Constructing Dystopia: Language, Violence, and Narrative Form in *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *A Clockwork Orange*

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Introduction

Two problems, then, confront the dystopian novelist with regard to language: to convey the stultifying effect that the rigidly controlled society would have on how its citizens think and speak, and to create an imaginatively valid language reflecting the specific social and technological realities of the projected future. — Beauchamp

Dystopian literature is a genre well-established in literary history; the writers and readers of every era have had anxieties concerning the future of the world as they know it and have expressed these anxieties by creating dystopian worlds in fiction (Grubisic et al. 5). A trademark of dystopian literature is a futuristic society in which there is a high level of regulation that impairs individual liberty, usually enforced by a power structure—social, legal, or otherwise—that privileges some and oppresses others. The limitations experienced by all or some members of the society are usually presented from the narrator’s perspective.

In the basic structure of a dystopia, John Joseph Adams writes,

Society itself is typically the antagonist; it is society that is actively working against the protagonist’s aims and desires. This oppression frequently is enacted by a totalitarian or authoritarian government, resulting in the loss of civil liberties and untenable living conditions, caused by any number of circumstances, such as world overpopulation, laws controlling a person’s sexual or reproductive freedom, and living under constant surveillance. (1)

The Handmaid’s Tale (1986) by Margaret Atwood and A Clockwork Orange (1962) by Anthony Burgess are both dystopian novels. The flaws in the dystopian worlds of the texts are often recognizable as flaws found in the writers’ and readers’ own societies. “Conceived of as vehicles for preemptive political activism, dystopian imaginative extrapolations … address
familiar developments—automation through to authoritarianism—in order to forewarn, illustrate, and dissuade” (Grubisic et al. 8). By presenting a social critique of familiar issues, issues such as the patriarchy, social hierarchies, and state abuse of power, in more extreme forms than they are currently found in their societies, an author can criticize elements of her society while seeming to talk about a whole other place. As Gubrisic et al. suggest, common fears reflected in dystopic fiction include authoritarianism – such as George Orwell’s *1984* (1949) or Katharine Burdekin’s *Swastika Night* (1937) – or technology – *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) by Ray Bradbury, for example – and how society will be affected by changes in these domains in the long-term. For example, Orwell takes post-World War II and Cold War fears of perpetual war states and world powers and imagines these fears becoming a future reality in *1984*. Though these authors suggest that the mission of dystopian literature is to inspire activism, it is less true that every dystopian author presents a path of preventative or proactive action so much as they caution against the propagation of harmful social and political trends. Dystopian texts are, if not calls to action, persuasive in their articulation of a future with extreme, usually undesirable, results of existing negative qualities.

*The Handmaid’s Tale* is set in the 1990s, the near future relative to its 1986 publication, in the Republic of Gilead. The narrator, Offred, is a “Handmaid” living with the Commander and his Wife in the city formerly known as Cambridge, Massachusetts. Through Offred’s narration, which Atwood calls “the literature of witness” (xviii), the reader learns of her daily life as a Handmaid, in which she is assigned to a Commander, with whom she must try to conceive a child. Through flashbacks, the reader learns of Offred’s normal contemporary life in the “time before” the totalitarian Gileadean regime’s coup d’état, and of her training for and transition to life as a Handmaid. As a Handmaid, Offred’s daily activity, clothing, and speech (what she says
and to whom) are regulated by governmental decree and enforced by her society. There is a new lexicon comprised of new and redefined words that uniquely describes and shapes Gileadean life. This vocabulary is developed and enforced by the government. Community rituals – under the guise of pseudo-Christian worship but actually for the purpose of social control – feature public executions of those who do not obey the rules. The most significant aspect of the Handmaid’s role is that she is obliged to have sex with the Commander to whom she is assigned. In this monthly ritual, timed with the Handmaid’s ovulation, the Handmaid positions herself in between the legs of the Commander’s Wife while the Commander has sex with the Handmaid. The highly ritualized performance is based in biblical precedent: In the Book of Genesis, Rachel and Jacob cannot conceive a child, so Jacob conceives two sons with Rachel’s maid, Bilhah, and Rachel and Jacob raise the children born by Bilhah as their own. Bilhah does not seem to have a choice in the matter. The Republic of Gilead, which is based on the fundamentalist interpretation and application of Christian doctrine, implements this practice to compensate for widespread infertility caused by environmental pollutants.

What sets *Handmaid’s* apart from other dystopian literature is Atwood’s commitment to reflecting the “atrocities” of real life. Unlike other dystopias, Atwood does not include futuristic technology. “One of my rules was that I would not put any events into the book that had not already happened in what James Joyce called the ‘nightmare’ of history, nor any technology not already available,” she wrote in the 2017 introduction to the text (xiv). For instance, Gilead has a secret police force that rigorously upholds the rules of the regime, but they do not have mind-reading technology because it does not exist. Atwood identifies enough existing power structures in contemporary society to create a fictional world that is, if immediately unfamiliar, ultimately recognizable in its recreation of “group executions, sumptuary laws, book burnings, the
Lebensborn program of the S.S. and the child-stealing of the Argentinian generals, the history of slavery, the history of American polygamy,” all of which Atwood lists as precedents for Gilead (xviii). She draws attention to how the “mass rape and murder of women, girls, and children” are always features of genocide and a means of controlling a population. By identifying the real events from which she drew inspiration and how they disproportionately affect women, Atwood bases the dystopia in an oppressive patriarchal regime which uses restrictive biblical interpretation to limit the rights of women.

Burgess establishes a dystopian world based on violence among individuals and between a powerful state and its people. *A Clockwork Orange* is set in a near future that resembles mid-20th-century post-war London. The narrator, Alex, spends his evenings roaming the city with his droogs (friends), drinking, stealing, assaulting, and even raping. The crimes they commit are at times planned, as when they set up alibis or pick a house to rob, and at other times spontaneous as they follow the whims of their violent urges. The frequent violence depicted in the dystopic world of the novel contributes to a sense of societal chaos. The fear that results from the violence-inspired chaos transpires into philosophizing and panic among the public, reflected in newspaper editorials and comments from characters including Alex’s parents, corrections officer, and victims. Burgess’ dystopia focuses on the politics of power and the violent means through which it is established and maintained: Through his violent actions, Alex is established as a criminal and unsympathetic figure; in order to control his violence, the state inflicts violence on Alex, subjecting him to medical treatment to make him incapable of “badness.” The government is an authoritarian power, controlling the lives of its people as demonstrated by the violence with which Alex and other prisoners are treated, the implementation of the Ludovico technique, and the violence regular citizens experience.
The social critiques of *Clockwork* are also found in the conflict among social classes and between youth and elders. Generational and class differences are expressed through language and clothing. Youth are perceived to have different values than elders because of their violent behavior. The most notable expression of class conflict is the language used by Alex and his peers in their narration and dialogue. Their slang, Nadsat, is used to describe, and thus code, all of their actions, associating the language with the violence and casting the violence in a “mist.” Nadsat also serves as a resistance to, liberation from, and mockery of the “proper” English spoken by other social groups. Nadsat, Burgess wrote, “drew on the two chief political languages of the age,” English and Russian, due to the Cold War tension between the United States and the Soviet Union over nuclear capabilities (*You’ve Had Your Time* 38). This slang, the conflicts among social groups, and a government, verging on authoritarianism, that is violently resisted by the people, are indicative of the political context in which Burgess wrote. The Cold War raised the specter of authoritarianism, and the era was marked by social changes, including an emerging youth culture that questioned the sanctity of the state.

In both novels, the representation of a dystopic fictional world serves as a means to critique the authors’ own societies. The politics – social tensions, human rights atrocities, and powerful states – that the authors know from life are reflected in those that appear in their texts. However, by presenting these dystopias in the form of fiction, the authors present futuristic worlds in which current problems are radically intensified and thus at times become unfamiliar and shocking. In particular, each text has an initially unfamiliar invented language that the reader must translate or decode. Readers also encounter unfamiliar legal, social, and political structures. Beyond these thematic and stylistic features, the narrative form of each text also informs its meaning. How the narrative is delivered, its structure as a whole and in parts, in addition to the
content of the narration, contribute to development of the dystopia and how the reader understands the text. Language, violence, and form are integral and inter-connected elements of *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *A Clockwork Orange*; examining their functions within the text as well as their effect on the reader reveals how the authors levy social critiques of contemporary society. By focusing on each text’s language, the violence it describes, and its narrative form as deeply interrelated, this paper argues that both Atwood and Burgess make searing social critiques of their own societies through the fictional societies of the texts.

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The first chapter explores how both authors invent a language to characterize the futuristic dystopia. This invented language is both familiar and unfamiliar; though initially readers might find the language unfamiliar, they gradually learn the vocabulary and syntax, and through context use the language to decode and demystify the dystopia. This process reflects the novels’ larger interest in writing futuristic worlds that have an uncanny relationship to the present. Once familiar with the language, the reader notices how the author’s social critiques, which, though written into an unfamiliar context, can be applied to her own world. In other words, flaws in the dystopia are flaws that are specific and relevant to contemporary European and American society. In *Handmaid’s*, the invented language is imposed by the regime, which creates and enforces strict social hierarchies. Atwood’s lexicon is mostly a construction of existing words, repurposed and redefined in the context of Gilead to show how the government has established and enforces social order. In *Clockwork Orange* as well, Anthony Burgess invents a language inspired by Russian words, slightly altered English words, and childish words, which the reader is gradually able to comprehend through context clues or the narrator’s translation. By narrating most of the novel in this slang (Alex, the narrator, switches between
Nadsat slang and more recognizable English depending on his motivation), Burgess defamiliarizes the society he represents with the dystopia.

A shared theme between the texts is violence, which is an expression of the society’s distorted power dynamics. Violence is exercised by the state against the people and among individuals as well; violence is invariably experienced with greater frequency and in greater extremes by women. In both texts, then, patriarchal and totalitarian or authoritarian structures are exaggerated but recognizable as similar to our own, inspired by the contemporary world from which these texts emerge.

The second chapter analyzes the violence of both texts. In *A Clockwork Orange*, by including violence like rape and murder, the treatment of violence and criminals by the government, and how (in)justice is served, Burgess argues that regular citizens and their governing body are all violent but that the state should take greater responsibility for implementing justice and peace instead of acting as a punishing force. While at first, Alex is cast as an irredeemable perpetrator of violence, this portrayal is complicated as we see how violent the state is as well. Burgess’ examination of power and violence suggests that the state, supposedly concerned for the welfare of its citizens, at times acts with violent power, actually hurting their welfare. Individuals who do not fear the state present a risk to it. The state’s alternative option is to condition its people and impose “good” on them, but in doing so it eliminates human agency and individuality, instead ensuring its limitless power. Alex’s character demonstrates that this imposition of “good” is neither lasting nor effective and that it is an abuse of individual rights that is ultimately as harmful to society as those individuals who choose to be bad.
Atwood reveals and criticizes the abuse of power – and the resulting violence – as well. In the oppressive patriarchal society of Gilead, violence is enacted frequently and ritualistically, particularly against women, who have been stripped of their rights and autonomy. In addition to articulating the misogynistic abuses of the Gileadean regime, Atwood reveals the events and social influences that created this regime. Doing so intervenes in contemporary (to the time of publication, 1986, especially) social debates regarding feminism, Christianity, and how topics such as these are handled by those in power. However, unlike Burgess, Atwood’s examination of violence and power offers the possibility of resistance through her narrator, Offred, who uses what little autonomy she has – including the power of recording her story, communicating subversively, and the connections she forges with others – to resist the regime’s rules, at great risk to her personal safety. By contrast, A Clockwork Orange offers no opportunities for resistance and does not challenge the gendered violence it features. Consequently, Clockwork re-objectifies women, while Handmaid’s criticizes the patriarchal system that perpetuates women’s oppression.

The third chapter explores the narrative form of each text. The formal elements of both texts – narrative style, temporality, structure of the narrative, and, in particular, the dual endings – independently and together, also reinforce the social critiques that are presented throughout the texts. The form illuminates how the language and violence of the texts are elements of the form itself because of how they contribute to the construction of the dystopia. If language is a mode of (de)coding or translating the primarily violent content of the dystopia, then the narrative form is the literary structure employed by the author as a means by which they can relay what the text is and how it functions within or beyond the boundaries of form and genre.
In *Handmaid’s*, Offred’s style of narration, which is reminiscent of a secret diary, serves as a form of resistance against rules that prevent her from communicating with others and expressing anti-Gilead sentiments. Her narration is complicated by the revelation at the end that she has recorded her life as a Handmaid after she has escaped that life. As a result, temporality and the possibility of multiple endings allows Atwood to deliver more than one message. With this structure, she can make commentary on Offred’s story and how Offred resists the Gileadean regime while also criticizing the societal forces that exist on a grander scale than Gilead itself. The second ending, in which it is revealed that Offred’s story is a recording that is being discussed at a post-Gileadean academic conference, brings the social critique out of the dystopia and into a more recognizable space. Though Gilead has ceased to exist, sexist jokes at Offred’s expense and a subtle dismissal of her identity in favor of the Commander’s demonstrate that patriarchal oppression must be continuously combatted. Atwood thus closes the text with a final revelation on current and future gender power and politics and how, despite changing language or political contexts, the same power dynamics will persist and must be resisted.

In *Clockwork*, Alex’s narration is also presented as a reflection, though it contains none of the self-awareness that Offred’s does. The division of his narrative into three parts, with seven chapters each, is symbolic of his coming-of-age, which the reader follows in the plot. Throughout, the text presents a tension between two structures, that of a bildungsroman and that which is representative of a more stagnant Freudian Pleasure Principle. As a bildungsroman, young Alex might come of age and accordingly achieve newfound wisdom and an evolved worldview. By contrast, if the text is a Freudian repetition of violence, and therefore static and incapable of achieving satiation, then Alex is shown to be a cog in a larger violent system in which individual change is not possible. This novel, too, has a dual ending, as it was originally
published in the United Kingdom with 21 chapters and in the United States with only 20 chapters. In the 21st chapter, Alex’s maturation would suggest that the text is a bildungsroman. However, the failure of any personal growth throughout the text until this final chapter, as well as his complete lack of remorse or self-awareness, suggest that the text is more likely a parody of a bildungsroman than a true bildungsroman. Without the 21st chapter, there is no growth and only dystopic repetition. In both Clockwork and Handmaid’s, the formal elements of the texts allow them to be read multiply, which results in different interpretations among readers.

Both novels construct a dystopic world of extreme violence, particularly against women. It is through the invented languages of each text that the formal and thematic elements are connected and made meaningful; through the invented languages, what is at first unfamiliar is rendered familiar. Dystopia-specific language is used by both narrators to tell their stories, which they – despite challenges to their autonomy – have achieved the power to tell in their own voices. The power of language, story-telling, and agency, as well as how one may struggle to get there, runs through both narratives as the narrators reveal dystopias which, in their faults, mirror our own societies. As we read these texts, we are called upon to think critically about how systems of injustice prevail in our own societies.
Chapter 1: The Language of Dystopia

In The Handmaid’s Tale and A Clockwork Orange, both authors invent a language within the world of their text. This includes vocabulary that is either not part of the English language or words that are part of the English language but have different meanings in the text. These invented languages allow both authors to make social critique and political commentary on social hierarchies. These languages are initially unfamiliar to the reader, but through contextual clues or explanation from the narrator, the reader becomes familiar with the terminology of the text. Once the reader knows how to read the invented language, she can analyze the characters’ use of the language as an insight on the dystopian world. The invented language can be used by characters to resist societal norms, or it may be imposed on characters by society, in which case the characters find ways to resist the imposed language. Either way, language becomes a tool with which characters express autonomy and resistance and authors express social critique and political commentary.

This chapter will demonstrate how the invented language of each text, though initially unfamiliar, allows the reader to understand the dystopian society as a defamiliarized but uncannily similar version of our own society. Atwood’s invented language in The Handmaid’s Tale is imposed by the Gileadean regime and resisted by Offred and others. Offred introduces the reader to a new vocabulary that consists of familiar-sounding words with definitions unique to the fictional world of Gilead. The Gileadean language reveals a society structured around social categorization and adherence to gender roles. This allows Atwood to make social critiques regarding the ways in which our own society echoes this structure. The construction of the language as well as how people, Handmaids in particular, are allowed to use the language and
communicate is strictly regulated. The Handmaids must use this new language in official capacities, but they also use it to code their private (and therefore subversive) communications.

By contrast, Burgess’ invented language is unfamiliar and foreign-sounding, designed to shock the reader. Influenced by Russian and incorporating child-like speech, the language – and the society in which it is used – is a political commentary on Cold War tension between English- and Russian-speaking powers as well as discord among social groups. While the language of Handmaid’s reflects social roles, the language of Clockwork incorporates a larger vocabulary of words. Burgess’ invented language is used by characters as a type of slang or language of society’s underbelly. Thus, their language describes and is specific to the extreme violence of the text, which both associates the language with violence and disguises the violence, to a degree, with the unfamiliarity of the language. In both texts, the language becomes an inextricable element of the dystopic world of the text.

Language and Social Critique

Atwood uses language to demonstrate the totalitarian regime’s power over its people as well as the ability of the oppressed to adapt to and then subvert new rules among changed societal conditions. The invented language is specific to Gilead, a society that on the surface is radically different from ours, but also serves as an extension of pre-Gileadean – therefore recognizable, even accepted – patriarchal structures that categorize, and therefore limit, women. As a result, Atwood’s invented language connects the world of the text to the world of the reader. Through characters’ resistance, Atwood is perhaps encouraging resistance to the patriarchal structure of our own society. Despite the oppression and communication restrictions faced by Gilead’s residents, the text remains optimistic through the presentation of resistance in subversive language and communication.
Atwood utilizes a vocabulary of familiar words and redefines these words to mean something different from their common English usage. In most cases, these new meanings reflect the social hierarchy and power structure of the dystopia. For instance, Offred’s name itself reflects the power structure of Gilead, where she is known not by her own name or identity but by her relation to her Commander. Her Commander’s name is Fred; thus, she is “of Fred,” hence, Offred. In addition to Offred’s name, all social categories or identities have redefined names.

- Angel
- Econowife
- Martha
- Commander
- Wife
- Handmaid
- Aunt
- Guardian
- Eye
- Unwoman

The word Angel, for instance, refers to a man who works as a soldier. Angels fight on the frontlines of an ongoing civil war that neither Offred nor the reader see firsthand. In the highly militarized and regulated society of Gilead, Angels are also present in civilian spaces, where their role is that of law enforcement. Rather than providing a sense of security, however, the armed Angels are threatening and serve as one of the tools of oppression against the handmaids. The first mention of the Angels thus causes dissonance between the reader’s existing understanding of the word angel – a spiritual being, associated with God or, in a nonreligious sense, purity and good conduct – and Atwood’s resignification of the word:

Guns were for the guards, specially picked from the Angels. The guards weren’t allowed inside the building except when called, and we weren’t allowed out, except for our walks, twice daily, two by two around the football field, which was enclosed now by a chain-
link fence topped with barbed wire. The Angels stood outside it with their backs to us.

They were objects of fear to us, but of something else as well. If only they would look. If only we could talk to them. Something could be exchanged, we thought, some deal made, some tradeoff, we still had our bodies. That was our fantasy. (4)

In this passage, it is clear that the women are being guarded by Angels to keep them in place, in captivity. Part of their threat, at least at this moment in the narration, is in their imperviousness, which makes them less human and more frightening. The women’s “fantasy” for the guards to be tempted by their bodies reflects the desperation of their situation and the extent to which the women have been rendered powerless. Ironically, the women turn to their sexuality, which the regime of Gilead has told them is dangerous for how it compels men to act. Atwood allows herself moments such as this one to comment on the more nuanced failures of the system. To introduce the political system of Gilead, how it came to be, and its various components, Atwood constructs a language specific to the system itself. By capitalizing the re-signified or invented words, she gives them emphasis and authority.

This passage also reveals a feminist perspective, which is to say that women should not only have the agency to reject sexual advances but that women may initiate these advances. Women should not only have the right to be modest – the “right” that Gilead enforces – but the right to be savvy and creative with their sexuality. Similarly, men should respect women’s right to accept and reject sexual advances and recognize that women can be desirous and make their own sexual advances. The contradiction between Gilead’s interpretation of a woman’s rights and the rights the Handmaids would prefer to have can be read into the duality of the Angels as they are presented in this scene. Though “angel” implies a sense of purity, and the guards are acting with a sense of chastity, it is not because they respect women’s agency in their sexuality but that
they have either respect for or fear of the rules imposed by the patriarchal regime. This contradiction is a theme throughout the text; women are “free from” unwanted sexual advances but barred from expressing their sexuality, and men who refrain from making sexual advances do not do so out of respect for women but out of respect for the law. The passage reveals that even in a “freedom from” society, women are still not free from fear of the men in control. As Offred notes, the Angels are “objects of fear” because although they will not make sexual advances, they could kill the women. As armed guards, they have the law to support them. Thus, words like Angel that denote social roles have a dual sense through which society’s power structures are revealed.

The capitalization of the words, all of which are social categories defined and regulated by Gilead, has a similar effect as capitalizing words such as Lord, God, Church, Heaven, and Hell; it lends authority. This reflects the overall politics of Gilead, which, on a fundamentalist interpretation of biblical precedent similar to puritanical Christianity, has restructured political and social structures so that women are reduced to their biological functions and limited extremely in their freedoms. Therefore, not only does Atwood utilize the association between capitalized words and divine authority, she also emphasizes the theocratic basis of the political regime. For the contemporary reader, this association is also a criticism of the increasing encroachment of religion, particularly Christianity, on politics in the United States. Thus, Angel evidently has a religious connotation but presents a contradiction between the Angels’ actual purpose and the redemptive, protective “guardian angels” they could be (or that one might wish them to be).

Gileadean language also includes terminology beyond that which describes social categories: Salvagings and Prayvaganzas are both state-enforced events that allow the regime to
control and threaten its citizens, despite the more positive connotations one might have with the terms. Salvaging, for instance, means to retrieve or preserve. But a Gileadean Salvaging is a public execution of traitors to the regime. Announced with little warning by Church bells, it is mandatory for women to attend Women’s Salvagings and for men to attend Men’s Salvagings. The Salvaging is an ironic, perverse application of the idea that by killing transgressors, their souls – and those of others who could be afflicted with the same transgression – will be saved. Of course, public execution for crimes against a brutal regime with oppressive rules does not make anyone feel “saved.” Rather, this pseudo-Christian concept is a guise under which Gilead operates so that it can threaten and control its people.

The term or social category that is most closely associated with the Bible is Handmaid. The term is found in the Book of Genesis, where Leah and Rachel are each bequeathed a “handmayd” from their father Laban. In Genesis, Leah and Rachel’s handmaids Zilpah and Bilhah are used by the competitive sisters to have more sons by their shared husband Jacob (The English Bible, Gen. 29-30). Whereas Angel has a contradictory and layered meaning, Handmaid is a literal term, suggesting that women are only vessels for reproduction. Atwood is strategic in the construction of Gileadean vocabulary; it reflects the disparities of gender (and class) that underlie modern societies on which the society is based. Since it is the patriarchal regime that has invented the vocabulary in the text, it is not surprising that women’s roles are defined by titles like “Wife,” “Handmaid,” and “Unwomen,” while men get “Angel,” “Guardian,” and “Commander.”

As a result, the social roles into which women are placed signify the value they contribute to society as perceived by the patriarchal powers. Not only do the men ruling Gilead choose the new vocabulary for society, but this vocabulary reflects beliefs and behaviors that pre-exist the
dystopia. For instance, women who do not fit into the prescribed Gileadean female roles of Wife, Handmaid, Econowife, Aunt, or Martha, whether by choice or coincidence, are called Unwomen. In this way, Atwood suggests that those women who add no value to society by existing outside of prescribed female roles are not even considered women. Further, it should be noted that each female role is defined by its designated relationship with men. The Wife, Econowife (meaning a wife of a low-ranking man), and Handmaid are primarily defined by their relationship with a man as is made obvious by their title. Even Widow, another role in Gileadean society, though Offred notes that is “disappearing” (154), is characterized by a relationship with a man; even in death he is the dominant essence of her title and recognized social identity.

Titles like Wife, Econowife, Aunt, and Handmaid are not so different from contemporary society’s titles, which include mother, wife, working mother, or spinster aunt. These titles and the identities they demarcate are used to categorize women in contemporary society. One effect of Atwood’s extreme dystopia is that it exposes underlying patriarchal structures in our own society as well. The title “working mother,” for instance, reveals ongoing tension over how women who choose to participate in society in more than one channel are viewed. “Working mother” qualifies the type of mother one is; it does not leave room to celebrate a woman’s accomplishments in the workforce. Rather, a working mother can have a negative connotation, as if the mother who works does not have enough time to give to her children. Even when women resist the suggestion that they are not doing enough in any of the roles they play by promoting the argument that they can “do it all,” the result is much more pressure on women than men, who are also often married with children. Thus, the way our society categorizes certain female roles discourages others and resists women’s justification in how they choose to participate in society.
In addition, words such as spinster, maiden aunt, cougar, vixen, whore, and others used in our own society which describe the living style, sexual behavior, and, above all, relationship with men of women who do not adhere to widely accepted (and all but enforced) female roles find extreme versions in *Handmaid’s*. In our society, these terms are derogatory; at the very least, they are used to tease or evoked in exasperation. The potency of these words lies in their association with the undesirable; women who choose to adopt the living style or behavior associated with these roles would not call themselves by these names. Even milder descriptors such as divorcée or childless, though they may be more factual and less rooted in vitriol toward women, still recall a woman’s relationship with a man and her departure from an accepted social category. Atwood’s use of language, then, in constructing social hierarchies reveals a dystopic society which is gradually revealed to be similar to our own when the reader understands that the extreme names given to women in Gilead are only slight extensions of our own gendered vocabulary.

Atwood extends the gendered and misogynistic quality of language beyond social roles to the everyday use of language. In one example of Offred’s introspective analysis of language, she considers how even in the “time before,” it was men’s words that women seemingly borrowed, even if those words do not express what a woman is feeling. For instance, Offred thinks, “Lay is always passive. Even men used to say, I’d like to get laid. Though sometimes they said, I’d like to lay her. All this is pure speculation. I don’t really know what men used to say. I had only their words for it” (37). Offred reveals this flaw that exists in our own society, which is in parts: (1) that men seem to have more control over the words that are commonplace and used, (2) these words are, as a result, male-centric and focused on men’s experience (in this instance, a man’s
view on sex), and (3) the meaning of men’s terminology is not compatible with women’s experiences.

In Gilead, communication between individuals, particularly between women, is scripted. Handmaids are trained in what they are allowed to say to one another and to the few people with whom they are permitted to speak. Not only are the acceptable topics limited, but there are key phrases which they must use to comply. For example, the language in which Offred and Ofglen must greet each other is “‘Blessed be the fruit,’ … ‘May the Lord open’” (19). Not only is this state-mandated language, but by using it and appearing to embrace it, they can protect themselves from suspicion. Again, the regime flexes its theocratic authority by coating (and coding) Handmaids’ language in a Christian flavor.

The language restrictions faced by the women of Gilead also allow the reader to reflect back on the gendered experience of communication in social spaces. In contemporary society, gender is performed or proven in a variety of ways, often by behavior and dress as well as social, domestic, and professional activities. The workplace is an oft-studied example of a social space in which behavior reflects larger social forces. Given that “women are more than twice as likely to report experiencing sex discrimination relative to men” and “sex, as a status unto itself, may override other forms of workplace status and the relative power they may or may not afford,” it is unsurprising that women and men must navigate the workplace differently (Stainbeck et al. 1175-1178). One study used conversation analysis to resist the “deficit model in language and gender research that attributes women’s subordination to features of their language use” (Li 428). While female participants in the study “consider their outspokenness as something undesirable,” a male participant’s outspokenness “is treated as a useful resource.” In demonstrating that women as a group do not lack communication skills, which could justify fewer “turns” in
workplace meetings, the study depicts how women use “non-vocal actions,” such as creating alliances, to ensure they get a turn to speak. In another example, while articulating a contradictory view with a mixed-gender group of superiors, two women “balance acts of solidarity and distancing, alternate between deference and assertiveness, extend their holds on turns, and work to have their ideas taken up in the immediate context of interaction” (Li 429). As this study shows, women are not only equipped to communicate well in the workplace, where they may be outnumbered or outranked by men, but they are aware of how they may be dismissed and therefore are skilled in navigating the gendered territory.

Language as Resistance

At the same time, despite the language of Gilead being one that is imposed on its inhabitants, the people of Gilead find ways to subvert its restrictions. For instance, several characters resist the language restrictions of Gilead by strategically using the language that is available to them in order to subvert the system in place. They communicate with one another by using signals and codes. The first example of this resistance to the regime is when Ofglen says “‘It’s a beautiful May day,’” which Offred realizes is an invocation of the distress signal “Mayday,” an Anglicism of the French m’aidez or help me (43-44). It is by using this coded language that Ofglen and Offred realize they can trust each other and speak more candidly. Another example, though an indirect communication, is Offred’s discovery of a message left by a former Handmaid who inhabited her room. “Nolite te bastardes carborundorum” is scratched into the cupboard. She refers to the writing as a “taboo message” and feels as though she is secretly communicating with this woman, which brings her comfort and a sense of companionship as she imagines an appearance and identity for this “unknown woman” (52).
Though their public communication is limited, there are other subversive ways in which the Handmaids communicate. “The crimes of others are a secret language among us,” Offred notes during a Salvaging, “Through them we show ourselves what we might be capable of, after all (275). Offred indicates that although the purpose of a Salvaging is to make women afraid of committing crimes by having Handmaids watch and participate in the death of the wrongdoers, Handmaids simultaneously take inspiration from the crimes of others and commit the same ones. Although they cannot openly discuss their oppression or how to resist it, the Handmaids subvert the system by committing crimes. The subversion continues on a wider scale as the crimes are read aloud at executions, which allows more Handmaids to imitate one another’s crimes. The phenomenon of imitating crimes is a form of communication because with all of the restrictions on what they can and cannot say, Handmaids must find alternate ways to send messages to one another. An individual crime does not spread a message so far, but the state, by publicizing crime and punishment, ironically aids in spreading dissents. Ultimately, however, the state catches on, and changes the practice, so that now the Handmaids – and Wives – will no longer be privy to the crimes of other women. This response by the state demonstrates that the totalitarian power is paying attention to the effects of its rules and continuously adjusting so that it may continue to hold power. As a result, even nonverbal and indirect communication becomes more limited for women, and for Handmaids in particular.

Indirect communication is also used between Offred and Nick as they navigate their secret affair. “Is it too late,’ I say. He shakes his head for no. It is understood between us by now that it is never too late, but I go through the ritual politeness of asking. It makes me feel more in control, as if there is a choice, a decision that could be made one way or the other” (269). This interaction is indirect because Offred asks a question that’s answer she already knows. By
answering the door when she shows up, they have both confirmed what they want. However, by continuously asking him if this is what he wants, she is asserting what she wants while respecting his freedom to decline. The consent prioritized in their relationship is in direct opposition to the Handmaid-Commander relationship. But to protect their safety and their emotions, they are indirect in their communication. Instead of discussing their affair openly, they develop a plan to continue meeting up, which is that Offred sneaks out of the house after her clandestine Scrabble meetings with the Commander. She knows to meet the Commander because Nick makes himself visible cleaning the car in the driveway, and if he is wearing his hat askew, it means that Offred goes to see the Commander at night. After she sees the Commander, she goes to Nick. Despite this pattern, Offred does not assume that Nick will always let her in when she arrives. She always fears that he will not be home or that he will turn her away. Since the relationship is dependent on indirect communication and patterns, if either Offred or Nick were to deviate from the existing pattern of behavior and the communication that codes it, they greatly risk losing everything about the relationship. As it is, they both feel that they cannot develop romantic feelings, as that could jeopardize their ability to preserve their own safety. During their first rendezvous, Nick says “‘No romance’ … It means: don’t risk yourself for me, if it should come to that” (262). Despite these parameters that Offred and Nick establish for themselves, Offred develops feelings for Nick. In him, she finds safety and is grateful, all the while knowing that the secrets she tells him are not necessarily safe (270). At the end, this reluctant trust is most obvious: “‘Trust me,’ he says; which in itself has never been a talisman, carries no guarantee. But I snatch at it, this offer. It’s all I’m left with” (294). Nick and Offred fail to maintain the emotional boundaries they had established between themselves, which is indicative of natural human attachment.
Adding to the sense that Offred and Nick develop a relationship based on trust and emotion is how they work to create a rapport. The coded way Offred and Nick communicate with each other in their initial rendezvous echoes the ways in which people in the real world have always communicated when trying to establish familiarity. Offred and Nick banter with each other, using clichés like “Abstinence makes the heart grow fonder.” Offred muses, “Possibly nobody ever talked like that in real life, it was all a fabrication from the beginning. Still, it’s amazing how easily it comes back to mind, this corny and falsely gay sexual banter. I can see now what it’s for, what it was always for: to keep the core of yourself out of reach, enclosed, protected” (262). If humans have always communicated – or spoken without saying anything – in that way, then the difference between the empty words of contemporary society and those of Gilead are that we can choose whether to make ourselves vulnerable or not. We can use language as protection or as a means of revealing. In Gilead, there is no choice.

The relationship that develops between Offred and Nick stands in opposition to the unnatural, not-trusting relationship between Offred and the Commander, her other sexual partner. Though Offred and the Commander must also go through a ritual involving language – primarily the biblical story – that precedes sex, when the Commander tries to subvert the ritual by meeting with Offred outside of the ritual, they both realize that she cannot act outside of the bounds of their mandated relationship. Offred is only with the Commander by force; with Nick she has a choice. Her adherence or resistance to imposed language or communication boundaries makes the difference evident.

Offred’s enjoyment of forbidden language suggests that language has a certain materiality that grants power to its user. When Offred and the Commander have their clandestine Scrabble meetings, Offred gets to relish language once again: “The feeling is voluptuous. This is freedom,
an eyeblink of it” (139). She plays with words and thinks in ways she hasn’t been permitted to since becoming a Handmaid. The time she has spent away from creating language and using non-mandated words becomes apparent: “My tongue felt thick with the effort of spelling. It was like using a language I’d once known but had nearly forgotten” (155-156). In the Scrabble scenes, Atwood reveals the empowering quality of unrestricted language in an individual’s life. Access to words, and the freedom to think them, even, is something Offred lacks. At the same time, Offred resists these limitations through the narration of her story. Throughout the narrative, Offred resists the limitations put on her speech in small, often introspective ways. She ponders the multiplicity of words’ meanings, as well as their origins and their role in the “time before.” In one instance, Offred plays with the word chair: “I sit in the chair and think about the word chair. It can also mean the leader of a meeting. It can also mean a mode of execution. It is the first syllable in charity. It is the French word for flesh. None of these facts has any connection with the others” (110). Here, Offred underlines the materiality of words rather than assumes them to be transparent conveyors of meaning. She subconsciously challenges herself, exercising her mind and resisting the limits posed on how she may participate in language use and acquisition. She occupies herself with forbidden language in self-motivated exercises like this, as well as when she encounters written (forbidden) words she does not know. As referenced previously, scratched into the cupboard in Offred’s room is “Nolite te bastardes carborundorum” (52). Offred refers to it as “a code in Braille,” which, too, suggests the materiality of language, as Braille is read by touch, and is obsessed with discovering its meaning, though its forbidden existence symbolizes a communication with an “unknown woman” (145, 52). The connection to this woman is exciting enough to her with or without translation; the existence of the words is enough to justify it as resistance to the ban on reading, writing, and unscripted communication.
In addition to Offred’s use of the materiality and power of language in preserving her autonomy, the role of language in resisting Gileadean power is relevant to how she delivers her narration. Offred reveals information that identifies the various elements of her life, the society in which she finds herself, and how it became that way. She does so in brief sentences and often refrains from expressing how she feels or revealing complete stories until later on in her story when she can construct the narration in a way that makes sense to her, having lived the experience, and that is truthful. Offred expresses this tension between the truth and how she experiences an event when she says “This is a reconstruction. All of it is a reconstruction” (134). She retells the same story – of an interaction with the Commander, of her first meeting with Nick – correcting and revising. At times, the reader witnesses Offred’s anguish and anger at her situation, such as when she laments that her husband Luke is not beside her. In these scenes, the conflict Offred feels is a result of the limitations of language (disregarding Gileadean restrictions) to properly express what she is experiencing. In the instances that are most difficult for her, Offred maintains a detached disposition:

Last week they shot a woman, right about here. She was a Martha. She was fumbling in her robe, for her pass, and they thought she was hunting for a bomb. They thought she was a man in disguise. There have been such incidents. (20)

Remaining emotionally removed is Offred’s means of surviving traumatic events while attempting to be truthful in sharing them with the reader. By sharing this information with the reader, Offred is enacting resistance because she is sharing a flaw in the Gileadean system. While many of the other horrific aspects of her life are shared in the narrative, they mostly reflect what Gilead supports and justifies. That a woman was shot in a panicked attempt to shut down anticipated resistance is not the kind of violence that the regime would want to be known. Thus,
though Offred’s entire narrative is a resistance in many ways, by sharing a flaw that Gilead would also perceive to be an error in its system, Offred counters the regime’s claim that it provides a better, safer place for women. The event she describes is violent, indiscriminately so, and could happen again with anyone as the victim. Rather than ponder that, she matter-of-factly delivers the story.

Offred’s detached delivery as in the quote above is a coping mechanism and a consequence of her limited linguistic autonomy. When she recalls the above scenario, she also recalls overhearing the reaction of the two Marthas, Rita and Cora, who serve the Commander and his Wife as cook and cleaner. In their reaction to the woman being shot, Rita and Cora express differing views: “Doing their job, said Cora. Keeping us safe. Nothing safer than dead, said Rita, angrily” (20). Though they are women, the Marthas have more freedom than Handmaids do to communicate with one another, as demonstrated by their less-mediated reaction to the innocent woman’s death. Again, this is tied to their relational identity to men and the value they can contribute to society; Marthas are unable to give birth, but as providers of domestic services, they serve in social roles that men do not want to take. Since they are not “national resources,” Marthas have more freedom (65). By contrast, Offred’s role as a Handmaid prevents her from expressing her own opinions or communicating freely among other women. Consequently, she cannot discuss the tragic event that is clearly on her mind. Without healthy ways of dealing with trauma – and with no hope for recourse against the loss of an innocent woman’s life – Offred must compartmentalize and resorts to concise, clinical descriptions, even in her correspondence with the reader. In other instances, particularly later in the book, Offred reveals her fears and uncertainty, but for purposes of practicality and self-preservation, she does not always want to delve into that mentality.
Offred’s clinical approach to her descriptions of her Gileadean life extend to the violence it supports and justifies. Her above description of an innocent woman being shot is characteristic of her factual delivery. With a similar tone, she describes executed bodies on public display, punishments that befall those who present any threat to the system, and her gruesome role as a Handmaid. Her descriptions are unflinching:

Beside the main gateway there are six more bodies hanging, by the necks, their hands tied in front of them, their heads in white bags tipped sideways onto their shoulders. There must have been a Men’s Salvaging early this morning. I didn’t hear the bells. Perhaps I’ve become used to them. (32)

Through her emotional detachment, Offred reveals how one can – and must – become accustomed to the realities of Gileadean life without reacting strongly to the violence. In this factual description, Offred forges the association of Gileadean language with the violence of the regime by referring to the Men’s Salvaging. By this description, which appears early in the narrative, the reader develops an initial understanding of a Salvaging and the kind of violence that the word codes.

Similarly, in her narration, which is often her interiority, Offred avoids responding to the grotesque images of violence that surround her: “What I feel toward [the hanged bodies] is blankness. What I feel is that I must not feel. What I feel is partly relief, because none of these men is Luke. Luke wasn’t a doctor. Isn’t” (33). Offred does not know where her husband is or if he is alive; she allows herself to feel fear in response to this unknown, but she tries to mediate her emotional response to the perils of unknown men. “Perhaps I’ve become used to them” is a grim signifier that one can adapt to anything, even in violent, unsettling situations. When faced with these situations, Offred uses simple, repetitive sentences. The effect is mantra-like, as if
Offred is convincing herself of how to feel. Despite this carefully constructed language framing her response, the reader understands that Offred indeed has an emotional response to the violence she witnesses.

Throughout the narrative, Offred questions how she describes violence while also monitoring her response to it. She is self-aware, commenting upon what she is saying and how she is portraying the people and events she describes. She presents contradictions, including an expressed dismissal of metaphor as she nevertheless includes metaphor:

I look at the one red smile. The red of the smile is the same as the red of the tulips in Serena Joy’s garden, towards the base of the flowers where they are *beginning to heal*. The red is the same but there is no connection. The tulips are not tulips of blood, the red smiles are not flowers, neither thing makes a comment on the other. The tulip is not a reason for disbelief in the hanged man, or vice versa. *Each thing is valid and really there*. It is through a field of such valid objects that I must pick my way, every day and in every way. I put a lot of effort into making such distinctions. I need to make them. I need to be very clear, in my own mind. (33, my emphasis)

The metaphor of the blood stain (which appears on the bag covering an executed man’s head) as a “red smile,” the equation of the color of blood and the color of the tulips, and the metaphor of tulips as a symbol of healing are presented and rejected by Offred. The tulip signifies new growth and healing – perhaps from the disruption of blooming, which also has a sexual connotation. Alternatively, the tulip is a tulip, and nothing more, just as the blood stains are blood stains, and not a dead man’s ironic smile. Offred’s analysis of what she says reveals that she is aware of the problem of aestheticizing violence through metaphors, which would sanitize the violence that occurs. The inclusion of “beginning to heal” and “Each thing is valid and really
there” are Offred’s rejection of any attempt to sanitize and colonize the violence of her society and oppressed circumstances.

Further examination of Offred’s linguistic style reveals a narrative of simply constructed sentences, identified specifically as “main clause + main clause; rarely do we find main clause + subordinate clause, and hardly ever more complex constructions.” This makes Offred’s narrative “paratactic,” mimicking the style of oral traditions, while the scholars of the frame narrative use longer, more complex “hypotactic constructions” (Klarer 129-142). For instance, Offred records, “I would like to be without shame. I would like to be shameless. I would like to be ignorant. Then I would not know how ignorant I was” (Atwood 263). Offred’s sentence construction is simple and repetitive, which allows her to deliver her narration – as she delivers her witnessing of violence – without losing the ugly, violent truth in euphemism, which would lighten and cheapen her experiences. This plain style also allows Offred to be honest with herself and the uncertainties she has throughout the narration; she does not riff or ramble. Through a feminist lens, the contrast in rhetorical style between Offred and Pieixoto, the scholar who appears in the frame narrative at the end of the text, is reflective of power differences between men and women, in which the men attempt to exert authority over a woman’s narrative. For example, one sentence Pieixoto utters to the gathered academia reads:

The superscription “The Handmaid’s Tale” was appended to it by Professor Wade, partly in homage to the great Geoffrey Chaucer; but those of you who know Professor Wade informally, as I do, will understand when I say that I am sure all puns were intentional, particularly that having to do with the archaic vulgar signification of the word *tail*; that being, to some extent, the bone, as it were, of contention, in that phase of Gileadean society of which our saga treats. (300-301)
By flexing his intellect through double entendre and complex scholarly language, he becomes a distinctly different storyteller than Offred. The sexual pun he makes regarding tale/tail contributes to a gendered difference in narrative style. This passage reveals that Pieixoto and the other academics have missed the significance of Offred’s story, which is that she has taken the agency, the burden, and the deliberation of telling her story in her own words. They reduce her life to a mere clue in determining the identity, social role, and historical significance of Fred the Commander, rather than acknowledge her painstakingly recorded experiences and the value of insight into her life. By contrasting Pieixoto and Offred’s style of speech, Atwood not only criticizes the dismissive treatment of men toward women’s agency in telling their own stories but also the dismissive treatment of scholars toward their subjects and the tendency of modern people to regard the experiences of historical figures without sympathy. By satirizing the intellect of the wordy scholars, Atwood indicates that Offred’s story in its simple, repetitive language is a more honest and direct form of communication. In its plain, readable language, it rejects false erudition. After having spent nearly 300 pages of text with Offred, the only way to read Pieixoto’s dismissive treatment of Offred’s life is as yet another patriarchal imposition on her life.

Since Gilead is a relatively new and unfamiliar place, Offred uses words that recall her life before Gilead, expressing her agency to recall that time and simultaneously making Gilead feel more familiar. Catharine Stimpson identifies a common “geography” or “languagescape” between the “imagined worl[d]” and the real world (Stimpson 764). Here she uses Annette Kolodny’s idea of a “languagescape,” “an elaboration of Leo Marx’s perception [of] … ‘a landscape of mind in which the movement in physical space corresponds to a movement in consciousness,’” resulting in an “intercession of a meaningful relational paradigm in and through
which she might be usefully and comfortably located on either terrain” (Kolodny 200). By referring to the languagescape of *Handmaid’s*, Stimpson refers to the construction of an imaginary world to which Atwood brings known terms with which she can render the unfamiliar more navigable for both the characters of the text and the reader.

The languagescape or imaginary world is created through vocabulary brought to the fictional world from a real world, which Offred creates by bringing non-Gileadean language into the Gileadean context. Non-Gileadean language refers to words or expressions used in the time before that Offred then uses in Gilead; bringing old words into this new context allows the speaker to contextualize her unfamiliar or unpleasant new surroundings. As Kolodny explains “For, while brief entry into unknown territories may prove momentarily exciting or even exhilarating, to be forced to accept the unfamiliar and unknown as daily experience challenges sanity itself” (189). This narrative strategy is similar to that of writing dystopia to present to readers; the reader is presented with a defamiliarized society in which she must bring some elements of her own context in order to understand the text. To counter insanity produced by unfamiliarity, Kolodny describes how women who participated in settling the ever-expanding western frontier of the United States “would transport to these alien realms a languagescape of accommodation— as so many women after her were to carry with them seeds and cuttings from more familiar landscapes … home, women’s traditionally appropriate (and thus comfortable) sphere of activity, might thereby be projected out of doors and provide, in however limited a way, a means of accommodation to landscapes otherwise impervious to women’s presence” (200-202). According to Kolodny, this practice resulted in how women, documenting their experiences in diaries, identifying the familiar elements of the frontier: an elderly couple that embraced an idealized “rurality” or the potential of a heavily wooded area to become a cultivated
garden. Kolodny cites “gardener” and “nurse” as words used by women to evoke “home, women’s traditionally appropriate … sphere of activity, [which] might thereby be projected out of doors … a means of accommodation to landscapes otherwise impervious to women’s presence” (202). Just as pioneer-era American women brought their own language to new frontiers, so do Gileadeans. For example, when Offred is at Jezebel’s, a new and uncomfortable space for her, she thinks “I must be back at the house before midnight; otherwise I’ll turn into a pumpkin, or was that the coach?” (Atwood 254). Offred’s out-of-context reference to Cinderella, in a world where Cinderella no longer exists, is her way of bringing something familiar to the unfamiliar; it benefits both Offred and the reader. For the reader, the reference to Cinderella is an analogy that clarifies what Offred is experiencing. For Offred, referencing Cinderella helps to normalize her experience by identifying a similar, if fictional, occurrence. In connecting a serious situation, in which she must return home with the Commander without being caught by his Wife or anyone else, with a fairytale, she allows a touch of levity and a brief escape to a softer, earlier era into her narrative.

Offred contributes to the languagescape as well in her first rendez-vous with Nick. In this forbidden and unfamiliar situation, she and Nick fall into a pattern of speech that echoes another time and place. “‘You come here often?’” he asks, ironically employing a cliched line that does not apply to the situation at hand but which lends a sense of familiarity and de-escalates the tension. Offred responds, “‘And what’s a nice girl like me doing in a spot like this,’” completing the line. This language facilitates an understanding between the two and makes a previously uncomfortable and unknown situation less so as they share this connection to a more familiar kind of discourse.
There is a gendered element here, as Kolodny identifies, in the types of words employed in the languagescape and how the unfamiliar is discussed. The languagescape that Atwood presents the reader in Offred’s narrative becomes more evident in contrast to the Historical Notes because the steady accumulation of Gileadean vocabulary is followed by the stark contrast of the future’s vocabulary. Pieixoto reveals his valuation of Offred’s story as a piece in the puzzle of Gileadean history and the history of its prominent figures, including her Commander. The scholar laments, “‘She could have told us much about the workings of the Gileadean empire, had she had the instincts of a reporter or a spy … we must be grateful for any crumbs the Goddess of History has deigned to vouchsafe for us’” (Atwood 310). It is telling that he includes the words “reporter” and “spy” because doing so reveals his lack of awareness of Gileadean reality for Handmaids. Offred’s expressed purpose in narrating her story was so someday a listener would know of her experience. She is not so bold as to assume she could tell others’ stories; in fact, she confesses to not knowing everyone’s stories. She does not know what became of her husband, her mother, or Moira. Further, the credit to the Goddess of History for the knowledge provided by Offred’s history reveals not only that Pieixoto speaks from another time and place but also that he does not fully credit Offred for her narrative.

The language used by the narrator and her Gileadean peers is one that is invented by Atwood and imposed by the dystopic Gilead. The invented language reveals how women are viewed by patriarchal society, and while it serves to oppress women’s identities and their ability to communicate, the Handmaids find ways to resist the restrictions. Through subversion of language restrictions, Offred navigates her various relationships. The coded and indirect modes of communication are an articulation of the Handmaids’ strength and resiliency. For Offred, language is also how she can deliver her story truthfully, to validate her experiences and resist
the regime. Through her invented language, Atwood demonstrates the power of language: those who can use it freely have more power than those who don’t. By demonstrating Offred’s dynamic relationship with language, Atwood reveals the close relation between freedom and oppression and the many applications of language, including reading, writing, conversing, and naming (of people and social categories). Both resistance to the externally-imposed regulations and the self-imposed restraint that Offred demonstrates in her narration reveal women’s inextinguishable agency.

**Language and Complicity**

Similar to Atwood’s invented language in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Anthony Burgess invents a language that is unique to the fictional world of his dystopic novel. Through this Nadsat language, which is slang and spoken by the teenaged Alex and his contemporaries, he creates a dystopian society that is a defamiliarized version of our own society. By inventing a dynamic lexicon that incorporates childish phrases, Russian words, and paradoxical meanings, Burgess’ language challenges the reader with its unfamiliarity. Once the reader begins to decode the language to understand the events of the novel, she can begin to see the extent of violence that occurs, as well as understand Alex’s interactions within various social groups. The dystopian society of *Clockwork* is extremely violent, and the violence is closely related to language, as all of the violent acts are filtered through Nadsat. The potential effect of this is that the reader becomes numb to the text’s violence as the unfamiliar language becomes a screen through which the violence is viewed.

In his memoir *You’ve Had Your Time*, Burgess writes that the language he uses in *A Clockwork Orange* is a “mist half-hiding the mayhem and protecting the reader from his own baser instincts” (38). The language is a disguise and suggests that the reader would want to
partake in some element of the violence, but since the mist-like qualities of the language prevent full contact with the violence, the reader cannot fully experience the violence. While it’s possible that readers have violent urges similar to Alex’s, it seems just as likely that the reader is horrified by violence. In assuming the motivations of his readers, Burgess reveals more about his own violent desires – “I enjoyed raping and ripping by proxy,” as he confirms in the introduction to *Clockwork* (xiv) – than those of the reader.

*Clockwork* operates on multiple levels: While it is a novel about violence and youth, it is also a critique of systemic issues rooted in governing bodies, including the lengths the government will go to in order to control its rivals in power, youth, delinquency, and the working class. Thus, while Alex is a perpetrator of violence, he is also shown to be a victim of violence at the hands of the state. However, if Alex’s violent behavior throughout the novel were in “proper” English, it might be harder to sympathize with him later in the book. Burgess’ Nadsat lexicon, then, is not only designed to shield the reader from the horrific violence but to assimilate the reader into the language and culture of violence in the context of *A Clockwork Orange*. The purpose of assimilating the reader into this culture is to make her feel complicit in the violence that occurs. Particularly as violence is described from Alex’s first-person narration, the reader must contend with how it feels to participate in this violence. If the reader feels part of this culture of violence, she is in a better position to support Burgess’ critique of this violence and the violence in her own society.

Nadsat is much more different from standard English than the language of Gilead, which relies more upon re-definitions of common words based on a dystopic power structure. By contrast, Nadsat invents an entirely new vocabulary, such as “rozzes” for police, “droogs” for friends, and “devotchka” for woman. It is also used for body parts: “glazzies” for eyes, “rot” for
mouth, and “groodies” for breasts. Alex and his friends have Nadsat words for nearly every part of speech, ranging from expletives (“cal” means shit and “kiss my sharries” is kiss my ass) to verbs (“tolchock” means to hit), nouns (“vesch” is thing), and adjectives (“horrorshow” means good). Additionally, Nadsat does not always replace the reader’s existing term with a new one but instead gives it a nickname of sorts. For example, Alex will refer to his parents as “pee and em,” or P and M, as a shortening of Papa (or Papapa as Alex sometimes calls him) and Mum (52). The Nadsat glossary includes child-like nick-naming and some influence of the Russian language. Further, the vocabulary is often paradoxical in meaning, contradicting the reader’s expectation despite connotations they would already have in English.

The childish language that Alex uses is in contradiction to the violence he exhibits and reflects Burgess’ critique of discrepancy between language and action. Burgess’ invented language includes child-like, rhymey words, such as “skolliwoll,” that Alex includes in normal thoughts and speech. The effect of terms like “skolliwoll” (school), “appy-polly-loggies” (apologies), and “jammiwam and eggiweg” (jam and egg) is an infantilization of Alex. At 15, he is too old to use language that is reminiscent of a toddler who is learning how to talk or who is repeating the baby talk its parents have been using. Notably, Alex’s parents do not use the same slang as their son. In the few lines of dialogue allotted to them in the narrative, they speak in “proper,” recognizable English, ““It’s gone eight, son. You don’t want to be late again”” says Alex’s mother in her first audible appearance (40). This establishes that Alex is alone among his family in using this language. The social critique that Burgess makes by having Alex talk in this language is that manner of speech is not indicative of one’s interiority or morality. Listening to Alex’s childish language without knowing how violently he acts would give an entirely different impression of who he is. The nostalgic quality of childish language is inconsistent with Alex’s
interiority, which is self-aware and rational; he is far too jaded to be nostalgic for childhood, which makes his use of this language partly ironic. Moreover, his violent behavior, particularly his propensity for raping women, renders him absolutely un-child-like. Alex is characterized by his words and actions; the childish language he uses is incompatible with the violence he commits, yet at the same time reflects his lack of maturity and social conventions.

Though Alex is the most frequent user of childish language, other characters selectively include child-like language in their vocabulary. The effect of this selective inclusion is that the character – and Burgess as well – is strategically employing a certain word so that the other characters and the reader have a particular understanding of it. For example, P.R. Deltoid, Alex’s Post-Corrective Adviser, refers to prison as the “barry place” and the “stripy hole”:

Next time it’s going to be the barry place and all my work ruined. If you have no consideration for your horrible self you at least might have some for me, who have sweated over you. A big black mark, I tell you in confidence, for every one we don’t reclaim, a confession of failure for every one of you that ends up in the stripy hole. (42)

In this passage, Deltoid is speaking to Alex in a threatening and condescending manner, clearly more concerned with his own reputation than the implications of Alex’s behavior on his future or society at large. Despite the serious nature of the conversation and the hatred and insults that Deltoid levies at Alex, he undermines the severity of the central and most serious part of the discussion, which is that Alex could go to prison. By referring to prison as the “barry place” or the “stripy hole,” Deltoid speaks to Alex as if to a child, which reflects a paternalistic state in which the state is seen as the “parents” of “children” who cannot take care of themselves. The paternalistic description of “prison” is at odds with the threatening way Deltoid is speaking to
Alex. Thus, Burges reveals another contradiction between what one says and what one means or acts, as well as the hidden nature of modern state violence.

Alex’s Nadsat speech is also heavily influenced by Slavic-sounding words, elements of Cockney slang and “gypsy bolos” (You’ve Had Your Time 37). According to Burgess, Russian fit better than German, French, or Italian because English is already influenced by the latter three; the “brevities” of Russian would work well. In particular, Burgess identifies the Russian “grud” for breast as much more fitting for “the glorious smooth roundness” of breasts (38). “Grud” becomes “groodies,” blending the Russian root with a sound and spelling more reminiscent of English. There is an uncanny political dynamic incurred by its integration with English. He writes, “And there was a fine irony in the notion of a teenage race untouched by politics using totalitarian brutality as an end in itself, equipped with a dialect which drew on the two chief political languages of the age” (38). Burgess refers here to the United States and the Soviet Union, which were the two major political entities involved in the Cold War, as they were the only two nations with nuclear capabilities. The blend of Russian and English is all the more ironic because in real life at this time, to use one of the languages in the wrong context would generate suspicion. Yet, the echo of Cold War antagonism and brutality is fitting for Clockwork, which itself is stratified by antagonistic social groups and dominated by an authoritarian government.

Among the hottest moments of the Cold War, (Bay of Pigs and the Cuban Missile Crisis, for example), Burgess presents the reader with a Russian-inspired lexicon. He assumes that English-language readers have a negative perception of the Soviet Union, associating it with totalitarianism and violence. Burgess takes advantage of the preconceptions and stereotypes the reader might have toward certain languages. For instance, current events, like wars or terrorism,
often influence the way languages are perceived within a culture. In English-speaking cultures, this phenomenon has affected the way German was perceived during and after World War II, Russian during the Cold War, and Arabic since the 9/11 attacks. Gareth Farmer alleges that the Nadsat words, of Russian and other origins, create a “lexical brutality,” specifically identifying britva (razor), cal (shit), and nosh (knife) as “word derivations [that] contribute to the dominant tone orchestrated by the Slavic lexis” (54-55). This assumption is shaky, as there is nothing inherently violent about a language. Farmer is more to the point when he writes that Nadsat is a “clash of discourses out of which emerges the third compound element which … is something else entirely” (60). There is violence itself, and there are words to describe violent actions or objects. If the reader finds the Russianized slang harsh, it is because it is used to replace words like razor, shit, and knife, which are used in harsh contexts. For a reader who has no particular associations with Russian, there is a sense of unspecific foreignness and unfamiliarity which, too, disguises the actions the language describes. Even if the reader knows Russian, the abbreviated and anglicized versions of words still signal a departure from standard language. As a result, the language becomes a “mist” that allows the reader to tolerate and adjust to the violent situations.

In addition, Burgess sets up a paradox between our positive connotation with certain words and the violence they convey in his dystopic fictional universe. For instance, in the line “‘So we goolied up to him, very polite, and I said: ‘Pardon me, brother’” (6), Emmanuel Aretoulakis notes that “‘gentle’ [used as a] preliminary to the beginning of violence, demonstrates that for these youths harassing people is in the daily routine and constitutes a perfectly normal activity” (42). The polite greeting – “Pardon me, brother” – suggests a thoughtful, well-spoken, gentle teenager. The greeting is perhaps overdone, but the reader would be more sympathetic to a charming, cheeky teen; even veiled sarcasm would be an acceptable
social transgression. However, what follows this seemingly polite greeting is an unprovoked attack on an elderly gentleman.

Burgess repeats this dissonance between actual meaning and particular usage with individual words, too, suggesting that Nadsat slang mimics the way slang can operate in real life. For example, in the novel, the word “horrorshow” means “good.” Burgess derived “horrorshow” from the Russian “khorosho,” meaning good (You’ve Had Your Time 40). Although we hear and recognize “horror” in the word and assume a negative connotation, lines such as “I turned on the ignition and started her up and she grumbled away real horrorshow, a nice warm vibraty feeling grumbling all through your guttiwuts” suggest that the narrator is using it as a positive descriptor (A Clockwork Orange 22). Although there is an etymological explanation for “horrorshow,” the reader does not know that, and Burgess chooses to anglicize the word in a way he knows is misleading, so even a Russian speaker might not immediately recognize it. Yet, paradoxical slang is not entirely fictional. For example, the word “wicked” has been used in English to mean “good” or “very” instead of its traditional meaning of “evil.” “Wicked” meaning “good” was first used in the United Kingdom (Coleman 18), while “wicked” meaning “very” is attributed to Massachusetts (Eaton 66-67; Celona 45-46). Jennie M. Celona’s research on international college students, including native English speakers, reveals the complexities of understanding slang and colloquialisms. One Canadian student recalled, “When somebody would come up and say they had a wicked good time, I didn’t know what the hell they meant … I goes ‘Well, which was it … good or bad?’” (Celona 46). Native English speakers may feel excluded when the usage of a known word contradicts how it is used by a member of a different social group. However, after learning its slang meaning, speakers become part of the in-group. Readers of A
Clockwork Orange are assimilated to the text by learning the lexicon and becoming insiders as they increase their exposure to the language.

Farmer argues that not only does this exposure assimilate the reader into the language, it “violently manipulates our schematic of normality (focalised through language) against those of the comprehension of the absurd” (61). According to Farmer, acclimation to the language is acclimation to violence because Burgess’ lexicon is composed of violent words or violent-connotating words. The most obvious example is the term “ultra-violent,” used by Alex to mean “rape.” The term itself literally includes violence and speaks much more directly to the action that is being described, even if we initially cannot recognize it as doing so. This produces an interesting contradiction: while “ultra-violent” is much more explicit in its meaning than rape, it also accustoms the reader to the commonness of violence because it is unspecific in the type of violence it names. In other words, by renaming rape as the ultra-violent, the violence of rape is given greater attention, but there is no delineation between rape and other violence, and there is no subsequent change in society’s response to this violence. If anything, the fact that Alex and his friends receive no punishment for rape is evidence that the dystopian society has a higher tolerance for violence and lacks appropriate recompense.

This effect of the higher tolerance for violence is witnessed in Alex’s cool detachment and precise explanations of violence as it occurs and as he partakes in it. Alex not only tolerates but desires violence. For him, violence is an outlet to the urges he feels. Since violence is normal by his standards, he can describe its occurrence dispassionately. For instance, he describes his fight with Dim: “So I swished with the britva at his left noga in its very tight tight and I slashed two inches of cloth and drew a malenky drop of krovvy to make Dim real bezoomny” (59). In the midst of a knife fight with a supposed friend, Alex clearly – almost scientifically – describes
his own actions to the reader. His narration is devoid of emotion, even though emotions, primarily pride, drove the two to fight. As Farmer writes, “It is almost as if the processes of rationalism which are used are being perverted out of the service of the Good to justify a flagrant crime” (56). Alex – well-groomed, particular, and in control – lends a false air of “Goodness” to the violence he commits, though the reader and Alex himself know that Alex is not good. This manipulation is driven by Burgess, and the logical language of Alex’s narration has a similar paradoxical effect as some of his vocabulary.

Alex’s emotional detachment and quasi-logic are a skill that he abuses to manipulate those around him, not only the reader. He is able to lead his droogs because he is more articulate than them; no one else can out-speak him or think of plans with better logic. For instance, in justifying his right to be the group leader, Alex says:

This sarcasm, if I may call it such, does not become you, O my little friends. Perhaps you have been having a bit of a quiet govoreet behind my back, making your own little jokes and such-like. As I am your droog and leader, surely I am entitled to know what goes on, eh? (55)

His speech is, as usual, full of Nadsat vocabulary. However, if we examine the structure of his sentences, they are complex; a trademark of Alex’s speech is how he arranges clauses so that the action appears later in the sentence. He does this in the first and third sentences of the passage above. Further, he delivers his argument in a strategic, rhetorical manner. He first criticizes his friends, then reveals that he knows more than they think he does, and finally asserts his right to be leader, based on the established argument that he knows more and knows better. Alex’s speaking style differs from that of his friends, who use Nadsat but do not speak in Alex’s stylized manner. By contrast, the friends use simpler sentence structure and repeat themselves: ““No
offence, Alex,’ said Pete, ‘but we wanted to have things more democratic like. Not like you like saying what to do and what not all the time. But no offence’” (56). Pete’s manner of speaking is much less intelligent than Alex’s and does not match Alex’s charisma. Alex uses his smooth-talking and seemingly hyper-rationality to evade and even manipulate his parents and PR Deltoid, too, in addition to his friends.

The reader is gradually assimilated into Burgess’ dystopian world as she learns to decode its language. Burgess describes his intention: “As the book [is] about brainwashing, it [is] appropriate that the text itself should be a brainwashing device” (You’ve Had Your Time 38). However, to consider the effect of the language as brainwashing does not give the reader the credit she deserves, as the reader is capable of identifying and challenging the paradoxes that Burgess presents. Between childish terminology that softens harsh realities, foreign-sounding slang that disguises that which it describes, and paradoxical meanings of words, all delivered by a cunning and detached narrator, Burgess constructs a language that assimilates the reader into the dystopian world and makes political commentary on Cold War politics as well as social critique on the relationship between how words sound and how the speaker behaves.

The invented languages of The Handmaid’s Tale and A Clockwork Orange render them similar in a number of ways: they are a point of resistance for characters as well as an avenue for authors’ social critique. Each language functions differently in its text, though, as Nadsat is spoken to resist norms and to mystify violence, while the Gileadean language is one that is imposed and resisted. If Nadsat reveals a number of flaws in Alex’s character, Offred’s use of language demonstrates her resiliency and the power of language to resist her oppression. Overall, the role of the invented languages is to establish a unique set of terminology that illuminates the social structure or culture of the dystopia. Language that is specific to the dystopia allows the
characters to describe their unique, fictional societies and allows the readers to understand the tenets and flaws of these societies.
Chapter 2: Violence and Dystopia

In both cases, the invented languages of the novels give particular insight into disturbingly violent dystopic societies. The language can code or interpret the violence; it can clearly reveal the violence, or it can serve as a mist between the reader and violence. Violence becomes the defining feature of the dystopia. By representing violence and defining dystopias on the basis of violence, both Atwood and Burgess draw attention to unequal power dynamics, the abuse of power, and show the disturbing consequences of these conditions, again linking the societies they describe to our contemporary world. In *A Clockwork Orange*, violent power relations are both interpersonal and political. Alex and his friends abuse their relative social and physical power by attacking women/girls and/or the elderly, and, moreover, the state is portrayed as corrupt and hypocritical in its violent pursuit of controlling citizens. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, similar power dynamics emerge among individuals but more strongly between the state and individuals, as it is the state that imposes and regulates much of the novel’s violence. Specifically, the state targets women and uses violence and threats to force women to conform to the restrictive society of the state’s design. By identifying the gendered aspect of this violence and its root in patriarchal culture as well as demonstrating how resistance is formed, Atwood critiques violent patriarchy without victimizing women.

The violence of each text reveals power dynamics that are displayed in the social structures of the dystopian world. In both *Clockwork* and *Handmaid’s*, violence is enacted and perpetuated by individuals and the state, the latter more powerful than the former. Each narrative carries this mission out in unique ways: in *Clockwork*, Alex is a perpetrator of violence; he attacks, steals, and rapes at random, thus confirming society’s fears of the unruly youth. Conversely,
Handmaid’s Offred, and all of Gilead’s women, are oppressed by the government. Because of this different positionality within the larger society, the individual experience of violence is different for each narrator. Yet both texts demonstrate that individual violence and state violence are inextricable. However, Handmaid’s takes into greater consideration the effect of violence on its victims, especially when the victims are women. Through the character of Offred, Atwood shows the effect of Gileadean violence on women: violence inflicted by one individual against another as well as violence mandated by the state, particularly through ritual. Atwood pays particular attention to how the Gileadean system was created through social and political pressure and in doing so critiques familiar and existing systems of social and political hierarchies. As in Clockwork, violence is the result of unbalanced power dynamics; by taking a feminist lens to these dynamics, Atwood yields a differing perspective on dystopia.

**Extreme Violence and Social Critique**

In A Clockwork Orange, Burgess presents an utterly violent world. As discussed in the previous section, the novel’s invented language allows the reader to become simultaneously more familiar and also more aware of the text’s violence. This allows Burgess to highlight power dynamics that resonate with the reader’s own world, extending his social critique beyond the world of the text. By including familiar power dynamics in his dystopic world pervaded by disturbing violence, Burgess plays with the reader’s reaction to and perception of violence throughout the novel as a means of social critique. As a result, the reader cannot simply disparage the familiar – such as crime cover-up or police brutality – without also engaging in introspection and critical thought regarding the relationship of the text’s violence to that of her own society.
Burgess illuminates a familiar power dynamic between violent aggressor and victim by representing Alex as strong and powerful and his victims as weak and powerless. In several instances throughout the text, Alex’s acts of violence are directed toward the weakest members of society, which often makes the violence more disturbing and shows how deeply power structures go into social life. In the first chapter, for instance, Alex and his gang are simply in the mood to be violent, and Alex says as much, that they’re looking for “a malenky jest to start off the evening with.” They attack an older man – “a doddery starry schoolmaster type veck” – first destroying the books he is carrying and then physically attacking him, taking and destroying his false teeth, ripping his clothing, and punching and kicking him (7). This man is chosen for his weak physical appearance as well as because he appears to be middle-class. While Alex’s victims are random in the sense that they are strangers, they are chosen with a distinct awareness of social status. Alex demonstrates his awareness of the age and class differences between him and his victim in his interior monologue: “You never really saw many of the older bourgeois type out after nightfall those days, what with the shortage of police and we fine young malchickiwicks about” (7). Here and throughout the text, attention is drawn to age and class differences and the fear that they inspire. Alex is acutely aware of how he is perceived because of these inequalities. An important aspect of Alex’s characterization is his awareness, even of his own violent actions. Yet despite his awareness, he feels no remorse. In fact, he enjoys causing discomfort and physical pain. His description of the attacked man is evidence of his pleasure: “then out comes the blood, my brothers, real beautiful.” Further, he is aware of how he and his social set are perceived by society, and he takes joy in confirming bourgeois fears.

We can draw a parallel between the violent youths of the text and society’s fears at the time of its publication. The 1950s and 1960s were known for – among other social changes – the
emergence of a new youth culture and counter-culture. Other texts of the period that express inter-generational tension include S.E. Hinton’s novel *The Outsiders* (1967) and the film *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955). In these texts that feature deviant youth – who are often foiled with more obedient youth or angry parental figures, or they are associated with differences in social class – violence is often portrayed as an inevitable outcome of lifestyle conflicts. In such texts, young and socially deviant characters usually pose less of a threat to society than society believes. The purpose of such narratives is to demonstrate that new or different forms of rebellion are not inherently bad. By contrast, Burgess challenges the idea of innocent youth and innocent rebellion by creating young, deviant characters who are indeed harmful to society. Rather than reflecting the relatively shallow fears regarding sexual promiscuity and inter-class relationships that were seen in *The Outsiders* and *Rebel Without a Cause*, Burgess creates characters so immoral that they reflect a much deeper darkness that pervades society.

The desire of society to restrain and control the youth is a constant theme throughout the text. In one scene, Alex is reading the newspaper in which the writer of an opinion article claims to know what is wrong with young people and why they behave so violently. Alex comments on the constant discussion of “Modern Youth,” and shares the most recent article, in which a “man of Bog” claims “IT WAS THE DEVIL THAT WAS ABROAD … ferreting his way into like young innocent flesh” who is to blame for the transgressions of youths. The writer blames “no parental discipline … and the shortage of real horrorshow teachers who would lambast bloody beggary out of their innocent poops” (45-46). The concern over changes in parenting and the diminishing of corporeal punishment is relevant to this era, which saw changes in family dynamics and social norms. Some of these changes are referenced in the text. For instance, Alex notes that his mother works in a grocery store as it now required for “everybody not a child nor
with child nor ill” to work (40), showing the new social pressures emerging from the need for more women to work to support their families and the economy in a struggling post-war Britain. Like all elements of this novel’s dystopia, societal tensions and shifts are represented through extremes. In this case, while laws enforce universal employment, the youth now freed of parental oversight behave with extreme violence, to which the state responds with extreme regulation. Thus, in Burgess’ fictional world, the dichotomy between youth and elders is even more extreme than it is in real society or other texts that explore the difference between youth and older members of society. Attempts as in the above article to claim to understand social ills are criticized for their lack of perspective and overall inaccuracy. Burgess seeks to criticize both the government that exercises such rigid control of its citizens, as well as the citizens who misidentify where blame for social ills should be placed.

We see similar critiques of misguided attempts at understanding the youth throughout the novel. One headline claims: “Modern Youth would be better off if A Lively Appreciation Of The Arts could be like encouraged. Great Music … and Great Poetry would … make Modern Youth more Civilized” (46). Ironically, Alex enjoys classical music, Beethoven’s Ninth in particular, and listening to classical music incites in him feelings of violence and sexuality. Thus, the novel satirizes the psychological, esoteric opinions of older society by exposing them as ridiculous: an “expert” identifies the Arts as a cure-all while Alex uses classical music to stir his violent sexual fantasies. Though society recognizes that youth violence is an issue to be addressed, there is clearly a lack of understanding of how to prevent it. Alex is perfectly aware of this lack of understanding, which makes him able to effectively navigate society. The dramatic (over)use of capitalization in the article above parodies what society traditionally deems important. Its absurdity in the text reveals its pointlessness in other contexts. The inflated sense of intelligence
that the capitalization conveys is then easily undermined by Alex. Alex’s intelligent and impervious affect have a dual effect of making him seem all the more dangerous to the reader, and also to make the reader complicit with Alex’s social critique, as she also recognizes how ridiculous this analysis of Modern Youth is.

Alex’s awareness of how his violence is perceived by society manifests itself as emotionally removed descriptions of him acting violently, though it is evident that he desires his victims to feel pain. Alex’s abuse of his own social and physical power is again portrayed when he and his friends force their way into the home of a young couple and attack them, assaulting the man and raping and killing the woman. In this instance of violence, it becomes clear that Alex is motivated by desiring the pain of his victims. “What we were after now was the old surprise visit. That was a real kick and good for smeks and lashings of the ultra-violent” (23). He anticipates enjoying – “a real kick” – the feeling of invading someone’s home and raping them. Yet, during the rape scene, Alex remains emotionally removed as he describes how Dim physically restrains the woman while he, Alex, rips off her clothing, takes pleasure in her physical appearance, and rapes her. Aside from his evaluation of the woman’s “real good horrorshow groodies … that then exhibited their pink glazzies,” or breasts, Alex’s narration of this scene is focused more on what is happening around him rather than what he is doing. He perceives the “cries of agony and this writer bleeding veck … nearly got loose howling bezoomny with the filthiest of slovos” but does not describe, as a reader might expect, his physical or emotional response to his own actions (27). Afterwards, in the “like quiet,” Alex shares that the gang is “full of like hate,” channeling their anger into destroying the home in addition to the people who live there. For Alex, destroying ornaments and shredding papers has a more concrete, describable action: “I swept [the ornaments] all off then and they couldn’t shake
no more, little brothers” (27). There are a couple ways to interpret this scene. One is to imagine that Alex does not enjoy the violence as much as he enjoys the anticipation of violence, as his lack of response to the violence contrasts with the language he uses to foresee it. The other is that this lack of response is Alex’s (and Burgess’) way of shielding the reader from a graphic account of sexual violence.

Alex again demonstrates his awareness of how his actions are perceived even if he does not have the same reaction to his behavior as does the reader. When Alex and the gang leave the house they have just pillaged, Alex narrates, “The writer veck and his zheena were not really there, bloody and torn and making noises. But they’d live” (28). (His assessment is wrong – Alex and the reader later discover that the woman died.) By noting that his victims will survive the attack, Alex seems to understand the physical consequences of his violence and that the reader wants to know if his victims live or die. However, as he feels no remorse, this comment also underlines his sociopathy. Through this characterization, Burgess sets the reader up to be even more horrified by the gang’s actions.

Simultaneously, there is an element of desensitization that occurs as a result of the fact that the reader witnesses the violence through Alex’s narrative perspective. This perspective necessarily distorts the violence through Alex’s perverse pleasure and lack of guilt. In the scene in which he rapes the two young girls, he identifies the “strange and weird desires of Alexander the Large which, what with the Ninth and the hypo jab, were chooodessny and zammecchat and very demanding” (51). By this account, the source of his desire – or at least a driver of it – is not his own sexuality but Beethoven’s Ninth symphony, combined with some drug he’s injected. He acknowledges that his desires are “demanding” but expresses no guilt for the subsequent pain he causes his victims. Again, by using this strange, invented language to code the violence –
“choodessny” and “zammechat” are not common in Alex’s Nadsat narration – Burgess figuratively holds the reader at arm’s length from the narrative.

But despite this distance, the text is incessantly invested in understanding the power dynamics that underlie such violence. For instance, it is evident that in addition to being brutal and remorseless, Alex is also cowardly. Though he looks down on his friends, Dim in particular, for their intellectual inferiority, he knows he would never be able to take part in the violence he does without their physical intimidation and prowess in fighting. It is no coincidence that when he is on his own, Alex targets two young girls and rather than physically overpower them, he intoxicates and drugs them in order to rape them.

Alex’s rape of the two young girls reveals his cowardliness as well as his sexual idiosyncrasies, as he is more aroused by stimuli like music than sex itself. In this scene, Alex again demonstrates an awareness of the unspeakability of his actions by narrating: “What was actually done that afternoon there is no need to describe, brothers, as you may easily guess all,” and later adding: “But they were both very very drunken and could hardly feel very much” (50-51). Here, too, Burgess grants the reader a slight reprieve in not describing the violent action of the rape. However, the reprieve could also serve to desensitize the reader, as the reader can only interpret the scene through Alex’s description of his actions, which are coded in Nadsat and euphemism. The fact that Alex is driven by external stimuli, in this case the Beethoven music playing, suggests a perverse way in which Alex is a product of, rather than only a rebel from, the culture in which he lives. The elements of the music that effectively turn Alex on – after he’s intoxicated the girls and decided to rape them – are: “the bass strings like govoreeting away … then the male human goloss coming in … then the lovely blissful tune … and then I felt the old tigers leap in me and then I leapt on these two young ptitsas” (50-51). Similar to the previous
example in which Alex is more in-tune to what he hears around him, in this instance, Alex cannot perform sexually until he has been aroused by the music. In both rape scenes, Alex’s seeming disconnect between the action in which he is engaged – rape – and the other stimuli that attract his narrative attention – music, in this scene – reveals an idiosyncrasy, which could be a way to shield the reader from the violence of the rape, or speak to the inextricability between violence and art.

As the rape scenes indicate, the most extreme violence in the text is gendered. This reflects the pervasiveness of gendered violence in real life as well, but it does so without recuperating women as dynamic characters. Although he acknowledges the gendered aspect of violence through the disproportionate violence experienced by women in the novel, Burgess does not do anything to give these women a voice or identity beyond victimhood. His male-centric narrative is echoed in Alex’s use of “brothers” as an address to an unseen male audience; for instance, Alex invokes “O my brothers” while narrating both rape scenes. Burgess’ failure to fully address disparate power between men and women will be contrasted to Atwood’s rigorous analysis of it.

However, it is also possible that by assuming a male reader, Burgess seeks to implicate the reader in the violence of the text in uncomfortable and provocative ways. By narrating this violence from the perspective of the remorseless perpetrator, Burgess puts the reader in the position of participating by proxy. As discussed previously, Burgess assumes that the violence in the text will speak to the reader’s “baser instincts.” However, since the reader is not Alex, there is a conflict between Alex’s remorselessness and the reader’s reaction to the violence. By implicating the reader in the violence, Burgess forces the reader to come to terms with their reaction to Alex’s violence and lack of moral consequence. Undoubtedly, the reader brings their own awareness and experiences with violent crimes to the text; this will impact their reading.
Since there is a disparity between men’s versus women’s experiences in the text, as the well-rounded (and violent) characters are men and the victims are women, and the assumed readership is male, the reader’s sense of implication or participation, whether desired or not, is affected by the reader’s own gender identity as well.

Yet, as we learn, the novel is not just a criticism of an individual, violent sociopath; rather, as we read on, there is a shift in the source of violence and, subsequently, in where the reader’s sympathies are directed. Increasingly, we see how a violent, remorseless Alex becomes a victim of the violent, unjust practices of law enforcement and other government forces. Ironically, the law enforcement is ineffective at capturing criminals as evidenced by their inability to catch Alex until he is betrayed. Although the police know that Alex partakes in criminal activity, they struggle to catch him. P.R. Deltoid, Alex’s Post-Corrective Adviser, vocalizes the law enforcement’s frustration with its inability to prove that Alex is committing crimes, saying that Alex’s name has been associated with “ nastiness.” Deltoid says “The word has got through to me by the usual channels … Oh, nobody can prove anything about anybody, as usual.” Deltoid, who can be seen as a representative of the state and its powers (and weaknesses), emblemizes the government by threatening Alex. “We know more than you think, little Alex,” using a “we” that invokes a larger force working behind the scenes (43). Despite any intelligence law enforcement has on Alex, he is only caught when his gang betrays him and leaves him for the police to find. “‘Away,’ [Alex] creeched to Dim. ‘The rozzes are coming.’ Dim said: ‘You stay to meet them huh huh huh’” (70). Dim whips Alex in the face, leaving him temporarily blind and unable to run away; the police are only too happy to find him. Thus, the reader’s first impression of law enforcement, before they become violent, is that they are bumbling and ineffective at catching criminals, though no less threatening for their inefficacy.
P.R. Deltoid’s corruption shows that the state is not immune from the society’s violent power dynamics. Demonstrating his disingenuousness in “helping” Alex to become a better, law-abiding person, P.R. Deltoid reveals that arresting Alex is really for his own personal reputation rather than a belief in law and order: “Next time it’s going to be the barry place and all my work ruined. If you have no consideration for your horrible self you at least might have some for me, who have sweated over you’” (42). Throughout the text, self-interest is a recurring theme among characters – not only for the violent thugs, but for the officers of the law as well. Alex is selfish, but when social workers or police officers with their own violent and vindictive agendas, or government officials seeking reelection and criminal reform at any cost, display this selfishness, the widespread effects of self-interest become apparent and alarming. P.R. Deltoid’s violent and immoral nature is further demonstrated when Alex is arrested, and the social worker spits on his client’s face.

Though the police should be representative of justice and good conduct, they are just as morally corrupt as Alex, prompting the reader to question who, if anyone, is good. In this novel, the police overcompensate for their fallibility and incompetence by acting violently and unlawfully toward the (alleged) criminals they arrest. When Alex asks for a lawyer, the police laugh at him, and a “top millicent” punches him in the stomach. Alex responds with a kick, and then they all beat on him (75-76). This is the true start of Burgess’ representation of the violence, corruption, and injustice of the criminal justice system. Alex even thinks “if all you bastards are on the side of the Good then I’m glad I belong to the other shop” (77). Here, Alex, despite being unapologetic for his own wrongdoing, correctly identifies the irony that those with the power to enforce law and enact justice are no less morally corrupt than him. He even claims that his position is preferable; perhaps it is better to be bad and know it than to be bad and feel
that it is being done for the good of society. Later, we see this system of criminal management carried out in prison as well: when doling out punishment, the guards are indiscriminate. “It wasn’t me, it was him, see,’ but that made no difference,” Alex observes as one prisoner is beaten for disrupting a church service (89). There is further commentary on the prison system as Alex describes the “very criminal but, Bog be praised, not given to perversions” men with whom he shares a cell. Alex describes an overcrowded institution that does not care for the well-being of those in its care, reminiscent of real-life prison systems that do not dignify the humanity of inmates. As Alex describes his cellmates, a seventh prisoner is brought into the cell which was designed to hold three (95). Alex observes the law enforcement’s abuse of power and the failings of the prison system. Both as a youth contributing to the crisis of violence and as a number in the system – 6655321 – Alex highlights each place where the system fails: first, failing to capture criminals, then, treating them unlawfully, and finally, imprisoning them in an overcrowded and dangerous place where they are subject to still more indiscriminate violence.

Even in prison, Alex finds ways to satisfy his violent urges, which would suggest that the state is hardly the arbiter of morality and the law. In a characteristic if sacrilegious vein, Alex finds sexual pleasure in the violent passages of the Bible, referencing “these starry yahoodies tolchocking each other … and getting on to the bed with their wives’ like handmaidens … That kept me going, brothers” (89). He also adopts an affinity for religion, which allows him to listen to the classical music that evokes in him a violent and sexual response. Finally, Alex murders one of his cellmates in a fit of rage. Alex’s violence in prison is a reflection of the inefficacy of the state’s prison system, which can be extended as Burgess’ criticism of the violence that takes place in real prisons and the inefficacy of contemporary society’s prison system.
The state’s most dramatic use of violence is demonstrated when Alex is taken from prison and subjected to the Ludovico technique, a type of aversion therapy that is supposed to prevent its victims from acting or thinking violently; any time he experiences violence, he will become ill (93;104-105). This fictional, violent state “remedy” for social ills serves as Burgess’ critique of how the state operates, attempting to restrain and control human nature for the potential benefit of good publicity and efficient economics.

It is during his Ludovico treatment that Alex realizes his powerlessness relative to the state. Initially, Alex assumes the state is naïve in its approach – “I had a real horrorshow smeck at everybody’s like innocence and I was smecking my gulliver off when they brought in my lunch on a tray” – which shows that he does not comprehend what is happening to him; he has been left ignorant of how the treatment works. His ignorance, of which the state takes advantage, is demonstrated in his assumption that he is being injected with vitamins rather than the more sinister treatment drug (110-111). Once the treatment starts, however, and watching violent film footage makes him physically ill, Alex quickly guesses that his body is being manipulated. He realizes “what a bezoomny shoot I was not to notice that it was the hypodermic shots in the rooker” (129). Moreover, once he begins the treatment, he has no power to stop it and return to prison. When he tries to escape the treatment center by tricking a guard and physically overpowering him, Alex finds that attempting the violence makes him ill and upset; “I had to escape into sleep from then was the horrible and wrong feeling that it was better to get hit than give it. If that veck had stayed I might even have like presented the other cheek” (135). He is aware of the autonomy he is losing but cannot prevent its continued loss.

Alex’s subjection to the Ludovico treatment and the manipulation of his bodily responses to violent thought and action are the height of Burgess’ critique of the government’s abuse of
power. Alex becomes a powerless and disenfranchised individual at the mercy of the state. This is clearer than ever at the end of Alex’s treatment when he is set before an audience to demonstrate its effects. Dr. Brodsky, who conducted the treatment, narrates Alex’s “performance” of the treatment’s effects to the audience while Alex is provoked by a man who insults and hurts him. Alex attempts to avoid responding to the provocateur with violence because doing so makes him feel nauseated. This public performance of the treatment’s “success” is both lauded and criticized by onlookers who appreciate its efficacy and bemoan its immorality, respectively (138-142). The exercise is then repeated with a woman who is supposed to tempt Alex to sexually assault her. But Alex has been turned into a “true Christian” in the words of Dr. Brodsky and subjugates himself to the woman, offering to “worship” and protect her: “Let me be like your true knight,’ and down I went again on the old knees, bowing and like scraping” (143). Here, Burgess reveals the state’s hypocrisy by including Alex’s observation that some onlookers looked at the woman with “dirty and like unholy desire” (143). Onlookers, all of whom work for the government, experience perverse pleasure while Alex, powerless under the effects of the treatment, suffers. Burgess exposes the hypocrisy of the state, revealing that it is more interested in using its power to control citizens rather than implement morality.

By using its power as a governing body to humiliate Alex in front of a crowd, by inducing him to moral standards to which other citizens might not be held, Alex is positioned as a victim of state power. Though Alex is the first criminal to undergo this treatment, there is no limit on how widely it can be applied, which some audience members note in dismay. This dark possibility is foreshadowed in a subtle reveal of other government abuses when the governor says, before Alex begins treatment, “Soon we may be needing all our prison space for political offenders” (102). If this implies that the Ludovico technique could also be used as government
mind-control for political thought rather than just violent behavior, and if the decisions regarding who will be subject and what they will know about its effects happen behind closed doors, then there are endless opportunities for the government to abuse its power over its citizens.

Even after his “successful” treatment, Alex remains a victim of unjustly applied state power. Within a day of his release, he discovers that his former friend Dim and former enemy Billy have become police officers. Having a personal disliking for Alex, they – in their roles as police officers – drive Alex to a remote place, beat him up, and leave him there. Again, Alex shields the reader by saying “I will not go into what they did,” but it is evident that he is the victim of violence when he finishes the sentence by saying “it was all like panting and thudding against this like background of whirring farm engines and the twittwittwittering in the bare or nagoy branches” (168-169). Alex suggests that he was hit in the face, but based on his description of “panting and thudding,” these noises could refer to sexual assault as well. Regardless of the extent of the violence, this scene is a pointed critique of law enforcement: Dim and Billy are just as violent and criminal as Alex, and yet they have been absurdly hired as police officers. They abuse their positions to attack Alex without consequence; another officer drives them all around and does not object to Dim and Billy’s actions. Meanwhile, Alex has been “cured” of his criminality; he poses no threat to the state and thus there can be no justifiable, matching violence on the part of the state.

The text’s introspection on what it means to be good versus bad suggests that eradicating all immoral behavior by state violence is not in fact a moral action. Before his arrest, Alex comments on his own “badness” and how it stands in opposition to the government:
But the not-self cannot have the bad, meaning they of the government and the judges and the schools cannot allow the bad because they cannot allow the self. And is not our modern history, my brothers, the story of brave malenky selves fighting these big machines? (44-45)

Alex’s logic is that institutions reject the “bad” alongside every other human trait and, in doing so, they reject individuality and humanity. It is a poignant statement to make about institutions and the relationship between the institution and the individual. Yet, it suggests that Alex, and perhaps Burgess as well, believes that badness is inherent to humanity. This is evidenced by Alex’s growth; in the final chapter, he has discovered that he is aging out of his angsty, violent stage and instead wants to settle down with a family of his own. Though this change of heart is barely believable, the weighty symbols of Alex’s development – much like the extremity of his violence – serve the argument that, if left to their own devices, people can grow and change.

Burgess puts faith in the ability to change and make moral choices that differ from past choices. If people can do this on their own, the state is criticized for dehumanizing people and preventing their natural tendency toward goodness. Any power the government tries to assert over its people’s freedom to choose from good and bad is an abuse of the government’s power; the government serves as a greater danger to its people than its people do to one another. The flaw of the state in this text is that rather than make changes to encourage goodness, such as just and fair law enforcement and prison systems, which would also protect citizens, the state would rather control its citizens’ decision-making power.

Thus, despite the fact that Alex is evidently a danger to society, Burgess is persuasive in demonstrating that it is the state that creates a violent reality in which individuals act violently as a means of succeeding or surviving. This suggests that violence is not an individual issue but one that pervades society to its core. The state’s size, its ability to cover-up its actions and be
secretive, and its potential for indiscriminate abuse make its violence potentially irredeemable. The violence of the individual cannot be separated from that of the state because they interact in the same spaces, and one is part of the other.

Indeed, the state continues to act violently even after Alex has been “cured.” Despite no longer being violent, Alex neither comforts the victims of his former crimes nor feels remorseful. Rather, he still feels pity only for himself, while his victims experience no sense of justice as Alex is released from prison. In the scene preceding Alex’s assault at the hands of Dim and Billy, the police are called when Alex is being beaten by the angry old men at the library, spearheaded by the man Alex and his gang assaulted a couple years previously. The police respond with unnecessary violence, “They were lashing into these starry old vecks with great bolshy glee and joy” (165). The officers who find sadistic pleasure in “controlling” crime are hypocritical in exercising violence in a situation where it’s unwarranted. By heightening rather than mitigating the situation, the officers fail to act morally and reveal a broken system.

Although the Ludovico treatment was meant to reform Alex, even when it “succeeds,” Alex fails to develop morals. When he is discovered by the aforementioned old man he assaulted two years previously and whose rare books he destroyed, Alex still does not feel any guilt. He’s surprised and irritated that the man still cares, and he is more focused on his own suffering, which has caused suicidal thoughts, or at least explaining to the old man that he’s changed rather than taking responsibility for his past behavior (162-163). Neither does he feel guilty about imposing on the hospitality of the writer who he had previously assaulted. Before realizing who Alex is, the writer says to him, “‘your punishment has been out of all proportion … To turn a decent young man into a piece of clockwork should not, surely, be seen as any triumph for any government’” (174-175). But the writer reacts volatily to the thought that Alex might be a
perpetrator in his wife’s death: “showing his stained zoobies, his glazzies mad … ‘For, by Christ, if he were, I’d tear him. I’d split him, by God, yes yes, so I would’” (184), contradicting with his purported beliefs that criminals should be treated with greater kindness by the state. His reaction indicates that curing criminals using the Ludovico technique brings no sense of justice to the survivors of criminal violence. Instead of recognizing this, the government proves further inefficacy by arresting the writer while Alex is given princely treatment because of the bad press the government has gotten. “‘There is a man … a writer of subversive literature, who has been howling for your blood … We put him away for his own protection,’” says the Interior Minister, who chose to subject Alex to the Ludovico technique, to Alex (198). It is important for the state to treat Alex kindly for publicity purposes, and the writer poses a threat to the state. Therefore, the state preserves power by arresting the writer and making amends with Alex. There are no further government actions described so it is impossible to determine how the government of this dystopia will act in the future. Burgess leaves the reader with no hope of the institution’s recognition of its systemic issues or pursuit of effective change, though he offers Alex’s transformation as a token of optimism.

Thus, the pervasive violence in the novel is Burgess’ way of criticizing power dynamics that sacrifice the individual for the benefit of the state and, regardless, yield no social or moral progress. This misplace belief in the state as the guarantor of morality is also recognizable in the reader’s own world. For instance, police brutality in the United States, which is disproportionately directed against marginalized people, black men in particular, demonstrates a systemic failure within the police force to uphold justice and ensure safety for all. Through highlighting certain types of violence, how violence and criminals are treated by the government,
and how (in)justice is served, Burgess argues that even when regular citizens act violently, individual criminality is inextricably linked with the institutional abuse of power.

Gender, Power, and Violence

In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Atwood, too, portrays a violent world, although she approaches the causes and effects of violence through a different lens. Violence is woven into the culture and law of the Republic of Gilead. It pervades life in the form of social control, like forcing women to become Handmaids or face exile and imminent death, rituals, such as the forced sex between Handmaid and Commander, and social events, like Salvagings, where women must participate in the execution of other women. The threat of violence, too, pervades every-day life, as minor transgressions have major consequences, and flaws in the system result in innocent deaths. The extent of violent policy and punishment is such that the Republic of Gilead would not exist without the violence; yet, the structure and causes of the violence make it familiar to a contemporary reader. In this way, the violence of Atwood’s dystopic world is rendered believable, and perhaps all the more frightening as a result.

Gilead uses its totalitarian power to target women by establishing rules and threatening violence as punishment for breaking the rules. For example, the state exerts power over individuals by enforcing a rigid social hierarchy focused on the division of gender and social class. Each social role is assigned duties, rules to follow, and a social value. The ubiquitous threat of punishment by death is another way that the state maintains its control over its people. By establishing rituals such as the Salvaging, at which women who have transgressed in any way are publicly executed, the state flexes its power and threatens the living with death. As angry as Offred – and presumably nearly every Handmaid – is about the oppression they face, it is clear that fear tactics work. When potentially faced with her demise at the end of the text, Offred
reveals her fear of dying: “Everything they taught at the Red Center, everything I’ve resisted, comes flooding in. I don’t want pain … I resign my body freely, to the uses of others … I am abject … I feel, for the first time, their true power” (286). Offred’s reaction signifies the power of the state to coerce her into conformity. Though she says she gives herself “freely,” she is under the control of the state whether they kill her or use her for any other purposes. It is telling that she relinquishes her body for use as that is what Gilead values in her. Any entity that poses the choice between death and complete lack of freedom is one that has enormous power that it uses for immoral purposes.

The state’s abuse of power is even more apparent in *Handmaid’s* than in *Clockwork*. The government of each text is similar in the sense that there are distinct social roles and a hierarchy which determines one’s lifestyle and quality of life. By limiting information and disregarding justice, both texts show worlds in which the government holds excessive power. In *Handmaid’s*, however, it is more extreme. For instance, in Gilead, women are valued only for their ability to produce children. Daphne Patai describes this phenomenon as one in which “women are reduced to their biological function, out of which is constructed an entire social identity” (Patai 88). She attributes this to a “cult of masculinity,” a result of a “preoccupation with domination, power, and violence” (87). Patai identifies the disparity in a text’s recognition of gender as a factor in domination, power, and violence as it occurs between George Orwell’s canonical *1984* (1949) and Katharine Burdekin’s relatively unknown *Swastika Night* (1937). Orwell’s novel describes a fearful and violent society ruled by a totalitarian regime. Burdekin’s novel, too, describes a totalitarian regime but clearly identifies how male domination, power, and violence, rooted in socialization, are a plague to society. The relationship between *1984* and *Swastika Night* is similar to the one between *A Clockwork Orange* and *The Handmaid’s Tale*, particularly with
regard to the treatment of gender and power. Although *Clockwork* shows that violence is gendered (rather than random), it does not address that masculinity is the culprit, whereas *Handmaid’s* identifies the patriarchal hand in women’s oppression.

Participating in the cult of masculinity allows male writers to avoid assigning ownership to widespread problems. The cult of masculinity allows Orwell – and Burgess – to consider “bullying and power worship” as “typical of ‘human beings’” rather than consider the polarized societies in which they live (Patai 88). Patai writes “While [Orwell’s] novel makes it clear that life for women in Oceania is in many respects similar to their life in Orwell’s own society, this is not part of his critique” (88). The same can be said of Burgess, who recognizes the gendered experience of victimhood by writing female characters who are the victims of rape and murder but who does not ponder the particularly gendered nature of power that has created that pattern. Neither does he grant the female characters a voice to express themselves or an opportunity to heal. As a result, both Burgess and Orwell write novels from the perspective that men control the future and the potential to change it and do not consider women’s roles or their ability to rebel against the patriarchy; by contrast, Atwood and Burdekin confront and challenge the “ideology of masculine supremacy that leads us to a preoccupation with power,” and by identifying the root cause of an issue from where progress can occur (Patai 95).

Violence is legitimized in Gilead because it becomes part of the rule of law and is assigned religious credibility. The ritualistic violence demanded by the state is assigned a cultural and religious value. By establishing the role of Handmaid as an extension of the biblical story of Rachel and Leah, the state legitimizes this violence. Further, the language of the Gileadeans, as examined in the previous chapter, is used to code and justify this violence. Introducing new language is just one step in normalizing and ritualizing violence.
As a means of survival in Gilead, Offred retreats into her interior monologue to find a sense of autonomy. From her narration, we see that she resists the violence imposed on her by taking small actions, such as saving the butter from her dinner and using it as lotion (Atwood 66, 96), a luxury she is not allowed. It is significant that she performs this small act of rebellion and self-care the same night she must have sex with the Commander. By using the butter on her dry skin, she is providing herself with a sense of healing and luxury that the violent ritual of forced sex takes away from her. Likewise, Offred often calls upon memories of “the time before,” or the pre-Gileadean era, recognizable as the United States in the 1980s, to maintain a sense of identity. Though she no longer has the liberty to choose to have sex, or to have a family or a career, by recalling the past whenever possible, she keeps her memories alive and challenges the validity of the present system. She also starts an affair with Nick, which breaks the rules that determine whom she is allowed to have sex with. By breaking the rules to have an affair with Nick in order to fulfill her needs (for desired sex, communication, trust), Offred bravely exercises autonomy and resists the violence of her only sexual relationship. In doing so, Offred is unlike Alex, whose interiority reveals him to desire and thrive on violence.

Since controlling women’s sexuality and rendering them solely vessels for reproduction is a primary focus of the Gileadean state, Offred’s most poignant act of resistance is her affair with Nick. Despite the risk involved, Offred chooses to resist the limitations placed on her sexuality and physical being; rather than exist only as a victim, or someone to whom things are done, she becomes autonomous. Being with Nick makes her feel safe, though it’s dangerous for them to be together. She records, “Being here with him is safety; it’s a cave, where we huddle together while the storm goes on outside. This is a delusion, of course” (269). Though she claims they do not love each other, there is clearly an attachment that is formed, either due to true
feelings or the extreme quality of their circumstances. “Neither of us says the word *love*, not once. It would be tempting fate; it would be romance, bad luck” (270). Though she claims to avoid the word “love,” by asserting her avoidance of using the word, she suggests that it’s something she feels if not something she expresses. In their first encounter, Nick tells Offred “No romance,” which she equivocates to taking unnecessary risks for one another. The attachment she feels toward Nick is empowering because she has chosen to be with him, exerting a forbidden agency. Yet this attachment puts her future at risk. Not only because if caught she will be executed, but because of her feelings for Nick she is no longer interested in Ofglen’s schemes of resistance and escape (268-270). Yet, what is her future? What else can she expect from her life? Offred is aware of the contradictory nature of her affair. Although she feels safe with Nick and trusts him with secrets (270), the fact that their relationship meets some of her human needs makes her less inclined to resist the regime: “I no longer want to leave … I want to be here, with Nick, where I can get at him,” she says, “ashamed” of her aversion, but proud of “how extreme and therefore justified” the relationship is (271). Her persistence of the affair despite this contradiction reveals her to be an ordinary woman in an extraordinary situation, with ordinary human needs. But Atwood shows the reader that in Gilead, the emergence of a hero is unrealistic because the system in place prevents that. Instead, the most radical thing Offred can do is reclaim her sexuality and her autonomy.

Violence in Gilead is so effective because even its victims are at times complicit in perpetuating it. Although certain members of Gileadean society, such as Offred, are acting in their prescribed roles against their will or, like Ofglen and Nick, they are working within a resistance group, other members advocated for and continue to support the system. For example, Serena Joy, the Commander’s Wife, had advocated that women should stay home and care for
their families instead of having careers in a television program that Offred remembers from her childhood. In characterizing Serena Joy in this way, Atwood shows that there are some women who advocate against their own interest.

Serena Joy is not the only woman who is complicit in the violence Gilead perpetrates against women. Within the household, Offred finds that the Marthas, particularly Rita (more so than Cora, who would like to take care of a baby and is therefore kinder to Offred), are cold and ungenerous. Though Marthas and Handmaids have more relaxed rules regarding their communication with one another, Offred is often shut out of conversations. The Marthas aid and abet the violence that occurs within the households as well and actively enforce the social boundaries between themselves and the Handmaids, whom they regard as impure for their supposed willingness to become sexual objects. The Marthas, particularly Rita, deliberately misread the Handmaids’ situation and, rather than acknowledging their plight, misplace blame. The choice most Handmaids faced was to become a Handmaid, be exiled to the colonies, or enter into the underground world of predominantly sex work, as Moira does. None of these choices are particularly non-violent. Even becoming a sex worker, which, as Moira describes, permits certain freedoms, is only temporary until a woman is no longer a viable sex object, at which point she is shipped to the Colonies to clean up toxic waste.

This type of behavior can be seen in contemporary society among women who support social conservativism. Tina Cassidy writes that in the 2016 U.S. presidential election – and, in fact, since the time women gained suffrage – women’s votes have been “more fiercely delineated by class, race and religion — factors that generally determine their party affiliation — than their gender.” She describes how white women seem to vote against their own interests when supporting GOP candidates who are against, for example, female reproductive rights. This is
because white women voters more often value their whiteness over their femaleness or their evangelical Christianity over their femaleness. Atwood portrays this same pattern among some women in the text. Characters like Serena Joy and the Aunts actively contribute to the system that oppresses all women, some more than others. Even though they, too, are restricted by Gilead’s rules, they place a higher value on the fundamental Christianity of the state than they do on their own liberties.

Where Atwood lacks in her social critique, as the article might suggest, is in her failure to account for race in the hierarchy of social roles assigned to women in the Republic of Gilead. It stands to reason that intersectional identities would be impacted by the novel’s authoritarian government, just as they are in the real world. Would women of color be permitted to have the “valued” role of handmaid? Would women of color serve as Marthas? Would they be relegated to unwomen? In the text, it is clear that a religious cleansing took place at the onset of the regime and that, as non-conformers continue to be found, they are also forced to convert (especially women with viable eggs) or are executed. It is noted that Catholics, Quakers, and Baptists are among the Christian sects that are not accepted. There is also mention that all of the Jews were forced to convert or move to Israel; Offred admits that she does not know how true that is, as truth is difficult to identify in Gilead. It is reasonable to think that in the context of the United States and of Gilead, a racial purge might also have occurred, but it is not explicitly discussed. As horrifying as her dystopian world is, by not acknowledging that race is always factored into systems of power in the American context (from institutional leadership to the prison system to higher education), Atwood erases the ongoing system that privileges the white race over all other races.
Atwood’s analysis of the way culture and already-existing social hierarchies influence the development of systems of power is effective in recognizing that culture, indeed, has its own power. By contrast, Burgess’ text suggests a disconnect between the political elite and everyone else; though they must be elected, they maintain a distance fueled by misinformation. In *Handmaid’s*, it is clear that the Republic of Gilead was created by a powerful but silent faction that emerged suddenly. Offred recalls that everything changed “after the catastrophe, when they shot the president and machine-gunned the Congress and the army declared a state of emergency” (174). Offred records that soon after, she lost her job and access to her bank account. When she loses her job, she observes that the army is present but then realizes “It wasn’t the army. It was some other army” (179). These details show that despite slower cultural movements that Offred recalls, such as the anti-porn campaign in which her mother participates (38), the political coup is fast. It is also faceless – Offred never says who “they,” the ones who overthrew the U.S. government and installed Gilead, are. Allan Weiss argues that regarding the creation of dystopian regimes, they “are not so much imposed from above as sought from below” (Weiss 127). Assuming that the pre-Gileadean U.S. government did not orchestrate its own demise, the reader can understand that it was a faction of Americans who overthrew the government. His argument is that dystopian worlds mimic reality by showing how some people choose “to be free from harm more than free of oppression” (Weiss 132). Aunt Lydia supports this notion when she explains the difference between “freedom from” and “freedom to” to the handmaids-in-training. A supporter of the Gileadean system, Aunt Lydia preaches that the “freedom from” that the regime provides women is far safer and surer than any of the “freedom to” that they had previously (Atwood 24).
In both texts, violence is an expression of the authoritarian or totalitarian power. As a result, violence is rampant throughout society, imposed by the government and exercised among individuals. There is a greater emphasis on the misused power of the state against individuals and groups of a particular identity. In exploring various violent acts and their purpose, Burgess reveals the types of power dynamics present in a violent society and critiques the hypocrisy of a state that seeks to control its unruly citizens with even more violence. Atwood’s dystopian society demonstrates how gender determines who has power and who experiences the violence at its expense. Yet, in offering resistance as a possibility and allowing those experiencing violence to think through their experiences, Atwood reveals more complexity as well as more hope in the characters’ navigation of society.
Chapter 3: Reading Dystopian Form

Innovating with conventional novel form results in more complex texts, meaning that emerges from multiple levels of the text, and social critique that is embedded in narrative structure. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the primary social critique is against patriarchy as demonstrated by the violence of Gileadean society. In *A Clockwork Orange*, Burgess’ main critique is against state abuse of power. That said, neither text can be reduced to one idea, as there are many critiques and complexities presented. As discussed previously, the invented languages and representation of violence in each text provide avenues for analysis and numerous points of contact between the dystopian society and our own society. Through the narrative form, too, the authors compel us to read how dystopia pushes up against typical formal qualities of the novel. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the elements of temporality, narrational authenticity, and the duality of the ending all contribute to an openness in how the text is to be understood while unifying underlying themes. In *A Clockwork Orange*, the division of the text into parts, a shifting locus of violence, and the duality of the ending have a similar effect.

In both texts, the dual endings are open-ended, allowing multiple interpretation and hinting at the text’s significance beyond the confines of the narrative. This open-ended form gives the reader the power to determine the ultimate meaning of the novel. Given that both novels are works of social criticism, the narratives extend beyond the “narrational level,” and therefore the reader must take into consideration the existence and relevance of external systems (economic, social, political) (Barthes 264). This complicates the reader’s role as interpreter and message-receiver, suggesting that there is not just one authoritative text but multiple possible texts that exist simultaneously. By de-emphasizing the importance of authoritative meaning in
this way, both authors subvert masculine narrative paradigm and allow the themes of the text overall to be stronger. The narrative form of each text offers additional insight into their representations of dystopia and their reflections on whether effective change is possible.

**Form and Patriarchy**

The orality and temporality of Offred’s narrational style are elements of *The Handmaid’s Tale*’s narrative form that further show her precarity in and resistance to the dystopian world. Offred’s narration is reminiscent of a diary. Her story is shared in snippets and in secret. The confessional-style text allows the reader access to the forbidden (in Gilead) text of her experience as a Handmaid. It is well established that she is not permitted to read or write, but even her imagined/internal narrative (as the reader perceives it before discovering that it is a voice recording) appears to be added to in spare moments of free time when she is otherwise not engaged mentally or emotionally. Alternatively, Offred appears to use her narrative as an escape from tasks in which she is engaged but from which she would like to remove herself mentally and emotionally. This is particularly potent when the reader believes herself to be reading the events of Offred’s life as they occur.

Offred offers readers a historical “present” at the same time she stresses that the narrative is a “reconstruction.” Both are obviously bound up with storytelling and the sense of interminable repetition. As first-person narrative, this writing masquerades as a speaking, an oral storytelling about the past, as though the narrator is still in that past. (Ingersoll 173)

When one considers the impact and trauma that being a Handmaid has on Offred, who urgently wants to share her story with a listener she wills into existence, this storytelling style is particularly significant. Offred is aware of the temporality of her narrative which makes its faux
“present-ness” intentional and no less legitimate than if she had delivered it in the present. A notable element of the text, regardless of its temporality, is that Offred must restrain herself both in her narration and her behavior; the reader senses this when she explicitly says she must not think in a certain way or of a certain memory. For instance, when Rita bakes bread, “The kitchen smells of yeast, a nostalgic smell. It reminds me of other kitchens, kitchens that were mine … This is a treacherous smell, and I know I must shut it out” (Atwood 47). The nostalgia is treacherous because it threatens Offred’s resiliency to survive in Gilead, where the activities, spaces, and identities she once had are no longer available to her. Offred also makes extradiegetic commentary on her narrative, such as “I wish this story were different. I wish it were more civilized. I wish it showed me in a better light, if not happier, then at least more active, less hesitant, less distracted by trivia” (267). Offred is aware of the ways in which both her experience and her record of it could be different. However, she is limited by the oppressive patriarchy in which she exists and her ability to resist this oppression has realistic limits, which leaves her regretful though not guilty of any wrongdoing.

The text’s unique chronology and temporality reflect Offred’s coping mechanisms while she is a Handmaid and in the telling of her story: While sharing her memories and her “present” life, Offred interjects memories even where they are seemingly isolated from what she is currently doing. For example, between memories of her childhood/young adult life and introspection on who will hear the story she’s telling, another thought interjects:

But then what happens, but then what happens? I know I lost time. There must have been needles, pills, something like that … Where is she? What have you done with her? … You’ve killed her, I said … She was wearing a dress I’d never seen, white and down to the ground. (39)
Without sequence to or from this foggy and nightmarish memory of realizing her daughter had been taken from her, it is clear that this is a traumatic memory that evokes emotions that Offred must suppress in order to maintain composure in her new life. This interjection also demonstrates the persistence of memory and experience and Offred’s tenacity in controlling her thoughts to stay sane in the present moment, unaffected by memory, and, at other times, recall memories in order to validate herself as a complete human with an identity that preceded the institution of this violent regime. If we draw on Freud’s “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” as Earl Ingersoll does, we can understand Offred’s compulsion to repeat her memories as if reliving them as a subconscious desire to relieve the trauma they produced. While Ingersoll interprets Freud’s theories in the context of sexual fulfillment, we can understand Offred’s compulsion to repeat her past as more similar to the experience of the First World War veterans who were found to suffer from recurring nightmares and hallucinations and the sense that they had returned to the battlefield; it is reasonable to believe that Offred has similar experiences in her post-Handmaid life. Doubtless she is, as she records, still processing and still feeling the same uncertainty, guilt, and anger – among other emotions – that she describes in her narrative.

The temporality of Offred’s narration is an element of the novel’s form that complicates straightforward understandings of the text as a simple testimony or memoir. According to Roland Barthes,

The goal is to give a structural description to the chronological illusion; it is up to narrative logic to account for narrative time. To put it another way, temporality is no more than a structural class of narrative just as in ordinary language, time exists only in the form of a system. (251-252)
By this, we can understand that temporality is one element of narrative structure. In Offred’s case, the narrative structure is based in her recording, which anticipates a listener. The constant move back and forth in time, although it complicates the temporality of the narrative, is significant because it allows a connection among Offred’s pre-Gileadean past, her Gileadean “present,” and the time of the recording. The inclusion of these different eras is the sense of a constructed narrative. Ingersoll writes that the “constructedness” of Offred’s narrative is “apparent in Offred’s longing for the ending that she did not know in the past but now knows as a survivor of that past” (173). Despite the fact that she has survived her experience as a Handmaid, her narrative does not reflect any sense of relief but instead a “longing for the ending.”

Thus, what grounds the narrative structure is not chronological events but the multiple possible endings. Offred’s narration ends, and then there is a frame narrative, called “Historical Notes,” that continues the story in a different time with a different narrator. These endings compel us to ask where the “truth” of Offred’s story lies. For instance, we must ask if the ending occurs when Offred’s narration ends or when the Historical Notes conclude. In a technical way, the text ends with the Historical Notes. In the Historical Notes, the reader becomes privy to some information that Offred’s narration leaves unknown, including that Offred did indeed escape Cambridge and recorded her story in Maine. It also reveals that Gileadean society ended. However, the actual “Handmaid’s Tale” ends when Offred’s narration ends. Though the scholars in the Historical Notes comment upon Offred’s story and reveal new details, like her escape to Maine, they are of a different time, place, and perspective and therefore act as an appendix to, rather than a main part of, her narration.
If the story ends with the conclusion of the Handmaid’s tale, then we end when Offred takes the risk to leave into an unknown future with Nick. Some scholars criticize Offred for her weak moral character and her complicity in the Gileadean regime as well as her lack of heroism when she has the chance to actively rebel with Ofglen and the Resistance (Weiss 137-138). If Ofglen is the tragic hero who dies for her principles, and Moira the hero snuffed out or mysteriously vanished, whereabouts unknown, then Offred is the “every woman,” characterized by moments of hesitation, lost opportunity, and small acts of bravery. Against Weiss’s reading, Offred’s honesty about her uncertainty and her awareness of how fear and nostalgia impact her decisions do not condemn her. Rather, her character personifies the human desire to adapt, to feel safe and protected and, until the very end, to choose certainty over uncertainty. Instead of committing to the Resistance with Ofglen, Offred places a greater priority on her relationship with Nick, which, though it endangers them both, provides her with an outlet for her human need for love. She feels that “Being here with him is safety; it’s a cave, where we huddle together while the storm goes on outside,” though she acknowledges “This is a delusion, of course. This room is one of the most dangerous places I could be” (Atwood 269-270). In the final moments of her narration, Offred is faced with the decision of whether to trust Nick and his assurance that she is being taken by Mayday operators; it is a risk. Her other option is to challenge them; if they are Mayday operators, they will disappear and leave her with the Commander and his Wife, where her life will maintain its relative safety and status quo. She chooses to trust Nick and embrace risk; she goes with the Eyes, “into the darkness within; or else the light” without knowing the outcome of her decision (295). Therefore, the ending of Offred’s narration solidifies her as someone who, confronted with two options requiring immediate action, chooses the possibility of a better life, even at the risk of her own demise.
If the novel ends on the Historical Notes, however, the meaning is different. In this ending, Atwood applies a feminist lens to denote the continuity or cyclicity of misogyny in contemporary society. In the Historical Notes, the reader is presented with the transcript of an academic conference held in the post-Gilead future, where it becomes apparent that Gilead met its demise at some point after the conclusion of Offred’s narrative. Despite the progress and hope that Gilead’s end and Offred’s survival (of some degree and quality) offer, there is a lack of progress in other aspects. For instance, Offred’s life, in which the reader has been invested and experiencing, is described in such clinical and dispassionate terms by Pieixoto, the primary speaker of the frame narrative, as to make Offred’s experiences seem like less of a personal trauma and more like an unfortunate event of history. Professor Pieixoto says of his studies of Gilead “Our job is not to censure but to understand,” indicating that he has recused himself from moral judgment to take a superior, objective perspective, echoing the language of many current historians. Meanwhile, the reader herself has just witnessed Offred’s trauma and is frustrated and shocked that she should be dismissed as collateral damage. This dismissal echoes the language of sexist patriarchy, particularly when Pieixoto “delights in his feeble yet misogynist attempts at humor with his remarks about the ‘Underground Frailroad’ and his silly double entendres on the handmaid’s tale/tail” (Ingersoll 177).

In addition to the continuation of patriarchy, even after Gilead’s demise, the dual ending might also be read as gendered. Ingersoll describes how certain contemporary novels – including *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *A Clockwork Orange* – subvert the “masculine narrative paradigm,” a structure which asserts, following Peter Brooks, that plot is representative of the male sexual act and the ending of a text, representative of ejaculation, provides the meaning for the whole of it; although the reader is compelled to finish reading the text, they also wish to impede its end, as
they enjoy the process of reading (Ingersoll 26). However, Ingersoll argues that these two novels challenge Brooks by asserting that the “female plot” has a “double ending” (15), so that the Historical Notes “calls into question once again what we mean by the term ‘ending’ and whether ‘plot,’ as a traditional narratologist such as Brooks views it, can be the sole, or perhaps even the weightiest, component in the reader’s ‘sense of an ending’” (171). Therefore, a feminist writer – or someone writing in the feminist mode – is someone who purposely or otherwise subverts this masculine narrative paradigm, indicating that the male sexuality is not the stand-in for human sexuality (26). Ingersoll identifies and studies a variety of “contemporary novels clearly marked by their desire for the end” but which challenge “Brooks’s notion of ending as the consummation of the reader’s desire for meaning” (29-30).

Reading the Historical Notes through Ingersoll’s lens calls into question the authenticity of the story as Offred’s direct testimony. We read: “As editors, Pieixoto and … Knotly Wade, have found it necessary to shape the material of the tapes into a narrative with a plot and therefore an ending” (177-178), suggesting that Offred did not actually construct the order of her own story. We question Offred’s authenticity because even though she is the narrator, we learn of a second author who might have rearranged, edited, or deleted parts of her story, as she did not have the final editorial power of translating or ordering. This raises the question of power not only in repressive societies but in authorship as well. If Offred’s narration was never really her own, then what can we take away from the story? Perhaps the reader’s take-away is the tenets of the world, that which is not determined by the “big finish,” which is to say, the ending does not determine the meaning of the whole story. Perhaps the take-away is the continuity of sexism and the erasure of individual experiences, which simply become footnotes or collateral damage in the grand scheme of history. Ingersoll writes that this “double ending” is indicative of
“nonnarrativity, or a narrativity working toward freedom from sequentiality” (112). By nonnarrativity, Ingersoll refers to a resistance to typical chronology and temporality. In applying this to *The Handmaid’s Tale*, regardless of who designed the narrative structure of Offred’s story – Offred herself or the scholars – the scholars’ presence at the end of the text should not determine the meaning of the entire text. Though her words and their order may have been tampered with, Offred’s experiences and description of Gilead are no less authentic. Further, by introducing this complication to the ending, Atwood is, as Ingersoll suggests, freeing her text from what is culturally expected of a narrative and an ending.

Atwood’s dual ending allows her to make multiple social critiques and involve the reader in interpreting her messages. Ingersoll argues that:

The incidence of more than one ending in these novels seems to undermine the traditional “masculine” paradigm. However, it might also be argued that the multiplying of endings has the opposite effect, a shoring up that paradigm by focusing on how dependent meaning is on the ending(s) of narrative. Accordingly, whichever ending readers choose as the ending confirms the particular meaning the reader wants to see the narrative supporting. (112)

Whereas in the so-called masculine narrative paradigm, the ending is thrust upon the reader, made evident in its singularity, its finality, and its narrowness, the subversive, “feminine” double ending allows Atwood to deliver a two-fold parting message. One is that Offred is a character who takes risks and determines her own destiny to the greatest extent that she can. The other is that the flaws of Gileadean society are not unique to Gilead; when the era ends, its flaws do not necessarily correct themselves. The two messages refute the problem that Ingersoll suggests could occur, which is that “whichever ending the readers choose as the ending confirms the
particular meaning the reader wants to see supporting” (112). In this text, the existence of two endings does not limit the reader to choosing which ending represents the meaning of the text. Rather, the two endings provide the author with the opportunity to conclude the social critiques she has been making throughout the text in two different fictional contexts, as that is relevant to the genre of criticism she makes. Therefore, as Ingersoll argues, Atwood successfully subverts the masculine narrative paradigm. The outcome of the first ending, the conclusion of Offred’s narration, is ambiguous – diffusing the importance of meaning in the final scene – yet optimistic. Offred’s resistance (as a tangential participant in Mayday or through her affair with Nick; she’s not sure why she’s being taken away or by whom) has resulted in her departure from the Commander’s house and the life to which she was accustomed. The second ending, the conclusion of the Historical Notes, presents a semblance of closure on Offred’s narrative but presents a new context: University of Denay, Nunavit (in what is currently known as Canada) in 2195, a post-Gileadean time. The academic conference at the university reveals flaws, including sexism, the refusal to criticize problematic regimes, and an insensitivity to or dismissal of women’s trauma. That these flaws resonate with the flaws of both Gilead and our own society conveys that Atwood’s social critiques apply to a larger context than one dystopic society.

Reading the dual endings of *The Handmaid’s Tale* as an expression of more than one meaning and not the determinant of the text’s meaning is supported by Roland Barthes’ concept of “units” that operate at multiple levels in the text. Barthes challenges Brooks’ idea as well in writing that “meaning does not lie ‘at the end’ of the narrative, but straddles it” in the context of an argument that a “unilateral investigation” will not yield valid results. Rather, one must analyze the hierarchy of levels within the text – units, sequences, actions (or characters), and the narrative itself – as well as the purpose(s) each of these structures serve for the text (whether
they are critical to a further plot point or merely complementary) (Barthes 243). In applying Barthes to the two endings of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, we can examine the characters’ choices in the language they use to convey meaning to the reader. The last sentence of Offred’s narration is “And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light” (Atwood 295). On one level, the darkness refers to the darkness of the van’s interior relative to the daylight. The completion of the sentence with the contrast of “light” presents the reader with a contrast that opens a metaphorical level of interpretation. The understanding of darkness as metaphorically foreboding, threatening, and the end is a contrast to the metaphorical understanding of lightness as hopeful and a new beginning. This metaphor extends to a religious level, particularly a Christian interpretation of the metaphor, which suggests entry into the darkness of hell or the light of heaven. This metaphor is all the more poignant in considering the oppressive fundamentalist-Christian regime of Gilead. A final reading of this sentence examines this sentence (or unit) as the referent of repeated “nuclei” units, the Day and Night chapters that segment the narrative. “Day” and “Night” had previously been offered at the level of a chapter title, referring to one level of the “present day” chronology of the text, and are now being echoed in the darkness or lightness in which Offred’s story will end. The “coding” of the ending, Barthes asserts, is on the narrational level due to its conspicuousness (Barthes 264). Barthes’ understanding of how endings work supports the feminine mode of narrative in his identification of the ending as merely one piece of an interconnected narrative totality.

The concept of meaning “straddling” the text is seen in the consistency of the themes that Atwood presents throughout the text, a practice that de-emphasizes the role of the ending in conveying meaning. According to Barthes’ theory, at each transition between acts, within a sequence (a grouping of units), there is a “‘freedom’ of meaning” which “becomes possible” and
which has both a “local context” and a “larger context” (Barthes 254). If we were to examine the text on a unit by unit basis, from individual words to groups of sentences, we would find that a unit can be applied to the local context of the scene described by Offred as well as to the larger context of the language she uses, the oppression she experiences, and the construction of her narrative as a whole. For example, the use of the word “freedom” in the context of “The fact is that I no longer want to leave, escape, cross the border, to freedom. I want to be here, with Nick, where I can get at him” can be examined in its local context to mean that freedom is elsewhere, outside of Gilead and that Offred is limiting herself by choosing Nick (Atwood 271). However, applied to the larger context of the novel, in which Offred is not permitted to make choices for herself, especially as they concern her body or sexuality, “freedom” can mean freedom to choose. In this reading, Offred has achieved a freedom that she does not want to risk losing again. Further, “freedom” echoes the earlier reference to Aunt Lydia, who says that “There is more than one kind of freedom … freedom to … [and] freedom from” (24). Aunt Lydia’s analysis of freedom sets up a conflict that occurs throughout the text, extending to how Offred evaluates her own resistance to Gilead and how she should or should not try to escape. The various ways to read “freedom” are related and perhaps build on each other, but as Barthes suggests there is a “‘freedom’ of meaning” that exists in the spaces between contexts. In other words, there does not have to be one meaning. As a result, meaning “straddles” the narrative and cannot only be elucidated in an “explosion of metaphoricity” at the end (Ingersoll 25). The meaning of the text is that which Atwood has accumulated throughout – in brief, a social criticism of patriarchal culture – compounded by the force of the frame narrative discovered by the reader at the end.

Form and Reform
Similar to *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Alex’s narration in *A Clockwork Orange* is a candid confession to the reader, though unlike Offred’s story’s complex temporality (the question of when she records the story versus when it takes place), it seems relatively clear that *Clockwork* is told in retrospect. The exception is the 21st chapter, which appears to take place in the current moment. The text is constructed in three parts with seven chapters in each part. The 21 chapters symbolize 21 years of age, the traditional age of maturity, suggesting that by the end of the novel, Alex has reached maturity. Each of the three parts represents a different stage of the narrative. The first is when Alex is freely living his violent life; the second part explores Alex’s life in prison and under state control; the third covers Alex’s experiences under the effects of the Ludovico treatment and how he frees himself of this treatment and eventually undergoes a change of character attributed to his maturity.

It seems clear that Alex is telling this story after it has taken place. For instance, he often ends chapters by foreshadowing an event that has yet to take place. For instance, he refers to going “out to my doom” the night he is arrested (Burgess 61). Yet despite this foreshadowing, it is not clear that Alex’s character has undergone any moral change from the beginning to the time of its telling; although he is narrating through the lens of time/hindsight, he does not project his current wisdom onto his past self. This is perhaps due to his continued lack of remorse, which is part of the deeply immoral world Burgess is trying to portray. “Growing up” and finding new outlets for his desire has not made Alex a better person; he is simply oriented toward new goals now, goals – like marriage and children – which are more socially acceptable.

Alex’s lack of remorse can also be witnessed in the spontaneous and light-hearted nature of his narration, despite all of the wickedness he feels and describes. If we choose to apply Freud’s Pleasure Principle to Alex as we do to Offred, we could construe that Alex, too, experiences the
compulsion to repeat in order to satisfy a desire. Alex desires violence, which he closely associates with sex and sexuality. His compulsion to repeatedly commit violence – particularly sexual violence – cannot satisfy whatever desire drives him. Freud asserts that no desire can be completely satisfied unless there is a return to nothingness, or death (also referred to as the Death Wish). Alex dies, in a sense, when the Ludovico treatment alters his desires through aversion. The futility of this treatment, though, is demonstrated in its failure to work permanently. Instead of compulsion, Alex is now driven by his aversion to the pain and illness he feels when presented with violence. Due to his continuous fear of becoming weak and ill and the constant presence or threat of violent situations, he can never fully satisfy this desire to avoid violence. Yet, despite this apparent psychological hold on Alex, both the effects of the Ludovico technique and his own inherent desire for violence stop working. The aversion he feels to violence due to the Ludovico technique ceases to work after he is driven to suicide; upon his physical recovery, he finds that it no longer has an effect. But ultimately, his violent tendencies do wear off, in the final chapter, when he reaches emotional maturity. By breaking the desire and imposed aversion to desire, Burgess mirrors Freud’s assumption that death (or nothingness) alone can satiate desire in Alex’s rejection of his violent ways in the 21st chapter.

Alex’s violent repetitions are mirrored by the state’s repeated efforts to stop his violence, but while Alex ceases to be violent at the end, there is no reason to assume the state stops being violent as well. Ingersoll extends the application of Freud’s compulsion to repeat to the text as a whole:

The text is performing its own variety of repetition compulsion in the seemingly endless and increasingly boring iterations of violence. The narrative appears to be trapped in its own efforts at finding a means of escape from a compulsion to repeat until such deathly impulses
‘master,’ and perhaps eliminate, unruly desires. In its own way the narrative is desperately seeking the means of ending those repetitions, of breaking through in some form of transformation in order to achieve the metaphoricity implicated in ending. (126)

The implication of Ingersoll’s argument is that in each of the three parts of the text there is a new strategy implicated to try to end the repetition. The distinct differences between the content of each of the three parts of the novel demonstrate how the state tries to break the cycle of violence and fails. After each failure of the state to control Alex’s violence, it is difficult to believe the “metaphoricity” of the ending. Though Alex finally undergoes the transformation the state wanted, it is attributed to maturity achieved through age as well as Alex’s boredom with violence. Thus, while Alex’s personal cycle of violence is eliminated, it is not through any moral achievement, and it cannot be assumed that the overall violence of Alex’s society has been diminished.

Each of the three parts of the narrative serves as individual narrative units with their own structures, beginnings, and endings. In the first part, Alex establishes himself as a violent individual, repeatedly seeking violence as a means of fulfilling an internal desire to commit violence as well as resisting the rules that his parents, Deltoid, law enforcement, and society at large want him to obey. At the end of part one, he has been arrested and finds that a woman he attacked has died, which means that for the first time, despite all of his prior criminal endeavors, he will be seriously punished by the state. This would suggest a limited future. It also anticipates what will be developed in the second part as a perverse sense of justice – perverse because although Alex is finally answering for his crimes, the state to which he must answer is corrupt and violent. The second part details Alex’s incarceration and his subjection to the Ludovico technique. In prison, he is still trying to flout rules to benefit himself. Part two ends with Alex
being “cured.” The emphasis on Alex as a threat to others’ safety is more muted while he is in prison (with the exception of when he murders his cellmate), as it becomes clear that the prison system – and the government of which it is a part – itself acts violently to prisoners and is indiscriminate in its punishments. The success of the Ludovico treatment marks the potential for the state to start imposing this treatment on a large scale, which poses a threat to the liberty of the people. Part three covers Alex dealing with his new aversion to violence and highlights the societal flaws that negatively affect him despite his supposed removal from violence. Alex eventually breaks the hold of Ludovico, becomes violent again, and then outgrows his violent nature. The persistence of violence in society despite Alex’s inability to participate in violence reveals that systemic violence and the government abuse of power influences society more than individual acts of violence. At the same time, Alex’s victims reappear in his life, demonstrating that the victims neither forget nor forgive and that he remains accountable for these crimes. Neither the state nor Alex feel true remorse for their flaws.

As is clear in the above description, each part of the text presents a new avenue for social critique that is then complicated by the following section. Burgess’ social critiques shift in their focus but ultimately take on a perspective that reveals the sources and effects of systemic violence and abuse of power. If at first Alex and his friends seem like the most destructive sources of violence in society, Burgess then shifts attention to the corrections officer, law enforcement, and government to demonstrate that those who seek “correct” Alex are creating more violence, with far greater potential for harm compared with an individual like Alex. Finally, attention shifts to the dynamic between society – those who have been harmed by Alex – and law enforcement. Still, the state continues to act violently, this time toward those who have done no wrong. As Burgess’ attention shifts in each part of the narrative, it becomes clear that
his criticism lies in the state’s abuse of power. The formal construction of the text is instrumental in creating space for the author’s social critiques individually and as a whole.

In this context, the 21st chapter suggests a hopeful future as Alex grows out of his violence not through state control but through his own will. This newfound maturity might suggest that the novel is ultimately a bildungsroman, in which Alex matures as a reflection of a “natural” human process despite his earlier crimes. While this ending has been criticized by some as unbelievable or, as Ingersoll suggests, as an oversimplification of the human experience, it nevertheless reveals Burgess’ sense of the reform of the individual.

However, if the text is considered complete after the 20th chapter, which is how it was originally published and read in the United States, then it is no longer a bildungsroman but a manifestation of Freud’s Pleasure Principle through the repetition of violence with a static plot representative of a static or stuck society that’s systemic violence has it doomed to repeat the same violence over and again. This is a much bleaker dystopic text than the bildungsroman. As in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *A Clockwork Orange* has the possibility of multiple endings that suggest a number of interpretive possibilities for the novel as a whole. Burgess had originally written the novel in the masculine narrative paradigm, meaning that there was a decisive and definitive ending at the conclusion of the 21st chapter when Alex achieves his transformation. The novel was originally published in the United Kingdom with this ending. However, it was published in the United States without the 21st chapter per the decision of Burgess’ New York publisher (Burgess xiii). It was not until 1986 that the 21-chapter text was published in the U.S. The existence of a 20-chapter version of the text means that *A Clockwork Orange* has two different endings. Thus, reading the endings through Ingersoll’s lens, the text has a subversive “‘feminine ending’” due to the multiplicity of the endings: the unintended ending after the 20th
chapter on one hand, and the intended ending after chapter 21 on the other. Ending at the 20th chapter means that Alex is no longer under the effects of the Ludovico technique and is in the same violent state in which he started the narrative. The cyclicity of violence suggested by the end of the 20th chapter subverts what would otherwise be the “linear, transformational ending” of the 21st chapter (Ingersoll 127). Burgess’ original manuscript follows the masculine narrative paradigm described by Brooks and challenged by Ingersoll in the sense that the ending – Alex’s transformation – supplies all meaning when reflecting upon the novel. In other words, after the reader has finished, she could reflect that the text progresses toward an ending that resolves the conflict of Alex’s violence. As in the masculine narrative paradigm, knowing that Alex has stopped acting violently or that he now desires normative family life, including monogamy and a son, is significant. It demonstrates that the text’s purpose is to show everything that Alex must experience – the desire for violence, the repetition compulsion, violence from the state – in order to achieve a resolution. Similarly, the 20-chapter version definitely conveys that violence and instability are permanent and incurable ills of society. However, by publishing two versions of the novel, though it was not his intention, Burgess’ work takes on dual meanings that are now open for the reader to interpret.

Though both versions of the ending are written in the masculine style, the fact that they both exist and thus serve as possible endings subverts the masculine narrative paradigm and reveals themes that stand in both endings. Ingersoll writes that the “ending may determine meaning, but questions about endings may end by destabilizing meaning in narrative … this ‘true’ ending forces readers to doubt that a ‘masculine’ ending can ever really do justice to their sense of the complexity of human experience” (128). In other words, the dual endings call into question both determinate endings and present the tension between two possibilities as the novel’s message:
Does Alex remain violent, or does he transform? Or, we can ask what remains true in either ending. In both endings, the state, which Burgess criticizes for its violence, incompetence, and hypocrisy, has not progressed. The static nature of the state points to the cyclicity and a lack of meaningful change; an engaged reader knows that whether or not Alex has become disinterested in violence, the state has not changed. The state still has the ability to abuse power. There will always be new tools to be leveraged against the individual if the individual threatens the power of the state.

The duality of the endings seems to be reflected by Alex himself as evidenced in the language he uses to talk about his transformation. According to Barthes, a unit of language can operate on a number of levels within a text. Thus, individual units and sequences in the two endings can be connected on a narrational level to the rest of the text: For example, at the end of the 20th chapter, Alex says “I was cured all right” as he realizes that the effects of the Ludovico technique have lifted and he has returned to his normal self (Burgess 199). He purposefully adopts the word of the doctors, “cured,” and uses it as an antithesis to its original meaning, as now he is back to his disturbingly violent self. This echoes the paradoxical style of other vocabulary like “horrorshow,” which is a positive adjective despite containing the negative “horror.” The connection of the word “cured” to its previous usage and its transformation into Alex’s style of speech connect this sentence to the narrative as a whole. However, it does not challenge any idea that Burgess had previously presented, contributing to the static, Freudian style of narrative. At the close of the 21st chapter, Alex returns to Nadsat-heavy speech in a long farewell address to the reader that is passionately ironic:

Tomorrow is all like sweet flowers and the turning vonny earth and the star's and the old Luna up there and your old droog Alex all on his oddy knocky seeking like a mate … But
you, O my brothers, remember sometimes thy little Alex that was. Amen. And all that cal.”

(212)

Here, there is an echo of the first chapter, in which Alex takes care to describe the setting, “a flip dark chill winter bastard though dry,” in his naturalist description of the tomorrow that the reader will not share with him. He brings back Nadsat vocabulary, satirizes the notion of prayer (which recalls his fake affinity for religion in prison), and signs off with a dispassionate, unneeded, undescructive “And all that cal.” This final clause self-consciously undermines his status as narrator and demonstrates, perhaps, a new sense of fatigue in telling his own story that could symbolize his transition into another, more mature phase of life. While the ending of the 21st chapter connects with various other elements of the narrative, it also presents a new version of the narrator, compatible with the bildungsroman reading of this ending.

The narrative form of both A Clockwork Orange and The Handmaid’s Tale serve as a means for the authors to convey messages about the society of the text and the real world. “We like to think of writing as merely personal, merely self expression, and hopefully neurotic, because it lets us off the hook,” Margaret Atwood said in a 1980 lecture at Dalhousie University. “If that's all it is, if it is not a true view of the world or, Heaven forefend, of a human nature of which we ourselves partake, we don't have to pay any serious attention to it … at its best writing is considerably more and other than mere self-expression” (“An End to Audience” 421). Taking this into account, we must take care to not assume that these texts are outlets for self-expression. Thus, through the narrative form of the texts, the authors are expressing messages that are universally applicable, and recognizable, in nature. Through elements including temporality, sectioning the narrative into parts, and, especially, the dual endings of the text, the authors present consistent themes, like threat of and resistance to patriarchal culture in Handmaid’s and
the cyclicity of violence in *Clockwork*. They speak to moral and political issues that plague not just the author’s conscience but the conscience of many; if they do not, then perhaps they should. Through the form of each text, particularly the dual endings, the authors allow an openness that strengthens the narrative as a whole rather than solving a dystopian society that, much like our own society, cannot be readily fixed.
Conclusion

As readers, we can turn to books to escape our own lives. However, books do not merely provide an opportunity to escape. Inevitably, they exist in and reflect the contexts in which they were written. In order to present social structures and characters that readers recognize, and to make readers aware of the dangers lurking in their own societies, the authors of *A Clockwork Orange* and *The Handmaid’s Tale* wrote dystopic futures in societies disturbingly similar to our own. Thus, although they are extremely violent, with unfamiliar language and social structures that shape characters’ experiences, we recognize our own lives in them as we decode the language and violence and understand the implications of the narrative form.

Published in 1962, *Clockwork* reflects the grimness of cities recovering from World War II through rules making people work, the tension between American and Russian nuclear powers, and the fear of totalitarian power through the violence leveraged by a state that abuses its power. In his 1986 introduction to the text, Burgess reflects on how the text existed in the context of the Vietnam War. He writes that the original version of the text, which concludes with the 21st chapter, is “Kennedyan” as it reflects an optimism regarding moral progress, whereas the American version of the text, ending with the 20th chapter, is “Nixonian” for its emphasis on the persistence of violence (Burgess xiii).

*Handmaid’s*, published in 1986, reveals the politics of its era as well. The text reflects the continuous resistance that women and feminist movements faced despite social “wins,” like the drastically increased female workforce of the 1970s (*Women in the Workforce*), and equal male and female college graduates by 1985 (Guilder), as well as political momentum with Roe v. Wade in 1973. It is also an examination and critique of certain strains of what Atwood refers to
as “1984 feminism” (xvi), also referred to as Second Wave Feminism, which, among other initiatives, sought to outlaw pornography and advocated for laws against sexual assault (Rampton). The Cold War was still in full force at the time of Atwood’s writing, an historical period that connects *Clockwork* and *Handmaid’s*, and Atwood reflects the “feeling of being spied on, the silences … the oblique ways in which people might convey information” behind the Iron Curtain (xiii). In these ways, Atwood’s text, too, is rooted in the social and political moment of her writing.

Though *A Clockwork Orange* and *The Handmaid’s Tale* were written in earlier eras, influenced by the contexts of those societies at that time, they reflect larger social and political themes that have existed throughout history and that continue to resonate with current readers. As Atwood writes in her 2017 introduction to *Handmaid’s*, “*It can’t happen here* could not be depended on: anything could happen anywhere, given the circumstances” (xiii). In current political climates, including those of the United States and numerous countries in Europe and South America, the growing strength and proliferation of far-right political movements has sparked fear and doubt in the stability and futurity of democratic institutions. In recent years and through the present, the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States and the United Kingdom’s referendum vote to leave the European Union, to give two examples, have called into question what political and social realities will change and how quickly. Faced with this fear, readers turn to texts in which these systems are analyzed and criticized. If these texts can identify the root causes of widespread and systemic issues, then perhaps they can inform how the phenomena we are experiencing came about and how they will transpire in the short- and long-term.
These novels have not exactly predicted the future, but they reveal how the oppressive patriarchy, the abuse of power by governments, and limitation of individuals’ rights, to name a few, can manifest and persist. In this sense, the texts are dark and inspire dread in readers who identify these qualities in their own society. However, both texts provide spaces for characters to resist the powers that leverage control through violence and oppression. In this way, the texts demonstrate that when faced with bleakness, there are methods of resistance. There are others who want to work against these powers as well. There is an optimism in human resiliency when faced with adversity.
Works Cited


Women in the Workforce. United States Census Bureau, Aug. 12, 2011,