth" (Frank 22). Frank describes how reconstructing the story reveals "the truth of the desire for what is being told, as the corrected version of what was lived" (Frank 22). As a narrator, Offred hides and lies about certain events in her story. However, in itself this reluctance to share reveals her character to us.

This thesis will also be supplemented by methodology informed by the cognitive framework of Theory of Mind, as established in Lisa Zunshine's *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (2006). Theory of Mind "describes our ability to explain people's behaviors in terms of their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and desires" (Zunshine 6). We assign thoughts based off behavior, such as assuming that a person sitting down for dinner is likely hungry or

that someone who's shivering is cold. Although not originally designed for fiction, Theory of Mind provides us with a tool to "make sense of fictional characters" (Zunshine 20).

By examining Offred's thoughts and actions through a Theory of Mind lens, we will gain a richer understanding of how trauma influences her character. Offred does not explicitly state that she is traumatized. However, her behavior demonstrates that she has been harshly affected by the severe restrictions the society of Gilead has placed on her: "But who can remember pain, once it's over? All that remains of it is a shadow, not in the mind even, in the flesh. Pain marks you, but too deep to see. Out of sight. Out of mind" (Atwood 125). Offred's trauma is evident in the way she describes her self-story, in which pain has scarred her in invisible ways, much like trauma.

The Handmaid's Tale is narrated by Offred as a "self-story". As she recounts the events of her life, she is actively modifying these accounts. She freely admits that she will alter her version of events due to her need for a better ending. "If it's a story I'm telling, then I have control over the ending. Then there will be an ending, to the story, and real life will come after it. I can pick up where I left off. It isn't a story I'm telling. It's also a story I'm telling, in my head, as I go along" (Atwood 39). Offred cannot endure her current life without reconstructing it. It's too painful to withstand without anything to soothe the wound. The narrative style in *The Handmaid's Tale* is a direct effect of the trauma Offred's suffering from, and it informs us about her psychological state of mind.

Offred's trauma is the most obvious in the dehumanization she endures. The regime of Gilead robs her of all agency and independence. Offred's life is strictly overseen by her

superiors. She's not allowed to be outside by herself. She's forced to wear the highly restrictive red robes of Handmaids, which announce her role to society, and the white angel wings headdress, which blinds her vision. She doesn't even have the comfort of her own name, which particularly pains her: "I keep the knowledge of this name [her true name] like something hidden, some treasure I'll come back to dig up, one day. I think of this name as buried" (84). By removing her name, Gilead effectively erases her identity, making her fade into the background. This is particularly devastating considering that the audience never gets the opportunity to discover Offred's true name.

Although Offred was an independent educated woman before the establishment of Gilead, she is forced to adopt a distorted perception of herself (and of all women) to stay alive. After Offred was first enslaved and drafted as a Handmaid, she was sent to be trained for her new duties. Taught by Aunts [higher-ranked women that oversee the indoctrination of the Handmaids, but are still oppressed themselves], Offred, alongside a cohort of Handmaids, was bombarded with misogynistic, religious messages for the duration of her stay, emphasizing values such as obedience, purity, and passivity. She never fully agrees that she's meant to be a "walking womb", but the propaganda serves to condition her into associating women with reproductive aspirations and accepting her new place in society. She begins to associate her past life with absurdity, questioning how she even went to university and earned money. She states that "it's strange, now, to think about having a job...It's a job for a man" (Atwood 173). As Offred's captivity continues, she begins to be warped by the beliefs of the regime, with her self-identity being shaped by her womb.

"I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will...There were limits, but my body was nevertheless lithe, single, solid, one with me. Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I'm a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping" (Atwood 74).

Offred's own body has become unfamiliar and foreign to her. Her body is no longer a home for her identity; it now revolves around her uterus. Offred's identity is reduced to her reproductive organs. As she describes it herself, society believes that "[Handmaids] are two-legged wombs, that's all" (Atwood 136). No longer an individual human being with needs and desires, her sole purpose is now to produce children.

Offred's dehumanization continues, as she is the recipient of other people's actions, never the instigator. As she states about her experience in the Commander's house, "I wait, washed, brushed, fed, like a prize pig" (Atwood 69). By comparing herself to an animal, Offred makes it clear she struggles seeing herself as human. She feels alienated from her own body due to a lack of autonomy. This is particularly glaring when it comes to the sexual advances of the Commander, which Offred cannot refuse, such as in this section: "My red skirt is hitched up to my waist, though no higher. Below it the Commander is fucking. What he is fucking is the lower part of my body" (Atwood 94). Offred distances herself from the assault by dissecting herself into body parts. She exits her body to cope with the trauma of being sexually assaulted. By seeing her body as foreign, as something that doesn't belong to her, it is easier to cope with the sexual violation.

Suicide and suicidal ideation are recurrent forms of trauma within *The Handmaid's Tale*. Introduced within the first ten pages of the novel, they continue to make appearances for the entire novel. The first mention of suicide arises when explaining how possible weapons of self-harm have been removed from Offred's room. She mentions that "I know why there is no glass, in front of the watercolor picture of blue irises, and why the window only opens partly and why the glass in it is shatterproof. It isn't running away they're afraid of. We wouldn't get far. It's those other escapes, the ones you can open in yourself, given a cutting edge" (Atwood 8). In a world where every choice is made for you, where your body doesn't belong to you, it can be freeing to find an escape in death. Offred is not even allowed that possibility. Offred's bedroom and bathroom have been altered to remove that option from her mind: "There were incidents in bathrooms at first: there were cuttings, drownings. Before they got all the bugs ironed out...In a bathroom, in a bathtub, you are vulnerable, said Aunt Lydia. She didn't say to what" (Atwood 62). She continues to confront suicide throughout the novel, primarily through her predecessor, the previous Offred.

Offred's predecessor serves as a parallel to Offred, demonstrating the possible courses of actions she might have taken if her desperation grew big enough. Offred is first introduced to the existence of the previous Offred by finding the Latin motto "Nolite te bastardes carborundorum" carved into the inside of her cupboard in her room. This type of rebellion, as writing is illegal for women in Gilead, inspires Offred, who begins to repeat the motto as a form of determination to keep surviving. She finds comfort in her predecessor and her small ways of rebellion. However, this comfort is extinguished when the Commander, one of Offred's abusers, reveals he was the one who taught it to the previous Offred. The motto's translation is

revealed to be: "Don't let the bastards grind you down", which under other circumstances would be inspiring. However, the sentiment becomes ironic when only a few paragraphs later, it's revealed that the previous Offred killed herself after her affair with the Commander was discovered. As the Commander's recollection shows, "She hanged herself," he says; thoughtfully, not sadly. "That's why we had the light fixture removed. In your room." He pauses. "Serena found out," he says, as if this explains it. And it does. If your dog dies, get another" (Atwood 187). This reveal only emphasizes the parallels between both Offreds. Not only do they share the same name, but they have been manipulated in the same way and might share the same fate. They're the same victim incarnated. Just like the previous Offred, the Commander has ordered the current Offred to sneak into his room and entertain his whims. Just like the previous Offred, this might kill the current Offred. The reveal that the previous Offred hung herself in the same bedroom where Offred now sleeps haunts Offred: "I look up at the ceiling, the round circle of plaster flowers. Draw a circle, step into it, it will protect you. From the center was the chandelier, and from the chandelier a twisted strip of sheet was hanging down. That's where she was swinging, just lightly, like a pendulum; the way you could swing as a child, hanging by your hands from a tree branch. She was safe then, protected altogether, by the time Cora opened the door. Sometimes I think she's still in here, with me. I feel buried" (Atwood 211). Offred sees a refuge in suicide. She contemplates deeply about it, as shown by the lengthy descriptions in this passage, and she feels comforted by the idea, particularly with the imagery associated with children. Suicide ideation, which is what Offred's wishful desire for suicide can be interpreted as, is often a stark manifestation of trauma.

By using the Theory of Mind in this previous section, we have gained greater insight into how Offred's behavior sheds light on her trauma. Her psychological state of mind is fragile from the dehumanization, the sexual abuse, and the suicidal ideation she has been bombarded with since she became a Handmaid.

Offred's narrative unreliability is a direct effect of the trauma she has endured. Her psychological state of mind does not allow her to revisit the exact events she had endured, as a form of coping mechanism. Offred herself admits that a constant refrain in her past life was "if you don't like it, change it...Change, we were sure, was for the better always. We were revisionists. What we revised was ourselves." (Atwood 227). If you don't like your story, change it. Offred has implemented this principle to her new life as a Handmaid. By revising her self-story, she is creating a new happier reality for herself, though one she admits isn't true and cannot last. As Offred says, "If it's a story I'm telling, then I have control over the ending. Then there will be an ending, to the story, and real life will come after it. I can pick up where I left off. It isn't a story I'm telling. It's also a story I'm telling, in my head, as I go along (Atwood 39-40). Offred is conflicted between falling into the fantasy while knowing it's out of reach for her. She deliberates between calling her narrative a story, demonstrating this inner conflict.

The Handmaid's Tale continues with the theme of self-story throughout the novel: as Offred keeps referring to her story as a reconstruction: "This is a reconstruction. All of it is a reconstruction. It's a reconstruction now, in my head, as I lie flat on my single bed rehearsing what I should or shouldn't have said, what I should or shouldn't have done, how I should have played it. If I ever get out of here —" (Atwood 134). Offred freely admits to altering the story she's telling when the pain is too much to describe. Her self-story includes parts that cannot be

“filled in”; they can only “be told around” (Frank 23). Despite the pain, there is a visceral need to share her story. This brings us to the crux of Offred’s character, which is exemplified by the following:

“I’m sorry there is so much pain in this story. I’m sorry it’s in fragments, like a body caught in crossfire or pulled apart by force. But there is nothing I can do to change it..Nevertheless it hurts me to tell it over, over again. Once was enough: wasn’t once enough for me at the time? But I keep on going with this sad and hungry and sordid, this limping and mutilated story, because after all I want you to hear it” (Atwood 267-268).

One of the most vulnerable statements in this book, this is the core of Offred. Agonized, she tells her broken, tragic story, which reawakens her pain, for the hope that someone will listen to it. Offred’s trauma demands to be heard. Her self-story is told solely so that she can share herself fully with others.

Being seen is Offred’s greatest wish. *The Handmaid’s Tale* has made genuine human connection nearly impossible to Offred, and this is by explicit design, beginning with the clothes Offred is forced to don: “The white wings too are prescribed issue; they are to keep us from seeing, but also from being seen” (Atwood 8). These wings obstruct Offred’s vision, literally blinding her to the world around her. Offred is impeded from connecting with others, forced to see reality through a narrower perspective. She isn’t seen for whom she is, and neither can she see others. This fear of being seen is later emphasized through Aunt Lydia’s admonishments. “Modesty is invisibility, said Aunt Lydia. Never forget it. To be seen — to be *seen* — is to be — her voice trembled — penetrated. What you must be, girls, is impenetrable” (Atwood 28). Aunt

Lydia here represents the patriarchal views that dominate Gilead, and which dictate that witnessing someone is alike to being penetrated, to being robbed of your feminine virtue.

However, being seen is what Offred desires most. Her true self has been in hiding for years, torn apart from her family, her identity and autonomy, even robbed of her name. As she tells herself, "I want to be held and told my name. I want to be valued, in ways that I am not; I want to be more than valuable. I repeat my former name, remind myself of what I once could do, how others saw me" (Atwood 97). She wants to be laid bare. In a world where Offred has been robbed of even her own name, being seen is exhilarating. It represents freedom. It's a way of recovering her identity.

Storytelling is the method by which she fights for herself and seeks to be witnessed. By recording her story, she assures herself that someone will listen to it. Someone will hear what she went through, and they will see her. As she states at the beginning of the audio tapes, "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's always someone else. Even when there is no one" (Atwood 39-40). By choosing to believe that someone is listening to her, Offred regains the will to live: "By telling you anything at all I'm at least believing in you, I believe you're there, I believe you into existence. Because I'm telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are. So I will go on. So I will myself to go on (Atwood 268). Telling your story implies the desire for an audience, a desire for connection. As Frank discussed in *The Wounded Storyteller*, the wounded storytellers seek an audience to serve as witnesses to their suffering (40). By needing someone to see her, Offred fits into this archetype perfectly. She can continue surviving, so long as she keeps telling her story. The unreliable narrative that began as a traumatic response, a coping

mechanism for all the suffering she has endured, became the reason Offred wants to keep living. By telling her story, Offred regains autonomy and allows others to know her voice in a world that demands her silence.

Citations

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