

A READING OF MARGARET ATWOOD'S THE HANDMAID'S TALE IN LIGHT OF GENETTE'S PARATEXTUALITY

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ABSTRACT

The present paper attempts to vindicate that a paratextual reading of Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* exposes many specific traits of the novel as a futuristic work. In addition, our analysis of the novel's paratext in light of Gerard Genette's theory of paratextuality drives attention to the significance of many paratextual elements in guiding the reading process and setting the tone of the novel. We aim to demonstrate how a paratextual reading of *The Handmaid's Tale* reveals the ideological characteristic of the narrative as a female dystopia directed against patriarchal theological extremism.

Keywords: Paratextuality, dystopia, theology.

INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* appeared in 1985 as a female dystopia that attracted criticism from different orientations because it came as a psychologically disturbing account of how life would be if the political, scientific and theological extremist trends continued to exert power. In fact, the majority of the criticism devoted to the study of the novel concentrated either on one element of the paratext such as the epigraphs or "The Historical Notes", or the text as a female narrative in face of political and theological dictatorship. However, we believe that the significance of the work can be highlighted through an analysis of its paratext as a whole, its relationship with the text and the ideological implications of the combination between the text and its paratext. Such endeavour can be completed only in resort to Gerard Genette's theory of paratextuality that appeared as part of his broader theory of transtextuality or textual transcendence.

PARATEXTUALITY: DEFINITION

The notion of "paratextuality" was introduced into literary criticism by Gerard Genette in his book *Paratexts* (French title: *Seuils*). The latter was published as part of his broader project of poetics of transtextuality. We call paratext all the elements that surround a text (either in prose or verse). According to Genette a text is "rarely presented in an unadorned state, unreinforced and unaccompanied by a certain number of verbal or other productions such as an author's name, a title, a preface [and] illustrations." (Genette, 1997, p. 1)

These productions that present the text to its reader and make it a book constitute "more than a boundary or a sealed border, [they are] a threshold" (Genette, 1997, p. 2) and they appear in two ways: first, they can be inside the book or around the text such as the cover, the name of the author, the title, the preface, tables and illustrations...etc. These elements are called **the p ritext**. However, when the productions are separate from the work and do not appear in the book, they form what we call **the  pitext**. The latter can be either a part of media (interviews, conversations) or private communications (letters and diaries).

The paratext consists of both the p ritext and the epitext and Genette determines its importance in the role it plays for the text when he states:

The paratext in all its forms is a discourse that is fundamentally heteronomous, auxiliary, and dedicated to the service of something other than itself that constitutes its *raison d' tre*. This something is the text [...] the paratextual element is always subordinate to "its" text, and this functionality determines the essence of its appeal and its existence (Genette, 1997, p. 12).

Thus, the paratext is not important in itself but the aim of its existence or analysis lies in helping the reader reach a better understanding of the text or at least make prepositions and hypotheses about it before the act of reading.

Genette believes that the paratext is "a zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition but also of transaction: a privileged place of pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public, an influence that [...] is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it" (Genette, 1997, p. 2). Indeed, Genette's theory defines the paratext's functions in general terms such as facilitating the process of reading and also controlling it when he quotes Philippe Lejeune in describing the paratext as "a fringe of the printed text which in reality controls one's whole reading of the text"(Genette, 1997, p. 2).

THE PARATEXTUAL RELATIONSHIPS IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S THE HANDMAID'S TALE

1 – THE TITLE:

The Handmaid's Tale is the title of Atwood's dystopian novel. According to Genette's categorising of titles, it can be classified as a mixed title, however, in the reverse. Genette believes that mixed titles consist of two parts, the first is always designating the genre while the second indicates the theme; however, in the case of Atwood's dystopian novel, the form is reversed to the specific characteristics of English as a language. Instead of writing The Tale of Handmaid, the use of the possessive "s" makes the reverse possible: The Handmaid's Tale, a form which emphasises the importance of the handmaid as protagonist and narrator.

The use of the article "The" suggests that the story is of one person in particular while referring to such person with the word "handmaid" shows that she represents a whole category or class in the new regime. The name of the protagonist is Offred but it is not used in the title because the focus is not on her as a person but on the implications of a new constructed gender role played by fertile women in the Republic of Gilead for their existence and survival in the new system are closely bound to their effectiveness in being handmaids.

The Handmaid is the thematic part of the title; it has theological origins as it is used in the Old Testament to refer to a female servant: "When Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, she envied her sister, and she said to Jacob. Give me children or I shall die!...Then she said Here is my maid Bilhah; go into her, that she may bear upon my knees, and even I may have children through her"(Genesis 30: 1-3).

This scene seems to be an inspiration for the crisis of Atwood's novel because it has been imitated by the authority of Gilead in a strikingly literal way. The society of Gilead is threatened by infertility and fertile women were chosen to be handmaids devoted to procreation.

Atwood's dystopian novel envisions the world in the near future of the 80's in America if the right wing took control and put its religious fundamentalism into practice and pollution

reached its catastrophic results on the environment. In fact, Atwood's inspiration came in 1981, in a dinner with a friend when they discussed religious fundamentalism. In 1984, Atwood started preparing a file that contained news about the problems of that time and reading the Bible closely. Harold Bloom quotes Coral Ann Howells when she held that the file contained

Pamphlets from Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace...beside reports of atrocities in Latin America, Iran and the Philippines, together with items of information on new reproductive technologies, surrogate motherhood, and forms of institutionalized birth control from Nazi Germany to Ceasescus' Romania... The clippings file contained a lot of material on the New Right with its warnings about the "Birth Death," its anti-feminism...its racism and its strong underpinnings in the Bible Belt (Bloom, 2004, p. 14).

The second part of the title "Tale" is supposed to indicate the generic category of the book. Atwood's choice of the word suggests that the story is a personal account that can be doubted. In fact, the ambiguous title is appropriate as it refers to a psychologically disturbing story that resists generic categorisation. "Alternatively defined as science fiction, dystopic nightmare, futuristic prophecy, slave narrative or satiric romance, *The Handmaid's Tale* expands beyond such limiting frameworks as it explores a potential future" (Macpherson, 2010, p. 53). Most critics situate the novel within dystopian fiction in addition to Atwood's own statement in many interviews after the publication of the novel that it is written to be a dystopian novel. Amin Malak states that "While the major dystopian features can clearly be located in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the novel offers two distinct additional features: feminism and irony" (Malak, 2004, p. 84).

As a title, *The Handmaid's Tale* is positively tempting as it prepares the reader for a personal account of terrifying experience in a dystopia presented from a feminine angle. The richness of Atwood's work contributed to its success even in academic contexts as a warning against a man-made nightmare. "At the college level, the book shows up on the syllabi of courses in 'economics, political science, sociology, film, business, and other disciplines outside the humanities, and it has been adopted by several universities (e.g. George Mason, Miami University) as a required text for all undergraduates'" (Bloom, 2004, p. 15). Indeed, Atwood's imagination of a future based on present crises provided the reader with more than expected from science fiction. The horror of such dystopia comes from its probability as a logical end of a combination of circumstances and factors.

2- THE EPIGRAPHS

Atwood used three epigraphs to open her dystopic novel *The Handmaid's Tale* and set the tone of the work for the reader.

-EPIGRAPH 1:

When Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, she envied her sister, and she said to Jacob. Give me children or I shall die!...Then she said Here is my maid Bilhah; go into her, that she may bear upon my knees, and even I may have children through her. (Genesis 30: 1-3)

The first epigraph is a quote taken from the Bible from Genesis 30:1-3. It narrates Rachel proposal for her husband Jacob to impregnate her handmaid Bilhah in order to have children whom she considers her one while the handmaid is regarded only as an intermediate. The first epigraph, it has two main functions in reference to Genette's theory:

a-COMMENTING ON THE TITLE

Most of the readers' first reaction to the Handmaid's Tale is thinking about the meaning of the title because the use of the word "handmaid" is not frequent in modern English. However, the first epigraph serves to comment on the title by explaining the key word "handmaid" and providing a theological context for the title.

b-COMMENTING ON THE TEXT

The first epigraph introduces the reader to the image of exploiting women bodies for procreation. The Gileadean society took the Biblical reference literally and applied it to create a system of reproduction that includes three persons in one sexual act which aim is solving the problem of infertility and saving the human race from extinction. The epigraph explains many details in the narrative that are based on the Biblical incident which is taken as a justification for dictatorship and exploitation of fertile women by the ruling class to produce children.

In Gilead, infertile upper class women are devalued by the system and must bear the feelings of jealousy, in addition, fertile handmaids are denied any emotional or sexual desires and treated as breeding wombs that are given time limits to produce children or they will be punished by sending them to clean toxic waste in the colonies. The epigraph also explains to the reader why the sexual act becomes a ceremony repeated in a mechanic way as a religious duty performed by the man and the two women involved without any shame or pleasure.

In addition, the choice of the Bible for the first epigraph highlights its use by political systems to control and limit people's choices and freedom in addition to legitimising the systems authority and patriarchy. Karen Stein drives the reader's attention to the use of the Biblical story for the benefit of the system by excluding its emotional aspect and using it as a pretext for man's exploitation of women when she writes, "In the guise of a re-population program, Gilead reads the biblical text literally and makes it the basis for the state sanctioned rape, the impregnation ceremony the handmaids must undergo each month. In this recasting of the biblical passage, Gilead obliterates the emotional meaning of the story and, instead, turns a woman's desire into an instrument of male control"(Stein, 2001,p. 131)

Moreover, the epigraph shows that the theological dictatorship has used the Bible for its enforcement of political measures by taking it as a pretext for its crimes. In Stein's words,

On a more figurative level, the choice of a biblical text for the epigraph suggests that spiritual as well as political significance is at issue in the novel. The state-controlled religion of Gilead, like the patriarchal Israelite society and the Puritan theocracy of Massachusetts, offers its adherents little spiritual sustenance. Its belief system is a harsh theology based on a judgmental father god rather than on a nurturing divinity. The state cynically selects the texts which it privileges to authorize its political control, and promulgates religious rituals (such as the Salvagings, Particutions and Prayvaganzas) as "steam valve[s] for the female elements." Its written texts are subject to state control. (Stein, 2001, p. 131)

The Bible is used in the Gileadean society as a source of power because people do not have access to the Bible and the state dictations are religiously justified.

-EPIGRAPH 2

"But as to myself, having been wearied out for many years with offering vain, idle, visionary thoughts, and at length utterly despairing of success, I fortunately fell upon this proposal..."

Jonathan Swift "A Modest Proposal"

The second epigraph is taken from Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal" in which an inhuman solution to Irish people poverty is suggested by considering the children of numbered families as a source of food or selling them as a source of income to overcome hunger and poverty. Swift is being satirical because the British proposal to solve the problem of Irish people is considered modest and better than "vain, idle, visionary thoughts". However, the proposal offers Irish people a savage system of cannibalism.

a-THE EPIGRAPH-EFFECT

By its mere presence, the second epigraph makes a set of relationships between Atwood's book and Jonathan Swift's essay "A Modest Proposal". It situates the novel in the area of satire because the speaker in the essay is criticising the British political and economic systems that impoverished the Irish people. Similarly, Atwood's novel is a satire that shows the possible results of environmental scientific and political systems in America.

-EPIGRAPH 3

The third epigraph is a Sufi proverb that says:

In the desert there is no sign that says,
Thou shalt not eat stones.

It is taken from Islamic Sufism and has been neglected by literary critics and often oversimplified, compared to the biblical reference, due to its estrangement from their culture. For example, Lucy Freibert explains it in relation to ideology in the novel by referring to its literal meaning when she links it to survival and holds that authorities know unneeded regulations and must avoid them because they are obvious (Freibert, 1988, p. 280-292).

On the other hand, Nancy V Workman analyses the use of the Sufi proverb by Atwood and argues for its allusive nature and deep meaning that are underestimated by most critics. Moreover, she believes that the proverb's meaning is echoed in the actions and the speech of the protagonist Offred when she writes: "In contrast, I feel that the proverb's message is complex in nature, hiding in its core a unifying element which is echoed throughout *The Handmaid's Tale* in the words and actions of Offred, the narrator. Beneath its apparent simplicity lurks a complex alternative vision of reality, compared to the Judeo-Christian tradition which Atwood satirically mocks in her novel"(Workman, 1989,p. 2). The third epigraph has two functions:

a-COMMENTING ON THE TEXT:

There is a thematic relationship between the epigraph and the novel either in its reference to authority regulations in a state of survival or in the protagonist's reactions to the system which bear a kind of Sufi mysticism; a phenomenon that Workman analyses in details in her aforementioned article. For example, she writes

More important than her outward appearance, however, is Offred's attitude to the events that surround her. In two important respects, she demonstrates a Sufi perspective: one, in her inwardness, her attempts to discover and evaluate her own feelings and psychological realities despite the teachings and proclamations of the society that denies them and which refuses to accept their legitimacy; and two, in her need to express that inwardness through language games that appear to be simple or perhaps clever, but which actually reveal complex networks of feelings and ideas.(Workman, 1989, p.3)

In addition to the thematic relation between the epigraph and the novel, it shares with it, despite the apparent simplicity of the epigraph, a sense of irony.

b-THE EPIGRAPH-EFFECT:

The presence of the Sufi epigraph before Atwood's novel, suggests an aspect of mysticism that readers can hardly understand at the beginning of the novel, however, they can easily guess that the presence of such proverb is certainly not arbitrary.

3-THE NOTES: "THE HISTORICAL NOTES"

The notes used after the narrative and entitled "Historical Notes" provide a historical context for the tale. However, the reader is not introduced to this historical context before reading the story, so the academic historical discourse used in the historical notes is seen in parallel to the narrative personal discourse used by Offred in the story. Moreover, it is a challenging discourse that puts the validity of the memoir into question for the lack of historical material evidence. In addition, the objectivity used in such part of the novel offers a re-evaluating of the tale from historical perspective and a manifested detachment from the human and ethical aspects of the narrator's story. The latter is underestimated and reduced to its historical value while misogynist judgements are still persistent in the academia which seems still male-dominated.

The chapter entitled "Historical Notes" is a partial transcript of the proceedings of the "Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies," that took place on June 25, 2195 at the University of Denay, Nonavit. It is part of the International historical Association Convention, which provides the readers with twenty-second century's view of the Gileadean regime and informs them that the regime has failed and resulted in reshaping the powers of the world. It provides the readers with disturbing information that puts their affectionate involvement with Offred's tale into question, an involvement that started early in the narrative when Offred uses the pronoun "you" to address the reader or in the original form of her story, the listener.

The readers' discovery that the story was originally recorded on tapes and has been transcribed, organised and edited by Professors James Darcy Pieixoto and Knotley Wade makes them shocked because according to the professor's own words the work was based on guesswork. As a narrator, Offred is already pointing out to her construction of some events and the knowledge of certain details provided by Professor Pieixoto strengthens the unreliability of what is said in contrast to historical facts. In her article "The Handmaid's Tale: 'Historical Notes' and Documentary Subversion," Dominick M. Grace writes:

The "Historical Notes" force a purely retrospective re-evaluation of the text, unlike the pseudo-documentary strategies in the vast bulk of such fictions, which almost invariably precede the text or are incorporated throughout it, to signal clearly to the reader their presence. Because there is no hint in the body of the text of the recontextualizing to come at its end, the "Historical Notes" are discontinuous and disjunctive; they invite us to question, rather than accept, the authenticity of what we have just read. They invite an active interrogation of the text. (Grace, 2001, p. 158)

In Genette's terms, the notes are authorial added to a narratorial actorial editorial text. Although the "Historical Notes" are a transcript of the proceedings of an academic event, they are however, provided by Atwood herself to accompany the personal narrative recounted by the handmaid. The latter can be considered as a narratorial, actorial, editorial text, a type that does not exist in Genette's categorisation because the relationships of the senders are complicated in Atwood's Dystopia.

In fact, her artistry makes the text a blurring of different genres that seldom co-exist in a non exclusive way. The tale was originally an oral personal self-reflexive, reconstruct memoir of the handmaid's experience under the Gileadean regime. However, it is received by readers after transcriptions, selections and arrangements by the two Historian scholars Darcy Pieixoto and Knotley Wade who chooses its name in homage to Chaucer's "The Canterbury Tales" which have few in common with the feminine narrative under investigation. Such titling is reflective of the objective historical detached analysis of the recorded experiences that are transformed into a literary narrative with its accompanying uncertainty that rises from its oral form by its original narrator to its published form after edition.

In addition, "The Historical Notes" as a paratextual element has many functions that were not identified by Genette due to the novelty of such form that did not appear before the writing of Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. Although Genette drives attention to the function of the notes that accompany works of fiction that have historical or philosophical aspects, however, he does not detail the functions of the notes that accompany *Dystopia*. Indeed, the previously published *Dystopia* did not provide the reader with another vision of the future of the *Dystopia* itself. A technique that serves to offer a moving rather than static vision of human experience because the after-dystopia narrative although limited in a scientific objective discourse of academic proceeding becomes reflective of the possibility of repetition of human experience due to the capability of human mind to find excuses to his acts in an objective historical view. Everything becomes logical due to scientific detachment from ethical judgement and concentration on referencing and documenting rather than analysing, judging and learning.

CONCLUSION

Atwood's dystopia links human experience of desire, necessity, suffering, danger and survival in cyclic way that evokes different contexts and times, suggesting that the human being is the same when he undergoes certain conditions. Her combination of the epigraphs, the narrative and the notes completes the cycle that makes her novel revise the human experience in different times and lands ranging from Chaucer's pilgrims to Jacobe's life to Sufist's mysticism in the east, to Irish suffering in the eighteenth century to the 1980's American misleading ecological, religious and scientific practices to the Gileadean regime in the mid 1980's to its aftermath in 2195. The final section of the novel forces the reader to detach himself from "her story" to question its authenticity while being personally concerned with the historian scholar's scientific objectivity, misogynist remarks and absence of moral consideration of human experience. As a dystopia, Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is "cyclic". We suggest this because it is capable of criticising the present through the futuristic tale and the future of the future through the historical notes which show that some of the seeds that led to the establishment of the Gileadean system still exist including the detachment of science and History from ethical judgement.

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