

5-2022

“Dear You”: Witnessing Trauma in the World of The Handmaid’s Tale

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“Dear You”*: Witnessing Trauma in the World of *The Handmaid’s Tale

An Honors Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of English
Bates College

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts

by

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Lewiston, Maine
March 30, 2022

Acknowledgements

With tears in my eyes and a smile on my face, I would like to give my sincerest thanks to the following people for their part in making this project happen. I am forever grateful to:

My advisor, Professor Katie Adkison, for her remarkable guidance and endless kindness. You were somehow always able to help me make sense of my spiraling thoughts and ideas, and our discussions have left with me a newfound appreciation for literature. Thank you.

My parents, for their everlasting encouragement and profound patience. Your sacrifices and your understanding gave me strength when I felt weak. I love you.

My entire family, for their steadfast support. You had faith in me at a time when I had none, and it gave me the confidence I needed to find my own.

My friends, for always knowing when I needed a good laugh or just a shoulder to cry on.

And finally, the Bates College English as well as Rhetoric, Film, and Screen Studies Departments, for teaching me to foster a critical eye, a curious nature, and a committed voice.

For Karen, Melissa, Michael, and Peter.

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Abstract

This project explores the relationships between memory, intimacy, and witnessing trauma in the world of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. Chapter One looks into Atwood's novel itself, tracing Gilead's abuse of memory, both individual and collective. I argue that Offred turns to intimate memories and new intimate encounters to hold onto her memories, and thus to her sense of self. In Chapter Two, I examine Hulu's series adaptation of Atwood's story and the way the show develops its titular character beyond the novel by turning her tale into a revenge tragedy. I contend that June's Gileadean life warped her perspective of power, which causes her to rely on an addiction to revenge in order to express and validate her trauma. Chapter Three then tackles how the woman Offred/June became in Gilead impacted her children in Atwood's sequel novel, *The Testaments*. The subconscious behaviors and desires exhibited by June's daughters suggest that the longing and hopelessness June endured were passed down to her children. However, for the very first time in *The Handmaid's Tale* universe, *The Testaments* also illustrates how witnessing for one another enables Agnes and Nicole to begin processing their trauma. Ultimately, these messages urge audiences to consider the value of their own memories and relationships in order to recognize how their traumatic experiences will shape the next generation.

Introduction

“I would like to believe this is a story I’m telling. I need to believe it. I must believe it. Those who can believe that such stories are only stories have a better chance. 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.”

—Offred, Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*

Indeed, while *The Handmaid’s Tale* may be fictitious, the “story” Offred is telling certainly isn’t. In these disturbingly dystopian-esque times of ours, Margaret Atwood’s 1985 novel has recently reemerged in popular discourse, so much so that Hulu adapted the book into a television series and Atwood herself, partially, it seems, in response to the fervor surrounding the show, released a sequel novel. This resurgence is also allowing audiences to appreciate many of the points Offred warned us of in 1985 for the very first time: “It isn’t a story I’m telling.” Offred’s “story” isn’t just a tale for us to appreciate in the moment and shove to the back of our bookshelves. No: Atwood’s novel, and truly the entire *The Handmaid’s Tale* universe, pleads with us as readers to take note of what her characters are feeling, what they’re experiencing, and what they’re trying to prevent. *The Handmaid’s Tale* is not simply, as Cathy Davidson referred to it, a “feminist 1984” (Davidson 24). More than an Orwellian tale told through a woman’s eyes, it is also a raw, honest account that insists on the role of storytelling in political life, one that reminds us to treasure our own voices because they have been silenced.

Even further, the reappearance of *The Handmaid’s Tale* and its related works has fostered a new appreciation, both in academic and popular discourse, for how trauma functions in Atwood’s fictional world. Rather than viewing trauma as solely a topic or theme within Atwood’s works, however, I here also use it as one of the critical methods for approaching—and witnessing for—her series. In her foundational study of trauma

theory, Cathy Caruth defines trauma as “a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind” (Caruth 3). It is “an event that [...] is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness”; trauma is “*not known* in the first instance” because it is simply too unfathomable for a survivor to give meaning to until well after the event (Caruth 4). Atwood’s world bespeaks these kinds of traumatic wounds. However, we as readers are unaware of Offred’s “after” in *The Handmaid’s Tale*; she is consistently undergoing traumatic experiences throughout the entirety of the novel. As a result of this continued trauma, I assert that Atwood’s novel is Offred’s “story of a wound that cries out,” yet that receives no response because there’s no one there to listen (Caruth 4). Instead, Offred endeavors to self-witness her own wound by recording her traumatic experiences on a set of cassette tapes, speaking as if to a future witness, which, in the logic of the novel’s “Historical Notes” afterword, we learn were later transcribed into *The Handmaid’s Tale* novel as we know it.

Hulu’s TV series tells the story of Atwood’s novel in its first season, but moves beyond the end readers know with the start of Season Two. My analysis primarily picks up in Season Three and beyond, therefore, in order to explore how June’s search for a witness morph from her recorded cassette tapes into actual interactions with other people. While June escapes Gilead and gains her freedom in the fourth season of the Hulu adaptation, viewers watch as she struggles to fully process her trauma and see how the people around her fail to fully witness with and for her. Unlike *The Handmaid’s Tale* novel, which illustrates a complete lack of proper witnessing, the television adaption explores the experience of failed witness, highlighting how June’s loved ones and her judicial system fail to engage with her in ways that could facilitate such a witnessing

process. As Dori Laub contends, “Testimonies are not monologues; they cannot take place in solitude”; therefore, June is incapable of completely witnessing for herself (Laub “Bearing Witness” 70-71). Instead, “listening to another’s wound” and receiving witness in turn has the potential to help each individual process their traumatic experiences (Caruth 8). Witnessing, however, is also dependent on the knowledge and experiences of each listener. To be a successful witness, one must be “able to hear and to receive, across the distance of their cultures and through the impact of their very different traumas” (Caruth 9). Listeners need be able to take part “in the reliving and reexperiencing of the event” (Laub “Without a Witness” 76). I suggest that the unavailability of these fundamental listener requirements create the central conundrum of *The Handmaid’s Tale* Hulu adaptation. Despite her best efforts, June is inhibited from starting to process her trauma by this “central problem of listening, of knowing, and of representing that emerges from the actual experience of the crisis” (Caruth 5). She cannot witness for herself; the people around her fail to witness with and for her; and her society refuses to witness for her. Thus, June is left to struggle with “the oscillation between *a crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*” (Caruth 7). She didn’t die in Gilead, but she didn’t come out whole, either—the trauma she went through prevents her from truly living again.

The question of witnessing’s relation to trauma is thus quietly interwoven into each of my three chapters, but Chapter Three takes it up most explicitly. While this gap is partially a result of my own writing methods and how I grappled with and learned from each of these texts, my learning process also mimics the structure of Atwood’s universe. Which is to say, *The Handmaid’s Tale* world and the three works in question function

narratively not only as individual texts, but also in relation to each other. As the final text in this world (at least to this point, since the Hulu series is ongoing), *The Testaments* speaks back to those texts which precede it, opening up insights about characters and the theme of witnessing itself. It took reading *The Testaments* to be able to reflect back on *The Handmaid's Tale* universe and see that the series' entire structure revolves around modes of witnessing. Successful witnessing is not present in *The Handmaid's Tale* novel or television adaptation. Ergo, I did not recognize that Offred/June was prevented from processing her trauma because we as readers, paradoxically, had yet to witness an example of successful witnessing ourselves—that is, until it finally appeared in *The Testaments*. Indeed, as it appears Atwood intended, *The Testaments* provides us as readers with the new, interpretive sense necessary for rethinking each of the previous *The Handmaid's Tale* works together by introducing June's two daughters as its main characters. With Agnes and Nicole's witnessing in *The Testaments* in mind, we are able to revisit the entire *The Handmaid's Tale* world and realize that each work directly speaks to one another by depicting different forms of witnessing: a lack of witnessing, failed witnessing, and, finally, successful witnessing. Moreover, with this theme in mind, we can also begin to see how these three texts actually *witness for each other*.

As Caruth explains, trauma “resists simple comprehension,” yet it is “spoken in a language that is always somehow literary: a language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding” (Caruth 6, 5). Real victims of trauma often recount their experiences, whether that be vocally or in a written format, in the form of a literary narrative. In the absence of words and ideas that make sense, the abstraction of story and literary language acts as one mode for (re)accessing meaning and for enabling the witnessing process to

take shape. In that way, the narrative function of *The Handmaid's Tale* novel functions as its own unwitnessed story, using the very question of storytelling—of what is true—to emphasize its search for a witness. Likewise, the Hulu adaptation attempts to re-highlight the series' unwitnessed message, even as characters sometimes fail to be effective witnesses themselves. Finally, Atwood's publication of *The Testaments* functions as a guide for us to use to successfully witness her own original novel and the Hulu series.

I initiate my own deep dive into the world Atwood has constructed by beginning my first chapter with *The Handmaid's Tale* novel. In Chapter One, I examine Offred's relationship with memory, both individual and collective, as well as the way in which Gilead employs an abusive feedback loop to pervert and exploit memories to its own advantage. While an effective method to keep unwilling Gileadeans submissively sane, Gilead's memory feedback loop also constantly places the country's safety on the line. One false step, and each of the individuals Gilead strives to keep in check could realize how much strength their numbers truly possess. Even more, as Offred's intimate memories and new intimate meetings with Nick illustrate, intimacy has the potential to turn into witnessing, and to thus overcome Gilead's feedback loop by helping the people trapped there cling to their memories, and hence their true identities.

Chapter Two builds upon my analysis of Offred/June by considering the events and relationships found in Hulu's 2017 television adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale*. The series, which currently consists of four seasons, expands our understanding of June's character through the use of her interactions with the people she's close with. These interactions, which don't exist in *The Handmaid's Tale* novel, enable us to see June through eyes other than her own and find that Hulu's adaptation has morphed her story

into a revenge tragedy. I demonstrate that June's time as a Handmaid twists her perspective on what it means to possess "power." Further, June's loved ones and, distressingly, the societal systems supposedly designed to support her, fail to help June work through her Gileadean trauma. I argue that this neglect causes June to rely on her growing, violent addiction to exacting revenge against Gilead and the Waterfords in order to force the people who disregarded her trauma to listen, ultimately transforming the show into something that resembles a revenge tragedy.

My third and final chapter addresses Atwood's most recent addition to *The Handmaid's Tale* universe: *The Testaments*. Published in 2019, *The Testaments* features not one, but three distinct narrators: June's two daughters, Agnes and Nicole, as well as Aunt Lydia. In this chapter, I contend that Atwood utilizes the final quarter of her novel to introduce her readers to a genuine, successful example of trauma processing through witnessing. By witnessing each other's trauma, Agnes and Nicole are able to begin healthily managing and even learning to live with the damaging experiences they endured at Gilead's hands. Even more, Atwood spreads the impact of Agnes and Nicole's witnessing even further by showing that June, who has so far gone unwitnessed by anyone but us, can finally begin to sort out her own trauma with the help of her daughters' witnessing.

As I explore each element of today's *The Handmaid's Tale* universe throughout these chapters, the most significant thought I hope to leave you with is the chilling realization that the true horror of Atwood's world isn't Gilead. Nor is it the speed or ease with which Gilead erects an oppressive, patriarchal theocracy, or even all of the sickening atrocities our beloved heroines endure. Rather, I argue that as a dystopian novel,

“Gilead’s horrors are portable” (Garber). Thus, what is profoundly frightening about *The Handmaid’s Tale* stems from our society’s academic and historical failure to acknowledge, respect, and witness the trauma real human beings have survived.

Chapter One: “One” and “One” and “One” and “One”:

Negotiating Individual and Collective Memories Through Intimacy

It begins with an offhanded comment: “I’ve never held a pen or a pencil, in this room, not even to add up the scores. Women can’t add, he said once, jokingly. When I asked him what he meant, he said, For them, one and one and one and one don’t make four” (Atwood 186). Knowing that the Commander isn’t simply stating that women are incapable of basic addition, Offred asks, “What do they make?” She expects the answer to be “five or three,” alluding to how other dystopian novels, notably George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, have explored the concept of false and enforced truths. However, as Offred discovers upon the Commander’s reply, blind obedience toward the men running Gilead isn’t the ultimate point. For Fred, the other Commanders, the Eyes, and the Guardians, “four” is their big picture—it’s the society they’ve erected, the rules they enforce, and the war that they’re winning. As Canadian author Margaret Atwood explores in her renowned 1985 feminist dystopian novel *The Handmaid’s Tale*, how Gilead reaches the “four”—and what becomes of the “ones”—doesn’t matter. As long as the end result still equals “four,” Gilead has no need to remember the “ones.”

For the women unwillingly trapped in Gilead, however, there is no “four,” not only because most women don’t reap the benefits of the patriarchal theocracy Gilead has created, but because they never lost sight of the “ones.” For Offred, “one” are her missing family members that she imagines alive but feels are dead; “one” is the daughter who no longer remembers her because her child has been lost to strangers; “one” is the body that isn’t hers because she is a rare commodity, not a self; and “one” are each of the Handmaids she suffers silently alongside, grouped always in twos because “ones” are too

powerful. *The Handmaid's Tale* is full of “ones” that Gilead has purposely forgotten. As Lois Feuer argues, one of the many ways in which Atwood has “extended the reach of the dystopian genre” involves how memory is “linked with liberation” (Feuer 85, 88). Offred dreams of her past in order to “retain [her] individual humanity” while Gilead relentlessly tries to transform her into an obedient procreative slave (Feuer 84). Likewise, Offred’s efforts to hold onto her individual humanity as well as the humanity of others enables her to take the Commander’s statement, as Feuer puts so elegantly, as “a great if unintended compliment: women can’t add [...] because what they always get is [...] a sense of the irreducible value of the individual” (Feuer 87). This “irreducible value of the individual” is, of course, precisely what Gilead is trying to reduce. By dehumanizing each of their “ones” and demeaning them until they become nothing more than undistinguishable parts of their “four,” Gilead erases the ability for Handmaids to be individuals, making them simply “of” men—in Offred’s case, “of” “Fred.”

However, to go a step further than Feuer, Offred’s memories of her past aren’t solely helping her “retain [her] individual humanity”—they’re also keeping her alive. Like her individual humanity, Offred’s individual memories of her loved ones and her life before becoming a Handmaid initially provide her with the respite needed to survive. But by allowing Offred to rely too heavily on her individual memories, Gilead runs the risk of making her and the other Handmaids desperate enough to want to fight back. Thus, Gilead is trapped in a paradox of needing to keep its Handmaids docile by allowing them to retain some of their individual memories while still ensuring that those same memories don’t spark active resistance. Similarly, Offred also has an individual sense of

the world's collective memory, one that's filled with significant moments throughout her fictitious time—the death of the president, Congress' fall, or the suspension of the Constitution, for example—that each individual remembers in their own, unique way depending on how they perceived or were impacted by them. Therefore, in order for Gilead to successfully impose its own way of life, it must first alter the collective memories of the people trapped there by preventing these victims from accessing this collective. By submerging Handmaids, Marthas, Econopeople, and Unpeople into the never-ending nightmare that is Gileadean life, Gilead essentially creates a memory-destroying feedback loop that constantly rewrites the way people view the past, the present, and even the future. However, by abusing the world's collective memory and stomping out any remnants of a time before its existence, Gilead jeopardizes permanently destroying people's individual memories and subsequently inciting a rebellion.

And yet even as Gilead's feedback loop continues to turn, Offred's narrative exposes how individual memories also operate in their own kind of feedback loop. By having frequent flashbacks of or reflections on her individual memories, Offred challenges the collective memory Gilead seeks to construct, recognizing the parts that feel normal and the parts that have been falsified for Gilead's convenience. As Offred meditates on her past, readers are able to witness how Offred's connection to five distinct factors—trauma, vulnerability, desire, rage, and loss—enables her to actively resist Gilead's reign and provide herself with the ability to create indelible memories.

Finally, there is one variable that, if Gilead's victims find the chance to use it, has the potential to uproot every single memory that Gilead painstakingly rewrote with its

feedback loop: intimacy. Intimacy is not solely an individual memory, but rather an experience shared between two people, or perhaps a small group, such as a family or close friends. Likewise, intimacy is not a collective memory; it is reserved to the minds of the people involved in creating it. Therefore, in this chapter I argue that considering intimacy in regard to intimate *memories*—private, emotional memories shared between two or so people—is essential to understanding how Gilead will, one day, fall. Intimate memories, whatever they may materialize from—love, friendship, closeness, attraction, etc.—are an inconsistency that Gilead can't account for. And while Gilead can both abuse its feedback loop and restrict intimacy to its heart's content, intimate *memories* are what inspire people to keep fighting.

During her early days as the Commander's Handmaid, Offred begins to have small memory lapses in which she forgets snippets of her life before Gilead. These instances frequently involve forgetting arbitrary facts that, in both Offred's world and our own, are oftentimes easier to research rather than commit to memory. One such incident occurs after Offred encounters the hidden revolutionary term "mayday" within Gilead's borders for the first time: "*Mayday, mayday*, for pilots whose planes had been hit, and ships—was it ships too?—at sea. Maybe it was S O S for ships. I wish I could look it up" (Atwood 44). As inconsequential as this comment may seem—"I wish I could look it up"—it is, in a sense, the beginning of the end of Offred's ability to remember her past life. In spite of Gilead's numbers, laws, and weapons, memory isn't something that's easy to steal—it isn't tangible, and it can't be robbed. But by erasing something as overlooked as the ability to research random facts, Offred suddenly has no way of

confirming or denying the past, the present, or the future; she is entirely subject to Gilead's grasp over her ability to reaffirm the truth, and for Offred, that's terrifying. The luxury and safety of having all of the information a person could ever dream of needing at one's fingertips is quietly comforting, so much so that society as a whole has grown away from prioritizing memorization.

Therefore, as Theo Finigan contends in his examination of Atwood's novel and Jacques Derrida's research on "archive fever," Gilead snatching away Offred's ability to refresh or record her memories with external reminders means that her ability to recall internal memories is all but lost. "The splitting up of families, the confiscation of photographs and other mementos, the strict supervision of any social contact, the prohibition on access to almost every form of media, [and] the ever-present threat of torture and disappearance" each ensure that Offred no longer has the capacity to sustain her individual memories within Gilead (Finigan 441). Ergo, unless a piece of information is inherent to the success of Gilead's attempt to alter collective memory, such as replacing commonplace phrases like "Hello" with "Blessed be the fruit," it, like the rest of Offred's individual memories, automatically become irrelevant and therefore easy to forget (Atwood 137, 19).

The phrase "I wish I could look it up" also reminds us that reading and writing have been entirely outlawed for Gileadean women. Offred's memories of reading and writing are particularly emotional for her—once upon a time she even worked as a library "discer," as she affectionately called her job (Atwood 173). Besides being a "discer," Offred has always had a special relationship with books: "After the books were

transferred they were supposed to go to the shredder, but sometimes I took them home with me. I liked the feel of them, and the look” (Atwood 173). The charming, almost protective way that Offred once treated books highlights the pain that comes with knowing that she’s prohibited from ever interacting with them again. It’s unsurprising, then, that Offred is so enraptured by the petit-point cushion cover and the Latin phrase in her room: “I can spend minutes, tens of minutes, running my eyes over the print: FAITH. It’s the only thing they’ve given me to read” (Atwood 57). In this sense, the phrase “I wish I could look it up” isn’t just Offred literally missing having the ability to look stuff up—it’s also her feeling deeply sentimental about the memories, both big and small, that Gilead has stolen from her, which is exactly why she can spend “tens of minutes” obsessively reading the word “FAITH” over and over again. Thus, Offred’s relationship with her individual memories and the loss of those memories is just as emotionally damaging as it is functionally.

As the novel progresses, it begins to become more and more clear that Offred’s individual memories aren’t just disappearing—they’re becoming distorted. Offred’s time in Gilead has not been kind to her; to return to the Commander’s mathematics problem, Offred is a scarred “one” who has endured relentless physical, sexual, and psychological trauma that has not left her memory unscathed. Trauma is, in itself, a memory, one that can make us forget and, of course, remember. Likewise, trauma is, conflictually, simultaneously unique and shared. In order to understand trauma, it must be analyzed both as an individual experience, but also as one that is influenced by a collective experience. In this way, trauma has its own feedback loop, as individual trauma is

constantly affected by collective trauma, and vice versa. Thankfully, the women of Gilead still respect and, most importantly, remember individual trauma: “What the Commander said is true. One and one and one and one doesn’t equal four. Each one remains unique, there is no way of joining them together” (Atwood 192). Offred knows that each of the “ones” are “unique” and cannot be thought of in terms of “four,” as “four” is Gilead’s way of avoiding the individual trauma it has caused on its journey to its utopia. Women—the primary victims of Gilead’s reign—know that “joining them together” is equally impossible, as addition without acknowledgement of difference belittles the distinct upheavals experienced by each and every “one.” By solely thinking of the women enslaved by Gilead as one collective, suffering party, each of their individual traumas are glossed over and forgotten. However, by considering both the individual *and* collective traumas that Offred and the other Handmaids experience without reducing one to the other, we see that Gilead’s feedback loop is purposely erasing collective trauma in order to blot out individual trauma.

But is Gilead actually accomplishing its goal of erasing individuals and their pain? In reality, Gilead has gravely misunderstood the way in which trauma functions—and it may just cost them everything. For Offred and all of the other oppressed women in Gilead, trauma acts as a memory glitch. While one of Gilead’s savage goals is to remove all traces of women’s trauma, both individual and collective, within its patriarchal theocracy, the text allows us to see that Offred not only sometimes recognizes these attempts, but that when she does, they spur her to make an even more conscious effort to remember her trauma. As a result, even though Gilead’s manipulative feedback loop is

beginning to eclipse and darken Offred's individual memories, the trauma she continues to experience is exactly what's simultaneously helping her to resist that loop and find it within herself to fight back.

Offred's individual trauma begins to bleed into her memories in small ways. After revealing that she sometimes entertains herself by singing, for example, Offred admits that she doesn't always "know if the words [to songs] are right" because "she can't remember" them. This is evident in her rendition of "Amazing Grace," especially in the last line; rather than singing "Was blind, but now I see," Offred misremembers the lyrics to be, "Was bound, but now am free" (Atwood 54). Even though Offred only misremembered two measly words, *how* she misremembers them is concerning and potentially disturbing. By confusing "blind" with "bound"—in a song that originates in ideas about religious redemption, no less—it becomes evident that Offred's traumatic feelings of suffocation and oppression are impacting her thoughts so heavily that it makes her misremember lyrics in a light that reflects her current position. Likewise, replacing "see," a word used to emphasize religious enlightenment, with "free" highlights how Offred's yearning to be "free" in both a physical and mental sense is skewing her memories to reflect that ache. Furthermore, "bound" and "free" also express the fact that Offred now openly views herself as a trapped individual that *wants* to be freed. By seeing herself as someone who "was" bound, but is "now" free, Offred is both acknowledging her present situation and actively picturing a future in which she is liberated. Therefore, by simply misremembering two song lyrics, Offred is concurrently recognizing the

harmful impact that Gilead's feedback loop is having on her individual memories and actively resisting her enslavement by visualizing herself as a liberated woman.

Much like her misremembering the lyrics to "Amazing Grace," Offred has a similarly tainted individual memory of an old painting. While walking with Ofglen, another Handmaid, near the Wall, Offred imagines a scene of the gods Death and Victory she once saw in the Harvard Library: "Death is a beautiful woman, with wings and one breast almost bare; or is that Victory? I can't remember. They won't have destroyed that" (Atwood 166). In the referenced depiction, Death is not the "beautiful woman"—it's a dark, hooded, robed figure clutching a soldier that Victory is attempting to ascend with. Offred's uncertainty cannot be excused as a simple bout of confusion, as this instance, much like her warped song lyrics, reveals not only her continued lapses in memory but also how Gilead's collective memory is traumatically impacting these lapses. By misremembering Death as a "beautiful woman, with wings and one breast almost bare," Offred is communicating that she views Death—and lowercase death—as a feminine savior. Death is no longer a concept or figure that Offred fears; it is, aside from a Mayday miracle, the key to her permanent freedom. Death and death becoming so physically attractive and appealing in her mind heavily suggests that Offred's entire individual memory has become so awry that she imagines the more negative of the two forces as her victory. Even worse, the fact that Offred doesn't know that the figure she's actually referring to is Victory indicates that the idea of a more physical freedom—escaping Gilead and aiding in its destruction—is no longer her end goal, as death is easier, more probable, and closer. Therefore, while this incident is of a similar caliber as the

“Amazing Grace” development, its impact is much worse because Offred doesn’t realize that Gilead’s feedback loop is influencing her individual memory of the painting. While readers know that Gilead’s feedback loop is detrimentally impacting Offred, Offred doesn’t even register that she’s romanticizing Death and death. Instead, readers serve as witnesses to the effects of her desire and her memory intermingling in strange ways, thinking of herself as an unbound woman because the loop is subtly yet so effectively ensuring that our heroine doesn’t always notice its influence anymore.

In spite of these clear incidents that show how Offred’s memory has been altered by her agonizing life in Gilead, Offred herself has a difficult time coming to terms with the existence of her own trauma—and not just the trauma inflicted by Gilead. While irritated by a fellow Handmaid named Janine’s pleading during childbirth, for example, Offred explains, “It’s her second baby [...] So she ought to be able to remember this, what it’s like, what’s coming. But who can remember pain, once it’s over? All that remains of it is a shadow, not in the mind even, in the flesh. Pain marks you, but too deep to see. Out of sight, out of mind” (Atwood 125). In spite of the agony that comes with pre-, mid-, and post-childbirth as well as the permanently life-altering impact that it has on the human body, people regularly have children. The toll that pregnancy takes on the body is so frequently overlooked in favor of the end result that it is unsurprising for Janine to have quite possibly forgotten “what it’s like, what’s coming.” Pain is an individual experience; even though Janine is having her “second baby,” the experience of childbirth may have been “out of sight” long enough for it to also be “out of mind.” However, Janine isn’t the only person, whether intentionally or accidentally, who has

temporarily brushed aside the trauma of childbirth—society, both Gileadean and otherwise, has also purposefully forgotten it. In a fictional world where having children is already nearly impossible, pregnant people frequently die or are even deliberately killed just for the chance of a healthy baby. On top of that, Gilead views producing children as such a vital duty that they force dozens upon dozens of women to make it their sole goal in life to do so. And yet in the face of all of these frustrating and deadly reasons to maintain a negative mindset toward having a child, many Handmaids still *want* to be pregnant—and not just because Gilead trained them to want it. The collective memory of the cultural importance of childbirth both in Gilead and in Atwood’s now-shrunken U.S. is so all-encompassing that it literally makes pregnant people forget—or at least devalue—the torment that comes with it. In this sense, Gilead didn’t have to add a pregnancy agenda to their efforts in relooping the world’s collective memory to their advantage—it was already there.

Offred’s reaction toward Janine’s screams of pain also reveals Offred’s own relationship with trauma. Offred seems to treat her own pain as if it’s an old, sealed scar, a permanent reminder that the trauma she has experienced happened, but not something that actively aches her. Like a scar, Offred also states that “pain marks you, but too deep to see”; however, this claim seems false, as numerous instances throughout the novel suggest that Offred’s pain is literally rewriting the way in which her individual memories function. With this in mind, Offred’s severely repressed trauma appears to be raising her psychological tolerance to pain, making her remember significantly harmful instances as just another addition to her collection of innumerable traumatic ordeals. In this sense,

Offred's trauma is more akin to a scab; it's capable of sealing, but it inevitably reopens and stings in the open air when the trauma is scratched at.

As Atwood's novel develops, Offred's individual memories become more vulnerable to Gilead's attempts to reconstruct the world's collective memory—especially her memories of her husband, Luke. As expected, the Commander's mathematics become more complicated when the men Offred cares for are involved: “They cannot be exchanged, one for the other. They cannot replace each other. Nick for Luke or Luke for Nick. *Should* does not apply” (Atwood 192). In the grand scheme of “four,” Offred knows that Nick—her Gileadean significant other—and Luke still remain their own unique “ones” that cannot, in her sole, sensible mind, be “exchanged” for one another. Indeed, Nick and Luke are not assigned a reducible numeric value in Gileadean society because they are men; in that sense, the two also “cannot replace each other” because they are distinct men that have never been cut down to simply just “one” and “one.” However, we are still left with the italicized “*should*.” While Offred knows that Luke “*should*” not be replaced in her individual memories, both the demands of Gileadean life and the toll being a Handmaid takes on her influence her thoughts and feelings about him. Gilead's ability to consistently warp the world's collective memory in its favor relies on the birth of new “ones”; therefore, the Commander (or, in reality, Nick) “replaces” Luke as Offred's procreative partner. This replacement is wretchedly ironic: by showing that the Commander's possible infertility makes him exchangeable in the same way that Offred is as a potentially fertile woman, Gilead has devalued the very people that it was supposed to be empowering: men. In this sense, the entire Gileadean population has been

reduced to nothing more than faceless impregnation and reproductive machines.

However, Handmaid duties and the image of horrifying baby assembly lines aside, Offred also feels extremely guilty about beginning to substitute Nick as the recipient of her romantic and sexual feelings—feelings that she once shared solely for Luke. While neither of these impossible situations make Offred love Luke any less, they also demonstrate that even though Nick *shouldn't* replace Luke, Offred's circumstances mean that he, in some ways, does.

Luke is no longer a person in Offred's current life; her individual memories of him are fading, yet she has no possible way to create new memories of or with him. Luke's deterioration within Offred's mind also suggests that her means of temporary escape—dreaming about and remembering her loved ones—are starting to fail her as well. After recalling the fate of her pet cat, Offred attempts to bring the images of her family members to mind:

I try to conjure, to raise my own spirits, from wherever they are. I need to remember what they look like. I try to hold them still behind my eyes, their faces, like pictures in an album. But they won't stay still for me, they move, there's a smile and it's gone, their features curl and bend as if the paper's burning, blackness eats them. A glimpse, a pale shimmer on the air; a glow, aurora, dance of electrons, then a face again, faces. But they fade, though I stretch out my arms towards them, they slip away from me, ghosts at daybreak. Back to wherever they are. Stay with me, I want to say. But they won't. It's my fault. I am forgetting too much. (Atwood 193)

In this passage, Offred is in an incredibly vulnerable place. She begins expressing these feelings of helplessness by speaking as though the images of her loved ones—Luke, her mother, her daughter, and her best friend, Moira—are in a different place, packed away in an attic somewhere, collecting dust. In many ways, they are. As Finigan expresses,

without consistent external reminders of her family members and friends—the individuals themselves, photographs, recordings, etc.—to refresh her internal images of them, Gilead is actively making Offred forget their faces: “...their features curl and bend as if the paper’s burning, blackness eats them.” Likewise, by ensuring that Offred doesn’t have the chance to create or access any of these external reminders, there’s nothing to put out the flame that’s eating away at Offred’s individual memories. They have become “ghosts at daybreak”—dead, in Offred’s mind, and barely visible in the morning sun. And in spite of the fact that Offred isn’t responsible for this happening in any way, she feels as though she is: “It’s my fault. I am forgetting too much.” Offred is not willingly forgetting her loved ones, but the pain of it happening nonetheless is eating her alive.

Offred isn’t the only person that’s suffering from individual memory loss—the other Handmaids and the Marthas certainly are as well—but she, like the others, will be some of the last to, if Gilead continues to hold power. Much like the way in which Offred is forced to replace Luke with Nick, Gilead’s goal is to replace Offred’s generation of Handmaids—the “transitional generation”—with women who would, ideally, be impartial to what happens to all of the “ones” because all they will have ever known is the “four” (Atwood 117). This is expertly encapsulated in Aunt Lydia’s ominous words of “comfort” while Janine is starting to give birth:

You are a transitional generation, said Aunt Lydia. It is the hardest for you. We know the sacrifices you are being expected to make. It is hard when men revile you. For the ones who come after you, it will be easier. They will accept their duties with willing hearts. She did not say: Because they will have no memories, of any other way. She said: Because they won’t want things they can’t have. (Atwood 117)

As a member of the “transitional generation,” Offred has sound memories of a life of relative freedom—the freedom of independence, the freedom of expression, and, most importantly, the freedom of love. Gilead acknowledges these hardships and knows that “it is the hardest” for their group of Handmaids because they, of course, weren’t always Handmaids. The Handmaids are forced to “[sacrifice]” these freedoms and become accustomed to those allotted to them by Gilead, and while it is unlikely that Offred and the other Handmaids will ever become the perfect subservient incubators, their children certainly can. “They will accept their duties with willing hearts,” explains Aunt Lydia, because Gilead has found the fastest way to breed the perfect women: by quite literally ensuring that they’re born for it. “They won’t want things they can’t have” “because they will have no memories” of what those things even are.

While Offred’s awareness of the next generation’s submissiveness unmistakably horrifies her, Aunt Lydia makes it do something even worse: it places Offred in an unbelievably vulnerable situation where she is left with the knowledge that she will be one of the last Handmaids—and the last women—in Gilead to remember the before time. Then again, is Aunt Lydia’s justification valid? The hypothetical “ones” won’t share in the very specific longings for the time before that the transitional generation has, true, but won’t they yearn for something better? Aunt Lydia’s argument centers around the idea that the new generation of Handmaids will be compliant and content because they quite literally can’t want what they never had in the first place. Even the daughters of Wives—the most privileged daughters in all of Gilead—will be raised and comforted by the knowledge that copying petit-point designs, pleasing their husbands, and conceiving

children are their only purposes in life. But lacking the logistical knowledge behind what you're hoping for doesn't mean that you can't pray that it exists in some form or another. The new generation might not, for example, know that freedom lies in Mayday, what remains of the U.S., and neutral countries like Canada, but that certainly doesn't mean that they can't wonder what it might be like to be unencumbered by the shackles of Gileadean conventions. The desires that many members of the next generation of Handmaids will share—autonomy, love, and peace—are inspirational, even if Offred can't see them. But because these small mercies are hidden from her, Offred begins to feel more hopeless than ever before.

Having previously been able to endure everything that Gilead has thrown at her, it is finally a photograph—an external reminder—of her daughter that makes Offred vulnerable enough to crack:

So tall and changed. Smiling a little now, so soon, and in her white dress as if for an olden-days First Communion. Time has not stood still. It has washed over me, washed me away, as if I'm nothing more than a woman of sand, left by a careless child too near the water. I have been obliterated for her. I am only a shadow now, far back behind the glib shiny surface of this photograph. A shadow of a shadow, as dead mothers become. You can see it in her eyes: I am not there. (Atwood 228)

In this reflective segment, Offred's daughter has grown in the years apart from her mother. Her child is "smiling a little now," which suggests that, unlike Offred, her daughter is at least somewhat happy and well taken care of, wherever she is. Yet for Offred, who has yet to experience any joy or love in Gilead, it is too "soon" for her daughter to smile—not that it would ever be long enough, either. While faded, Offred still has plenty of memories of her daughter, yet she believes herself to be "a shadow of a

shadow, as dead mothers become” in her daughter’s eyes because, in Offred’s mind, if her daughter can smile, then she certainly can’t remember being stolen: “You can see it in her eyes: I am not there.” Readers have seen how time and trauma have ravaged Offred’s individual memories; for her daughter, who was only five when she was abducted, it is infinitely harder, if not impossible, for her to hold onto concrete memories of her parents. Because of her youth at the time of her kidnapping, Offred’s daughter likely only possesses fragile snippets of her childhood memories—at five years old, her brain simply wasn’t developed enough for her to have the capacity to create memories of and understand what happened to her. But unlike her daughter, Offred has the capacity to reflect on and cling to her life-preserving memories of her family—for now—because she’s an adult with a fully matured mind. Thus, it is tragically reasonable to assume that Offred’s young daughter may have truly—and blamelessly—forgotten her. Knowing this, and feeling utterly heartbroken and exposed, Offred does the only thing she can do: she survives.

Desperate to avoid the loneliness caused by her withering individual memories and looking for any semblance of normalcy, Offred makes the choice to save herself by creating new individual memories—but not with Luke. “You can’t help what you feel, Moira said once, but you can help how you behave. Which is all very well. Context is all; or is it ripeness? One or the other” (Atwood 192). “Context” is, at least partially, “all”; Offred’s oppressed being makes having feelings for the one you’re with rather than the one you love an appropriate response to the trauma she’s enduring. By the same token, Offred loving both Luke and Nick is entirely natural; love is an ever-shifting experience,

and Gilead's immoral reduction of women to nameless, penniless, biological instruments facilitated Offred's need to belong only to her own wants rather than to other people. Still, Offred's feelings toward her initial affair with Luke are considered a less traditionally acceptable "context": "I was nervous. How was I to know he loved me? It might just be an affair" (Atwood 51). Offred and Luke's actions are not considered a conventionally appropriate way to "behave," and neither is her relationship with Nick. However, Offred quickly changes her mind and asks if "ripeness," rather than "context," is "all." "Ripeness" is a term that possesses heavily prolific connotations; Gilead's Handmaids are consistently examined to check if they are "ripe," or capable of having children. Therefore, while situations used to be considered in terms of "context," for Gileadean women, their circumstances are literally determined by their "ripeness": "ripe" women become Handmaids, or are already perhaps Wives or Econowives, and "unripe" women are either Marthas, Aunts, or forgotten Unwomen. For women in Gilead, it's only "one or the other"—and yet, to save her individual memories and steer away from the influence of Gilead's feedback loop, Offred finds a way for it to be neither.

Even long before her relations with Nick, it was always evident that Offred retained the desire to make her own choices. While Offred is walking with her Handmaid partner, Ofglen, for instance, the pair encounter two young male Guardians. Even though Offred and Ofglen remain silent during this brief meeting, Offred's thoughts betray her true desires:

They touch with their eyes instead and I move my hips a little, feeling the full red skirt sway around me. It's like thumbing your nose from behind a fence or teasing a dog with a bone held out of reach, and I'm ashamed of

myself for doing it, because none of this is the fault of these men, they're too young. Then I find I'm not ashamed after all. I enjoy the power; power of a dog bone, passive but there. I hope they get hard at the sight of us and have to rub themselves against the painted barriers, surreptitiously.
(Atwood 22)

During this scene, Offred is not a Handmaid: she is a woman, gleefully enjoying the leverage that her feminine body—covered and hidden, but still there—gives her. She “enjoy[s] the power” that “[moving her] hips a little” can bring her, and she hopes the Guardians “get hard at the sight” of her and Ofglen, each of whom are women that Gilead has deemed untouchable, yet that certainly doesn't mean that they've been unsexed. Offred shares the same desires that the two young male Guardians—oppressors, but human beings nonetheless—presumably possess, and she remembers a time during which she was allowed to act on those desires. While Offred isn't able to outwardly interact with the Guardians, her intense yearning to flirt with them shows that she desperately wants to release her sexual tension. Her wish to make them “surreptitiously” uncomfortable—which, as a woman without the ability to fulfill her sexual needs, Offred always is—reflects her own constant state of frustration. Therefore, when the opportunity to be found as a desirable person—and just simply a person at all—again rather than as a Handmaid presents itself, Offred jumps at the chance to steal back even a smidgen of the power she once retained as a free woman.

In the final few pages of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred's relationship with Nick begins to intensify—both at the request of the Commander's wife, Serena Joy, but also for Offred's personal enjoyment. While slipping off to Nick's lodgings for the first time, Offred recollects some of the different names for the word “apartment”: “A bachelor, a studio, those were the names for that kind of apartment. It pleases me to be able to

remember this. *Separate entrance*, it would say in the ads, and that meant you could have sex, unobserved” (Atwood 260). Offred’s triumphant feelings toward being able to remember the purpose of apartments with separate entrances—having private sexual encounters without being suspected by other individuals—is a clear indication of the pleasure she takes in being able to, in a way, rebel. While Serena Joy has approved of this particular meeting between Offred and Nick, she’s still sneaking around, avoiding Gilead’s watchful eye, and doing something that makes her heart race with an emotion that isn’t solely terror for the first time in years. Unsurprisingly, then, Offred takes advantage of the “separate entrance” “ad” on numerous other occasions: “I went back to Nick. Time after time, on my own, without Serena knowing. It wasn’t called for, there was no excuse. I did not do it for him, but for myself entirely” (Atwood 268). Because she finally has the opportunity to secretly indulge in her own sexual desires for the first time since being with Luke, Offred isn’t satisfied with just one approved meeting between herself and Nick: she wants more rebellion, and she wants more intimacy. But intimacy isn’t something that Offred has in Gilead. Her hushed conversations with the other Handmaids are infrequent and dangerous, and while Rita and Cora, the Waterford’s two Marthas, do speak to her, they “are not supposed to fraternize” (“fraternize,” because, as Luke once mistakenly declared, “sororize” is not a word) with her (Atwood 11). Similarly, the Ceremony, while an event involving sex, doesn’t offer Offred a shred of intimacy—she simply becomes a body to be raped. Nor are Offred’s furtive meetings with the Commander truly intimate; while she does have the opportunity to at least be somewhat acknowledged as a former person in his presence, the power dynamic in his

study is not one of mutual closeness. This perversion of intimacy that the Commander enjoys reminds us of the relationship that intimacy shares with memory, which, as I will argue shortly, is the key to understanding how to bridge the gap between individual memory, collective memory, and the feedback loop that controls them both.

To return to Offred, though: in order to gain the intimacy that she lacks in the Commander's household, Offred finds asylum with Nick. She goes back to him "for [her]self entirely" because having the opportunity to be a normal person again—not Offred the Handmaid, but the otherwise unofficially identified narrator who may possibly be named June—also gives her the chance to create new individual memories. Experiencing semblances of the past with Nick reawakens her ability to form individual memories that aren't controlled by Gilead's feedback loop. For Offred, forming these individual memories isn't just exciting on a sexual level—it's on a personal one, too. By being seen as a person after years of being forced to hide behind her white Handmaid wings, Offred finally has fresh individual memories that she can relive and reuse to survive when she has to go back to being invisible.

Despite her newfound relationship with Nick and the individual memories she gains during the time they spend together, Offred hasn't entirely forgotten her past life. She is, for the most part, considered by everyone around her to be empty: an empty vessel to be filled with children, an empty woman without thoughts or feelings, and an empty "one" ready to conform to the new, collective memory and become part of Gilead's "four." Left starving for a life that Gilead won't provide her and furious with herself for involuntarily forgetting her husband, Offred finds nothing inside of her but rage.

Remembering her loved ones was the only consistent coping mechanism that Offred had to help her survive Gilead; by steadily losing that ability and being forced to seek warmth from a new source, Offred is left with her hate and the burning desire to lean into it—and lean she does. Whether it's wanting to steal knives and sewing scissors or even “burn the house down,” Offred's rage has slowly but surely been building throughout the entirety of *The Handmaid's Tale* (Atwood 2019). She is angry, but she's not angry alone. By first analyzing the impact that life in Gilead has had on Offred's individual memory, it became clear that, despite her best efforts, Offred's memories of her past life, her identity, didn't stand a chance against the suppressive strength of Gilead's feedback loop. However, by now respectfully expanding Offred's individual memory into the collective memories of each of the “ones” suppressed by Gilead's overarching loop, a new alliance emerges—not Gilead's “four,” but the “one” and “one” and “one” and “one” that make the “four.” Just like how Gilead's “four” has no correlation to the actual number four, these “ones,” of course, aren't simply four individuals—they're the tens of thousands of unwilling people stuck in Gilead. And while Offred's Commander might think of these individuals as just “one” and “one” and “one” and “one,” their numbers stand for something far greater than Gilead could ever calculate.

Gilead is aware of the fury that's building inside of Offred and other Handmaids like her, and it knows that, for its own safety and that of its precious Handmaids, their fury must, occasionally, be released. Therefore, Gilead devises the ultimate form of exercise for Handmaids to unleash their wrath: Particutions. However, for Offred,

watching a Particution in which a man is torn limb from limb seems to have the opposite of Gilead's intended effect:

But also I'm hungry. This is monstrous, but nevertheless it's true. Death makes me hungry. Maybe it's because I've been emptied; or maybe it's the body's way of seeing to it that I remain alive, continue to repeat its bedrock prayer: I am, I am. I am, still. I want to go to bed, make love, right now. I think of the word relish. I could eat a horse. (Atwood 281)

Rather than feeling disgusted by or even simply numb to the brutal murder of a Mayday supporter, Offred instead finds herself hungry—but not for food. As she states, Offred is aware that she has been “emptied” of practically all of the individual memories of her past life, so much so that she has to convince herself that she is still her own person, a human being with thoughts and urges, not just a fertile baby maker: “I am. I am, still.” Offred is “still,” after all this time, despite everything, a woman; the Particution reminded her of her humanity, and she's enraged to have been forced to forget it. The urgency and fervor in her desire to “go to bed, make love, right now”—not later, *now*—spotlights both how long she's been keeping her feelings of frustration, sexual or otherwise, bottled up inside, but also how little the Particution did to ease them. For Offred, acting on her feelings of sexual or intimate desire is forbidden; therefore, for these feelings of hunger to suddenly burst out after witnessing a man get pulverized suggests that she is in desperate need of comfort. Offred's word choice in needing to “make love” rather than simply have sex is deliberate; death reminds her that she is still “alive,” and sharing those essential intimate memories with another human being provides Offred with a way to remember that. Likewise, Offred's use of the word “relish” while referencing her feelings about the Particution is significant; “relish” has direct connotations to traditional hunger as well as considerable pleasure. In that sense, Offred

isn't just relishing in the Particicution that just took place—she enjoyed it, and she's ravenous for more of the violence and feelings of desire it excited in her. Offred's relishing is also a clear indicator that the two feelings—violence and desire—have become intertwined in her memory: violence makes her desire, and desire makes her crave violence. The conviction with which she states the disturbing final line of the chapter—"I could eat a horse"—proves this. A common enough hyperbole, "I could eat a horse" implies that a person is hungry enough to eat a significant amount of food, not, of course, a literal horse. However, like her earlier hunger, Offred's use of the phrase implies that, after years of starvation, she is absolutely famished for an opportunity to be an individual again—and that means tearing into Gilead.

Having finally reached the point of no return, Offred is ready to revel in her newfound confidence. She's walked into the lion's den again and again, each time emerging unscathed, at least physically. After coming so far, Offred also isn't the person she once was, and her individual memories reflect that. She's our narrator, Luke's wife, and her daughter's mother, yes, but she's also the Commander's confidant, Nick's companion, and a member of Mayday—that is, until the other shoe finally drops. In rapid succession, Offred loses everything and everyone that ever gave her the hope to believe in the strength of the collective memories of the other women in Gilead. First comes the knowledge of Ofglen's suicide: "I stand a moment, emptied of air, as if I've been kicked" (Atwood 286). Mere minutes later, Serena Joy confronts Offred and calls her "a slut" for secretly rendezvousing with the Commander and threatens that Offred will "end up the same" as her predecessor: dead (Atwood 287). In the span of maybe an hour, Offred has indeed been "emptied": she's lost her genuine friend, her only connection to Mayday, her

“in” with the Commander, and her safety. Whatever rage-fueled fire had been burning in her heart has been entirely extinguished, leaving her at the mercy of what comes next: “I sit in my room, at the window, waiting” (Atwood 291). Offred doesn’t know what, or better yet, who, she’s waiting for, but she knows that she doesn’t have much time. But as absolutely stunned and lost as she is, Offred waits too long to do anything. It doesn’t seem to matter, though, because Nick’s already done something: “‘It’s all right. It’s Mayday. Go with them.’ He calls me by my real name. Why should this mean anything?” (Atwood 293).

But Nick’s use of Offred’s real name *does* mean something. Offred willingly told Nick her real name—a name that Offred’s hypothetical intended audience doesn’t even explicitly get to know. In that sense, Offred’s name is an extremely intimate part of her past self, and with that intimacy comes faith. The intimate memories that Offred and Nick share—and all intimate memories—are the solution to overcoming Gilead’s feedback loop. Intimacy has been made a scarcity in Gilead: everyone has been pitted against one another, all travel and communication are strictly controlled, and loyalty oftentimes doesn’t survive the threat of death. But intimacy is hazardous for Gilead for another reason: intimacy births intimate memories. Unlike individual memories or collective memories, intimate memories have some immunity against Gilead’s feedback loop. Intimate memories are shared between such a small number of individuals that they subsequently can’t be altered by a feedback loop—they aren’t influenced by the ever-shifting thoughts of a large, collective group of people. Likewise, intimate memories don’t function the way that individual memories do; while each kind of memory can involve emotional attachment, intimate memories have the advantage of being protected,

sustained, and shared between the minds of the people involved rather than just one person. Gilead is at least somewhat conscious of the danger that intimate memories pose for it, which is why intimacy is essentially forbidden. And while readers are only privy to Offred's intimate memories in Atwood's novel, those few moments already make it clear that intimate memories are a threat to Gilead's stability—so threatening, in fact, that even males aren't allowed to openly indulge in them. While brothels like Jezebel's offer Gileadean men sexual or artificial experiences, by restricting all genuine intimacy in their "republic," Gileadean men also unintentionally deprived themselves of it. Therefore, even though the Commander claims that his perverted intimate moments with Offred—their anything but casual Scrabble games, for example—are for Offred's advantage, whether the Commander realizes it or not, they're also very much for his own enjoyment.

The Commander's self-inflicted forsakenness aside, Offred has no concrete evidence to prove that the Eyes in her bedroom are members of Mayday. While Offred has some trust that Nick might actually save her, she's also aware that she knows very little about him, and that it's not entirely impossible that he's simply tolerating her presence to spice up his sex life. But even though Offred has no choice in whether she "should" trust Nick or not—going with the men that come to take her is happening regardless of her opinion on the matter—the intimate memories the two share are enough to provide her with a modicum of faith: "But I snatch at it, this offer. It's all I'm left with" (Atwood 294).

Offred's uncertain future ("And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light") is all that readers of *The Handmaid's Tale* are left with—except, that is, for the

“Historical Notes” (Atwood 295). While Offred’s direct story ends ambiguously, the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies, which takes place on June 25, 2195, gives us a bit more. The event’s keynote speaker, Professor James Darcy Pieixoto, is commonly considered by Atwood readers and scholars to be “the precious and pretentious academic” who, in his attempts to study Gileadean society, belittles Offred’s experiences by making sexist jokes and complaining about how her account doesn’t provide future academics with concrete facts (Feuer 91). Ironically, Pieixoto proudly interrupts his discussion of Offred’s tapes by stating, “Our job is not to censure but to understand (*Applause.*)” (Atwood 302). The professor’s claim is so profound, so moving that it garners him a round of genuine applause, yet throughout the next few pages of the “Historical Notes,” Pieixoto contradicts his former statement in practically every sentence, culminating his thoughts into a griping complaint:

This is our guesswork. Supposing it to be correct—supposing, that is, that Waterford was indeed the “Commander”—many gaps remain. Some of them could have been filled by our anonymous author, had she had a different turn of mind. She could have told us much about the workings of the Gileadean empire, had she had the instincts of a reporter or a spy. What would we not give, now, for even twenty pages or so of printout from Waterford’s private computer! However, we must be grateful for any crumbs the Goddess of History has designed to vouchsafe us. (Atwood 310)

As Jocelyn Harris explains, “Here academics meeting in conference betray Offred by their obsession with form not content, their misogyny, their tolerance of evil in the name of objectivity, their triviality and their concern for their own prestige and pleasure” (Harris 275). Rather than honoring any part of Offred’s harrowing, heart-wrenching story, Pieixoto’s speech focuses entirely on analyzing the “crumbs” of facts scattered

throughout her tapes and complaining about the difficulty of filling in historical “gaps.” “She could have told us much about the workings of the Gileadean empire,” Pieixoto laments, “had she had the instincts of a reporter or a spy.” While whining about the “Goddess of History”—a direct mock to Offred and women everywhere if I ever saw one—what Atwood purposely ensures that Pieixoto fails to consider, of course, is how much Offred *does* speak on. Offred’s objective behind creating the cassette tapes wasn’t to divulge confidential information about the men pulling the strings behind Gilead—it was to reveal her *own* private story, one that never seems to be able to escape being brushed aside. By ignoring Offred’s experience in favor of breaking her tale down and scouring it for facts, Pieixoto is ignoring Offred’s individual memories, her trauma, and even what the other women inside Gilead endured. Likewise, the fact that Pieixoto disregards Offred is the very same way that Gilead did tells readers that pre-Gileadean, Gileadean, and post-Gileadean times are all equally dismissive of women. In this sense, societal misogyny is just as much to blame for enabling Gilead’s actions as Gilead is for abusing its extremist views to perpetuate them—sexism has always existed, and, as Atwood seems to be arguing, it *will* always exist, unless this history is rethought. As the old saying goes, history is bound to repeat itself, and chauvinism ensures that society has never been dedicated to respecting or documenting women’s history because it sheds light on how women have been treated throughout history.

As Finigan concludes, “In the end, the most important message archived in Atwood’s retroactive future history might be that *we* are—at least potentially—the totalitarians” (Finigan 452-453). And while some of the attendees of the Twelfth

Symposium on Gileadean Studies do perpetuate Finigan's prediction and Atwood's message, it also seems that Atwood is optimistic that the historical gaps in what happened to the women in Gilead will, someday, be filled in. Even though Pieixoto's treatment of Offred's story seems bleak, Offred herself is still hopeful that her listeners, her "ones," will tell it properly:

A story is like a letter. *Dear You*, I'll say. Just *you*, without a name. Attaching a name attaches *you* to the world of fact, which is riskier, more hazardous: who knows what the chances are out there, of survival, yours? I will say *you, you*, like an old love song. *You* can mean more than one. *You* can mean thousands. (Atwood 40)

As the antithesis to how the Commander uses the number "one" to belittle Gileadean women, Offred employs the word "you" to address her potential future audience. Offred's signified meaning for the seemingly insignificant pronoun is infinitely inspiring. Firstly, rather than delimiting her possible listeners into a signifier like "one," Offred addresses her "you" on a much more personal level. The use of the term "you" suggests that Offred shares a rapport with her speculative audience—one that mimics the closeness found in her intimate memories with Nick, Luke, Moira, and her daughter. Given the tremendously personal content found on the tapes and Offred's desperate optimism for a better future, the intimate usage of the word "you" is exceedingly appropriate. Likewise, the values that Offred assigns to her "you," which she introduces by saying "You can mean more than one," are equally significant. Offred's manipulation of "one" directly references the Commander's established boundaries for the number "one." But instead of restricting her possible audience to being just "one," Offred has faith in the fact that "You can mean thousands." Even though Offred has no way of knowing if anyone will ever

find her cassette tape recordings, as the “survival” of any potential “you” isn’t guaranteed, she knows that “*You* can mean thousands” because she’s already a “you”—she’s a sufferer, a Mayday supporter, and, most importantly, a woman. And while Offred’s “you” might not live to see better days, she hopes that “you”—we, her readers—can. Offred has placed her intimate memories of the past and the present in our hands with the dream that we’ll use them to alter the future. And while Atwood has shown us that characters like Pieixoto can’t be trusted with Offred’s intimate memories, both Offred and Atwood have hope against hope that “thousands” of “ones” can be.

Chapter Two: Hamlet the Handmaid:

June Osborne's Revenge Tragedy in Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale*

Created by writer and producer Bruce Miller, *The Handmaid's Tale* television show premiered in April of 2017. The first season of Miller's current four-season adaptation closely follows the events of Atwood's novel of the same name; Atwood herself acts as the series' consulting producer. However, while the succeeding seasons of Miller's show still exist in *The Handmaid's Tale* universe, they do not depict events that occur in Atwood's writing; rather, they expand upon information and plotlines already established in the original novel. Thus, in this chapter I follow the show's lead, referring to the protagonist that Atwood's original novel calls "Offred" as "June" (Elizabeth Moss)—the name that Atwood hints at and that June discloses to audiences of the Hulu series. Miller's show presents viewers with the unique opportunity to explore characters who are either physically absent during Offred's tale or simply not the main focus of her thoughts. These characters include but are not limited to: Moira Strand (Samira Wiley), June's best friend; Luke Bankole (O-T Fagbenle), June's husband; Serena Joy Waterford (Yvonne Strahovski), the Wife married to Commander Fred Waterford (Joseph Fiennes); and Commander Nick Blaine (Max Minghella), June's romantic partner-in-crime. Each of these characters plays a monumental role in expanding Atwood's novel to include the lives, experiences, and memories of other individuals impacted by Gilead's presence.

However, Moira, Luke, Serena Joy, and Nick also help audiences better understand June herself. Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is strictly told from Offred's perspective; readers are privy to her thoughts, and her thoughts only. This limited perspective heightens the novel's investment in the value of the individual, what I

considered in my first chapter as the “one,” rather than ignoring them in favor of the bigger picture, or the “four.” As I discussed in the previous chapter, Atwood emphasizes the importance of the “one” throughout her novel, but especially so in the “Historical Notes” portion through Professor Pieixoto, the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies’ narrow-minded keynote speaker. But unlike Pieixoto, Miller does not ignore or belittle June’s individual value. Instead, the Hulu adaptation strives to add to June’s value by illustrating a more detailed picture of her life and experiences with the help of the people with whom she is closest. Offred’s cassette recordings are deeply personal and priceless, but they don’t tell her entire story; rather, they paint an incomplete portrait of her experiences and self-image, one that’s created from a single reference: Offred herself. By gaining insight on June from sources other than her—the people that know her best, or perhaps, who think they do—the television series broadens and enhances audiences’ perspective of her. It also furthers the novel’s exploration of what it means to survive unthinkable trauma.

In more fully fleshing out the characters of Moira, Luke, Serena, and Nick, the show also investigates the exponential ramifications of the trauma and violence June survived in Gilead. The show’s investment in these characters allows its audience to see June from a variety of perspectives: where Moira cares for June and knows firsthand the traumas of Gilead, Luke loves his wife but cannot fully know what happened to her. Similarly, seeing June through Serena’s eyes complicates June’s and the audience’s sense of gendered power in Gilead, and seeing June through Nick’s eyes muddles June’s and the audience’s sense of romantic love and its own relationship to power.

Furthermore, as Miller's adaptation progresses from season to season, the disparities between June's pre- and post-Gilead behaviors and interactions demonstrate that her trauma has prompted her to sprout and nourish an addiction to revenge. As Dana Seitler argues, the disruptive yet pleasurable nature of addiction makes it a condition that is simultaneously excruciating yet necessary, "no matter how dangerous or self-destructive we may perceive that pleasure to be" (Seitler 9). While June doesn't use, abuse, or usually have access to addictive substances in *The Handmaid's Tale* universe, the show nevertheless depicts her as increasingly dependent on a quest that perhaps starts as one for justice, but that transforms into one for revenge—a quest that resembles the morally and ethically opaque quest of the hero in a revenge tragedy. It is important to note that while June's craving for revenge may be ethically questionable, it is not my desire to victim-blame her. Indeed, as Linda Woodbridge shows in her study of revenge tragedy's relationship to questions of social justice, "Many revengers are disempowered people, unjustly treated, who step up and take control" (Woodbridge 6). "These characters discover instead that they are subject to multiple contingencies: malice, injustice, treachery, grief, unstable values, and deprivations of power or status. Through revenge they attempt, with varying degrees of justification and success, to restore their integrity—their sense of psychic wholeness—and stabilize their identities" (Keyishian 2). Rather, precisely because trauma affects everyone differently, the show's depiction of June's trauma gives us the opportunity to grapple with the oftentimes difficult ethics of negotiating responses to personal and historical trauma when a justice system fails a survivor. Consequently, in this chapter I argue that June's trauma-induced addiction to

vengeance and the snowball affect her behavior has on others has shifted her tale into a revenge tragedy.

Initially, June's sacrificial choices are displayed in a heroic light. But as the series develops, June isn't just trying to rescue innocent victims anymore: she wants retribution. At least in part, the tragedy of the show seems to be witnessing how living in a patriarchal theocracy violently warped June's perspective on what "power" truly is, making her insistence on vengeance at any cost a symptom that belongs to Gilead as much as it does June. Even further, the show depicts the failures of society even beyond Gilead to provide June the support she would need to process her trauma; in doing so, the series performs for its audience the way that failures of witness further perpetuate trauma itself. In that sense, revenge becomes "a resort to private retaliation [...] a vote of no confidence in official bodies charged with providing fair treatment" (Woodbridge 6). As a result of this neglect, I contend that in spite of the wretched consequences, June submits to the resentful, tragic nature demanded of revenge tragedies in *The Handmaid's Tale* series in order to recognize and pay homage to her trauma when no one else will.

A crucial foil to June's desire for revenge, Moira is even more of an essential character in the Hulu adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* than she is in Atwood's novel. Moira knows June exceedingly well; she's been friends with her since college, long before June met Luke, and "grew up," per se, alongside her. Similarly, Moira is the only person from June's past life that she was able to keep some kind of relationship with inside Gilead's borders; they were trained in and attempted escape from the Red Center together (in Miller's adaptation), and later found each other again at Jezebel's. While Moira successfully slipped off to Canada before she officially became a Handmaid, her

training and her role at Jezebel's ensures that she's painfully familiar with how Gilead treats women. As a result of her Gileadean background, Moira stands in the unique position of being the only character who both knew June during their past lives as free women and can empathize with her in their present ones.

Moira's memories of June before Gilead's emergence outline June as a devoted lifelong friend. While searching for clues surrounding how her fiancée died, Moira remembers attending a birthing class with June when Moira was a surrogate single mother. During the memory, Moira, exasperated and uncomfortably pregnant, snaps at June for complaining about her own past pregnancy even though she had the "perfect" spouse—Luke—to rely on, while Moira has no one (S2E7 32:10). Aware of Moira's frustrations, June doesn't take her friend's spur-of-the-moment irritation to heart and instead makes her laugh by joking about how Luke never remembers to load the dishwasher. As the pair leaves the birthing class, June throws her arm around Moira's shoulders, and the two cackle about how "hot" wearing orthopedic shoes while you're pregnant can really be. Rather than being offended by or even lashing out against Moira for her unkind words, June quietly takes her friend aside, talks about what's actually bothering her, and cheers her up. Likewise, June, supportive friend that she is, acts as Moira's birthing partner during the class exercises that require two people. Moira's memory vividly paints June as a compassionate person that isn't vindictive, forceful, or quick to anger. Even though June could've reacted poorly to Moira's valid aggravation, June instead immediately deescalates rather than escalates the minor situation. Before Gilead, June didn't have an addiction to vengeance, but she also hadn't been exposed to the brunt of Gilead's misogynistic, brutal power dynamics. In this sense, the series goes

out of its way to show its audience that a pre-Gilead June is patient, attuned to the needs of others, and not vindictive—yet.

Although Moira's memories of June evince that she was once an unquestionably encouraging and forgiving person, June isn't nearly as considerate toward her friend after they reunite. Even though June spends a significant amount of time away from Gilead in Season Four—first in Chicago, and later in Canada and Little America—she never stops leaning into her need for revenge against everything and everyone Gilead-related. But June's desire for vengeance comes as somewhat less of a surprise to Moira than to say, Luke. Like June, Moira is well aware of the immeasurable amount of emotions that come with being a woman in Gilead; she's also made great strides to process her own feelings in a healthy manner and help others do the same. However, June not only hasn't made this progress, but she's also resistant to the work of therapeutic processing. While sitting in on Moira's group therapy sessions for escaped Handmaids, June expresses that she doesn't have much "in common" with the other women in attendance because instead of feeling vindictive, they're expressing forgiveness and learning to live with the trauma of what's happened to them (S4E8 4:40). Moira isn't concerned by June's apprehension, and she's hopeful that June will "find her groove"; with a carefree laugh, Moira even jests, "Or maybe you won't." Unfortunately, Moira doesn't know how true her own joke will soon become. Irritated by their so-called passivity, June purposely incites the other women's rage at the next meeting by bringing Irene, the former Aunt responsible for genitally mutilating June's friend Emily (Alexis Bledel), to the group. Much like the way in which Aunts treat "sinful" Handmaids, June then proceeds to shame and berate Irene

in the middle of their therapy circle with a sly (and disquieting) grin on her face (S4E8 33:00).

In a later group session, June continues to encourage the former Handmaids' rising vindictiveness until Moira protests: "Anger is a valid emotion, it's, uh, necessary, important even, to heal. But we can't live there" (S4E8 52:30). Leaning forward in her chair, June interjects with quiet irritation: "Why not?" Having witnessed snippets of June's maliciousness in Gilead first-hand, Moira knows that arguing with her isn't worth it; for the sake of their friendship, Moira attempts to quell June's anger just as June did for her in the birthing class. But June is no longer a person who tolerates being mollified: when Moira tactfully tries to end the therapy session for the day, rather than taking advantage of her friend's kindness, June invites the incensed women to stay at Moira's meeting longer, which they all agree to do. During this incident, Moira is mindful of how June is feeling because she, too, survived Gilead. However, she's also over-optimistically certain that June can learn to direct her energies into helping escaped Handmaids, and expresses such when she states that June and the other Handmaids shouldn't "live" in their "anger." Yet despite Moira's pure intentions, June resents her friend's attempts to quell her rising venom. June's years being constrained by Gilead have made her avid to ignore the need for restraint; she seems to experience even the processes of therapy as a violation of her agency, of her need to regain control. The show thus zeroes in on an extremely difficult ethical conundrum: how are we to support survivors when revenge becomes a stand-in for taking back control, for reclaiming agency? And while it's effortless for us as remote audience members to understand why June is vindictive and irritated by Moira's logic, it's infinitely more difficult for Moira to approve of June's

behavior. The June that Moira remembers would have once tried to comfort the people around her, but the June in front of her is unabashedly persuading others that revenge is the only way that they can “heal.” Hence, even though Moira understands the logic behind June’s bloodthirsty need for payback, she wants no part in making it happen. Ultimately, Moira’s perspective helps audiences begin to question June’s ethics—not of her desire for justice, but of her willingness to embrace revenge at any cost.

Atwood’s *Offred*, and therefore Atwood’s readers, have absolutely no idea what became of Offred’s husband, Luke. Offred herself often wonders if he survived and made it to Canada, was shipped off to the radioactive Colonies, or even just shot on sight. However, Miller’s June eventually learns that Luke is alive and well. After successfully escaping to Canada, Luke settles in Little America and works to rescue his wife and their young daughter, Hannah Bankole. This revelation allows Luke to become one of the show’s main characters in a world where he was previously nothing more than the frequent star of Offred’s daydreams. On a broader scale, however, Luke’s presence also enables us to witness June’s character from another new perspective. Like Moira, Luke knew and loved June years before Gilead was even a nightmarish rumor; however, because Luke never lived in Gilead, he is subsequently only capable of sympathizing with June. While there’s certainly nothing wrong with expressing sympathy, Luke’s inadvertent inability to fully empathize with his wife creates an insurmountable barrier between the couple where there previously was nothing but intimacy.

Luke’s memories of June from the finite amount of time they were able to spend together demonstrate the genuine warmth the couple once felt for one another. They defied conventional marriage standards to be with each other and were then fortunate

enough to have a child together in a world where babies are viewed as a scarce resource. As Luke lies shot and exhausted in an abandoned kitchen, he recalls his family's failed escape to Canada. With the help of a friend of June's mother, Luke and his family find themselves squished into their own car trunk as their family friend attempts to help them secretly cross the Canadian border. When flashing red lights illuminate the inside of the darkened trunk, June starts to panic; to calm her, Luke affectionately regains her attention by calling her "June bug," his sweet nickname for her (S1E7 16:50). Then, when the car bumps and June tries to turn around and investigate, Luke comforts her by saying, "Hey, hey, here. Just stay here" to get her to focus on his face rather than what's happening outside. Luke goes on, reassuring her, "I promise you we're gonna be alright," which, surprisingly, placates June. Luke, of course, has absolutely no idea if the three of them are going to be "alright," but June takes comfort in his false promises anyway, which is a testament to how much she trusts her husband. June's behavior in Luke's memory also spotlights how unguarded June was before Gilead corrupted her. June the Handmaid would never be appeased by someone simply telling her that she would be "alright"—she'd make sure of it herself. But the June who hasn't been raped, or beaten, or minimized is much more content to embrace her faith in Luke—or, given the reality of their circumstances, at least try to—rather than her own gut feelings.

However, years later (both literally and fictionally), when audiences finally receive June and Luke's long-awaited reunion, it's strikingly obvious that June is no longer the trusting person Luke once knew. She's spent years being forced to live as Offred, not June—she's nothing like the woman she once was, and even though it's beyond a doubt that Luke isn't the same man, either, his wife is practically

unrecognizable. Fortunately, while he's unable to fully empathize with June, Luke still strives—sometimes unsuccessfully—to understand his wife's trauma. As a volunteer in the ongoing Gileadean rescue efforts, Luke has witnessed the aftermath of Gilead's wounds first-hand. But even though Luke is as familiar with how Gilead functions as he can be, to June and the other survivors, he's still an outsider. Thus, as June starts to emerge from the shock of being with her loved ones again, Luke isn't able to fully recognize or process the drastic transformation his wife has undergone. He's thrilled to have her back in his life again, but his excitement is too much for June. After June spends a day full of overwrought, somewhat awkward moments with Luke and the rest of her family members, the truth behind June's need for revenge rears its ugly head. First, June goes out in the middle of the night and verbally attacks Serena Joy—a harsh scene I will turn to later in this chapter. Upon returning to her family's home, June patters around the darkened house (S4E7 41:20). Her facial bruises, which already stand out against her pale skin, look especially ghastly in the dim, blue-tinted light of a nearby window, giving both the room and June a cold, detached appearance. Similarly, when June's injuries are paired with the low, modest bun her hair is tied up in, her appearance is disturbingly reminiscent of numerous abusive scenes from June's time in the Waterford household. Cinematically, the show appears to remind its viewers of these earlier scenes, cueing them to recall the specifics of what June has survived.

But there is no way to prepare for what June does next. June then clambers into bed with her sleeping husband and starts to kiss him awake; he's surprised and confused by her behavior, asking, "Uh. What time is it?" Luke's hesitancy makes sense; the couple attempted to reconnect romantically in the kitchen just a few hours earlier, but it was less

a husband and wife sharing a passionate moment and more two people unfamiliar with each other uncomfortably trying to make out (S4E7 36:00). Given everything that's happened to both of them, their sensitivity is entirely understandable and even expected. But back to the present: after ignoring Luke's question about what time it is, June proceeds to rape her husband. I do not define June's actions as initiating consensual sex. Luke's expression is one of utter uncertainty; when he tentatively attempts to hold June's waist, she slaps his hand away. Upset, Luke pleads, "Alright. June, wait. Wait, wait, wait" in an unmistakable attempt to stop her from proceeding any further. Instead of listening to Luke, June aggressively shoves her hand over his mouth and pushes his head down into a pillow to silence him, forcing him into compliance. June's commanding—Commanding—behavior during this scene is a direct expression of the sexual trauma she underwent in Gilead. As a Handmaid, June was frequently forced to lie between Serena Joy's legs, hands harshly restrained, as Fred raped her. Now, however, June has reversed the situation; Luke is the silent, suffering Handmaid while June simultaneously acts as both a Commander and a Wife as she holds her husband down and sexually assaults him. June then finishes, all while Luke stares at her in clear discomfort. During this rape scene, June is entirely dominant in a way that is neither sensual nor loving, just violent. Her hostile sexual behavior is also evocative of her desire for retribution. With Fred and Serena Joy both in custody, June can't exact her revenge on either of them. As Woodbridge argues, because the revenger usually has no direct path to bring those who have harmed him or her to justice, the shape that revenge takes is not always direct (Woodbridge 6-7). Here, we see June struggle not only structurally with a justice system that fails her, but also psychologically, with her sense of agency-as-control morphing into

a violence that replicates the violence wielded against her. In some sense, a considerable portion of June's desire for revenge isn't focused entirely on Gilead as an entity—it's also directed toward men. While June was also abused by Wives and Aunts in Gilead, even those "empowered" feminine figures were being controlled by men. Thus, June's choice to sexually assault Luke, while exceedingly cruel and deeply abusive in every way imaginable, is not merely a personal attack against her husband—it's June's way of experiencing a taste of vengeance against the groups that have wronged her in the most horrifying of manners. Again the show resembles revenge tragedy, forcing its audience to sit with a deep ambivalence about June's actions: even as we can understand them psychologically as symptoms of the trauma June suffered, we must not excuse them.

To complicate June's relationship with Luke even further, the show subsequently dramatizes the agency that can be stripped from survivors through the structural rules of testimony, placing Luke at the center of June's negative experience of testifying. Following the previous events of S4E7, June is scheduled to give a preliminary testimony against the Waterfords. The night before, June explicitly asks Luke not to come and listen her speak. While venting to Moira, Luke disagrees with June's decision; he's aware that he's unable to understand June's suffering, and he believes that by attending June's testimony and hearing about her experiences, he'll be able to reconnect with his otherwise estranged wife. True to his word, Luke sneaks in at the last moment to hear June's heart-wrenching testimony. While Luke likely sits in on the testimony with the best intentions, his presence is a violation of June's privacy, an expression of entitlement to his wife's experience—and to which she clearly told him he was not entitled. June didn't want anyone, but especially not Luke, to accompany her to the event; she has no

desire to explain herself, her experiences, or her actions to people who will never fully grasp the way she feels, and that's okay. June needed her wounds to remain a private matter between herself and the courts. In a hypothetical future, June may feel ready to open up and discuss her trauma with her loved ones—or she may not. But by invading June's confidential moment, Luke fails to give his wife the space she needs to even begin her road to recovery, and in doing so, he causes June to resent him. Impatiently forcing himself into June's trauma replicates the gendered violence she suffered in Gilead, if on a different scale, and it encourages June to emotionally distance herself from him even further. That night, Luke, who is genuinely apologetic about his actions, tearfully says, "But at least now I know everything, and maybe we can just move on" (S4E8 36:50). Luke's use of the word "we" is entirely inappropriate; Luke might be ready to "move on," but he can't assume that June is. June knows how wrong Luke's actions are. Rather than addressing them, however, in true revenge tragedy fashion, June instead chooses to instigate another aggressive, unromantic moment with Luke without his consent. It seems that, for June, being physically close to Luke is much easier than being emotionally open with him.

In spite of their love for her, Moira and Luke both become casualties of June's revenge tragedy. Likewise, even though Moira and Luke understand June's experiences and post-Gileadean behaviors to varying, often unsuitable degrees, they still want what they think is best for her. But while Moira and Luke both care deeply for June, the same can't be said for many of the other characters found in this *The Handmaid's Tale* adaptation.

At first, Serena Joy may seem like an odd character to view as a person that's close to June. The two certainly aren't friends, but their Gileadean dynamic bestows an undeniable connection upon them nonetheless. Likewise, Serena cannot be considered a character who has June's best interests at heart. The two have had numerous bonding moments throughout the series—who could ever forget the scene where June rescues Serena from her burning house to prevent her from committing suicide (S3E1 34:00)? Ultimately, however, Serena is impeded from ever permanently connecting with June by her dedication to Gilead. Serena is constantly at odds with herself; she's the author behind *A Woman's Place* and the phrase "Never mistake a woman's meekness for weakness," yet her "meekness" and submissive behavior is, of course, exactly what she regrets agreeing to when she helped build Gilead. Serena supported Gilead under the false pretense that women who behave and dote on the men in their lives are automatically guaranteed love and protection from those same men in return. This, however, is obviously not how the world works—even Gilead's world. There is no unbreakable gender social contract between men and women that promises anything, especially when those women, under Gilead law, are the property of men and therefore have no say in how well they're treated. Thus, even though there are times when it seems as though June and Serena will finally unite against Gilead, Serena can't cross that bridge until she's able to subdue her twisted, internalized gendered power beliefs. However, until that happens—and it might not—Serena still provides us with the opportunity to examine the very same internalized beliefs as they encroach upon June.

While Serena doesn't care much about June's overall happiness or life during the earlier seasons of *The Handmaid's Tale*, there are times when the two at least understand

each other. During Season Two, Fred sustains grave injuries during a suicide bombing. While he recovers in a hospital, Guardians wreak havoc on the Waterford's neighborhood as they search for additional threats to Gilead's safety. To put a stop to the commotion, Serena goes against a slew of Gileadean laws, enters her husband's study—a room that's entirely forbidden to her and other women—and secretly orders the trigger-happy Guardians in her neighborhood away by pretending to be her husband. On top of illegally reading and writing, Serena also ropes June in on her scheme. After bringing June to Fred's study, Serena asks, "You're an editor, is that right?" (S2E7 50:15). Her use of the contraction "you're" is purposeful: Serena says "you're," or "you are," instead of "you were" in order to recognize June's current skills as an editor rather than as a Handmaid. But Serena also uses "you're" to acknowledge June's humanity. Back in Season One, Serena only saw June as her means to getting a baby; with Fred briefly out of the picture, however, June is her tentative rebel ally, a fellow woman who also wants the Guardians to leave the neighborhood for the protection of Serena's (June's) unborn child. Aware that Serena may be trying to trick her, June carefully replies, "I used to be," knowingly saying "used to be" rather than "I am" in order to play her role as the loyal, happy Handmaid. Instead of acknowledging June's cautious answer, Serena holds out a stack of orders in need of edits and says, "Read over these for me." Serena then stares at June, waiting for her to protest. Besides her unborn child's safety—which, given the importance of children in Gilead, is already relatively guaranteed—June has no real reason to help Serena. June could easily report her, yet June simply responds with, "I'll need a pen." Even though June hasn't fully developed an addiction to revenge this early in the series, her decision to help Serena is indicative of her fixation on ensuring that

Gilead gets what's coming for it—which, of course, is an entirely natural response to injustice of any kind. Serena acknowledges June's answer by giving her a small smirk, which June returns in kind. The scene and the episode then end with a direct nod to the feminine power in the room with the beginning lyrics of the song "Venus" by *Shocking Blue* playing in the background: "She's got it / Yeah, baby, she's got it / Well, I'm your Venus / I'm your fire, at your desire." In Fred's study, June and Serena aren't a Handmaid and a Wife—they're two women breaking the rules to get the job done. In a twist of irony, however, Serena isn't defying the rules to support herself: she's doing it to uphold the faulty system that instituted the very same patriarchal protocols that prevented her from helping Fred with his work to begin with. Thus, in the process of bonding with June over their shared rebellious act, Serena is still sustaining her internalized, misogynistic beliefs. And while June might not realize it yet, as her time in Gilead continues, she, too, will suffer the same fate.

The third season of *The Handmaid's Tale* concludes with Fred, and later Serena, being detained by U.S. and Canadian forces. As the series progresses into its fourth season, however, it's evident that Serena's time up north has changed her. Serena played a large part in her husband's capture, which shredded the few remaining threads of their marriage. In a surprising twist, Serena is also physically and emotionally alone with the knowledge that she's pregnant with Fred's son. Away from Gilead's prying eyes, Serena is, initially, entirely focused on the health and safety of her unborn child—which, given her devout religious beliefs, also means that she's relentlessly praying for forgiveness and guidance. By distancing herself from Gilead's ways and spending her time repenting, Serena gains the strength to avoid Fred's unfounded pleas for forgiveness and even

attempts to forge her own path as an independent woman. Her shift in mindset is colossal; she's no longer a meek Wife dependent on her Commander for love and support, but rather a single mother ready to fight for a place in the world for herself and for her unborn son. Regardless, Serena's change of heart in no way excuses her past actions and choices; she was an abuser, and no amount of regret will turn back the clock and erase the pain she inflicted on her victims. At the same time, the show suggests that Serena's genuine attempts to reform are, at least partially, her own way of healing from the distress and misery Gilead caused her. In some ways, Serena also fell prey to Gilead's influence. However, June isn't impressed by Serena's new self in the slightest.

After receiving news of Serena's pregnancy, June, restless after an evening of clumsy exchanges with her friends and family, decides to drop by and see Serena in prison (S4E7 37:40). Serena is immensely thankful for June's visit; she believes that June's presence is God's way of giving Serena the chance to make "amends." But June isn't ready to forgive Serena: "I brought myself here so that I could tell you how much I hate you. You don't deserve to make amends to anyone." In her somewhat selfish yet possibly honorable attempt to mend her relationship with June, Serena seems to have forgotten that forgiveness is often a two-way street. Serena might be ready to apologize to June, but June is incontrovertibly unprepared to accept Serena's regret over the trauma she caused her. With tears pooling in her eyes, Serena falls to her knees and begs June for forgiveness. During this exchange, Serena is both literally and figuratively looking up to June. She's on the floor, so she's physically raising her head to see June, yes, but it's more than that. June is Serena's role model; she's a self-reliant, powerful woman that Serena has come to admire. Likewise, June isn't dependent on the men in her life, and

right now, Serena wants June's guidance in learning to do the same. This is Serena's make it or break it moment; with June's help, Serena could, potentially, enjoy a happy life raising her son and giving back to the people she wronged. But without it? As warped and malleable as Serena's mindset is, she will see no other choice but to turn back to Fred, and thus Gilead, for protection. Alas, this adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* is a revenge tragedy, which means that if June's going down, she's taking Serena down with her. In a chilling performance by Elizabeth Moss, June kneels down to Serena's level and, with spittle flying from her mouth, bellows, "Do you know why God made you pregnant? So that when He kills that baby inside your womb, you will feel a fraction of the pain that you caused us when you tore our children from our arms!" As June storms out of the room, leaving Serena sobbing on the floor, she takes with her any chance that Serena had to redeem herself. While it undoubtedly wasn't June's responsibility to help Serena—she doesn't owe her anything—June either fails to consider or simply does not care that the effect of her revenge will drive Serena back to Fred, strengthening Fred's own political position.

Each of the previously analyzed characters—Luke, Moira, and Serena Joy—have relatively definable relationships with June. Moira cares about June and can empathize with her; Luke also loves June, but he can't identify with what she's going through; and Serena Joy, while often indifferent to what becomes of June, is able to empathize with her deeply because she, too, has endured Gilead's treatment of women. Likewise, June also comes to loathe each of these characters for the way in which they misunderstand or outright devalue her trauma. But June's bond with one final character isn't nearly as simple to place.

Nick's tangled connection with Offred in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is brief but extraordinary. However, the novel's ambiguous conclusion regarding Offred's fate leaves readers feeling ambivalent about Nick. Is he her savior or her doom? Yet despite four seasons' worth of time together in Miller's adaptation, the pair's relationship remains intentionally enigmatic. And even though the Hulu series gives audiences a detailed account of Nick's past, his background doesn't make his character any less cryptic. After grappling with familial problems and unemployment, Nick joined the Sons of Jacob movement responsible for Gilead's rise in order to gain stability; as Atwood establishes in her novel, Nick is also an Eye. This information constructs Nick as a deeply ambiguous character; he's not a passionate Gileadean, but he's also not fighting for democracy or women's rights—in fact, he doesn't seem to be keen on anything except, possibly, June. While June and Nick's clandestine meetings are few and far between after June is removed from the Waterford household, they're no less intense; every encounter is more passionate and convoluted than the last. And unlike the intimacy that June once shared with Moira, Luke, and even Serena, June's intimate relationship with Nick is in no way hindered by her increasing addiction to revenge. Instead, it's bolstered by it, just as June's revenge is also bolstered by this relationship.

Nick and June spend only a handful of episodes together in the latter seasons of Hulu's adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale*, yet neither time nor distance seem to damage their relationship. A few days after June arrives safely in Canada, she and Luke ask June's Gileadean sources for help rescuing their daughter, Hannah. Her frequent ally Commander Lawrence (Bradley Whitford) isn't of any service, but with a somewhat surprising suggestion from Luke, June asks to meet with Nick for help. The illicit couple

rendezvous at an abandoned, snow-covered church in a neutral zone between Gilead and Canada; June also takes her infant daughter, Nichole—Nick’s biological child—to the meeting. June wanders outside in the snow as she pushes Nichole’s stroller along and looks for Nick; he suddenly emerges from the church, softly calling her name to get her attention (S4E9 35:50). The moment she hears him, her entire demeanor changes: a warm, genuine smile graces her face for nearly the first time since she was rescued, and her eyes slip shut in immense relief. June’s reaction is stunning; she’s been spending the past few days with friends and family that she hasn’t seen in years, but all of her interactions with them pale in comparison to the few minutes she spends with Nick. She isn’t stiff or unsure about how to act anymore; it’s almost as if Nick’s presence has lifted the weight of the world off of her shoulders. In a way, it has. June gets to be her truest self around Nick, the self that she won’t—can’t—reveal to anyone else. June doesn’t have to hide from or explain anything to Nick because he isn’t perturbed by her addiction to revenge or her trauma; he doesn’t expect her to act or behave in a particular way, and to June, that’s a relief. But is it healthy? Nick’s ambiguous feelings toward June’s passion for bringing Gilead to its knees ensure that June’s intimate connection with him remains intact, but it also enables her to avoid processing her trauma entirely. And while June might, understandably, enjoy sidestepping her trauma around Nick, their relationship comes to embody the stark ambivalence of the genre of revenge tragedy itself—an ambivalence haunted by a sense of impending dread.

In the final episode of Season Four, Commander Lawrence devises a trade between Gilead and what remains of the U.S. government: Fred for twenty-two women involved with Mayday, the resistance group that’s fighting to take Gilead down from the

inside. U.S. government official Mark Tuello (Sam Jaeger) initiates the trade by arresting Fred and hauling him to the Canadian/Gileadean border in the dead of night where Lawrence is waiting to receive him (S4E10 41:05). As planned, Nick, whose status as an Eye outranks Lawrence, intervenes and takes Fred. Rather than bringing Fred back to Gilead where other Commanders are impatiently waiting to punish him for his betrayal, Nick drags Fred to a secluded part of the woods. On the way, Fred desperately tries to reason with Nick by calling him “Son” and pleading that his actions were just his way of trying to protect his family. Fred’s use of the nickname “Son” isn’t just because of their differences in age or status; Nick and Fred were once close—or so Fred thought. During the Waterford’s time in former Massachusetts, Nick was their loyal Guardian who could be trusted with the family’s secrets. However, Fred is almost entirely unaware of the depth of June and Nick’s intimacy. There are moments throughout the show—namely in S2E5, S2E13, and perhaps even in S1E10—where Fred is suspicious of Nick’s connection to June. But Fred never catches on to how strong that bond truly is because the entire Waterford household—even, shockingly, Serena—makes efforts to ensure that he’s kept mostly in the dark about their relationship. Thus, when June suddenly emerges from the dim treeline and Fred desperately turns to Nick and begs, “Nick, Son? Help me. Help me,” Fred isn’t necessarily sure of the fact that Nick would never choose him over June. He’s not completely oblivious, of course—on some level, Fred knows that Nick isn’t his biggest fan—but he’s also not as conscious of Nick’s covert Eye behavior as June or Serena are because he was blinded by his own self-delusion and his unrelenting confidence in his fellow men. After June reaches the pair, however, all of Fred’s hope flies out the window when, to Fred’s shock, June and Nick kiss passionately. In response,

Fred, who's disgusted and terrified, spits out that June and Nick are "fucking sick." I wouldn't use the same terminology as Fred, but there is something distinctly toxic about June and Nick's relationship all the same.

Nick's willingness to support June in every situation, while proof of their intimate bond, isn't necessarily healthy. Moira, Luke, and Serena were all once intimate with June, but unlike Nick, they each have definite expectations surrounding how she should go about processing and moving past her trauma. Forcing another person to heal in a specific way or at a precise pace isn't appropriate in any way, shape, or form—everyone's recovery process is different. Still, while the way in which Moira, Luke, and Serena pushed June was wrong, their objectives were generally constructive and positive. The same, however, cannot be said about Nick. To our knowledge, Nick has absolutely no assumptions about or thoughts on how June should or shouldn't act. Likewise, as such an ambiguous character, it's entirely possible that Nick chooses to help June time and time again because he's fueled by ulterior motives. We know very little about Nick; he's seemingly ready to support June in everything, but his allegiances always change to match his situation. Like Atwood, Miller, and a number of *The Handmaid's Tale* scholars, I'm currently refraining from attempting to give a full interpretation of Nick's character. Cultural critics also appear to be dancing around discussing him: there is a considerable gap in popular Hulu series discussions about Nick. This space has likely been caused by the fact that analyzing Nick makes analyzing June all the more difficult. Indeed, I tend to think that his placement as an ambiguous character in both the novel and the adaptation is entirely meaningful, forcing readers and audiences to contend with the ethical ambiguity of June's choices in the show, just as his presence in the novel forced

readers to “choose” Offred’s ending when she gets in the van. Of course, the adaptation has been greenlit for a fifth season, which could potentially shed some light on where—or with whom—Nick’s loyalties lie.

The last episode of Season Four strives to remind us that June is human. June’s time in Canada has firmly established her as the central character of her own revenge tragedy, but her trauma-induced behavior often makes us forget that forces outside of her control molded her into the addicted, power-hungry person she is now. Instead of treating June and her traumatic narrative with the respect they deserve, International Criminal Court (ICC) judges ask June to formally testify against the Waterfords to a camera in an empty room because the judges have “busy schedules” (S4E10 4:10). Afterward, June learns that Fred is scheduled to be flown to Geneva where the ICC will grant him immunity in exchange for revealing Gileadean secrets. In an emotional revelation to Emily, June cries, “Emily, I really want to let go of [Fred]...I want to focus on Hannah and my Nichole. And Luke. A good mother would be able to let go” (S4E10 16:30). June doesn’t elaborate on her statement, which in itself speaks volumes. June does “really want” to forget about Fred and move on with her life—it’s what she deserves—but she’s incapable of doing so. “A good mother would be able to let go,” but June doesn’t view herself as a “good mother” who can “let go.” While I will further analyze this scene in Chapter Three, June’s revelation currently leaves us to assume that she sees herself as the opposite: a bad mother who can’t move on. June’s traumatic experiences rightly make it impossible for her to heal without some sort of retribution. But when the ICC’s immunity hearing in Geneva goes through, June won’t ever have the chance to get it. And even though, as Moira vehemently promises, June could fly to Geneva and testify again, June

knows that that wouldn't work, either—Fred's too valuable. Just as Professor Pieixoto shrunk Offred's experiences in Atwood's novel, June knows that the ICC values Fred's help over her trauma. In fact, "Revenge sometimes seemed the judicial system's evil twin"—similar in appearance, yet wildly different in end result (Woodbridge 9). Thus, even though June might not truly want to, she relies on her own power to silence Fred once and for all.

The final few scenes of revenge tragedies always depict the inevitable, usually bloody end of lost heroes and heroines, and the last minutes of the fourth season of *The Handmaid's Tale* are no exception. While June herself doesn't meet an untimely end at the conclusion of Season Four, a chunk of her humanity does. June, Emily, and dozens of other former Handmaids barbarously murder Fred by literally ripping him apart in a style reminiscent of Gileadean Particutions (S4E10 47:10). As the women emerge from the woods after the deed is done, each covered in blood, June appears absolutely shattered. She closes her eyes as a tear rolls down her cheek and conclusive choir music transitions her from the wilderness back to reality. Yet June's expression isn't one of relief, pleasure, or even disgust—she just looks hollow. Her mission to kill Fred is over, but instead of experiencing her long-awaited, cathartic release, she's just left with the burden of what she has to do next: go home.

June arrives back at her family's house in the early hours of the morning (S4E10 53:40). Dressed in a maroon, blazer-style winter coat that's representative of her former Handmaid clothes and stained—metaphorically and physically—by Fred's blood, June climbs the stairs to Nichole's nursery. The room is shrouded in the rising sun's light as June gently lifts her daughter from her crib and coos at her. As June holds her, she

accidentally smears Fred's wet blood on Nichole's cheek, but makes no effort to wipe it off. Luke, still foggy with sleep, enters the room; it takes him a moment to process the blood on his wife's face and hands, but when he does, he recoils in horror. He knows what she's done, and June knows that there's no coming back from it: "Just give me five minutes with her, then I'll go."

Audiences have absolutely no idea where June will "go." The story of her revenge tragedy—or, at least, part of it—is over. Fred's murder, paired with June's rather poignant decision to mail Serena Joy Fred's wedding band and his severed ring finger, means that June has successfully exacted her revenge on the Waterfords. In the process, however, June's final few lines suggest that she has also permanently cut herself off from any chance she had to fully reconnect with Luke and Nichole. In doing so, it seems that the show is proposing that we, as audience members, must make certain that we try to process our own traumas before we, too, become characters in our own revenge tragedies.

While just speculation, the series' showrunners might see the conclusion of this slice of June's revenge tragedy as an opportunity to incorporate elements of Atwood's sequel novel, *The Testaments*, into the fifth season of their adaptation. If audiences believe that the heroines found in each of the respective *The Handmaid's Tale* works are, in fact, the same woman, June's story is far from over. However, hers is also not the only tale being told anymore: June's two daughters, Agnes/Hannah/Aunt Victoria and Nicole/Daisy/Jade (which is, conversationally, not spelled Nichole with an "h" as it is in the television series), along with the infamous Aunt Lydia, become our three leading ladies in *The Testaments*. Set during the beginning of the end of Gilead, Agnes, Nicole, and Aunt Lydia's respective accounts remind us that our actions today have

consequences tomorrow. Thus, as fans of *The Handmaid's Tale* series eagerly anticipate the fifth season, Hulu leaves us waiting and wondering: what will June's tomorrow bring?

Chapter Three: Witnessing the Revolution in Atwood's *The Testaments*

“The collective memory is notoriously faulty, and much of the past sinks into the ocean of time to be drowned forever; but once in a while the waters part, allowing us to glimpse a flash of hidden treasure, if only for a moment. Although history is rife with nuance, and we historians can never hope for unanimous agreement, I trust you will be able to concur with me, at least in this instance.”

—Professor James Darcy Pieixoto, Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments*

Set fifteen years after the events of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments* is the long-awaited sequel to her 1985 novel. The book follows the accounts of three women, two of whom are, notably, the daughters of June Osborne, our lost heroine from *The Handmaid's Tale* universe. In this convoluted setting, June's two daughters are referred to by numerous different names. Her eldest daughter, whom we primarily know from both *The Handmaid's Tale* novel and television adaptation as Hannah Bankole, also goes by Agnes Jemima and Aunt Victoria in *The Testaments*. June's youngest daughter, whom we've met as the legendary Baby Nichole/Holly in the Hulu series, is referred to as Daisy, Jade, and Nicole (without an “h”) in the sequel. To avoid the inevitable confusion that using all of these names interchangeably would likely bring up, I will refer to June's daughters as Agnes and Nicole, respectively, as these are the names most frequently used in Atwood's sequel. The third and final narrator joining June's children in *The Testaments* is, provocatively, Aunt Lydia, one of the four founding Aunts.

In *The Handmaid's Tale* universe, we as readers and viewers are painfully accustomed to being the only witnesses of June's trauma. June certainly has loved ones that attempt to support her to the best of their abilities, but given the nature and extensiveness of her trauma, June has no one but us as audience members to truly read

and interpret her devastating experiences. Thankfully, Atwood seems to use *The Testaments* as a way to offer a solution—certainly not a permanent or a perfect one, but a solution nonetheless—to not only June’s struggles with trauma, but to what the process of witnessing might need be in order to properly account for trauma. *The Testaments* reveals the varying traumas that its three narrators have undergone in a manner similar to the way in which they’re unveiled in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. However, unlike Atwood’s original novel, which contains only one narrator—Offred—*The Testaments* provides us with moments during which Atwood’s three sequel narrators interact with one another. As Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub contend, witnessing for trauma requires learning “how to bond with the narrator in a common struggle to release the testimony which, in spite of inhibitions on both sides, will allow the telling of the trauma to precede and to reach its testimonial resolution” (Felman and Laub xvii). I argue that these interactions—specifically, those shared between Agnes and Nicole—act as moments where the two sisters are able to witness for each other’s trauma. Subsequently, the sisters gain the necessary support required to begin the process of healing and reach “testimonial resolution.” Further, these experiences from *The Testaments* are especially remarkable because June’s daughters are the first characters throughout the entirety of *The Handmaid’s Tale* universe to successfully witness for one another, the ramifications of which are astounding.

While set in the present, *The Testaments* places our three narrators in vastly different settings. Agnes, for instance, is being raised in a Gileadean household, Nicole is living with her adoptive parents in Canada, and Lydia is running Ardua Hall, the living quarters and training center for Aunts. Indeed, an impressive three-quarters of the novel

features each of these women narrating their separate lives and backgrounds. As the adopted daughter of a high-ranking Gileadean family, Agnes' entire childhood education was focused on preparing her to become an obliging Wife. However, even though Agnes is technically a full-fledged Gileadean woman, she frequently exhibits signs of intergenerational trauma. As an up-and-coming Wife, for example, Agnes is supposed to adore the idea of a Gileadean marriage and the duties that come with it, yet they terrify her: "I pictured each one of [my suitors] on top of me—for that is where they would be—trying to shove his loathsome appendage into my stone-cold body. Why was I thinking of my body as stone cold? I wondered. Then I saw: it would be stone cold because I would be dead" (Atwood 223). Hauntingly, we see a resonance between mother and daughter, here, even though Agnes does not yet remember or know that she is June's child. As a Handmaid, June relied on feeling utterly detached to survive the regimented instances of sexual assault she was forced to cope with in Gilead. By imagining herself as "stone cold" and "dead," Agnes seems to have adopted and even intensified June's same feelings toward unwilling Gileadean relationships. Agnes narrowly avoids what would have become a deadly marriage by joining the ranks of the Aunts at Ardua Hall under Lydia's watchful, calculating eyes.

Nicole, on the other hand, while born in Gilead, was rescued as an infant and raised in Canada by her adoptive parents, Melanie and Neil. Unaware of the truth behind her parentage, Nicole always felt somewhat disconnected from her family members: "Melanie had a distant smell. She smelled like a floral guest soap in a strange house I was visiting. What I mean is, she didn't smell to me like my mother" (Atwood 47). Likewise, in order to keep her hidden from Gilead, Nicole had a "very ordinary" childhood—one

that deliberately had “nothing about it that would make you look at it twice” (Atwood 42). An unknowing mistake on Nicole’s part brings her entire world crumbling down when her adoptive parents—which she believed were her birth parents—are brutally murdered in an explosion by Gileadean operatives. Soon after, the remaining pieces of Nicole’s life shatter when Mayday reveals to her that she’s actually the famous long-lost Baby Nicole. Shaken and completely alone, Nicole is quickly roped into becoming an undercover Mayday operative responsible for safeguarding Lydia’s document cache filled with Gilead’s darkest secrets.

Thus, by the time the sisters meet in the final section of the novel, Atwood has acquainted her readers with each of their struggles, ensuring that readers recognize that the two young women are sisters well before they do. But even though Agnes and Nicole share a sisterly connection, their relationship as half-siblings does not automatically enable them to witness one another. Indeed, Agnes’ and Nicole’s tremendously dissimilar backgrounds make attempting to properly witness each other’s complex traumas challenging. What Atwood offers her reader, however, is a narrative that does not allow these differences to lead only to misrecognition or failed witness. Rather, Atwood explores how the sisters negotiate their differences as a part of the witnessing process.

Agnes’ trauma becomes especially apparent for Nicole as their escape takes them out of the heart of Gilead and closer to Canada. During their car ride to what was once New Hampshire, Nicole, who’s relieved to finally be away from Gileadean life, frequently finds her older sister’s Gileadean mannerisms irritating and odd. After Nicole complains about their subpar breakfast and Agnes chastises her for not giving thanks, Nicole silently ponders her sibling’s behavior: “I thought of asking [Agnes] how long we

had to keep it up, this Gilead way of talking—couldn't we stop and act natural, now that we were escaping? But then, maybe for her it was natural. Maybe she didn't know another way" (Atwood 361). Having spent most of her life in Gilead, Agnes only possesses snippets of unprocessed, confusing childhood memories from her time in a free world, and even fewer of June: "I did have a hazy memory of running through a forest with someone holding my hand" (Atwood 12). These childhood fragments aren't enough for Agnes to have any idea of the "natural" that Nicole is referring to. For Nicole, "natural" is the non-Gileadean way of life she's used to living in Canada—a life that some of Atwood's readers may understand and contribute to today. But as Nicole is beginning to recognize, Agnes' "natural" is the life that she's lived thus far. Gilead's teachings are all that Agnes knows—she's not keeping up an "act," it's her life. However, it's also her trauma. Agnes' etiquette is normal in Gilead, but as the two young women move farther away from Gilead and closer to freedom, Nicole realizes that she's witnessing (and witnessing *for*) her sister's trauma. As Laub explains, "The relation of the victim to the event of the trauma [...] impacts on the relation of the listener to it, and the latter comes to feel the bewilderment, injury, confusion, dread and conflicts that the trauma victim feels" (Laub "Bearing Witness" 58). Therefore, while Agnes' mannerisms may be strange and unfamiliar to Nicole, they actually allow her to better understand the restricted mindset that Agnes was unknowingly forced to adopt. And, perhaps, they also allow Nicole to better understand her own mindset: that what she herself has understood to be "natural" is neither innate nor guaranteed.

A few pages later, instead of just recognizing Agnes' trauma, Nicole begins to actively unravel how her sister's trauma has impacted her identity. As the siblings

prepare to board the *Nellie J. Banks*, the boat that's scheduled to take them from former Maine into Canada, Agnes is awestruck by the way in which the moon is reflecting off the water around them: "'Look,' Agnes whispered. 'I've never seen anything so beautiful! It's like a trail of light!'" (Atwood 368). Nicole witnesses something more in Agnes' wonder than simply a picturesque view: "At that moment I felt older than her. We were almost outside Gilead now, and the rules were changing. She was going to a new place where she wouldn't know how things were done, but I was going home" (Atwood 368). The moon, while certainly always beautiful, is a sight that Nicole and we as readers are relatively used to seeing, so much so that we might take it for granted. As an isolated Gileadean woman, however, Agnes was likely never allowed outside at night—June wasn't—nor is it probable that she's seen a body of water as large as the Penobscot River before: "Is this the ocean?" (Atwood 368). Gilead controls its women by keeping them entirely sheltered and uneducated; thus, even though Nicole is only fifteen, she "[feels] older" than her twenty-three-year-old sister. In age, Agnes is a legal adult, yet in comparison to Nicole, she's incredibly childlike because of how purposely little Gilead taught her about the world. In a recursive and multi-layered moment of potential witness, the text enables the reader's recognition that patriarchal authority infantilizes women to control them, even as Nicole realizes that literal age and emotional age are very different. Further, the siblings are officially leaving Gilead and entering Canada, a place where the "rules" would be different for Agnes. Nicole knows her fair share about "rules" from her time in Gilead, too—"Nobody had told me about this: What were the rules?"—but in this case, Nicole's use of the term is incorrect (Atwood 321). The "rules" wouldn't be different for Agnes—for the first time in her life, there just wouldn't be any.

Agnes' witnessing of Nicole's trauma isn't quite as glaringly obvious as the way in which Nicole witnesses Agnes'. Like Nicole, we as readers have never lived in the fictitious Gilead and can never truly comprehend what it would mean to grow up there. Therefore, a number of us might find Nicole's loathing of Gilead more relatable than how Agnes feels about Gilead. As the two young women hide below deck on the *Nellie J. Banks*, Agnes and Nicole argue about the purpose of their escape. Nicole, who's suffering from a raging arm infection, sarcastically comments that she hopes that she can find out why God has "effed up" her life (Atwood 379). Vulnerable, ill, and grieving, Nicole is feeling understandably bitter about her place in the world. Confused, Agnes remarks, "But I thought you grasped the true goal of our mission. The salvation of Gilead. The purification. The renewal. That is the reason." Nicole vehemently disagrees: "You think that festering shitheap can be renewed? Burn it all down!" As her sister shouts, Agnes suddenly registers that Nicole is also struggling. Gilead is directly responsible for everything that's gone wrong in Nicole's life: they killed her adopted parents, separated her from her biological family, and left her entirely alone in the world at fifteen years old. Fortunately, Agnes responds not with judgment, but with care. She embodies what Laub argues is a special kind of listening presence: "The task of the listener is to be unobtrusively present, throughout the testimony [...] The listener has to respond very subtly to cues the narrator is giving" (Laub "Bearing Witness" 71). Nicole is exceedingly passionate about her hatred toward Gilead; thus, to help her sister work through the broader scope behind how she's feeling, Agnes gently asks, "Why would you want to harm so many people? It's my country. It's where I grew up. It's being ruined by the leaders. I want it to be better" (Atwood 379). As a free Canadian, Nicole sees Gilead the

same way that we as readers are likely to: a strange, invading country that's permanently disrupted or ended the lives of tens of thousands of people. To Nicole, Gilead goes against everything she knows to be right. As a Gileadean woman, however, Agnes doesn't view Gilead as an entity that needs to be purged and burnt down—to her, it's a sick place that needs help. Agnes' argument is a bit world-shattering for Nicole. She's unexpectedly reminded of the fact that good can exist in the bad: "I get it. Sorry. I didn't mean it" (Atwood 379). Thus, by witnessing Nicole's trauma and, as Laub suggests, "very subtly" prompting her to continue vocalizing her emotions, Agnes helps her sister process the idea that in spite of everything Nicole knows about Gilead, it's still harmful to view it as a single entity and thus entirely in terms of black and white.

As Agnes and Nicole near the end of their journey to Canada, disaster strikes, forcing them to row a small, inflatable motorboat through treacherous waves to make it to freedom. They're a sad pair: Nicole's running a high fever and her left arm is useless, and Agnes doesn't know how to row. Nicole tries to instruct Agnes on how to row—"Yeah, with the oars. I can only use my good arm, the other one's like a puffball, and don't fucking ask me what a puffball is!"—but Agnes is at a loss: "It's not my fault I don't know such things" (Atwood 384). Of course, as Nicole has now realized, it really isn't Agnes' "fault" that she doesn't know what a "puffball" is—I'm not even sure if I do. Likewise, Agnes' use of the word "fault" suggests that Nicole has helped her see that Gilead is the guilty party behind her gap in knowledge—a party that she's, remarkably, beginning to willingly blame for her condition. Thus, having now spent some time witnessing and learning to understand one another, Nicole and Agnes know precisely how to help each other survive. Rather than berate her sister for her confusion as she

would have before their shared witnessing, Nicole teaches Agnes how to row: “Okay, now watch me! When I say go, put the oar in the water and pull [...] That’s it! Go! Go! Go!” (Atwood 384). Likewise, Agnes, who is “more than frightened,” fiercely battles her confusion and self-doubt by asking the one source she still believes in to save her sister’s life: “Dear God, I prayed silently. Please help us get safe to land. And, if someone else has to die, let it be only me” (Atwood 396). In spite of how healing their shared experiences have been, however, Agnes and Nicole’s witnessing certainly never guaranteed them their safety. Nevertheless, and against all odds, the sisters make it to shore.

Agnes and Nicole’s narration in *The Testaments* ends after they’ve successfully reached their allies in Canada with Lydia’s document cache loaded with proof of numerous Gileadean crimes (since, as we have learned, Lydia has been secretly working to bring Gilead down all this time). The sisters’ harrowing journey brought them closer together than ever before: “I’m so proud of Agnes—after that night she was really my sister. She kept on going even though she was at the end. There was no way I could have rowed the inflatable by myself” (Atwood 397). Indeed, Nicole wouldn’t have survived their trek alone—but not just because of her physical ailment. Without Nicole and Agnes’ joint witnessing, they each likely would have succumbed to the force of their traumatic experiences long before they ever reached Canadian waters. Rather than yielding to their own worries or contrasting viewpoints—“She’ll make a misstep, I was thinking. Someone will notice. She’ll get us arrested”—Agnes and Nicole committed to mending their traumas and preparing for a new life (Atwood 359).

The staggering impact of Agnes and Nicole's witnessing reveals itself in the presence of their mother, who in both the original novel and TV adaptation has experienced only moments of fractured, failed, or entirely refused witness. As Nicole recovers from her arm infection in a medical center, she drifts in and out of consciousness a few times, attended to by her sister. During one awakening, however, Nicole opens her eyes to find both Agnes and their shared biological mother in the room. Their mother—who, while never explicitly named, we know to be June—"looked sad and happy, both at once" to be with her daughters (Atwood 399). It's a touching and tragic moment all wrapped up into just a few meager yet telling sentences of dialogue. Their reunion is moving, but it's full of regret, too—regret for lost moments, for unspoken sentiments, for unnecessary heartbreak. June knows the burdens her daughters have borne—she's lived through them—and has gone without a proper witness to her own trauma her entire life. Her loved ones have tried to witness for her—characters like Moira from the television adaptation were close, and Emily, if given the chance, might have even succeeded—but they are still incapable of helping June fully recover because they're too forceful or inconsistent. As June hugs her children, her sorrow over both her own trauma and her daughters' is evident when she smiles unhappily and says, "Of course you don't remember me. You were too young" (Atwood 399). Miraculously, Nicole replies, "No. I don't. But it's okay." Agnes agrees, adding, "Not yet. But I will." The way in which Nicole and Agnes reply to their mother is strikingly illustrative of how restorative the witnessing they've done for each other has been. During this scene, the sisters have every right to be reacting in a multitude of manners. They've lived without their biological parents for most of their lives—it wouldn't be shocking if they started sobbing,

screaming, or questioning everything. And they might do that later. Yet in the span of just three innocent words—“But it’s okay”—Nicole forgives her mother for a lifetime of heartbreak and confusion. She knows that June never wanted to leave her, and she doesn’t blame her for what’s happened. Even more, Agnes says, “But I will”—she “will” remember her mother, “will” learn to understand this bewildering new world she’s in, and “will” even try to find the few pieces of Gilead she knows are worth saving. Their resolution is neither uncertain nor fraught with danger like Offred/June and Lydia’s conclusions; the sisters are healing and bonding in a way we as readers haven’t seen before. For the first time in *The Handmaid’s Tale* universe, Atwood is showing us that witnessing was the indispensable component of processing trauma that her other heroines were missing. And now that these three women have finally reunited, Agnes and Nicole have the ability to bear witness for June, and we as readers have the paradoxical pleasure and responsibility of witnessing the beginning of it ourselves. If Agnes and Nicole leave us feeling authentically hopeful, it is because we know that even though they’re not whole again—and they may never be—they’re going to be okay.

Atwood does leave us without answers for her third character, however. While the primary focus of this chapter has centered around Agnes and Nicole witnessing each other, we as readers have also borne witness for Aunt Lydia—both in the novel and, surprisingly, in real life. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Lydia rarely appears as a character in the present tense; instead, she’s frequently the face behind the agony Offred suffered at the Red Center. In the Hulu adaptation, however, Lydia (Ann Dowd) has more often than not acted as June’s harsh captor and punisher. The series’ writers’ decision to portray Lydia as merciless and monstrously pious shows signs of having impacted the way in

which Atwood shaped Lydia's role in *The Testaments*. In an interview with *The Atlantic* staff writer Sophie Gilbert, Atwood commented on whether or not the Hulu series influenced the way in which she perceives her characters: "Of course, [the series] has to in some way. I don't sit around thinking about what millimeter it changes this or that" (Gilbert). While Atwood committed to writing the sequel in 2016—one year before Season One of the Hulu series aired—it is noteworthy that her novel wasn't published until 2019, meaning that three of the show's current four seasons were completely available for public viewing before *The Testaments* was released. Even more, as the show's consulting producer, Atwood was able to guide some elements of the series' creation. But, given Lydia's contrasting role in the show compared to Atwood's novel, perhaps not all of them, and it remains to be seen whether the series' subsequent season(s) will use *The Testaments* as further source material.

Crucially, however, whichever way the series does go in the future, Atwood's sequel is at pains to get readers to reconsider the Aunt Lydia they think they have known. Alongside Agnes and Nicole's reciprocal witnessing, *The Testaments* also utilizes witnessing—or a lack of it—to invite us to see Lydia's own experiences in Gilead. Lydia is the force behind Agnes and Nicole's initial meeting and escape; without her, the two would have never interacted nor had the chance to witness one another's trauma. But while Lydia was able to ensure that Agnes and Nicole each had a witness, Lydia's only witnesses are, just like Offred, us—her readers. In this sense, the novel appears to stage for us the problem of giving witness for cultural traumas of vast scope. As Laub explains, "The degree to which bearing witness was required, entailed such an outstanding measure of awareness and of comprehension of the event [...] that it was beyond the limits of

human ability (and willingness) to grasp, to transmit, or to imagine” an event they were not present for (Laub “Without a Witness” 84). Try as we might, we as readers are never able to fully benefit Offred or Lydia as their witnesses for myriad reasons: because we are not *there* with them; because it is “beyond” our “human ability” to comprehend a trauma we did not experience ourselves; and because Atwood is careful to show us that the scale of their experiences exceeds even what she has represented. In this sense, Atwood makes room for inevitable failure not as a barrier to witnessing, but as a *component of witnessing* that any witness to trauma must consciously recognize.

Even so, in the final chapter of the novel, Lydia addresses the future audience she hopes will find and read her hidden manuscript, however imperfect the witness might be:

I picture you as a young woman, bright, ambitious. You’ll be looking to make a niche for yourself in whatever dim, echoing caverns of academia may still exist by your time. I situate you at your desk, your hair tucked back behind your ears, your nail polish chipped—for nail polish will have returned, it always does. You’re frowning slightly, a habit that will increase as you age. I hover behind you, peering over your shoulder: your muse, your unseen inspiration, urging you on. (Atwood 403)

In this passage, Lydia is optimistic that the future will contain a semblance of the “natural,” as Nicole put it, life she once lived, one full of little luxuries like “nail polish.” However, Lydia also wants Gileadean women to rebuild the “niche” they had once fought for, both in society but also, specifically, in academic spaces. Ironically, Lydia herself functions within numerous “niche[s].” Her narrative in *The Testaments*—her testimony—isn’t a recorded message like Agnes’ and Nicole’s. Instead, it’s a diary that’s hidden within a “niche” in her private library, tucked away inside a hollowed-out copy of Cardinal Newman’s *Apologia Pro Vita Sua: A Defense of One’s Life*. The title of this hiding place emphasizes how Lydia understands this diary, where Lydia’s testimony also

acts as her way of witnessing for herself. But this form of witnessing only truly benefits Lydia's future readers: "It is not by chance that these testimonies—even if they were engendered during the [traumatic] event—become receivable only *today*; it is not by chance that it is only now, *belatedly*, that the event begins to be historically grasped and seen" (Laub "Without a Witness" 84). Lydia knew that her testimony wouldn't mean anything to Gileadeans during her time—"it's late: too late" for Lydia—but she's hopeful that it's not "too late" to help her readers (Atwood 404). Still, it's impossible to read Lydia's aspirations without considering what she writes next:

You'll labour over this manuscript of mine, reading and rereading, picking nits as you go, developing the fascinated but also bored hatred biographers so often come to feel for their subjects. How can I have behaved so badly, so cruelly, so stupidly? you will ask. You yourself would never have done such things! But you yourself will never have had to. (Atwood 403)

The Handmaid's Tale series and novel have both shown us what we once believed Lydia's true colors to be. It seems unfathomable to picture the cunning, regretful woman we're meeting in *The Testaments* as the same torturous, manipulative one we thought we knew from *The Handmaid's Tale*. And it's true—most readers will, hopefully, never need to make a choice about "such things," as Lydia calls them, in their life. Captured during the beginning of Gilead's ascension, Lydia and a handful of women deemed potentially useful were manipulated and given a choice: shoot down their fellow women and join Gilead, or die. In such a horrific hypothetical instance, gun in hand, it's impossible to know how we would react. Like Lydia, maybe we think that we, too, could survive and fight the good fight from the inside, or maybe we'd be too scared. There were, however, a select few women given the same choice as Lydia—but even petrified with fear, they stuck to their morals and refused to play along. Lydia has undergone severe trauma—

there's no denying that, and I'm not trying to—and she's had no one but us to witness it. But even with what we know from *The Handmaid's Tale* universe, it's still grueling to decide how to rethink Lydia.

Surely, Atwood knows this, and the difficulty has informed her choice to write her sequel. I can't answer for you whether Lydia becomes redeemable in this moment—I can't even answer it for myself—but perhaps Atwood's sequel is itself proposing that redeemability is the wrong question. Just as it was wrong for Nicole to view Gilead as nothing more than a “festering shitheap,” it's impossible to view people in terms of simply “good” or “bad.” Seeking to align ourselves with only “good” characters, the novel seems to suggest, sets us up to be poor witnesses ourselves. We can neither entirely absolve Lydia of her crimes, nor ignore the actions she took to bring Gilead down in order to entirely condemn her—however much we may want to do either. Atwood lays down her gauntlet here, challenging us to inhabit the task of witnessing either way.

And, perhaps, this challenge with Lydia might better help us understand and return to June, as well. As I discussed in Chapter Two, June eventually concludes that she wasn't being a “good mother” to Hannah and Nichole because she couldn't “let go” of her hatred for Fred (S4E10 16:30). It's implied that June thinks of herself as a “bad” mother—but we as readers know that June's situation is much more complicated than she makes it out to be, even if we remain horrified by some of her actions. June has done everything in her power to be there for her children, but up until she meets Agnes and Nicole in *The Testaments*, her unprocessed trauma has prevented her from truly starting to heal. Thus, as we try to rethink Lydia, Atwood's decision to feature her as a narrator in

The Testaments appears, in part, to be Atwood's way of asking us to step back and remember what's at stake.

Like Atwood's original novel, *The Testaments* concludes with another Gileadean symposium. The Thirteenth Symposium, which occurs two years after the Twelfth Symposium from *The Handmaid's Tale*, features the same keynote speaker: Professor James Darcy Pieixoto. As I addressed in Chapter One, Pieixoto's first speech disparages Offred's story in favor of complaining about lost historical opportunities. His second isn't any better: "Now that women are usurping leadership positions to such a terrifying extent, I hope you will not be too severe on me. I did take to heart your comments about my little jokes at the Twelfth Symposium—I admit some of them were not in the best of taste—and I will attempt not to reoffend. (*Modified applause.*)" (Atwood 408). In a tactless attempt to make light of his former comments and laugh at growing gender equality, Pieixoto further trivializes Offred and the symposium's female audience by calling his misogynistic, trauma-reducing offenses "little jokes." As the address winds down, however, Atwood employs Pieixoto's character to ask us to question a more specific, prejudice-ridden territory.

Pieixoto concludes his speech with a few comments on a curious statue, which was originally located in Canada but later placed on the Boston Common after the Restoration of the United States of America movement. The statue is of a Pearl Girl—the title given to young women training to become full Aunts in Gilead—and reads as follows:

IN LOVING MEMORY OF
BECKA, AUNT IMMORTELLE
THIS MEMORIAL WAS ERECTED BY HER SISTERS
AGNES AND NICOLE

AND THEIR MOTHER, THEIR TWO FATHERS,
THEIR CHILDREN AND THEIR GRANDCHILDREN.
AND IN RECOGNITION OF THE INVALUABLE SERVICES PROVIDED BY A.L.
*A BIRD OF THE AIR SHALL CARRY THE VOICE, AND THAT WHICH HATH WINGS
SHALL TELL THE MATTER.*
LOVE IS AS STRONG AS DEATH. (Atwood 415)

Becka, Agnes' dear friend and honorary sister from school and Ardua Hall, sacrificed her life to ensure that Agnes and Nicole's escape went off as planned. Without her bravery, neither of June's daughters nor the document cache that helped lead to Gilead's demise would have made it to Canada—each of our narrator's testimonies told us such, and we've done our best to witness Becka through their eyes. Pieixoto, perhaps unsurprisingly, has not: "...history is rife with nuance, and we historians can never hope for unanimous agreement" (Atwood 415). Trauma is not something that can, or should, be "agreed upon" by people who didn't experience it. Indeed, the novel implies that academic criticism can become its own form of violence, when academics like Pieixoto focus on the historical event itself over its victims, enabling the trauma faced by the women trapped in Gilead to go largely unwitnessed. Laub notes something similar: "While historical evidence to the event which constitutes the trauma may be abundant and documents in vast supply, the trauma—as a known event and not simply as an overwhelming shock—has not been truly witnessed yet, not been taken cognizance of" (Laub "Bearing Witness" 57). This time, however, there are more people than just us as readers to remember the women that Pieixoto and others like him prefer to ignore. (And, indeed, Atwood allows us to see the tremors of dissent to Pieixoto's work itself). The witnessing Agnes and Nicole experienced enabled them to reconnect with their biological parents, become parents themselves, and even become grandparents. In an attempt at creating the possibility of cultural witnessing, they have immortalized—

Immortelleized—Becka's memory in this statue. Thus, *The Testaments* ends with a gesture toward possible witnessing, and suggests that even if it may be misread, this misreading cannot entirely negate the possibility of giving witness.

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