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"It didn't Happen that Way": The Role of Narrative Inconsistencies in Margaret Atwood's Dystopia the *Handmaid's Tale*

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the role of narrative inconsistencies in Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) applying the constructivist model proposed by Meir Sternberg and Tamar Yacobi (2015) in their discussion about narrative (un)reliability. The analysis suggests that the inconsistencies which arise when Offred's narration and the novel's epilogue – a transcript of an academic symposium taking place in 2195 – are juxtaposed have a specific purpose in the novel. This purpose can be identified through the application of two mechanisms of sense-making proposed by Sternberg and Yacobi: the one concerned with the specific *perspective* adopted in a narrative and the one related to the thematic goals of the text – its *function*. Thinking of the novel as a communicative act, we explore the ways in which it engages with the notions of both *despair* and *hope* imbricated in dystopian writing.

Keywords: *Unreliability. Dystopia. Margaret Atwood. The Handmaid's Tale.*

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Introduction

Since the publication of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* in 1985, the nature of its first-person narrative has been the subject of constant debate. A dystopian novel, it imagines a world in which a fundamentalist religious group takes control of the United States of America after assassinating the president and shutting down the National Congress. Using violence, widespread surveillance, and fear, the regime forces all people to live according to its principles and dogma, turning the country – now known as the Republic of Gilead – into a theocracy. The novel is narrated by one of Gilead's powerless and unwilling participants, a thirty-three-year-old woman known as Offred, whose function in Gilead is to be a Handmaid: a woman who exists exclusively to give children to the ruling class, that is, the Commanders and their Wives, when the latter are unable to conceive. The name Offred marks the Handmaid's status as a non-person in this society: she temporarily carries the name of the Commander to whom she is assigned by the State. She is "of Fred", just like other Handmaids in the novel are known as "Ofglen" or "Ofwarren".

Handmaids are not allowed to have names, families, homes, or histories; they are not allowed to leave the house unaccompanied or to make choices about their lives and bodies. Like all women in this society, they are also not allowed to do paid work, own any kind of property and, most importantly for the discussion regarding Offred's role as a narrator, to read or write. Throughout the novel, which is told mostly in the present tense, we are led to believe that we are simply accessing Offred's consciousness, as she states early on in the novel that her narrative is a story in her head:

> 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. Tell, rather than write, because I have nothing to write with and writing is in any case forbidden (ATWOOD, 2017, p. 49).

It is not simply a story, she explains, because it is also her life, which she must live through. But it *is* also a story she tells since even though her story is told "in fragments" (ATWOOD, 2017, p. 279), her act of narration is a constant

attempt to impose "a narrative line upon disparate images" – to continue the linkage established by Lois Feuer (1997, p. 91) between Offred's tale and Joan Didion's famous quote about us "[telling] ourselves stories in order to live" (DIDION, 2006, p. 185), taken from her 1979 essay "The White Album".

The novel's epilogue, or "Historical Notes", completely transforms what we have just read in the previous three hundred pages. The "Notes" are a transcript of a fictional academic symposium of "Gileadean Studies" taking place in the year 2195. In this symposium, a Cambridge professor explains that "The Handmaid's Tale" is a title he and his colleague Professor Wade appended to a narrative they arranged based on a collection of thirty unnumbered tapes found in what had once been the city of Bangor, in the state of Maine. The tapes were then transcribed and organized in narrative form according to a certain logic perceived by the two professors.

This late disclosure of information (taking place in the last fifteen pages of the novel) is a case of what Meir Sternberg and Tamar Yacobi (2015, p. 419) call "the *dynamics of (un)reliability*" in their comprehensive study of narrative unreliability and the mechanisms readers employ in order to make sense of narrative inconsistencies. According to them, "readers change their minds about a mediator's reliability on receiving, at some juncture, new information that presses for a retrospective review and reformation of the happening or the discourse about it or both" (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 419) – which is exactly what happens when Atwood informs us, in the last pages of the novel, that, contrary to what we had been made to believe this far, the narrative is not actually *in Offred's head as she goes along*. In this sense, once we get to the Epilogue and discover that Offred has likely narrated her entire story in retrospect, differently from what her narration had led us to believe, we realize we have been tricked by her up until the end: she can be understood, thus, as an unreliable narrator.

Offred's unreliability, however, does not lead the reader to turn against her. On the contrary, we suggest that when we, as readers, finally perceive her efforts to engage her listener through the use of narrative suspense, it should further our empathy towards the Handmaid, and this is substantiated by the way Atwood organizes the narrative and by the

juxtaposition of Offred's storytelling and Professor Pieixoto's discourse in the twenty-second century. Thinking of the literary work also as an act of communication between author and reader, following Sternberg and Yacobi (2015), we propose that the narrative strategies employed by Atwood in *The Handmaid's Tale* can be understood as furthering three essential aspects of dystopian writing: to be *didactic*, to be a *warning*, to be an act of *hope*. It is to these characteristics that we turn in the following section.

Dystopian hope, dystopian despair

John Stuart Mill first used the word "dystopia", a modification of Thomas More's sixteenth-century neologism "utopia", in 1868, during a parliamentary speech (cf. VIEIRA, 2010, p. 16), but dystopian writing truly flourished in the twentieth century, particularly with Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1924), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). If utopian writing presents to the reader an imagined society that is *better* than the reality in which the writer lives, set either in faraway places or in the distant future (euchronia), following "a humanist logic, based on the discovery that the human being did not exist simply to accept his or her fate, but to use reason in order to build the future" (VIEIRA, 2010, p. 4), the vision presented by the creator of a dystopia is, on the contrary, a negative one.

Neither utopias nor dystopias are about the future or about faraway places: both forms of writing are, in fact, about the present. Dunja Mohr (2005, p. 27) highlights that while both forms point to the present and to its recognition, they do so differently: the utopia seeks to create a *difference* between the writer's present and the writer's vision, creating, thus, the utopian desire for something better, while the dystopia thrives in its perceived *similarities* between the present and the vision, as this recognition becomes appalling for readers. Mohr insists, however, that these different forms of writing have a similar objective: "sociopolitical change by means of the aesthetic representation of a paradigm change" (MOHR, 2005, p. 28). In that sense, Lyman Tower Sargent places dystopian writing in his discussion of the larger phenomenon of *utopianism*, which, in its many different facets, reflects "social dreaming – the dreams and nightmares that concern the ways in which groups

of people arrange their lives and which usually envision a radically different society than the one in which the dreamers live" (SARGENT, 1994, p. 3).

Utopian writing, Fátima Vieira (2010, p. 17) suggests, is bound by a shared feeling of *hope*; dystopian writing, on the other hand, is "essentially pessimistic". In Erich Fromm's Afterword to Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four,* he interprets dystopias (based on Orwell, Huxley and Zamyatin) as "the expression of a mood" and "a warning" – a mood of "near despair about the future of man, and the warning is that unless the course of history changes, men all over the world will lose their most human qualities, will become soulless automatons, and will not even be aware of it" (FROMM, 1977, p. 313). If the word "despair" could potentially imply a lack of hope, the notion of "warning" reinforces the hopefulness, even if it is a faint one, assuming one would not engage in warning its fellow humans without first believing, at least to an extent, that such a warning could have an effect. Sargent (1994, p. 26) makes a similar argument: if dystopias are meant to warn, then they "imply that choice, and therefore hope, are still possible". For the scholar, this is the "positive message" (SARGENT, 1994, p. 27) of dystopian writing.

While some readings of dystopia argue that such writing should be careful not to offer any "consoling hope" to the reader through "positive, assertive characters" (MALAK, 1987, p. 11), many scholars of utopia and dystopia emphasize the notion of hope as central to dystopias, just as it is to utopias – though this hope does neither necessarily nor usually rely on assertive characters. Vieira, for example, while considering dystopias to be pessimistic in essence, as stated above, also affirms that they must leave room for hope; otherwise they would not be able to achieve their underlying goal of generating a positive reaction in the desire for "social improvement" (VIEIRA, 2010, p. 7). According to the scholar, "images of the future are put forward as real possibilities because the utopist wants to frighten the reader and to make him realize that things may go either right or wrong, depending on the moral, social and civic responsibility of the citizens" (VIEIRA, 2010, p. 17), thus making the dystopia a particularly *didactic* form of writing.

However, the way different dystopias engage with the notion of hope varies. Both Mohr (2005) and Raffaella

Baccolini and Tom Moylan (2003) read the three dystopian texts previously mentioned (*We*, *Brave New World*, and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*) as examples of the "classical dystopias" of the early twentieth century. For Baccolini and Moylan (2003, p. 7), classical dystopias "maintain utopian hope *outside* their pages, if at all; for it is only if we consider dystopia as a warning that we as readers can hope to escape its pessimistic future". They identify, however, a new trend beginning in the 1980s, which is described as the "critical dystopia": these works also engage with the possibility of hope within the pages as they evade the definitive closure of classical dystopias (with their ultimate subjugation of the individual) through "ambiguous, open endings" (BACCOLINI; MOYLAN, 2003, p. 7). Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, for instance, is understood as a work that "directly drew on the classical dystopian narrative even as it interrogated its limits and suggested new directions" (BACCOLINI; MOYLAN, 2003, p. 3).

In Baccolini and Moylan's solo endeavors, they perceive Atwood's novel in different terms, while still maintaining that her writing modifies the previous dystopian tradition in significant ways. Baccolini (2004, p. 519), for instance, is particularly interested in how "the intersection of gender and genre has opened up the creation of new, subversive, and oppositional literary forms", and she offers Atwood's writing in *The Handmaid's Tale* as one of the examples of dystopian writing by women that challenge the form of the "classical dystopias". In her view,

> by rejecting the traditional subjugation of the individual at the end of the novel, the critical dystopia opens a space of contestation and opposition for those groups – women and other ex-centric subjects whose subject position is not contemplated by hegemonic discourse – for whom subject status has yet to be attained (BACCOLINI, 2004, p. 520).

In Moylan's own initial discussion of the "critical dystopia", however, he places Atwood's novel more as a limit-case than as a direct challenge to the classical dystopia: in his view, the novel, in its ambiguity, is both a continuation *and* a challenge of such a tradition, more of an "ambiguous dystopia" (MOYLAN, 2016, p. 107) than either a classical dystopia – which,

to a certain extent, it reproduces – or a critical dystopia – which, in his view, she anticipates without yet being.

In Mohr's reading of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred's act of narration "becomes the utopian subtext" (MOHR, 2005, p. 230) which makes the novel not a classical dystopia, but a "transgressive utopian dystopia" – a category she creates to refer to dystopian works containing "a utopian subtext transgressive of binaries" (MOHR, 2005, p. 50). This utopia is presented not as a possible and better future (as Baccolini herself does, in Mohr's view), but as radically different "nows" coming into existence through alternative ways of looking at the present. Offred's narration celebrates this notion of *the alternative,* in Mohr's view, by constantly offering multiple perspectives and multiple versions of reality, and this is one of the features she reads as "transgressive" (MOHR, 2005, p. 231). Nonetheless, Mohr still concedes that, while narration can be seen as transgressive in the context of Atwood's work – especially if we consider the texture of Offred's narration – the novel has no "distinct utopian projects and subthemes" (MOHR, 2005, p. 230) and is more closely connected to the classical dystopias of the past than Mohr's other examples. Moylan (2016), in fact, avoids classifying *The Handmaid's Tale* too neatly because he has a similar perception of the novel: while the academic symposium happening in 2195 – after Gilead's fall – might be seen as a potentially utopian gesture on Atwood's part, this gesture loses strength if we consider the tone of the intellectuals as well as their dismissal of Offred's storytelling efforts. Thus, the epilogue of the novel might, in fact, rely on the antiutopian notion that humanity will never be better than it is. It is not clear, he argues, whether this imagined future is meant to be eutopian, to suggest that eutopia has failed, or that it has not yet happened.

This lack of clarity has led, for example, to one of the most critical readings of the novel, proposed by Jamie Dopp (1994). While some critics, such as Stephanie Hammer (1990), condemn Offred and our potential identification with her without condemning the novel, in Dopp's view, more than coming up with a problematic protagonist, Atwood creates a reality that "essentializes" history, and thus it "undermines the possibility of a constructive response" (DOPP, 1994), ultimately going against "a grass-roots political truth: if no one believes

things can be changed then no one will be motivated to seek change" (DOPP, 1994).

While it is true that there is an important ambiguity in Atwood's novel – a common characteristic of her writing, as discussed by Heidi Macpherson (2010, p. 94), for whom the lack of clear answers is a "familiar Atwoodian motif" – , we suggest that if we think of *The Handmaid's Tale* also as an act of communication with the reader, such negative views as Dopp's become less evident. Rather than "essentializing history", Atwood expands the scope of her warning, leading us to wonder, as put by Arnold Davidson (2000, p. 22-23), whether "we, as scholars, contribute to the dehumanization of society by our own critical work, especially when, as according to the distinguished professor of the novel, 'our job is not to censure but to understand'". In this sense, the formal organization of the novel and the peculiarities of Offred's tale become particularly important.

Narrative inconsistencies: the case for Offred's unreliability

In the transcript of his presentation at the Symposium on Gileadean Studies, Professor Pieixoto states that "obviously, [Offred's account] could not have been recorded during the period of time it recounts, since, if the author is telling the truth, no machine or tapes would have been available to her, nor would she have had a place of concealment for them" (ATWOOD, 2017, p. 315). This is, of course, an inference he, as a reader and scholar, makes in order to reconcile with a very clear contradiction found in the oral narrative contained in the tapes. The inference Pieixoto makes, he emphasizes, is based on the premise that the narrator/author is telling the truth about her situation. A similar premise is mentioned by Sternberg and Yacobi in their discussion regarding narrative (un)reliability. For the scholars, unreliability must be understood in the larger context of what they refer to as *integration* – our mind's search for order and coherence. In the context of integration, when we face inconsistencies in a narrative, we create hypotheses to explain them away:

> Averting blame for inconsistencies means transferring it and them elsewhere – to the perspective of an unreliable mediator,

> to a suitable frame of existence, to the work's genetic process, to a genre, to a function, or to some other (e.g., figurative) explanatory principle. Any such transfer will leave the author intact, in control, authoritative, indeed *reliable*, as the authorial power is by definition (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 431).

Here, we should differentiate between the historical author, or the author as a person in the world, and the implied author, which, as explained by Wolf Schmid (2014), "refers to the author-image evoked by a work and constituted by the stylistic, ideological, and aesthetic properties for which indexical signs can be found in the text". The implied author does not speak, for it is implied, neither is it an intentional creation of the author; instead, it depends on the reader facing the text and his or her reading activity, having, thus, only a "virtual existence" (SCHMID, 2014). This distinction is important because, in Sternberg and Yacobi's discussion, one of the *mechanisms of integration* proposed – meaning, one of the tools readers employ to make sense of inconsistencies – is what they refer to as the *genetic*, which is related to the genesis of the text and, if we apply it, we might transfer the "blame" of certain inconsistencies to the historical author, the author as a person in the world, who can make mistakes, for example. Therefore, while Professor Pieixoto uses tools of sense-making in order to maintain the legitimacy of Offred's account, we, readers of the novel, will work in making sense of its entire narrative – including the Historical Notes – in order to maintain Margaret Atwood's authorial reliability and control over her work of fiction.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, we have two very distinct parts: the first one, composed of fifteen sections and forty-six chapters, is Offred's account, narrated by her and introduced directly at the beginning of the novel, following its three epigraphs; the second one is composed of only one section, entitled "Historical Notes on *The Handmaid's Tale*", which contains the previously mentioned partial transcript of a seminar – more specifically, it transcribes the communication presented by Professor Pieixoto at the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies. When first seen in the table of contents, the title "Historical Notes" might seem like a piece of paratext appended by Margaret Atwood, the *historical author* of the novel, to the text. Once we get to the actual notes, however, it is immediately clear that while

this "appendix" is not part of Offred's account, and stands separately from it, it *is* part of the novel.

In the Notes, we learn about the Tale's origins, of how they were found, and that it was Pieixoto, along with a colleague, who prepared the manuscript for publication. We also learn that, since the tapes were not numbered, the text as we read it was organized by the two professors. Hence, in *The Handmaid's Tale* we have a case of what Uri Margolin (2014) refers to as a "two-level narrative". Margolin refers to the narrator as "the inner-textual (textually encoded) highest-level speech position from which the current narrative discourse as a whole originates and from which references to the entities, actions and events that this discourse is about are being made" (MARGOLIN, 2014). In the case of Offred's tale, however, as the professors intervene in her narration, they exercise an *editorial function*: Margolin explains that the editor becomes "the global narrator, since all the embedded [discourse is] basically quoted by him" (MARGOLIN, 2014). We only find out about the existence of this editorial function, however, in the closing fifteen pages, and are then forced to reevaluate what we had been reading for the past forty-six chapters. This retrospectively creates an important inconsistency in Offred's account: while she makes it sound, throughout the narrative, as if she were narrating *in her head as she goes along* (ATWOOD, 2017, p. 49), this is, in fact, not true, for the information presented to us by the end of the novel leads us to be believe she told her story retrospectively.

Offred's status as a narrator and the inconsistencies that can be found in her narration, especially after the disclosure of the Historical Notes, have been a topic of much discussion surrounding *The Handmaid's Tale*. The novel is mostly narrated in the present tense, though Offred will often slip into the past tense when recounting experiences from her former life, before Gilead – when she was a mother, a wife and part of the working force, as well as the daughter and the best friend of two women's rights activists from different generations. She will also use the past tense when contemplating certain experiences she undergoes as a Handmaid. The chronology of events is frequently disordered in Offred's narrative, and, on different occasions, she seamlessly connects the "time before", as she calls it, with what appears to be her present situation. Offred sometimes also disconcerts the reader by offering

multiple interpretations of a single event or highlighting the artificial nature of her own narration. She does sometimes shatter any ideas one might have as to taking her discourse at face-value without ever questioning her reliability – if only because, as stated by Angela Gulick (1991, p. 132), Atwood constructs a narrative of constant ambiguity in which we are "forced to take a step back and examine that what we are reading is a text".

Offred sometimes refers to her narration as a "reconstruction", particularly when she is describing her ambiguous relationships with the men she encounters in her Commander's household: the Commander himself and his driver Nick. Chapter twenty-three, which details her first illicit encounter with the Commander in his private office, where they play Scrabble (also illicit, since she is not allowed to read), begins with the phrase "this is a reconstruction" (ATWOOD, 2017, p. 144) and ends with "that is a reconstruction, too" (ATWOOD, 2017, p. 150). In chapter forty, in which her (also illicit) affair with Nick begins, Offred offers three different descriptions of their encounter. She states that "she made [the scene] up" (ATWOOD, 2017, p. 273), or that "it didn't happen that way" (ATWOOD, 2017, p. 275), and once again appeals to the idea of a reconstruction: "I'm not sure how it happened. All I can hope for is a reconstruction: the way love feels is always only approximate" (ATWOOD, 2017, p. 275).

What we actually have in Offred, though it takes us some time to realize, is a narrator who is "reconstructing" the events from memory; this is the first hindrance to her reliability. The Historical Notes disclose that the whole narrative is a "reconstruction", reminding us that the faulty status of Offred's memory – something that she does sometimes highlight throughout the narrative, even if not prominently – must be taken under consideration as well. Another hindrance is her shame. When she talks about the Commander in chapter twenty-three, for example, she works at justifying herself: "But if you happen to be a man, sometime in the future, and you've made it this far, please remember: you will never be subjected to the temptation of feeling you must forgive, a man, as a woman. It's difficult to resist, believe me. But remember that forgiveness too is a power" (ATWOOD, 2017, p. 144). After she kisses him at his command, she says: "He was so

sad. That is a reconstruction, too" (ATWOOD, 2017, p. 150). She is simultaneously ashamed – resulting in her offering justifications – and candid, in laying bare her own artifices, such as claiming that the Commander was *sad* or adding the noise of thunder to her memory of her first encounter with Nick in order to "cover up the sounds, which [she is] ashamed of making" (ATWOOD, 2017, p. 275).

For Lorene Birden (2002, p. 133), in the world of *The Handmaid's Tale*, to narrate one's story is a form of resistance and in this sense Offred's "'artistic' mixture of past, present, and hypothetical scenarios constitutes an attempt to resist the credo of Gilead and its rejection of former times and mores. Her 'reconstructions' counter those of the republic and help her in her attempt to regain her self". She reads these slips into fantasy and "reconstructions" as instances of "momentary control" on Offred's part, particularly because they appear when Offred is discussing what Birden (2002, p. 135) refers to as the "representatives of control" in Gilead: the male characters. While this is a form of rebellion, a downside of these narrative choices is that they hinder reliability, but for Birden this is not necessarily a problem, since Offred's strategies of "false narration" are more suitable to problematize the connection between language and power than a straightforward narrative would be. Because Offred often highlights her act of telling, she also emphasizes her own place as the teller, and thus could not be accused of "falseness" (BIRDEN, 2002, p. 137). This, too, is understood by Birden as a position of control; however, she reminds us that this control cannot be complete due to the intervention of the male scholars.

As previously discussed, Offred's *reconstructions* are usually related to her relationships with the three men who permeate her story – the Commander, Nick, and her husband Luke, from the time before Gilead. Sarah Morrison (2000) explores Atwood's use of the romance plot in *The Handmaid's Tale*, which in her analysis encompasses all three men. In her view, Offred spends the novel trying to "impose a romance plot, with either the Commander or Nick cast as the hero" (MORRISON, 2000, p. 315). She argues that, instead of attacking the romance plot, Atwood brings it to the center of Offred's narrative, but denies it a conventional ending. This reading can be contrasted with Madonne Miner's (1991), who is also

concerned with the romance plot in *The Handmaid's Tale*. For her, even if the reader wants to perceive romantic love as a revolutionary and subversive power, the intricate linkages established between the Commander, Nick, and Luke within the text suggest something different. Miner proposes that the images associated with the three men often merge all of them together: the Commander and Luke are associated with an "appreciation for the old things" (ATWOOD, 2017, p. 166), also implied in their knowledge of Latin and etymology – fields in which Offred is ignorant – , and they are further connected through the imagery of the hotel where they bring her to cheat on their respective wives. Nick is also associated with the two men by the imagery of the hotel, since both it and Nick's room – where she also goes for illicit sex – are described by Offred as mushroom-colored. Nick and Luke are further connected by the political apathy they both inspire in Offred. For Miner (1991, p. 165), with this patterning created in the text, "the novel insists upon love's limitations, rather than upon its latitudes".

Morrison's analysis of the romance plot in the narrative, however, is much more productive than Miner's, at least insofar as the discussion of Offred's status as a narrator is concerned. In her view, the Historical Notes clarify the nature of the tale as a "patched-together" collection of fragments whose "narrative impetus" can only be found *in* the romance plot, for which the reader creates an expectation of closure (MORRISON, 2000, p. 319). Furthermore, while most critics accept the claim made in the Notes that the entire narration was likely created after the events took place, most of Offred's narrative does not sound "like an after-the-fact account" (MORRISON, 2000, p. 321). To solve this issue, some critics read Offred as a conscious storyteller who is simply employing the historical present in her telling. Morrison is suspicious of this idea; as she reminds us, nothing taking place after Offred leaves the Commander's house ever makes it into her narration. To the scholar, Atwood creates these narrative inconsistencies and implicates Offred's reliability in order to better exploit the romance plot. The lack of resolution in Offred's relationships with any of the three men acts as a subversion of the romance plot, but, according to Morrison, "Atwood is counting on, even encouraging our attachment to the form. She does not require us to relinquish the romance plot; rather, in denying closure and minimizing

the significance of the hero, she suggests that its validity lies elsewhere" (MORRISON, 2000, p. 323). For the scholar, this "elsewhere" is located in Offred's reassessment of her conflicted feelings towards her mother, where we can find real closure, development, and growth.

Morrison emphasizes that Atwood, through the Historical Notes and their late disclosure of vital information about the narrative, purposefully incurs narrative inconsistencies. For her, the inconsistencies created by the interplay between the information provided by the Historical Notes and the narrative set forth by Offred are a deliberate choice Atwood makes in order to achieve a specific goal: to fully explore the empty – though not easy to discard – promise of the romance plot. Our take on *The Handmaid's Tale* differs slightly. We agree with the previous criticism Morrison uses to substantiate her reading – Sheila Conboy's description of the narrative as having a "sense of immediacy" (CONBOY, 1993, p. 357 *apud* MORRISON, 2000, p. 321) and the "overwhelming richness of concrete details" Offred infuses in her narration, as discussed by Zhongming Chen (CHEN, 1994, p. 347 *apud* MORRISON, 2000, p. 322). We also believe her claim that Offred would have to be "quite the conscious, controlled artist" (MORRISON, 2000, p. 322) to be correct. However, throughout the novel we are given too much evidence of Offred's skills as a narrator to attribute this perceived inconsistency exclusively to the implied author. In our view, this inconsistency can be made sense of *within* the novel.

The role of narrative inconsistencies

In Meir Sternberg and Tamar Yacobi's study (2015, p. 402), narrative unreliability is defined as "a perspectival hypothesis that we readers (hearers, viewers) form as sense-makers, especially under the pressure or threat of ill-constructed discourse"; thus, we attribute "tensions, incongruities, contradictions and other infelicities" to "a source of transmission" (YACOBI, 1981, p. 119). Because their approach is a constructivist one, in their model a reader and/or critic does not *identify* unreliability, neither is unreliability a *characteristic* of the narrator; instead, it is an *inference* made by the reader in order to reconcile with inconsistencies he or she

finds in the narrative – such as Offred's "sense of immediacy" towards past experiences. One could, for instance, infer that the author behind this narrative is simply a careless one. However, both Atwood's carefully constructed narrative voice and the self-awareness demonstrated in Professor Pieixoto's discussion about the nature of the present-tense oral narrative found in the tapes suggest that this is not the case.

The constructivist model proposed by Sternberg and Yacobi (2015) presents a series of mechanisms that a reader can apply in order to make sense of the inconsistencies he or she finds in a narrative. We can hypothesize about: mistakes made by the author or publisher (*the genetic mechanism*); specific characteristics of a genre (*the generic mechanism*); the aesthetic or thematic goals of the text (*the functional mechanism*); the specific ontology presented in the text (*the existential mechanism*); the perspective of a fictional being in the narrative which acts as a source of transmission (*the perspectival mechanism*); or the language employed as metaphorical or figurative (*the figurative mechanism*). What we propose here is an understanding of Offred's present-tense narrative through the application of a combination of the *functional* and *perspectival* mechanisms. In what follows, we explore the characterization of Offred's *perspective* as a source of transmission as well as our interpretation of the *function* of the inconsistencies in her narration.

In David Hogsette's (1997) reading of the novel, he highlights the interplay between the Historical Notes, which he considers to be ironic, and Offred's tale. His hypothesis offers an illuminating interpretation of this interplay: he suggests that the Notes teach the reader how *not* to read the tale. In his reading, Offred's act of storytelling and her use of language allow her "to create her own subjectivity", in itself a form of subversion (HOGSETTE, 1997, p. 265); one must remember that this is a reality in which women are not allowed to access or share knowledge, as they are forbidden from reading and writing. Throughout the narrative, Offred reacquaints herself with the power that lies in language and in its use, recognizing the possibilities it offers for political change. For an act of communication to be complete, however, Hogsette highlights that the reader/listener must do his or her part. Within the novel, he suggests, Professor Pieixoto fails to recognize the

true significance of Offred's tale, and fails to do his part; "he is blinded by his intellectualizing and fails to comprehend Offred's isolation, her subjugation, and the heroic significance of the risk she took in attempting to record her thoughts and feelings" (HOGSETTE, 1997, p. 272).

For Hogsette (1997, p. 272), Atwood directs the reader to the correct way of reading Offred's tale, which is to empathize with her suffering and to appreciate the risk she takes in recording her story, and not to "intellectually objectify" her narrative. The failure of the scholars to empathize with, and truly understand, the significance of Offred's account has also been noted by Gulick (1991, p. 139), for whom the Handmaid's account is "objectified" in academia as well. Gulick highlights the warning given by the Chair at the Symposium to Professor Pieixoto, reminding him to respect the time limit so no one would miss lunch, as well as Pieixoto and Wade's several sexist remarks towards not only Offred but Gileadean women in general, usually received with laughter by the audience. Morrison (2000, p. 323), too, proposes that the scholars "snicker at Offred's plight and discount her significance, preferring to focus on those they regard as serious players in the Republic of Gilead". In a similar vein, Coral Ann Howells (1996, p. 146) states that even though Pieixoto accuses Offred of not paying attention to the right things – which *he* wishes to know – , the reader might feel differently, since Atwood "highlights perspective rather than knowledge or truth as the main feature of any historical narrative". Howells emphasizes that, importantly, the largest part of the narrative if made out of Offred's voice and account, relegating Pieixoto's discourse to the margins. Similarly, Morrison (2000) also suggests that, for the reader who had been previously engaged in Offred's narration when he or she gets to the Historical Notes, the task of disregarding her emotional journey is not an easy one; the structure of the novel, after all, brings us to the Notes only *after* we have read (and reacted to) Offred's tale.

In *Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction,* Sternberg (1978) explores the notions of "primacy" and "recency" effects in literary writing. Departing from the book *The Order of Presentation in Persuasion*, in which psychologists explore how different organizations in verbal messages influence their impact on audiences, Sternberg discusses the

disparate impressions made by the opening part of a message (*primacy effect*) and by the closing part (*recency effect*), as well as the significant force and importance of the primacy effect in communication. The verbal medium has two important characteristics: "the discreteness of its units, and their successive and irreversible progression" (STERNBERG, 1978, p. 96). A verbal text can only be understood over time and, thus, readers can only know, at a certain point in the narrative, what the author wants them to know. This way, a reader "can easily be prevented from suspecting, for the time judged necessary for the primacy effect to take a strong hold on his mind, that conflicting information lies ahead" (STERNBERG, 1978, p. 96). Sternberg then presents the power of the primacy effect as so significant that "even if the reader retrospectively realizes that he has been tricked, it is usually too late for him to get out of the psychological trap" (STERNBERG, 1978, p. 97).

We can think of the organization of *The Handmaid's Tale*, and of the juxtaposition of the Tale and the Notes, as particularly significant for the interpretation of the novel. Throughout the largest part of it, Atwood prevents us from suspecting that Offred is not completely honest about the situation in which she narrates. Therefore Morrison (2000), for instance, suggests that it is not easy for the reader to let go of his or her attachment to the Handmaid when they encounter Pieixoto's words about her narration. Atwood's contrasting of Offred's first-person narrative of oppression and violence with the distanced and detached tone of the Historical Notes as well as her choice to present to the reader first the account and only then the transcript of the Symposium highlight the primacy of Offred's account within the novel. Morrison (2000, p. 322) suggests that Atwood "chooses to reinforce at every turn the uncertainty of the next day, next hour, next minute within the Commander's house, heightening the Handmaid's anxiety and our suspense". Atwood chooses to make such formal choices even though giving a retrospective quality to Offred's narration would have been more plausible. However, the establishment of *suspense* is an important feature for the reader's rather visceral engagement with the narrative.

Sternberg and Yacobi (2015, p. 424) state, in their approach to narrative inconsistencies, that "the gapped, equivocal version(s) of events conveyed by tellers or informants

motivate(s) the universals of narrative, with their threefold play of interest: suspense, curiosity, and surprise". In Sternberg's theory of narrativity, these are the three "generic master roles" behind different dynamics between the act of telling and what is told, and they "govern (at will assimilate, 'narrativize') all other elements and patterns found in discourse at large" (STERNBERG, 1992, p. 472). He defines these master roles, or the universals of narrative, as such:

> One is "suspense," or the dynamics of prospection, issuing from our uncertainty about some future development: as when we progressively construct and often adjust divergent scenarios regarding the outcome of a clash between agents, pulls, voices, ideologies. Another is "curiosity," or the dynamics of retrospection, keeping our minds engaged with some past mystery while we go forward. The third universal is "surprise," or the dynamics of recognition, forced on us by the belated disclosure of a gap in continuity and knowledge, so as to impel a repatterning of all that has intervened. This trio accordingly constitutes and controls the narrative process as such, with its peculiar generic movement between the times of happening and telling/reading (STERNBERG, 2006, p. 129-130).

Suspense, then, is the "dynamics of prospection", or a "prospective bearing of time" (STERNBERG, 1992, p. 526). While the other two narrative universals concern themselves with the narrative past, suspense is related to its future, which is "naturally opaque" (STERNBERG, 1992, p. 527). These master roles are, for Sternberg, different ways of creating *narrative interest,* an essential aspect of narratives, for he insists that regardless of the author's objectives, whether they are "purely aesthetic or extraaesthetic" (STERNBERG, 1978, p. 45), they cannot be achieved unless the reader's interest is first secured and then maintained, impelling the reading forward. In an interview, Atwood herself has mirrored, in slightly different terms, this notion when discussing her own writing and writing more generally: "a novel, in order to be successful, has first to hold the attention of the reader" (INGERSOLL, 1992, p. 112 *apud* HOWELLS, 1996, p. 7-8).

Both suspense and curiosity are forms of creating narrative interest, for Sternberg (1978, p. 65) considers them to be "characterized by expectant restlessness and tentative hypotheses that derive from a lack of information". However,

the nature of this lack of information is different in each case, as suspense is related to the future of the narrative, while curiosity is related to its past – thus, to a "time when struggles have already been resolved, and as such it often involves an interest in the information for its own sake" (STERNBERG, 1978, p. 65). In *The Handmaid's Tale*, it is suspense that predominates, although the novel does open up a very important line of curiosity: because Offred is presented, from the very first page, as a woman in-between worlds (the United States as we know it and the reality of Gilead), we are led to wonder *how* Gilead came into being, for, when the novel begins, Offred is already Of-Fred. As a narrator, however, Offred at all times exploits the suspense that naturally arises when she emphasizes the "opaqueness" of a narrative future that is, in reality, her past.

Though Offred's narration is actually a recollection of past experiences, her choice is to present them as part of an open-ended future which she appears to know nothing about. Such future opaqueness is an aspect that she constantly highlights, often through the ambiguous relationships she has with many of the characters surrounding her (which the reader, of course, believes she has just met). This emphasis on future opaqueness can be perceived in the way Offred talks about both the Commander and Nick, but also in another recurrent example: the way she perceives her shopping partner, Ofglen. It is Ofglen who first introduces Offred to the existence of an organized resistance within Gilead (a group called Mayday) and who asks her to join them and collect information about her Commander. Near the end of the novel, Ofglen commits suicide when her subversive activity is discovered; this revelation is received with "great relief" by Offred because, as she concludes, "She has died that I may live" (ATWOOD, 2017, p. 298). But we only find out that Ofglen is not a true believer in the ways of Gilead halfway through the novel. Before this point Offred's every interaction with her shopping partner – one of her day-to-day activities – is presented as potentially dangerous, and she constantly wonders and makes conjectures about Ofglen's true identity. As a narrator, Offred makes the reader feel the same anxiety towards Ofglen: "She may be a real believer, a Handmaid in more than name. I can't take the risk" (ATWOOD, 2017, p. 29), she says when we are first presented to the character. Later, as they look at three bodies displayed

on the Wall, Offred highlights her uneasiness towards Ofglen: "'We should go back,' I say to Ofglen. I'm always the one to say this. Sometimes I feel that if I didn't say it, she would stay here forever. But is she mourning or gloating? I still can't tell" (ATWOOD, 2017, p. 53).

In her narration, Offred introduces the reader to characters from the "time before", most notably her husband, her daughter, her mother, and her best friend, Moira. Moira is also taken to the Red Centre, where the soon-to-be Handmaids are indoctrinated by a group of women called Aunts, but she eventually escapes. Throughout the course of the narrative, Offred never finds out what happened to her husband, but she eventually hears about her mother and daughter's fates: her mother is deemed an "Unwoman" and sent to the "Colonies" – a distant place where she is supposed to clean up toxic waste – and her daughter is given to another family. Moira, on the other hand, she sees again during her time as Offred. When the Commander takes Offred to a brothel, she finds Moira there and has a chance to catch up with her friend, finding out that she had been caught after her attempted escape and was subsequently forced into prostitution. But Offred treats all these figures – her husband, her mother, Moira – equally in her narration: she wonders about the fates of every one of them, even though Luke is the only one whose fate remains completely mysterious by the end of the novel. We first hear about Moira, for instance, as Offred wonders whether she is still alive (ATWOOD, 2017, p. 35); several pages later, Offred must force herself to think about Moira in the present tense, as she also does with Luke. "She was still my oldest friend", she says, before correcting herself: "Is." (ATWOOD, 2017, p. 181). A similar phrasal construction is used to discuss Luke, as she looks up at the men hanged on the Wall: "none of these men is Luke. Luke wasn't a doctor. Isn't" (ATWOOD, 2017, p. 43).

From the beginning, both the Commander and his driver, Nick, are figures of great interest to Offred; also from the start, she wonders about the nature of their interest in her, as she tries to make sense of the interactions she has with each of these men, who remain unknown to her until the very end. Our first introduction to Nick is filled with *perhapses*: "He's just taken a risk, but for what? What if I were to report him? Perhaps he was merely being friendly. Perhaps he saw the look on my face and

mistook it for something else. […] Perhaps it was a test, to see what I would do. Perhaps he is an Eye" (ATWOOD, 2017, p. 28). In the last pages of the novel, even after Offred tells him she believes she is pregnant with his baby, she is still wondering about Nick's true motivations. When he tells her that the two Eyes – Gilead's secret police – who come to the house to take her away are actually part of Mayday, she cannot be sure: "'Trust me,' he says; which in itself has never been a talisman, carries no guarantee" (ATWOOD, 2017, p. 306). Her narration ends with her not knowing whether she is stepping up into "the darkness within" or "the light" (ATWOOD, 2017, p. 307), though we are led to believe Nick was telling the truth by the very existence of the tapes. Ending the way it does, however, the novel never provides any definitive answer, leaving the reader with the kind of open ending cherished in Atwood's writing. In this sense, although Nick might have been the one who arranged for Offred to escape Gilead, he is treated as ambiguously as the Commander – Offred's rapist – in the narrative, for Offred constantly wonders about the latter's true motivations, which deeply puzzle her. She speculates whether he might be testing her indoctrination (ATWOOD, 2017, p. 165) and what ulterior motives might be behind his apparent niceness towards her (ATWOOD, 2017, p. 193-4). By the novel's last pages, she still cannot fully tell what she truly is to him, though she seems to believe she is *something* (ATWOOD, 2017, p. 306).

Although she is looking at her story in retrospect, Offred at all times makes us wonder about the true nature of the people around her, about the fates of those with whom she had shared her previous life, about what the future might hold beyond the Commander's house. Professor Pieixoto claims that "there is a certain reflective quality about the narrative that would to [his] mind rule out synchronicity. It has a whiff of emotion recollected, if not in tranquillity, at least *post facto*" (ATWOOD, 2017, p. 315). Nonetheless, the level of control Offred exerts over her narration has been addressed by several critics before, leading some to consider it inconsistent. But her extraordinary control does eventually slip up, most notably when she gets to what she refers to as "a part you will not like at all, because in it I did not behave well" (ATWOOD, 2017, p. 279). For a little fragment of chapter forty-one, she becomes a second-person narrator. Here, she states:

> 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. I've tried to put some of the good things in as well. Flowers, for instance, because where would we be without them? Nevertheless, it hurts me to tell it over, over again. Once was enough: wasn't once enough for me at the time? (ATWOOD, 2017, p. 279)

Instead of being a story that she tells "as [she goes] along" (ATWOOD, 2017, p. 49), with occasional cases of explicit "reconstructions" of moments she is clearly trying to make sense of from memory, her narration is now a story she tells *over, over again*, distinguishing the time of the narration through her use of *at the time*. However, her control over her own present-tense storytelling remains significant. Throughout the novel, Atwood gives us plenty of evidence that Offred is indeed a very good, conscious storyteller who knows how to use different tools to create an affecting discourse.

Offred's job in the "time before" was in a library, digitalizing books meant to be shred, but which she would sometimes bring home with her, though claiming that what she really liked was how they felt to the touch and the way they looked. As pointed out by Miner (1991), Offred is ignorant concerning languages of the past (such as Latin) and the etymology of words – knowledge which connects most male characters in the novel (the Commander, Luke, and Professor Pieixoto) and which she can only access through them. But Offred is still presented as someone who knows words well, and who cherishes them: not only is she good at Scrabble but she also sometimes discusses the different meanings of a single word, as with the word *chair*: "I sit in the chair and think about the word *chair*. It can also mean the leader of a meeting. It can also mean a mode of execution. It is the first syllable in *charity*. It is the French word for flesh" (ATWOOD, 2017, p. 120). Furthermore, she sometimes casually mentions her knowledge in different areas such as introductory psychology, old cave inscriptions, Tibetan prayer wheels or several "things [she'd] once read about but had never seen" (ATWOOD, 2017, p. 164).

Offred sometimes also demonstrates quite clearly her own abilities as a manipulator of language. When she asks Rita about the household's previous Handmaid, she demonstrates how well she knows how to use her words to achieve a certain

effect and fulfill a certain goal: "Who was the woman who stayed in that room? I said. Before me? If I'd asked it differently, if I'd said, Was there a woman who stayed in that room before me? I might not have got anywhere" (ATWOOD, 2017, p. 63). When representing Aunt Lydia's speech, Offred also shows us that she understands the importance of well-spaced speech in order to achieve a certain effect:

> "Today's Salvaging is now concluded," Aunt Lydia announces into the mike. "But …"
> We turn to her, listen to her, watch her. *She has always known how to space her pauses. A ripple runs over us, a stir.* Something else, perhaps, is going to happen.
> "But you may stand up, and form a circle." (ATWOOD, 2017, p. 289, emphasis ours).

Offred's fragmentary narration is also full of pauses, and she, like Aunt Lydia, sometimes uses them to create a "ripple" to run over her audience. She explicitly creates a sense of anticipation in her account of her first meeting with the Commander in his office. At the beginning of the chapter, she presents only a very small snippet of the encounter, but only later puts it in context: "I want you to kiss me, said the Commander. Well, of course something came before that. Such requests never come flying out of the blue" (ATWOOD, 2017, p. 145), she says, prior to going back to what had happened *before* the encounter. She will only return to what led to such a request some pages later.

Offred's narration of experiences that clearly take place in the past – clear even for a first-time reader – is often done using the historical present as well. One interesting example happens when she is waiting for the Commander to arrive for the first Ceremony represented in the text. Her narration switches to a different moment in time – to her failed attempt to escape with her husband and daughter – , but she does not switch tenses: "We wait, the clock in the hall ticks, Serena lights another cigarette, I get into the car. It's a Saturday morning, it's a September, we still have a car" (ATWOOD, 2017, p. 94).

Another explicit demonstration of her skills as a narrator can be found in the two moments in which she brings to the text accounts that were given to her by other people: Janine, a fellow Handmaid, and Moira. The first of these moments

reports a story that goes through the grapevine and, by the time it reaches Offred, has had many different sources: "This is the story of what happened to Moira. Part of it I can fill in myself, part of it I heard from Alma, who heard it from Dolores, who heard it from Janine. Janine heard it from Aunt Lydia" (ATWOOD, 2017, p. 138-139). In this passage, Offred offers her own interpretation of how the conversation between Janine and Aunt Lydia might have gone. Her narration goes as far as stating what these two people might have been thinking or feeling towards one another at the time, as exemplified in the following passage: "She thought all Janine's snivelling and repentance meant something, she thought Janine had been broken, she thought Janine was a true believer" (ATWOOD, 2017, p. 139).

When Offred meets Moira again at the brothel, her friend lets her know what had happened after she escaped the Red Centre and how she ended up forced into prostitution. We hear this story in Moira's voice, but it is reconstructed by Offred, who explains it: "I've filled it out for her as much as I can: we didn't have much time so she just gave the outlines. Also she told me this in two sessions, we managed a second break together. I've tried to make it sound as much like her as I can. It's a way of keeping her alive" (ATWOOD, 2017, p. 255-6). This entire section does, indeed, greatly resemble the voice Moira has in their dialogues from the past, which sounds different from Offred's own voice and style of narration. Giving voice to others is something else Offred enjoys doing – though here in a negative sense – when it comes to the Wives, for whom she creates entire imaginary dialogues:

> Probably Serena Joy has been here before, to this house, for tea. Probably Ofwarren, formerly that whiny bitch Janine, was paraded out in front of her, her and the other Wives, so they could see her belly, feel it perhaps, and congratulate the Wife. A strong girl, good muscles. No Agent Orange in her family, we checked the records, you can never be too careful. And perhaps one of the kinder ones: Would you like a cookie, dear?
> Oh no, you'll spoil her, too much sugar is bad for them.
> Surely one won't hurt, just this once, Mildred.
> And sucky Janine: Oh yes, can I Ma'am, please?
> (ATWOOD, 2017, p. 125)

Elsewhere in her narration, Offred allows us to see that her memory is full of blanks, that there is much she cannot remember: what she used to look like, the faces of her husband and child, the last time she saw her mother, what the streets were like in the "time before". And yet, her entire narration, recreated from memory, is filled with vivid and richly described detail. This, too, is a way of engaging the reader in her narration, being earnest about her limitations to remember the "time before" – even though she limits its scope, just like she highlights a few specific moments as "reconstructions" although, per her own admittance, *everything* is a reconstruction: "It's impossible to say a thing exactly the way it was, because what you say can never be exact, you always have to leave something out, there are too many parts, sides, crosscurrents, nuances" (ATWOOD, 2017, p. 144).

Why she does it becomes clear if we think, once again, of her words regarding Moira's story: "I've tried to make it sound as much like her as I can. *It's a way of keeping her alive*" (ATWOOD, 2017, p. 255-6, emphasis ours). Storytelling is explicitly presented as *vital*: even if no one ever meets Moira again, her friend's voice will be immortalized in her narrative – and so will Offred's own voice, whether she dies or survives. It is unlikely, of course, that the inconsistency in Offred's narration is purely a rhetorical device. Although we can never know with certainty where and when the tapes were recorded, the recording is likely to have taken place during a time of extreme uncertainty in Offred's life, since they were uncovered in what used to be a prominent stop in the "Underground Femaleroad". With the new consciousness she gains throughout the novel regarding the ways in which her cherished "time before" led to a place such as Gilead as she herself "lived […] by ignoring" (ATWOOD, 2017, p. 66), she would probably live in a state of anxiety wherever she went, even after managing to escape. Thus, it can be difficult to determine to what extent the suspense created in the narrative is an expression of her attempt to merge the voices of her experiencing self (the Offred from some time before, at the Commander's house) and her narrating self (likely waiting in Bangor, Maine) or, rather, an expression of her state of anxiety *as* she attempts to escape. This way, she creates – intentionally or unintentionally, but likely *both* intentionally and unintentionally – narrative interest.

Through this interest, hopefully, she also creates a shared sense of anxiety in her reader, who, unlike the scholars, should empathize with her struggles.

Final considerations

The Historical Notes inform us that Offred's objective of keeping her friend and herself alive through storytelling is partially achieved, for in the twenty-second century, her narration is discovered, and her voice is heard. It is *partially* achieved, however, because her storytelling does not fall on sympathetic ears, but on the ears of an academic who dismisses her struggles. Furthermore, his misogynistic jokes, often received with laughter by the audience, indicate that, in the twenty-second century, humanity does not seem to have truly evolved past the kind of thinking that led to, and supported, a society like Gilead. In this way, *The Handmaid's Tale* might seem like a work ultimately devoid of hope, for even if Offred survived to tell her story, the professor's discourse "casts a shadow over our future", to repeat Atwood's own words when discussing classical dystopias *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (ATWOOD, 2007, p. vii).

However, if we ultimately think of the novel as an *act of communication* between Atwood and ourselves, this "shadow" does not actually leave us hopeless, for dystopias are never only the expression of despair – they are always, at least up to an extent, the expression of a feeling of *hope*. As previously explored, the hope of classical dystopias usually lies outside the pages of the novel, while more recent dystopian writing, either as "critical dystopias" (for Moylan and Baccolini) or "transgressive utopian dystopias" (for Mohr), are read as engaging with hope within the novels themselves. *The Handmaid's Tale* differs from the earlier classical dystopias in many ways. Most important of all, if we do not know whether the romance plot ended in betrayal and whether Offred truly managed to escape, we also most explicitly do not know the opposite to be true[1]. The hope remains alive because it is never ultimately crushed. Simply escaping, the novel seems to say, would never be enough. The Notes actually reinforce this notion when they present the disconcerting discourse of the professor. As stated by Vieira (2010), dystopian writing

[1] *The Testaments*, the sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale* published in 2019, indicates – without ever confirming irrevocably – that Offred, indeed, escaped to Canada and, several years later, reunited with the daughter Gilead had taken from her. However, since this sequel was only published thirty-four years after the publication of the original novel (and was only announced in late 2018, thirty-three years later), a significant body of critical work on Atwood's novel – including our own – is, evidently, built on the lack of answers with which it leaves us. Although we do not engage with *The Testaments* here for that reason, we do not believe that what is depicted there contradicts our reading of *The Handmaid's Tale*.

ultimately centralizes not individual change, but collective improvement:

> all human beings have (and will always have) flaws, and so social improvement – rather than individual improvement – is the only way to ensure social and political happiness; on the other hand, the readers are to understand that the depicted future is not a reality but only a possibility that they have to learn to avoid. If dystopias provoke despair on the part of the readers, it is because their writers want their readers to take them as a serious menace […]. Their true vocation is to make man realize that, since it is impossible for him to build an ideal society, then he must be committed to the construction of a better one (VIEIRA, 2010, p. 17).

In the previous pages, we have attempted to demonstrate that, through the way she molds the voice of *The Handmaid's Tale*'s narrator, Margaret Atwood has given Offred's account its own specific *functional purpose*: to fully engage her audience, that for her is only imagined, but nevertheless exists; as Offred reminds us, "you don't tell a story only to yourself. There's always someone else. Even when there is no one" (ATWOOD, 2017, p. 49). Offred's account has her own *authorial voice* behind it. In choosing to present Gilead through the voice of a very conscious storyteller who, if not allowed to be the master of her fate, can at least have partial control over the way her story is conveyed, Atwood attempts to ensure we will, unlike the scholars whose voices we get to hear at the end of the novel, be able to engage with the affective account of a victim of an oppressive, violent and cruel regime. Here it is important to remember that, in consonance with the dystopian literary tradition, Atwood creates a futuristic society in order to explore issues she perceived and worried about in the world she saw gaining form when she wrote the novel. She would ask herself: "How thin is the ice on which supposedly 'liberated' modern Western women stand? […] And further: If you were attempting a totalitarian takeover of the United States, how would you do it? […] How much social instability would it take before people would renounce their hard-won civil liberties in a tradeoff for 'safety'?" (ATWOOD, 2015, location 369).

In her 2017 introduction to the novel, Atwood (p. xiv, emphasis ours) connects Offred's story to the literary form known as the "literature of witness", which for her is always

an "act of *hope*": the hope for a future reader. Such a reader, however, can always turn out to be like Pieixoto and Wade – in Atwood's words, a reader who lacks empathy. In her novel, Atwood makes sure that this type of reader becomes only an afterthought, something *her* reader will ideally only access after being exposed to Offred's *act of hope*. For her, the academics in 2195 represent, like the novel's past – our present – the utopia that always exists within dystopia; imperfect as both the United States (and the West in general) of the 1980s and the future Nunavit of 2195 evidently are, they nevertheless represent a much preferable alternative to Gilead. But Offred's tale is also part manifesto: we should watch out lest we allow our societies to come to that. In this sense, Professor Pieixoto and his laughing audience's detachment and distance towards Offred's narrative become dangerous. They, too, are part of the warning that Atwood's dystopia creates. Through the voice of Offred, who uses her every skill in order to engage with our emotions, Atwood reminds us of that danger and trusts us to read the Handmaid's tale differently.

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RESUMO

"Não Aconteceu Assim": o Papel das Inconsistências Narrativas na Distopia the *Handmaid's Tale*, de Margaret Atwood

Este trabalho analisa a função das inconsistências narrativas presentes no romance distópico *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), de Margaret Atwood, com base no modelo construtivista proposto por Meir Sternberg e Tamar Yacobi (2015) em sua

discussão a respeito da (in)confiabilidade nas narrativas. A análise aqui proposta sugere que as inconsistências geradas pela justaposição da narrativa de Offred e do epílogo do romance – na forma da transcrição de um simpósio ocorrido no ano de 2195 – , têm um propósito específico. Este pode ser entendido por meio da aplicação de dois mecanismos interpretativos propostos por Sternberg e Yacobi: aquele relacionado à *perspectiva* específica adotada no texto e aquele que diz respeito aos objetivos temáticos do texto – sua *função*. Ao pensar no romance como um ato comunicativo, exploramos a maneira como ele se engaja com as noções tanto de *desespero* quanto de *esperança* que estão imbricadas na escrita distópica.

Palavras-chave: *Inconfiabilidade. Distopia. Margaret Atwood. The Handmaid's Tale.*

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