




BOOK (MIS)TREATMENT IN *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*: MANIPULATION, BURNING, AND CENSORSHIP

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ABSTRACT. This article is based on the theory that books contain ideas, ideologies, and alternatives, and that the restriction and destruction of books might signify the loss of these. This paper analyses the (mis)treatment of books in *The Handmaid's Tale* in three different timelines: during the regime of Gilead as well as the before and its aftermath. Offred's flashbacks offer an insight into the freedom of the past, but it already shows signs of the future restrictions. In the present timeline Handmaids cannot read and books are symbols of power; this is reinforced by the Aunts and Commanders. The future of the Historical Notes shows the negative impact that the lack of literacy has had for the history of the country. Overall, in *The Handmaid's Tale* books are tools of censorship that serve to control the narrative.

Keywords: books, dystopia, manipulation, censorship, Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*.

(MAL)TRATO DE LIBROS EN *EL CUENTO DE LA CRIADA*: MANIPULACIÓN, QUEMA Y CENSURA

RESUMEN. Este artículo comparte la teoría de que los libros contienen ideas, ideologías y alternativas, y que la restricción y destrucción de libros puede significar la pérdida de éstas. Este artículo analiza el (mal)trato de libros en *El cuento de la criada* en tres líneas temporales: durante el régimen de Gilead, así como el antes y el después. Los recuerdos de Defred ofrecen una perspectiva esclarecedora sobre la libertad de un pasado que ya mostraba signos de las restricciones futuras. En el presente, las Criadas no pueden leer y los libros son símbolos de poder; lo que aparece reforzado por las Tías y los Comandantes. El futuro de las Notas Históricas muestra el impacto negativo que la falta de alfabetismo ha tenido en la historia del país. En definitiva, en *El cuento de la criada* los libros representan herramientas de censura que sirven para controlar la narrativa.

Palabras clave: libros, distopía, manipulación, censura, Margaret Atwood, El cuento de la criada.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Handmaid's Tale (1985) is an extremely popular novel that has been adapted into multiple media, including a television series (Miller), and which counts with a sequel titled *The Testaments* (2019). Due to its popularity, the contents of this novel have been deeply analysed by many critics and scholars. A large majority of the articles about this novel have focused on totalitarianism and patriarchal culture (Bouson, Finigan, Malak, and Mingoia). Others have explored the impact of the television series (Somacarrera-Ínigo), and the role of religion within this society (Tennant). Nonetheless, even though some of these critics mention the reading prohibitions and their effect on society, the impact of books and literacy in the establishment of the totalitarian state seems like a topic of study that still lacks some depth. Book banning and censorship continue to be topics of importance in the present-day cultural panorama. Particularly in the United States, where only between 2023 and 2024 over 10,000 books have been banned in public schools, many of which “target stories focused on LGBTQ+ people and people of color” (Oladipo). The censorship of today seems to parallel the dystopian works in attacking critical thinking and freedom of thought.

The Handmaid's Tale is a dystopian novel that is set in a futuristic United States under the rule of the patriarchal and theocratic Republic of Gilead. Due to the disrespect for the environment, pollution has caused major infertility, malformations,

and birth defects. To solve this issue, the government has decided to create the role of Handmaids; low-class fertile women forced to become surrogate mothers and to bear children for the elite couples. This novel follows the story of Offred, a Handmaid who has lost her family, her job, and her identity as she becomes the Handmaid of a Commander's house. Offred's story is not linear, and the main events get interrupted by flashbacks as she records it from an unidentified future. As the reader gets to know Offred's past from the flashbacks, it is also possible to notice how women lose their privileges, especially those from low classes. Offred goes from attending university and working to attending the Aunt's lessons about obedience and submission. Through the treatment of books and other writings, this article attempts to illustrate how writing and reading are forbidden and punished as measures to eliminate alternative and dissident ideologies; in other words, those who disagree with the government of Gilead.

This article aims to explore how books serve as a tool of control for an authoritarian government in Gilead's past, present, and future. Each of these timelines is highly representative of different ways in which books are mishandled, although these mistreatments might appear at any time within the narrative. Thereby, it is possible to create connections between burning and the past, censorship and the present, and manipulation and the future. The scenes of the past serve to create a stark contrast with the oppressive narrative of the present. Although in retrospect, it is possible to notice some of the events that led to its present state. In Offred's present, the book restrictions and reading and writing prohibitions have facilitated the excessive control of the government. Finally, the conference of the Historical Notes explores a post-Gilead world, where reading and writing has been re-established, but also where Offred's story gets reframed and misinterpreted by scholars.

2. BOOK BURNING AND CENSORSHIP AS RESTRICTIVE MEASURES

One of the most common forms of book destruction is burning. Some of the most recent and relevant burnings for the topic of this article corresponded with twentieth-century dictators such as Hitler and Franco or the Soviet Regime. The Nazi book burning that took place during the tenth of November of 1933 is probably the most widely recognised, and it is estimated that they burnt over 25,000 books. The burnings surrounding the Spanish Civil war and Franco's dictatorship were less documented and some of its tracings have been deliberately erased, but they are worthy of mentioning, nevertheless. Ana Martínez Rus explores the concept of the 'Bibliocaust', or book holocaust, in "*No sólo hubo censura: la destrucción y depuración de libros en España (1936-1948)*" (2017). Martínez Rus applies the term Bibliocaust to book destruction under fascist regimes, and particularly to the destruction of libraries and bibliographic heritage in Spain. These two examples had a global impact beyond Europe, and they serve to illustrate how book burning can become a component of cultural genocide if it systematically threatens to erase identities and heritages.

During the twentieth century, book burning was more sporadic in North America than it had been in Europe, but censorship and banning had a considerable impact on the society of the United States, where Margaret Atwood sets her novel. Even today, censorship represents a topic of heated debate in the country's politics. The United States has an extensive history of censorship, especially considering the relatively short span of time that the country has existed as such, and the attempts to ban books only grow exponentially each year. According to the data from the American Library Association (ALA) published in 2023, that same year stood as the year with the highest number of censorship attempts to date. Additionally, it is possible to trace connections between book banning and the rising of conservative values. *The Handmaid's Tale* itself has been described as one of censorship's main targets: "According to the American Library Association, *The Handmaid's Tale* is among books most often challenged or banned in US schools" (Pengelly), and it has become the object of attack of various conservative groups. Among the reasons for this banning, Atwood's novel has been labelled as "anti-Christian" (Yang et al.), "highly inappropriate" (Cwiklinski), and even "pornographic" (McCrorry).

Yet, after all the commotion created by the increasing number of censorship attempts, one cannot but question whether these measures are effective at all. Kenneth Kidd insists that censorship "needs to be understood not as an isolated action or singular event but rather as part of a complex set of exchanges and leverages within the cultural field" (199). The effectiveness of censorship is doubted because it often seems to attract attention rather than deflect it. Censorship might have the opposite of the desired effect and put the focus on books which otherwise might have been overlooked. Kidd further associates censorship with book prizing, even though these are generally conceived as opposite concepts: "While prizing can serve as a counterstrategy to censorship, and in fact emerged as such, prizing and censorship also can look rather alike and/or have similar consequences" (214). They both lead to more visibility towards the objects involved. It is also interesting to consider the notion that book censorship might not be an inherently evil action, and there are multiple factors to consider. In *Burning Questions* (2022), Margaret Atwood questions the burning of books when the content goes against one's principles as she states: "If it's a function of which others disapprove, shall our books be burned? Why not? It's been done before. There is nothing inherently sacrosanct about a book" (17). However, it is undeniable that there are certain patterns in regard to book burning and censorship concerning manipulation and restrictions.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the authoritarianism of the Gileadean regime and the subsequent censorship are tightly connected to Puritanism and the rejection of what its members consider obscene, among other things: "The state in Gilead prescribes a pattern of life based on frugality, conformity, censorship, corruption, fear, and terror—in short, the usual terms of existence enforced by totalitarian states" (Malak 4). Overall, Gilead's regime survives due to a series of oppressive mechanisms; including surveillance, the establishment of power hierarchies, and the Bible as a justification of their authoritarianism. Reality and fiction intersect in this novel because both Gilead and real-life governments are partly motivated by fear; fear of

uprisings and subversion, fear of losing control, fear of not being in a dominating position. Book censorship and destruction are implanted as a reaction towards potential threats for the autocratic state; they serve to eliminate dissenting perspectives that could challenge the authority of the government. In Atwood's own words: "Book-burning reflects both the respect and the fear: no one would feel impelled to burn an innocuous book" (*Burning Questions*, 151). In this novel, the perspectives that the government target mostly include Handmaids, Marthas, Unwomen, and low-class men. Gilead disposes of the books that they deem as subversive and dangerous, and the act of reading is highly restricted. Margaret Atwood's novel presents an exaggerated version of reality inspired by both the historical context and previous novels from the dystopian genre.

3. BOOK CENSORSHIP IN DYSTOPIAN CONTEXTS

Book censorship exists outside of dystopian literature, but it is especially characteristic of it. As a whole, the treatment of books in dystopian fiction mirrors the reality of authoritarian governments. In dystopias, books are burnt, restricted, rewritten, and generally mistreated. Along with the lack of freedom and power imbalances that became characteristic of this genre, it is also common to find a series of characters who are determined to overthrow totalitarianism and that share an affinity for books and writing in one way or another. Book censorship, along with these aforementioned characteristics, represents a central part in the archetypal dystopias of the twentieth century, some of which have directly influenced *The Handmaid's Tale*: "E. L. Doctorow claims that Atwood's novel 'can be read as a companion volume to Orwell's *1984*'" (qtd. in Ingersoll 64). Even Margaret Atwood herself has addressed Orwell's influence: "*The Handmaid's Tale* is a classic dystopia, which takes at least part of its inspiration from George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*—particularly the epilogue" (*Burning Questions*, 26). Today, Atwood's novel has become one of the most relevant works in the dystopian genre.

Totalitarian regimes might feel threatened by the influence that books can have on people because it challenges their own authority. In Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), firemen burn books because these are perceived as dangerous weapons with potential to instigate change. At one point in the novel, Ray Bradbury writes: "So! A book is a loaded gun in the house next door. Burn it. Take the shot from the weapon. Breach man's mind. Who knows who might be the target of the well-read man? Me?" (77). In this scene, Beatty, who speaks from a position of power, defends the burning of books as a preventive measure against uprisings and as a solution to maintaining the status quo. Beatty feels personally attacked because he is one of the instigators behind the burning and censorship. Historically, the idea of books as weapons can be traced to the political context of World War II and the alleged words of former president Franklin D. Roosevelt: "In this war, we know, books are weapons¹." In this sense, books are dangerous because they can influence readers'

¹This sentence appears in a World War II poster from 1942, depicting a Nazi book burning and a quotation from President Franklin D. Roosevelt, www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3g04267.

thoughts and actions, either to encourage critical thinking or to spread propaganda. This conception of books can be extrapolated to the content of *The Handmaid's Tale* in regard to the Commander's locked Bible, as will be shown later in this article.

Books and other writings might be allowed in dystopian fiction as long as these are beneficial for the totalitarian state. Occasionally, governments tamper with the content of books, in which cases their members do not deem banning as necessary. Manipulation and alteration are two of the key elements that facilitate the reign of terror of Big Brother in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). What Orwell explores in this novel assimilates to a potential future for Gilead; the manipulation, the submissive population, and the complete control of the narrative: "When memory failed and written records were falsified—when that happened, the claim of the Party to have improved the conditions of human life had got to be accepted, because there did not exist, and never again could exist, any standard against which it could be tested" (Orwell 107). Among others, the erasure of history was influenced by the propaganda and suppression that prevailed during the Spanish Civil War: "Since at least the Spanish Civil War—with its orgies of lies and misinformation—Orwell felt that the very concept of objective truth was fast disappearing from the world" (Dwan 74). The control of the narrative gives the government control of history, and because Handmaids are not allowed to read or write, it is possible to conclude that someone else will be in charge of telling their stories. This is similar to what happens to Offred's story in the Historical Notes, where the professors take control over how it is told and passed on.

Additionally, dystopias can incorporate selective banning and restrictions when only certain characters have access to reading and writing. In Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), high class citizens are encouraged to read scientific books that help with the evolution of society: "[Our library] contains only books of reference. If our young *people* need distraction, they can get it at the feelies. We don't encourage them to indulge in any solitary amusements" (142). However, the lower classes never even learn to read. This government does not encourage individuality nor critical thinking, and this is similar to what occurs in Gilead. The lower classes are not allowed to read but some of the members of the higher classes can, including Commanders and Aunts. Similarly, the majority of the people that belong to the new generations will never be taught to read nor write. In an attempt to eliminate the threat of books, totalitarian governments might directly focus on attacking and condemning literacy. Illiteracy is an extended practice in dystopian fiction because the limit of education and information ensures a more docile population: "The bleak, dystopian counter-vision is often one in which print-based literacy is devalued, absent, or restricted" (Du Plessis 103). The access to literacy and critical thinking are two of the fundamental pillars of society. Ursula K. Le Guin defends that literacy is a sort of guide to navigate life: "The reason literacy is important is that literature is the operating instructions. The best manual we have. The most useful guide to the country we're visiting, life" (6). Therefore, people are lost without the manual. Literature is enriching, and it provides valuable wisdom and insight. In this context, literature encompasses not only fiction, but any type of writing. Overall, the

restriction of books in dystopia helps with the control of the lower classes of society and of the narrative, and this is one of the principal characteristics of *The Handmaid's Tale*.

These dystopias incorporate references to real-life censorship and criticise totalitarian regimes and practices. At the end of *The Testaments*, Professor Crescent Moon argues that “history does not repeat itself, but it rhymes” (407), mirroring how the events of these novels can relate to our past as well as our present. These novels are able to condemn a time that they knew while at the same time they warn about potential future dangers. In regard to Atwood’s novel, Amanda Howell insists that “*The Handmaid's Tale* mediates between past, present, and future, engaging anxieties about present political reality and projecting them into a fantasy of the future, a fantasy that draws upon and mobilizes historical knowledge of past trauma and totalitarian abuse to flesh out its imagery” (225). For instance, the “new wave of global Anglo-American feminism which has emerged at the January 2017 Anti-Trump Women’s March” (Somacarrera-Inigo 86) parallels the second wave of feminism that inspired Atwood’s novel in the 1980s. This explains the success of the novels and the show; the warnings of *The Handmaid's Tale* apply to the past as well as the present.

4. BOOK MISTREATMENT IN *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*

Book censorship is an extensively used practice within authoritarian governments. In the words of Jonathan Friedman: “Book bans are often an early sign of authoritarianism” (qtd. in Dunbar). Book banning is frequent in dystopian narratives, where it is joined by other manipulative practices to exert control, including language restrictions and the elimination of freedom. To create this novel, Atwood drew inspiration from real world events, and she even stated that she “didn’t put anything into this book that hadn’t already been done somewhere, or could be done given available technology” (*Burning Questions*, 249). She addresses topics such as gender, inequality, puritanism, and, centrally to this article, the censorship and destruction of books. Atwood denounces how books are banned, destroyed, used for manipulation and even misinterpreted. In both fiction and reality, the destruction of books signifies something more than the physical destruction of an object. It appears as a tool for control, and these destructions are accompanied by restrictions of the narrative. Totalitarian governments might fear that books will lead to uprising and subversions; by eliminating them they attempt to eliminate dissenting narratives.

It is also important to mention the role of gender within this society, since these restrictions affect low-class women in particular: “In Gilead, women are forbidden by law to read books; after the third conviction, the offender’s hand is cut off” (Bouson 53). This even applies to Commanders’ Wives. In fact, the only women who are able to read are Aunts: “For every rule there is always an exception: this too can be depended upon. The Aunts are allowed to read and write” (Atwood 135). This becomes particularly relevant during *The Testaments*, where the soon-to-be

Aunts learn to read. Even though they are women, Aunts belong to the dominating class, not the dominated. In *Burning Questions*, Margaret Atwood herself questioned the conception of *The Handmaid's Tale* as a feminist novel. In this book she stated that although she wanted to write a dystopia from a female perspective, “this does not make *The Handmaid's Tale* a ‘feminist dystopia,’ except insofar as giving a woman a voice and an inner life will always be considered ‘feminist’ by those who think women ought not to have these things” (27). Nonetheless, considering how the denunciation of gender inequality is one of the key themes of this novel, it is difficult not to offer a feminist analysis. This article will highlight the role and mistreatment of women when necessary, and it will pay special attention to the relation between Offred and books. For the analysis, this section is going to be divided into three different parts, according to the past, present and future timelines.

4.1. Books in pre-Gilead

The pre-Gilead scenes interrupt the main storyline and they appear as scattered flashes. Offred ponders about her past, and these scenes serve to highlight the contrast between past and present. In these flashbacks, there are several instances where the role of books is paramount. Offred's background as an educated person who graduated university and her book-transferring job are key to analysing the contrast between the freedom she enjoyed in the past and the restrictions of her present. On the other hand, the book burning that Offred attended with her mother as a young girl serves as a precedent for the Gileadean society. These scenes serve to illustrate that change is progressive and that it is not after one looks back and puts everything into perspective that it is possible to notice all the details and nuances that lead to totalitarianism.

The reader does not have many details regarding Offred's previous reading nor writing habits, but it is explicitly stated that she attended university: “I had a paper due the next day. What was it? Psychology, English, Economics. We studied things like that, then. On the floor of the room there were books, open face down, this way and that, extravagantly” (Atwood 43). This is one of the first flashbacks of the novel, and it transports the reader to an ordinary day in Offred's life. She has books lying around carelessly, indicating they are not prized possessions but everyday objects, useful to complete her assignments. Books are taken for granted, because it is not a commonly held thought that one day their access will be denied. Offred reminisces about this scene with sadness and melancholy, because her freedom has been taken away, and books are just another reminder of it.

In Offred's present, the university has been turned into a detention centre. The refusal to let women study and be educated is a form of manipulation. If they are illiterate and uncultured, they will show less resistance to the impositions. Literacy is a relevant topic in dystopian fiction, and Atwood addresses the dangers of illiteracy and submission to denounce the mistreatment of women. In her text, she exposes an underlying male desire to control women and leave them in a state of vulnerability.

Offred's previous job in the library is also indicative of the small steps that paved the way for Gilead. At work, she used to transfer books into a digital format, and she might have unknowingly helped to facilitate future manipulations: "I worked transferring books to computer discs, to cut down on storage space and replacement costs, they said. Discers, we called ourselves" (Atwood 178). The "they said" implies that her employees might not have been entirely truthful and that they hid their true intentions. In any case, it is unclear whether Offred had her doubts at the time, or if this is just a later reflection of hers. In the television series, Offred's job changes slightly. Instead, she used to work as an editorial assistant in a small publishing house. Her work becomes particularly relevant during the flashbacks in season two, where it is shown that women losing the right to work and the establishment of Gilead was something progressive. Nonetheless, her connection to literature and her hunger for literacy remain similar in both formats.

The advances in science and technology had a positive impact in certain fields of work regarding automation and digitalisation. These innovations reduced the costs and, more importantly, increased the efficiency and reduced the workload, but they brought disadvantages too: "The dangers of digitization are depicted in the fundamentalist Republic of Gilead, where people's identities are stolen electronically and books outlawed and burned" (Johns 180). In the current society, the dangers of digitalisation are more present than ever, especially regarding manipulation and the uncertainty of book ownership. Digitalisation has made it so that people do not really own books anymore: "When you buy a physical book, you can keep it, lend it to a friend, donate it, or resell it. But a kindle book? You pay full price for the equivalent of a long-term rental" (Tucker). This means that books can be completely wiped out at any given point and for any reason.

In the case of this novel, the digitalisation of documents makes people more susceptible to manipulation. Offred continues to say: "After the books were transferred they were supposed to go to a shredder, but sometimes I took them home with me. I liked the feel of them, and the look" (178). Books were supposed to be destroyed because if Gilead decided to alter their content, the older books would be proof of the manipulation. This whole scene is somewhat reminiscent of Winston's job in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, where he was in charge of transcribing documents and deleting obsolete information. The broader context of the two novels differs slightly: Winston operates at the height of a fully established dystopia, whereas Offred experiences the early stages of a dystopian regime. Yet the parallels cannot be ignored; the destruction of these books and documents serves to destroy a past that the government wants forgotten: "The absolutist regime wants to abolish the past. Yet Offred re-enacts the past in the present" (Staels 119). Offred's storytelling is represented as an act of resistance, she makes sure that the past is recorded and thus not forgotten.

On another occasion, Offred offers some insight into the pre-Gilead stages in a scene when, as a young girl, she accompanied her mother to a book burning protest: "There were some men, too, among the women, and the books were magazines. They must have poured gasoline, because the flames shot high, and then they began

dumping the magazines, from boxes, not too many at a time. Some of them were chanting; onlookers gathered” (Atwood 44). The people at the protest act as if they were performing a ritual, with chants and dances. In this scenario, burning is perceived as a positive experience. The reader is able to form an even clearer picture about this burning after Offred reveals that they were destroying pornographic magazines: “The woman handed me one of the magazines. It had a pretty woman on it, with no clothes on, hanging from the ceiling by a chain wound around her hands” (Atwood 44). Far from encouraging the restrictive policies that would become characteristic of Gilead, these activists burnt magazines as a protest towards the sexualisation of the female body. Alas, Gina Mingoia defends that even though Offred’s mother intended to denounce the patriarchal establishment, “she unknowingly foreshadowed the policies of Gilead” (5). Moreover, Anne Gardiner connects this particular burning to the Nazi regime as she states that “Atwood links the burning of porn to the burning of women in gas ovens, one of her many allusions to the Third Reich” (91-92). Similarly to what happens with books, the burning of these magazines can be interpreted as an allegory for the burning of people and ideas. Additionally, this scene heightens the puritanical lifestyle that Gilead would later impose; one which punishes “obscenity” and rewards modesty. This puritanism also appears reflected in the Bible teachings of the Aunts and in the overall organisation of society.

4.2. *Books in Gilead*

In Gilead, knowledge is power, which makes it dangerous because it can lead to revolts. Therefore, knowledge is punished. The restrictions in education limit the ability of women to communicate, and ultimately, the lack of reading and writing has the goal of illiteracy. All things considered, if illiteracy is established as a norm, eventually women will not be able to record their own experiences. Offred’s deprivation of literature has a negative impact on her storytelling. According to Nicole Du Plessis: “She struggles with a limitation on her experience of reality caused by deprivation of literacy as she narrates her ‘tale,’ often with uncertainty or a willingness to substitute an alternate version of her experience for the reality she endured” (108). Either accidentally or deliberately, Offred’s story fails to be a completely accurate portrayal of reality. Multiple times in the novel, Offred corrects herself while speaking: “I made that up. It didn’t happen that way” (Atwood 269), and a few pages later: “It didn’t happen that way either. I’m not sure how it happened; not exactly. All I can hope for is a reconstruction: the way love feels is always only approximate” (271). She is limited by not being able to write her story as it happens, and she is forced to rely on her memory to record it in the tapes. But also, she might potentially lie purposefully or hide information. This is her story, and she is choosing how to tell it.

University classes are replaced by lessons about how to be an obedient Handmaid, and class books are replaced by recordings of altered Bible verses. Handmaids must attend these indoctrinating lessons in a place called “The Red

Center,” where the Aunts teach them to become submissive. Alternatively, this place has been referred to as “The Rachel and Leah Center” after the Biblical story. The Aunts enforce a specific lifestyle dedicated to childbearing, and they even employ corporal punishment to achieve blind obedience. Nonetheless, the verses that they teach have been either taken out of context or altered to fit a certain narrative: “Gilead selects passages that suit its ends—needing women to give birth to healthy children—and uses them to frame and justify rape” (Tennant 38). The State of Gilead takes advantage of the authority that the Biblical texts hold in order to support their own statements, even though the fragments that they use are counterfeit. Offred is well-aware of the deceptions of the Aunts: “I knew they made that up, I knew it was wrong, and they left things out too, but there was no way of checking” (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 96). Yet she has no way to corroborate the information: “Despite the fact that Offred recognizes the omissions and changes to the scriptures ... in the absence of physical proof she is unable to check them for accuracy” (Johnson 132). And even if she did, she has nobody to share it with. Isolation is one of the goals of totalitarian governments because it makes individuals feel powerless.

There are several clear instances where Gilead takes advantage of the Bible. One of the most prominent references is the story of Rachel and Leah that appears in Genesis. This story is used to justify the oppression and manipulation, and it provides justification for forced childbearing and surrogate mothers. In this story, the sisters Rachel and Leah are married to the same man, Jacob. Jacob favours Rachel, even though she has not been able to provide children, whereas Leah has. After years of rivalry, Rachel offers her Handmaid Bilhah to Jacob as a surrogate mother, and she bears him two sons. To this, Leah responds by offering Jacob her own Handmaid, Zilpah, who also bears him two sons. In chapter 15 of *The Handmaid's Tale*, the Commander reads this story to his household. Gilead likes to remind Handmaids of the stories of the Bible, but since they cannot read, the Commander has to perform the active action of reading whereas the women perform the passive; they listen. None of the members want to attend this meeting, but it is mandatory: “The Commander, as if reluctantly, begins to read. He isn't very good at it. Maybe he's merely bored. It's the usual story, the usual stories” (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 95). Offred refers to this passage as “the usual story” because many Biblical stories are used for a similar purpose. Through these stories, the state of Gilead consistently perpetuates authoritarianism and emphasises the place of Handmaids within society.

The television series incorporates new Biblical references that are not linked to Handmaids. A very prominent example where the Bible is misquoted to justify the abuses of Gilead appears in episode eight of season two, after the Commander discovers that Serena Joy has been forging his signature. In this scene, the Commander beats her with a belt as he misquotes Ephesians and mixes it with other fragments from the Bible. Colette Tennant argues that “the way the Commander takes parts of these verses and puts them together as one passage allows him to present himself as a superior being with the right to beat his wife” (108). He includes a description of wives as “the weaker vessel” (*King James Bible*, 1 Peter 3:7) while

he deliberately ignores the lines: “Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it” (Ephesians 5:25). Thus, partly altering the meaning of the message for his own benefit.

Offred's relationship with books and reading suddenly alters in chapter 25, when the Commander invites Offred into his office. In this scene they play scrabble and he offers her a magazine to read. Whereas before books and magazines were perceived as ordinary objects, now they are like a collector's prized possessions: “It's an old one, he said, a curio of sorts. From the seventies, I think. A *Vogue*. This like a wine connoisseur dropping a name. I thought you might like to look at it” (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 161). Offred is surprised about the magazine because she thought that they had all been destroyed: “These were supposed to have been burned, I said. There were house-to-house searches, bonfires” (162). Additionally, it is particularly telling that the first thing that the Commander offers her to read is an old beauty magazine. This serves to indulge her and assert his superiority, but not to impart any real knowledge on her. The Commander and Offred are not equals, and the scenes in his office serve to reinforce the power imbalance that exists in their relationship. He is able to possess forbidden objects whereas she cannot own anything at all. Moreover, it can even be argued that even Offred has become one of his possessions.

Some authors defend that the lack of books is typically a strong indicator of the lack of freedom. Such as Clare Purcell, who has argued that “a library is a symbol of freedom... So long as we have the free interplay of ideas recorded in books and made available in great libraries for all to read, our freedom is secure” (55). Libraries allow access to a wide range of ideas and ideologies, which encourage critical thinking and might lead to informed debates, but Gilead has disposed of all of these. In the Commander's office books are displayed because no one else in the household has access to it. On the other hand, the Bible that the Commander reads during the scene of Rachel and Leah is locked up and only he has the key to open it: “The Bible is kept locked up, the way people once kept tea locked up, so the servants wouldn't steal it. It's an incendiary device: who knows what we'd make of it, if we ever got our hands on it?” (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 87). The Bible is described as a weapon because it holds the potential to ignite insurrection. This metaphor is reminiscent of the aforementioned comparison between guns and books in Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*. In both cases, books are perceived as dangerous because they encourage critical thinking. They may lead to rebellion and threaten to overthrow the totalitarian governments.

The relevance of the Bible is noteworthy in the television series, where, in episode thirteen of season two, Serena places a request with a group of Commanders for Wives and their daughters to be allowed to read it. In this scene, she even opens a Bible and recites the first lines from the New Testament, causing outrage among the Commanders and even the rest of Wives. This scene is significant because Serena manages to confront the Commanders rather than remaining submissive and obedient. As a former novelist, Serena is still connected to books and literacy, and,

as a religious person, to the Bible specifically. However, she gets punished by the very system that she helped to create and she gets her finger cut-off.

Offred's relationship with books is progressively altered over the course of various scenes because of the Commander, and by chapter 29 she describes reading as an almost pornographic act. Several days after Offred's first encounter with the *Vogue* magazine, there is a scene where the Commander watches Offred read: "While I read, the Commander sits and watches me doing it, without speaking but also without taking his eyes off me. This watching is a curiously sexual act, and I feel undressed while he does it" (Atwood 190). This scene between Offred and the Commander appears to convey more intimacy than their actual sexual relationships, which are non-consensual acts. And yet, the books and magazines that he lends her are but another attempt for the Commander to control Offred: "After, the commander fails to control Offred through separation, confinement, surveillance, schedule, and language manipulation, he changes his techniques for controlling Offred. He starts to employ new tools for controlling her like beauty magazines, fashion, and makeup" (Raouf 650). The Commander attempts to make clear his position of superiority over Offred, but she is determined to challenge and defy him.

4.3. Books in post-Gilead

This article has already established that, in dystopian fiction, the lack of books is an indicator of a lack of freedom. However, it is also worth noting that the presence of books is not inherently a guarantee for freedom nor an indicator that these will be treated well. The last section of the novel, the Historical Notes, revolves around a university symposium that takes place many years after the ending of the novel. In 2195, the regime of Gilead has been overthrown, and reading and writing have been re-established in society. And yet, some of the patriarchal structures that existed even before the implantation of the regime continue to be a part of this society, and these structures affect how Offred's story is being passed on. The Historical Notes show the aftermath of Gilead and they expose some of its negative consequences; parts of the history of the country have been lost. This includes the documents that have been destroyed, the people who have not been able to write down their legacy, or the professor's misinterpretation of Offred's story.

In this conference, Professor Pieixoto is presented as the keynote speaker regarding a series of tapes that contain the testament of an unnamed Handmaid. Pieixoto and his team have been working on transcribing the content of the tapes and on contrasting the veracity of the story. However, he admits that the work that they present at the conference is not final and parts of it are heavily based on guesswork. Even the title of the symposium, "Problems of Authentication in reference to *The Handmaid's Tale*" (Atwood 308), tells the reader that the analysis of the tapes might not be completely accurate. Likewise, the decision to name Offred's story after Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* assimilates her narration to a fictional work rather than to a historical account and, according to Dominick Grace (1998), it "undermines the claims [Professor Wade] and Pieixoto make about the

truth value of their transcription" (487). Pieixoto and his team encountered various issues, which included arranging the order of the tapes and contrasting the veracity of the content. As Offred's tapes were scattered, Pieixoto and his team need to rearrange her story, rather than merely transcribe it. Additionally, they faced challenges regarding the accent of the speaker, vague references, and archaisms.

Pieixoto's perspective on Offred's story is very narrow, and he continuously misreads and misinterprets her. In regard to women's writings, Green and LeBihan (2001) insist that "not only have women's works been systematically ignored by male critics and academics, but they have also been systematically misread, or read according to the expectations and values of the wrong gender" (239). This seems to resemble Pieixoto's potential misinterpretation of Offred's tale. As a consequence, Offred's story gets lost in translation. Pieixoto and the rest of his colleagues are caricatures of pretentious academics that are unable to fully grasp the complexities of Offred's account. In the words of Amin Malak: "[Atwood] exposes, in a hilarious epilogue, the absurdity and futility of certain academic writings that engage in dull, clinically sceptic analysis of irrelevancies and inanities, yet miss the vital issues" (9). The identity of the Handmaid should not be more important than the personal account in itself. What matters is that there is a personal narrative that denounces the totalitarian regime and dares to contradict it. This idea that Pieixoto and his team focus on the wrong details and ignores the key parts of the story has been supported by other authors: "He values statistical data more than personal experience, dismissing the significance of Offred as an individual while concentrating on the identification of the male Commander" (Jubair 3419). Like the men that preceded him, Pieixoto has also taken Offred as his property. As a whole, the section of the Historical Notes signifies a satire of pretentious academics and scholars.

Through the addition of this section, Margaret Atwood addresses how perspectives and privileges shape people's interpretation of historical events, or even present events. In a way, Pieixoto's re-arrangements of the tapes distorts Offred's message: "Instead of being filled with excitement about the diary, however, Pieixoto seems to have little respect for the text he has 'constructed'" (Jadwin 37). The professors seem to completely misread the text, and they go so far as to disregard the Handmaid's suffering with their analysis: "The self-satisfied Pieixoto and Wade trivialize the expressions of pain to 'a whiff of emotion'" (Staels 123). Pieixoto belittles the experiences of women and downplays the true extent of their dystopia.

Likewise, this discovery that Offred's narration is a transcription undermines her story and puts the veracity of her words into question. As Brian Shaffer states: "The 'Historical Notes,' which suggest that she survived long enough to narrate her story (onto 30 cassette tapes), throws into doubt the degree to which the meaning of Offred's narrative has been grasped by the scholars" (153). Up until this last section, Offred's story had benefited from a certain degree of authenticity, but the credibility disappears the moment when it is revealed that Pieixoto is the actual voice of authority: "All that we have assumed about the text we have been reading, including the authority of the order in which the events are narrated, is violated by the 'Historical Notes,' and the voice we thought we were listening to is subsumed, even

fictionalized, by Pieixoto" (Grace 487). The Historical Notes subvert the traditional manuscript motif that served to impart a sense of realism but which, in this case, has the complete opposite effect. All in all, Offred becomes a victim of the Gileadean regime, which censors her story, and also of the future generations, which misread and manipulate her story, even if unintentionally.

The Historical Notes attempt to show that part of the lost knowledge of the past has been recovered, and this section also serves to reinforce the notion that Gilead's practices regarding the control of the narrative have not completely disappeared yet. Theo Finigan approaches this subject and expresses hesitation regarding the work of future academics as he states: "Both Orwell and Atwood are also quite ambivalent about the possibility of combating totalitarianism's pernicious manipulation of historical records through recourse to the supposedly more balanced or objective archival methodology of an enlightened academic discourse" (436). The censorship that affected Offred's story continues to affect the society of the future. Therefore, part of Offred's story will forever be lost due to censorship and the misinterpretations of Pieixoto. The lack of information regarding the society of Gilead is also a reflection of the cultural genocide that this society has undergone.

5. CONCLUSION

In dystopian fiction, books tend to be generally mistreated in a variety of manners, because they are a metonymy for the complex worlds that they embody. Books embody ideas, ideologies, and overall alternative worlds, and many authoritarian governments threaten to burn, censor, or rewrite them in order to support their own authority. This article has analysed the mistreatment that books undergo in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* in three different timelines. Offred's flashbacks show that the transgression towards books is not inherently conducted by the burning itself, which here is a revolutionary act against overcontrol, but by Gilead's desire to rule and manipulate. This burning is a precursor of Gilead, and the mistreatment of magazines serves to mirror the denunciation of the objectification of women. In Offred's present, the Bible is used to manipulate the main narrative, but also to shape it. The authority behind the words of the Bible is part of the reason why the government of Gilead can exert such levels of extortion and domination. This manipulation conditions how history is recorded and how it will be told in the future. And indeed, the negative consequences can be observed in the symposium of the Historical Notes. The aftermath of the writing and reading restrictions affects Offred's own story through the misinterpretation of the professors. Because Offred was only able to leave clandestine tape recordings that are difficult to rearrange, part of the story has been lost along the way.

In conclusion, this article determines that within Atwood's dystopia there is a direct connection between the mistreatment of books and the government manipulation. Learning about the errors of the past is essential to avoid repeating them, and with their restrictions and impositions Gilead is taking away this learning

opportunity from the rest of the citizens, especially low-class women. An ignorant society is easier to manipulate, and especially if the majority are illiterate, and this is what Gilead seems to want to accomplish. The suppression of alternative narratives inevitably leads to the eradication of these, and thus what remains is a future that is unaware of the atrocities of its past.

These last reflections about Atwood's narrative can be extrapolated to the current society of the twenty-first century as well. *The Handmaid's Tale* might be an exaggerated version of reality, but it is definitely one that accurately represents some of today's concerns. Book banning and censorship remain as relevant as they previously were, especially within the United States, but also in other parts of the world. These restrictive actions can be taken as indicators of the rising of totalitarian tendencies, and in time, they might have disastrous consequences regarding poor critical thinking, lack of freedom of thought, and they can even lead to troubles with literacy. As a final reflection, *The Handmaid's Tale* certainly does not claim to be a vaticination of what is to come, but perhaps readers should take it as a warning about what to avoid.

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