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A study of clothing in dystopian literature

How clothing in dystopia contributes to the oppression of female characters in *The Handmaid's Tale* written by Margaret Atwood

Graduate thesis in Bachelor in English (BENG)

Supervisor: Ysabel Muñoz

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to examine the role of clothing and its attributes in *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood and how clothing can contribute to the oppression of the novel's female characters. Additionally, this study aims to shed light to the role of clothing within dystopian literature specifically. Through this analysis, elements such as colour symbolism, the headpiece and the dress itself from the novel and indoctrination will be studied with supplemental theory from fashion history, religion, colour theory and politics. Key quotes and passages from the novel will form the primary research for this thesis. This interdisciplinary study related to both literature and fashion will analyse the uniform used for the Handmaids in the novel, using Offred as the main example of analysis to investigate the oppression of which clothing can contribute to.

Keywords: clothing, dystopia, indoctrination, uniforms, oppression.

Sammenheng

Målet med denne oppgaven er å undersøke rollen til klær og egenskaper knyttet til klær i *The Handmaid's Tale* av Margaret Atwood og hvordan klær kan bidra til undertrykkelse av romanens kvinnelige karakterer. I tillegg til dette har studien som mål å belyse rollen til klær i dystopisk litteratur spesifikt. Gjennom denne analysen vil elementer som fargesymbolikk, hodeplagget og selve kjolen fra romanen og indoktrinering bli studert med supplerende teori fra motehistorie, religion, fargeteori og politikk. Sentrale sitater og passasjer fra romanen vil danne kjernen i undersøkelsen for denne oppgaven. Denne tverrfaglige studien knyttet til både litteratur og mote vil analysere uniformen for gruppen «Handmaids» i romanen, ved å bruke Offred som primæreksempel ved analyse for å undersøke undertrykkelsen som klær kan bidra til.

Nøkkelord: klær, dystopi, indoktrinering, uniformer, undertrykkelse.

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Introduction

Whether walking through familiar streets of hometowns or travelling to new locations far away, clothing choices are information transmitted to passing people. Choosing an attire for comfort, fashion or preferences are all individual choices that offer much information to those around them, as they express identity, character and self (Rall, 2). We may think about other people's fashion choices instinctively or notice clothes in our subconsciousness that stand out to us. Clothing is an important part of our lives whether it is day to day workwear or special occasion dresses, suits and costumes. It is therefore interesting to look at the choices of clothes in literature and how it may reinforce certain features of the book, a character or the genre. Often, features such as technology, politics, class or architecture are prominent studied areas in dystopian literature, whereas fashion and clothing tend to be neglected. This study aims to investigate the following thesis statement: how clothing in dystopia contributes to the oppression of female characters in *The Handmaid's Tale* written by Margaret Atwood. The Canadian writer, born 1939, has recently published *The Testaments* (2019), which is the sequel to the novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), now an awarded TV series showing the impact of the novel in popular culture (*Biography*, 2022). The study will focus on female characters as the novel's main character is Offred, a female Handmaid whose task is to reproduce with a male of higher rank. The women often are forced into oppressive roles chosen by an authoritarian and patriarchal regime in the novel, while the men have more power and choice (Cardon, 2021). The study will focus on the dystopian and authoritarian side of how the government interferes with women's right to choose what they want to wear themselves, as well as the more hidden, secretive and symbolic sides of the clothing itself of the Handmaids' attire to illustrate evidence on how clothing can oppress women in a dystopian world.

This dissertation hopes to contribute to the field of literature and fashion studies. Attire in literature is often overlooked, and therefore this thesis hopes to bring the two fields closer by looking at how both literature and fashion contribute to each other's written works. The uniform from *The Handmaid's Tale* has become a symbol for the fight for women's rights, and it is therefore important to break down and look at in the novel as to why it might be such a symbol and the meaning behind it (Carrola, 2021). Throughout the novel, the reader gains an insight into the clothing and uniforms of the authoritarian regime of Gilead.

Moreover, Atwood's use of analepsis, or literary flashbacks shows the importance of people's clothing, textures, styles and colours in sentimentalism and memories (Analepsis, n.d.).

To continue exploring these elements more in detail, this dissertation will open with a theory section focused on dystopia in literature, a definition of concept of "oppression", "indoctrination" and "conditioning", as well as theoretical consideration about uniforms. This will aim to create a common ground of knowledge about the literary and fashion related sides of the thesis that will help with understanding the arguments of the text. However, some more theory will be introduced throughout the discussion where relevant. A chapter about the methodology is then presented to show the way this study has been carried out and the tools employed to do so. The next part is the discussion of the thesis statement. This part is divided into chapters that will discuss the dress itself of the Handmaids, colour symbolism, the headpiece of the uniform, indoctrination of clothing and why Atwood and other dystopia writers may want to use clothing as a trait in dystopia. A conclusion is presented at the end with the findings from this study.

Theoretical Frameworks

Dystopia

To understand the world in which the Handmaid Offred lives in, we need to define "dystopia". The simpler definition of "dystopia" is "an imaginary place where everything is as bad as it can be" (Dystopia, n.d., a). This is supported by Merriam-Webster which adds that the people within the dystopian world live in fear and is dehumanised (Dystopia, n.d., b). Gregory Claeys (2010) writes in his book *The origins of dystopia: Wells, Huxley and Orwell*, that some people tend to use the term "dystopia" as a synonym with "anti-utopia" because the meaning of a utopia is a good place, therefore anti-utopia is a bad place. According to him, it can be correct depending on individual definitions of what can be seen as a dystopia and what not (Claeys, 2010). From the twentieth century the term is used more widely, and we can see that authors and reviewers start to use it for describing failed societies built up by totalitarianism and collectivism (Nicholson, 2023). H. G. Wells is seen by many as one of the founding fathers for the dystopian genre in literature with his early dystopian and science fiction publications (Nicholson, 2023). Wells saw sociology to have an imaginative component that included "an ideal view of society against which one can measure the

present” (Seeger, 2019, p. 46). This means looking at either a dystopian or utopian world and comparing it to the present-day world we live in to catch possible imaginative components of it, which will be important when looking at why Atwood chose to use clothing as such a central feature to her dystopian writing. The most common feature of a dystopian society consists of a totalitarian state which demands full obedience from the citizens and is opposed to individualism (Claeys, 2010). This is different to other authoritarian ideologies as the goal is total and complete control over the citizens, whether it is over their body or mind, and Claeys (2010) goes as far to say control over their souls as well.

Oppression

The thesis statement specifies that the study will focus on how oppression towards women can be done through the use of clothing in dystopia. The word “oppression” according to Merriam-Webster is an unfair, improper or cruel treatment of people (Oppression, n.d.). For example, oppression can be targeted towards women, a certain race or people of a certain lifestyle, as well as it includes the improper use of power or authority (Oppression, n.d.). Those who are being oppressed suffer consequences of discrimination, exclusion, exploitation, deprivation of rights and to the extreme, deprivation of life (Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1996). Usually, there is a dominating group or singular person who exercises this cruel treatment creating a lopsided relation of power within a society, limiting resources to the oppressed and stimulating fear (Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1996). This asymmetry has existed between individuals, classes, states, and communities, but in relation to this thesis I will focus on the oppression of women.

Indoctrination and conditioning

The term “indoctrination” will be used throughout this thesis, and it is therefore worthwhile to breakdown the term. In the beginning of the 20th century, the term was not used in the negative manner it is today (Snook, 2010). The definition of “indoctrination” can be read as “the process of repeating an idea or belief to someone until they accept it without criticism or question” spanning from political indoctrination to religious (Indoctrination, n.d.). Snook (2010) supports this, adding the central concept of “implantation”, early in the use of the term indoctrination it was used with “the implanting of Christian doctrine” (p. 8). Individuals having undergone indoctrination are attained to certain and specific beliefs (Wareham, 2019). Furthermore, an important part of indoctrination is how it is put forth. According to Wareham (2019) “the transmission of belief [is done] through teaching” (p. 43).

To encapsulate indoctrination, it is teaching of ideas and beliefs related to religion, politics or ideology, transmitting it through repetition until it is believed by the indoctrinated. This can be seen in *The Handmaid's Tale* as the citizens are taught from a young age the beliefs of the regime in charge until the citizens themselves are indoctrinated (Atwood, 1985).

Related to indoctrination, is the term of “conditioning”. The meaning of the term is “the process of training or influencing a person or animal mentally so that they do or expect a particular thing without thinking about it” (Conditioning, n. d.). An important effect of conditioning is that the individual or individuals subjected to the process acquire new fears in the process (Rachman, 1977). By being exposed to pain as a result of an action, stimulation of fears is acquired which in turn result in actions of avoidance to reduce the fear of pain (Rachman, 1977). This will become relevant to the analysis of why the uniform of the Handmaids work in Gilead, as they have been conditioned to it. If one does not use the uniform, pain can be a result and therefore avoidance acts are institutionalised by the women to avoid negative effects. Thomas F. Green (1972) states that “(...) we may indoctrinate people to *believe* certain things, but we condition them always to *do* certain things” (p. 25) which is important in making a distinction between conditioning and indoctrination. Hence, the two concepts work together to achieve a goal. In the case of Gilead, this will be to enforce a uniform that makes women keep to themselves and upkeep norms and rules set by the authoritarian regime.

The uniform

Before discussing how clothing contributes to oppression towards women within the dystopian world of Gilead, it is necessary to take a closer look at what the clothing in *The Handmaid's Tale* really is like. Cardon (2021) says that the clothing in the authoritarian state of Gilead, is within the category of “uniform” (p. 10), whereas this is not applicable to the time before the police state. With this type of dress for the characters involved, the uniform tends to express repressive regimes (Cardon, 2021). Repressive regimes in return aim to limit the individual independence and freedom of its citizens (Claeys, 2010) and control their identity and can be able to do it partly through forcing a uniform onto subordinates (Cardon, 2021). Speculative fiction is a genre where the way characters are dressed shows circumstances such as social layers and norms, political camps, hierarchies and systems, or environmental surroundings (Cardon, 2021). Simultaneously, “the characters’ dress is a good

indicator of the governmental regime” (Cardon, 2021, p. 10) as it can often show if it's repressive, open, authoritarian or liberal. Hierarchy and roles are shown through colours. The Handmaids wear red, Marthas wear green, and the Wives wear blue (Atwood, 1985).

When looking at the word “uniform” in the Merriam-Webster online dictionary, the following definitions can be found: “having always the same form, manner, or degree : not varying or variable” and “of the same form with others : conforming to one rule or mode” (Uniform, n.d.). This therefore means no variations or expressions of something else than the set from the government's rules, or organisation, workplace or schooling. The way the characters dress should be rule conforming, non-shifting and alike the others part of a community. When analysing uniforms used in dystopian and fictional worlds such as Gilead, they are about controlling people, both their social self and their inner self (Craik, 2003). This way of dressing has a tendency to send out a message to onlookers where the intelligence can be out there and easy to perceive, or they can be hidden, and “[o]ften it is those other subliminal messages that make them so intriguing” (Craik, 2003, p. 128). These subliminal messages have a secrecy and mystery to them which in turn can make them spiritual or sacrilege. This is in hand with the subscription to the same beliefs, namely indoctrination which dystopia and totalitarianism is built on (Claeys, 2010) making it almost a religion or cult to follow with a state decided uniform. Rather than specific attributes to a uniform, it is more important to wear it properly and obey the rules that comes in place by wearing a piece of clothing like this (Craik, 2003). In the ideological sense, the uniform is an instrument. It helps create a persona within the individuals of a society which the state wants to get across, but it also helps create a collective presence (Craik, 2003). The uniform is not only a piece of clothing, but constitutes a physical habit of posture, a certain way to move and a mental quality of being part of a larger group (Craik, 2003). Therefore, getting assigned a dress in *The Handmaid's Tale*, whether it is red, green or blue, sets an individual into a role and they need to be obedient and disciplined, as well as keep up with the standards the government set out for that specific role or consequences may arise. The aesthetic of the clothing pieces provides an imposed identity for the women, not chosen by them, but by the government, therefore, they are not their true form of identity (Barkass-Willamson, 2016). This is vital to keep in mind when analysing the attire of the women of Gilead.

Methodology

The purpose of this chapter is to clarify the methodology used in the analysis of *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood aiming to uncover ways in which clothing can contribute to the oppression of female characters in the book. This research was done early in the process by a close reading the novel several times and working with the content of it. Collecting the account provided by Offred and other Handmaids was vital for the study. The study focuses descriptions of the uniform, inner thoughts and monologues from Offred about both clothing, the regime and previous memories from the pre-authoritarian society.

To inform personal readings about the role of clothing in the text, a thorough literature review was carried out to investigate clothing, fashion history, women's history and the relationship between religion and clothing. In addition to this, sources on dystopia and authoritarianism have been used to understand why the choices in clothing may have been made as these sources have direct connection to the genre and content of the novel. They support the arguments about how clothing in *The Handmaid's Tale* may be used by a government in a dystopia to oppress women. As an interdisciplinary thesis, research needed to be done in both the field of literary studies and fashion. Following this, I applied the input from critics and other academic sources to the reading of the primary text itself, interlacing the quotes from Atwood's novel with theory and research done about the different themes. By combining theories of fashion and dystopia with a critical close reading of the novel, this dissertation aims to contribute to the field of literature as well as fashion.

Discussion

This section consists of the analysis and discussion of specific examples of clothing and fashion in the novel and how they can be interpreted through the theory discussed earlier as well as the role of oppression within all of this. First, the dress of the Handmaids will be analysed, before looking into the colour symbolism of it. Continuing onto an element of the uniform, namely the headpiece, the white wings will be analysed. Fourthly, a discussion of the indoctrination of beliefs within using the uniform in *The Handmaid's Tale* will be explored before ending with why clothing may be used as a trait in dystopias like this novel.

The dress

The dress of the Handmaids has now become iconic, even as a symbol for women liberation movements such as the right for abortion (Carrola, 2021). Purely aesthetically and materialistically, “[t]he skirt [of the dress] is ankle-length, full, gathered to a flat yoke that extends over the breasts, the sleeves are full” (Atwood, 14, 1985). Looking further into the shape of the dress, it is loose and does not show much of the shape of a woman: “One of [the Handmaids] is vastly pregnant; her belly, under her loose garment” (Atwood, 32, 1985). Even if a woman is pregnant, the dress and its shape does not allow for any accentuated feminine shapes of the body. This indicates *draping*, how the fabric falls or behaves when it is folded or gathered, which is affected by amongst others, weight of the fabric (Anstey & Weston, 1997). A heavy fabric is therefore indicated, which in return creates a lot of weight on the Handmaids as they have to carry it around and do daily tasks with it. The heaviness of the fabric and the shape of the skirt also hinders mobility and the ability to run freely, dance and move your legs naturally (Engeln & Zola, 2012). The female body is therefore oppressed through the layers of fabric (Barkass-Willamson, 2016).

The modesty of this dress being long enough to cover everything from the neck down to the ankles, is similar to modesty within religious clothing. A long dress like this can be found in for example traditional Bulgarian clothing within both Islam and Christianity (Ghodsee, 2008). This sets Gilead back in history, as by the end of the 1800s women started to move more towards practical clothing which allowed them to travel in the public space more freely and pursue political equality and employment (Rall, 2022). The length and shape of the dress, as well as how much it covers, is reminiscent of Victorian dresses which “was a form of social control which contributed to the maintenance of women in dependent, subservient roles” (Crane, 2012, p. 112). Within the nineteenth century, the general idea was that women should wear clothes for their health and comfort rather than beauty standards, trends and social status; a radical thought encouraging women to step away from the inherently political sides of clothing (Rall, 2022). Before this, politics and religion, both fields mainly with men in charge or as the lead figure, influenced and stylised the way women dressed (Rall, 2022). In this way, the dress conforms to traditional modesty found in religion and earlier time periods when women were conformed into modesty by society and its norms which were often set by men.

When the clothing of women in the end of the 1800s started to create mobility, a new world was open to women (Rall, 2022). However, the mobility in *The Handmaid's Tale* is not there because of the sheer size of the dress: "We go up the stairs, single file, being careful not to step on the trailing hems of each other's dresses" (Atwood, 1985, p. 122). One can wonder if the long hem of the dress or the length of the skirt is there to assure distance between women, but also between women and men as the dress is there to protect them from "predatory male sexuality" (Ferns, 1989, p. 381). The skirt is very full and down to the floor, which creates some sort of circle around each woman protecting them from others or disabling them coming closer to others when they are not supposed to. The Handmaids have their privilege or freedom to move wherever and however close to others, removed and the oppression of being forced to stay away from people you care about, such as friends, is a way the regime controls the population. Crane (2012) suggests that certain "styles of clothing can be a straitjacket constraining (literally) a person's movements and manners" (p. 2). This goes hand in hand with the point of the uniform; to be disciplined and it constitutes a habit of for example posture, as mentioned in the theory part about the uniform (Craik, 2003), but more importantly for the largeness of the dress – a certain way to move about from the shape of the dress. This controls women into behaving and acting in an indoctrinated way.

It appears that the population of Gilead follows some sort of Christianity, or at least reads the Bible, as it is quoted and mentioned several times, for example on page 94: "He inserts the key, opens the box, lifts out the Bible, an ordinary copy, with a black cover and gold-edged pages". (Atwood, 1985). Hence, the relation of attire and Christianity comes into question. One verse from the Bible that has relation to the way women must dress in *The Handmaid's Tale*, is Deuteronomy 22:5. This states that "[a] woman shall not wear a man's garment, nor shall a man put on a woman's cloak, for whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord your God" (English Standard Version Bible, 2001). To wear the apparel of a man is not allowed for a woman according to this verse in the Bible, but a man should not wear women's clothing either. Cross dressing is therefore strictly forbidden, in agreement with this verse from the Bible. This can partly be why no woman in Gilead wears trousers, as this is seen to be menswear, and a dress is chosen for the women instead. Offred is often remembering back to the elusive times before the oppression of women in Gilead, where Atwood uses analepsis to create a flashback: "Moira, sitting on the edge of my bed, legs crossed, ankle on knee, in her purple overalls" (Atwood, 1985, p. 43). Her friend, Moira, is described to wear overalls or dungarees, which consist of trousers and fabric covering the

chest with straps over the shoulders (Dungaree, n.d.). This used to be worn usually by working men because of the heavy and protective fabric but went into popular fashion for everyone later in history (Dungaree, n.d.; Crane, 2012). This is not something Offred would see in Gilead as women have to wear the uniform in shape of a dress, rather than trousers which the men get to wear. Crane (2012) highlights this saying “[c]lothing (...) performs a major role in the social construction of [gender] identity” (p. 1). In the nineteenth century, “fixed gender identities” were ascribed to trousers as the dominant view was that these were gendered male (Crane, 2012, p. 112). Thus, one can interpret that the oppression is created through the belief in the Bible by making women wear dresses, not trousers, since clothing can be considered as a mostly gendered convention.

Another interesting aspect of the dress itself, is that it has no details such as frills, hems or decorative elements. One can wonder if the simplicity of it relates to the government not wanting the women to be distracted by such elements. Engeln and Zola (2021) writes that a constant monitoring of clothes is found more regularly amongst girls and women than boys and men. Engeln and Zola (2021) continues by suggesting that this becomes a distraction. If there are no elements to monitor or become distracted by, the uniform creates a focus and it becomes easier for the regime to ensure that the women are focused on their jobs, tasks or the path in front of them (Engeln & Zola, 2021). The simplicity therefore creates focus for the wearer which is one of the qualities the authoritarian regime wants as this can help controlling the masses (Claeys, 2010). This suits the theme of the wings creating a focused path not to be distracted, as details on the dress would be of distraction as well. Therefore, the dress oppresses the women into a mind game where the regime has so much control over what women wear that they can control their actions and mindsets.

Colour symbolism

Colour plays a vital role in clothing. Atwood describes texture and colour rather than focusing too much on style or specific details of the clothing, although it is mentioned (Hughes, 2006). This is done to make colour the more important factor of it as it can convey several different meanings and messages and contribute “to humans’ [aesthetic] experience of the world” (Elliot et al., 2015, p. 531). Colour is used to denote a feeling, class or characteristic of a character (Hughes, 2006). Colours have a communicative value with different meanings to different people and different associations, as well as context-specific

meanings (Pravossoudovitch et al., 2014; Elliot et al., 2015). Thus, it is therefore important looking at the symbolism of all the colours Atwood uses to denote different messages, hidden or visible at first glance to the reader, outsiders of Gilead and not to forget the people of Gilead themselves as well.

The women in the world of Gilead are all constricted to the colour of which role they are limited to (Cardon, 2021). The Handmaids are forced to wear a red dress, and this is the colour we will first look at in terms of symbolism. Red is an important colour and “the first ‘real’ colour with a defined wavelength” with names for other colours within languages coming later than the denomination for red (Petru, 2006, p. 203). In some cultures, the name for the colour red is the same word for blood (Petru, 2006). One might associate blood with red and since this is prevalent in many languages one can take this into consideration when looking at the reasoning for choosing red dresses for the Handmaids. The function of the Handmaids is to reproduce and be fertile; if they are not, they are not of much use to the society of Gilead (Atwood, 1985). A part of being fertile is menstruating, which is the monthly cycle when biological and “healthy” women bleed, indicating ovulation (Critchley et al., 2020). By having the very evident colour of blood as the colour of the uniform they must wear every day, it is evident that they are hopefully fertile and can reproduce. “A Sister, dipped in blood” (Atwood, 1985, p. 15) is how Offred describes a fellow Handmaid. The way the Handmaids are dressed in this colour shows to the society that these women are fertile and will with time produce a child. Being dressed in red to symbolise this is intimate and personal. It also underlines the fact that Handmaids have one function in society and are only seen as a “wandering womb” (Atwood, 1985, p. 152). With this, the colour red of their costume can symbolise blood and the fact that the whole dress is red, rather than a symbol or a part of it, underlines how the Handmaids are viewed. They only have value if they bleed and are fertile.

Red is also the colour of female sexuality in a lot of art (Elliot et al., 2015). Red skin of females is seen to “be an indication of fertility, as blood flow is enhanced when [o]estrogen levels increase” (Elliot et al., 2015, pp. 531-532). By having the colour of good blood flow as the colour of a dress which covers most of the body indicates that the message the authoritarian state is trying to send to those around, is that the Handmaids are fertile. During peak fertility, Elliot et al. (2015) suggests that even the faces of women can appear redder. As the Handmaids cannot show their faces because of their headpiece with wings, the

colour of peak fertility then must be shown through the dress. Even though research have shown this to be true during peak fertility, does not mean it is the case all the time for a woman. By only caring about their fertility, the regime and society is oppressing the women into being only that. They only care about their fertility and want to show to the men around that they are indeed sexually attractive in terms of being able to reproduce. Thus, they minimise human beings down to their ability to reproduce or not and adding to it by dressing them in the colour of sexuality. This is how the regime takes control and oppresses the female Handmaids into the criteria of being fertile. If one is not fertile, one is not of use to society. Elliot et al. (2015) claims that “men may associate red with female sexuality because they witness red on women’s skin at a time in which the women are feeling and acting most amorous” as well as perceiving the woman more attractive (p. 523). Although sexual or physical touch and contact between a male and a Handmaid is prohibited except for at times of conceiving a child, the Handmaids still cause attention from men with their red dresses according to this thought. It is therefore a suitable colour to use on the women that are marked to be reproduction machines.

Today, we often use red as a reference to dangerous, problematic or unsafe situations or objects to avoid (Pravossoudovitch et al., 2014). In our day-to-day life, we often see words such as “caution”, “danger” or “warning” combined with the colour red (Elliot et al., 2015). For many governments or safety teams around the world, red is “used to denote the highest level of threat” or connoting a hazard (Elliot et al., 2015). Studies have also shown that most people connote the colour red naturally to a high level of threat, danger or insecurity (Elliot et al., 2015). It can therefore be relevant to look at the red dress of Handmaids in this context as well. It might not seem relevant at first, but as we have seen, the task of a Handmaid is to reproduce and birth a child and with this comes danger. The danger of this is then a possible interpretation of why the Handmaids are forced to wear the colour of a threat or danger, as they might be a threat to the government. After all, they are forced to be reproductive machines, a role that demands a lot from the women and forcing them into a role they might not have wanted; being docile is difficult when one has memories from a free world where there were options of what to do with each individual’s life (Feuer, 1997). This can create tension and thoughts about uprising against the government, which is dangerous for the powerful and authoritarian regime as they want control, and they want obedience from its citizens (Claeys, 2010). Therefore, having the Handmaids in red makes them a symbol of walking danger both in terms of childbirth and as a threat of discontent. If a Handmaid then

tries to do something in opposition to the regime or against the norms of Gilead, it is easy to spot her as she is wearing the powerful colour of red, resulting in it being easier to find her if she tries to escape or hide. As mentioned earlier, red objects are seen to be objects to avoid as well (Pravossoudovitch et al., 2014). “Now we walk along the same street, in red pairs” (Atwood, 1985, p. 30) is how Offred describes herself and her Handmaid partner. Red pairs are easier to spot, and they are perceived by all around as this red figure, potentially fertile or dangerous. Handmaids should avoid others and their headpiece underlines this by shielding their sight and their face. Colours can be used to indicate others to avoid or stay away (Elliot et al., 2015) and as red is a very visible colour and can easily stand out; the boldness of the bright red makes it easy to spot (Gage, 1999). In this way shows for other women, but especially men that they should stay away as they are fertile women with the specific job conceiving a child.

The headpiece of the Handmaids will be looked at more extensively below, but before that the colour of it should be noticed. Clothing can denote signs such as virginity and purity (Hughes, 2006) and by having the wings around the Handmaids’ faces in white, it gives off a certain meaning. White is the colour of purity and can in certain contexts symbolise comfort, peace, protection and the alleviation of despair (Chiazzari, 1999). Traditionally, white is also seen as the colour of virginity (Chiazzari, 1999). This purity is underlined in the novel: “What if I were to come at night, when he’s on duty alone – though he would never be allowed such solitude – and permit him beyond my white wings?” (Atwood, 1985, p. 27). Offred indicates that permitting him beyond her white wings is a step too far, indicating sexual intercourse and the whiteness of her wings being spoiled and impure. However, white can also be a colour that separates us from other people and creates distance (Chiazzari, 1999). Taking this symbolism into consideration, the headpiece does create distance from others as it hinders the Handmaids from seeing others and blocks others from seeing the Handmaids’ faces. This therefore is both in result of the headpiece itself with the wings, but also the colour of it. The white wings are a symbol of the purity the Handmaid should upkeep and can be interpreted as what they should aim for to be and to keep up with the standard of chastity and pureness. Chiazzari (1999) writes that psychologically, the colour white creates space to contemplate and think. If we take that into consideration when looking at the headpiece, the colour and the shape of the wings both work together to keep the Handmaid in her own head, rather than in touch with the outer world, resulting in the regime creating domination and power over them by enforcing this headpiece.

The headpiece

One of the most important parts of Offred and the Handmaids' uniform is the headpiece. The first time we read about the headpiece is when Atwood (1985) is describing the uniform and writes that "[t]he white wings too are prescribed issue; they are to keep us from seeing, but also from being seen" (p. 14). As she forthrightly writes, they are to keep the Handmaids from seeing their surroundings and for them to keep to themselves, in addition to hindering others from seeing their face. The white wings can be compared to blinkers used on horses. This covering of their eyes is used to limit the field of view the horse has and "force them to focus on a priori traced pathways" (Scopa et al., 2022). Humans use this to force the horse into focusing on their task and not to be distracted by surrounding objects, horses or people. When the women forced to wear a similar headpiece in *The Handmaid's Tale* wear this, they too are forced to focus on their tasks and not to be distracted by surroundings, forcing them to have a carefully selected view of the world, decided by the regime.

Another part of why the government enforces the use of the wings, is to take away the identity of the Handmaids. When Offred is asked by tourists if they can photograph her, she expresses this: "I look down at the sidewalk, shake my head for *No*. What they must see is the white wings only, a scrap of face, my chin and part of my mouth. Not the eyes" (Atwood, 1985, p. 34). This is central to the totalitarian state which want a mass, without personality and no personal life (Claeys, 2010). The opposition to individualism comes through in the headpiece. The people around the Handmaids cannot see their full faces, contributing to the loss of personal identity. The face is important to see facial expressions and emotions, but when it is covered up a lot of a person's identity is also covered up. As Offred say herself bystanders should see only "a scrap of [her] face", not the full face or her full identity (Atwood, 1985, p. 34). This results in the wings oppressing women by not allowing them to show their full identity as their face is covered.

The indoctrination of the citizens of Gilead also impacts how the Handmaids act with the headpiece. We can see how Offred reacts when people, a man in this example, looks at her or in her direction: "He begins to whistle. Then he winks. I drop my head and turn so that the white wings hide my face, and keep walking" (Atwood, 1985, p. 24). The wings in themselves hide most of her face, but even so it was necessary for her to drop her face to cover even more from the man. She has been indoctrinated and conditioned into thinking that

she should not look at or avoid being looked at by others, especially men with whom she has no relationship. In addition to this, she gets unsure if this might be a test made by the authorities: “Perhaps it was a test, to see what I would do. Perhaps he is an eye” (Atwood, 1985, p. 24). Just because a male looked in her direction and showed interest, she has been conditioned to then react in a matter of shielding her face even more. Simultaneously, she is also questioning whether the intent of the man was genuine or if this was the government testing her of some sorts to see if she was loyal and followed the rules.

Both the veil and the white wings also gives of a certain characteristic reminiscent of religious or spiritual customs. Coad (2001) suggest that the headpiece “makes [the women] nun-like, ostensibly pure, chaste, and virginal and it aids their effacement, actively disempowering them” (p. 56). Earlier, the colour of the headpiece was analysed to signify chastity, purity, virginity and isolation (Chiazzari, 1999). With this the headpiece is quite reminiscent of religious headwear, such as nuns in the Catholic church wearing a veil. Originally the veil was “used by Christian consecrated virgins to distinguish themselves from secular society” (Kuhns, 2007, p. 56). It was also supposed to, and is today, a signifier that this woman is not available for marriage (Kuhns, 2007). A thought that has carried through from the early beginnings of Christianity is that through the choice of what they wear, women can act as temptresses towards men and leave them in a helpless situation (Kuhns, 2007). This is present today and somewhat present in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Along with these thoughts within Christianity, is the view that women were only worthy enough to see the world through a veil that covered their hair, head and sometimes most of their face, leaving a space only for the eyes (Kuhns, 2007). This view is reminiscent of what we see in Atwood’s novel where the Handmaids are forced to only see a small impression of the world around them as their head is covered and the wings force them to perceive the world through a smaller scope. One can see this when Offred talks about the headpiece: “[g]iven our wings, our blinkers, it’s hard to look up, hard to get the full view, of the sky, of anything” (Atwood, 1985, p. 36). They are not worthy enough to see more of the world or interact in a proper manner with other people, and therefore the wings are set in place. Offred continues and says that “[the Handmaids] have learned to see the world in gasps” (Atwood, 1985, p. 36). The limited view of the world is part of how the government wants to control what they can see and how they can interact with other people, leading to a lot of power within the simple headpiece. This is part of the indoctrination; they have learnt to adapt to a view of the world trapped within two white wings, reminiscent of certain religious headpieces.

This thought of covering your head and hair is found in the Bible. The headpiece of Offred can be interpreted to have something to do with covering yourself around men. This is found in Genesis 24:65 where we can read a female asking a “servant, “Who is that man, walking in the field to meet us?” The servant said, “It is my master”. So she took her veil and covered herself” (English Standard Version Bible, 2001). Uncovered hair around other people, especially men, is not permitted in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Hair is seen as sexual when Offred is talking about Japanese tourists: “their hair too is exposed, in all its darkness and sexuality” (Atwood, 1985, p. 34). As mentioned earlier, using the Bible to interpret some of the reasoning for the way the women should be clothed, is applicable to *The Handmaid’s Tale* and we can refer to the Bible and the verses concerning inequality in the way men and women can dress to understand it better. Therefore, the Genesis verse is relevant as the Handmaids shall not wear their hair out in the open, only when they are alone, as covering yourself can be a sign of respect towards the males as the woman does in the Bible verse. Using religion and biblical verses, the oppression of women is underlined by stating their hair should not be uncovered as this is too sexual and not modest enough.

Indoctrination of beliefs

Indoctrination and clothing go hand in hand in the novel as touched upon previously. On page 34, Offred is describing a group of tourists from outside of Gilead with a different way of dressing: “It’s been a long time since I’ve seen skirts that short on women. The skirts reach just below the knee and the legs come out from beneath them, nearly naked in their thin stockings” (Atwood, 1985, p. 34). Offred is describing a sort of discontent she has towards how the female tourists are clothed. Most people today would probably say that a skirt with a cut below the knee is not overly sexual or showing too much, as the miniskirts have been in fashion and quite widely accepted since it was popularised in 1965 by Mary Quant (Duff, 2017). Offred however has been conditioned into thinking and having an opinion that skirts showing this much skin is incorrect and something a woman should not do. The legs of the women are covered, but not enough in the eyes of the brainwashed women of Gilead. The see-through stockings show the skin too much and does not cover enough as Offred sees them as “nearly naked” (Atwood, 1985, p. 34). The fact that Offred herself thinks like this shows that she has become a victim to the harsh and sexist indoctrination resulting in an indoctrination from the government.

Even the rule of the Handmaids having to wear headpieces is shown to create angst against the uncovered heads of the female tourists: “Their heads are uncovered and their hair too is exposed, in all its darkness and sexuality” (Atwood, 1985, p. 34). In Gilead, the head of women should not be uncovered as this can make the women see the world around them (Atwood, 1985, p. 14). In addition to this, showing your hair to the male population around you is seen as sexual and Handmaids’ hair should not be uncovered when out amongst others. The only time a Handmaid would be able to show her hair would be in her private chambers or when she is taking a bath (Atwood, 1985, p. 68). The way of thinking that something so natural as hair is sexual and should be private is quite extreme. However, this is something we have looked at previously in relation to the headpiece and religions. The fact that she applies the norms and rules of authoritarian Gilead onto others, in this case outsiders from another country, shows however how a certain use of a uniform like this can over time indoctrinate certain thoughts or mindsets.

The regime of Gilead is also using indoctrination to make women think modesty is the only way to live. This is evident in multiple parts of the book, for example when Offred is sitting pondering in a chair in her room: “You can think clearly only with your clothes on” (Atwood, 1985, p. 149). Even though she is alone in her room, she chooses to be fully dressed as she has been conditioned to think modesty equals a clearer mind. They have also been told that “[m]odesty is invisibility” (Atwood, 1985, p. 34). All women in this society have a goal to dress modestly and not draw unwanted, sexual attention to them from the opposite sex, and by the government enforcing the fact that modesty is invisibility, they are creating a mass that looks the same (Ferns, 1989). Although many women choose to dress modestly and want to pursue this, it is not applicable to all women. Many want to express themselves and be free to wear what they want and show how much or how little of their skin. The creation of a mass to control, rather than individuals is something we will look further into in the next chapter.

Why use clothing as a trait in dystopia to oppress and gain control?

Controlling clothing of the population in dystopias is important. On the one hand, controlling how people dress is a way of controlling identities. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the Handmaids must wear clothing which is characterised by covering their bodies and obscuring

their faces to repress the identity and sexuality of women towards the men of Gilead (Barkass-Willamson, 2016). In this way, the uniform made by the clearly patriarchal state hinders the chances of women like the main character Offred using her body to make statements or expressions towards the government (Barkass-Willamson, 2016). In addition, by controlling what people can wear, the government removes the element of expression through clothing by making everyone wear somewhat the same clothing or have the same uniform for each sub part of the hierarchy, in this case, Wives, Marthas and Handmaids. Barkass-Willamson (2016) writes that the uniform in this novel is the way it is “to repress the body’s feminine expressions” and to not differentiate between different women and their identities as this could deceive men and the government into “distinguishable identities” (p. 164). Distinguishable identities are harder to control and one of the ultimate goals of an authoritarian government as in a dystopia is as we have looked at to control identities. Clothing is part of one’s personality and through certain clothing choices one can reflect one’s individual self-image and communicate one’s personality (Giorcelli, 2017). By not having the diversity of different personal expressions, identities and feminine expressions, the population becomes more of a mass, which is easier for a government to control giving less space for individual thinking.

By using the lack of control over one’s own clothing, the author of a dystopia also achieves something internal with the reader. Clothing and what we wear is something most people want to control and enjoy having say in (Rall, 2022). When this right is removed, a part of freedom is also removed. The female body and how it has to wear a set uniform which covers certain feminine traits, is used “as a symbol of dystopian social satire” warning the reader about “the repercussions of current social and political trends” (Barkass-Willamson, 2016, p. 161). The result of current political trends could therefore result in the removal of the right to wear what you want, express yourself, be comfortable and not dress according to a patriarchal view of women. When this is articulated in the dystopian novel the reader gets a glimpse into the world of no control over something as basic as clothing and how restricting and expressing it can be with a personal freedom removed. The internal thoughts of the lack of control over what you can and cannot wear might strike a nerve in the reader's mind as it is so basic, and some might take it for granted today, but tomorrow that right might be gone. This right to wear what you want is only one side of a dystopian potential tomorrow, but there are worse sides as for example control over reproduction, mind control, censorship and suppression. When Atwood then brings up this basic side of life as something women no

longer can control as it is in the hands of men, the reader is warned about a dystopian future where all your basic rights and ways of life are controlled and taken away by a potential patriarchal authoritarian government.

The loss of control over clothing might feel insignificant, but through the character of Offred and her thoughts, she “makes a point of noting its loss and the reality of wearing the same full-coverage, veiled garment for the rest of her life” (Cardon, 2021, p. 10). In this context, choice in fashion is not about trends and the aesthetic of a certain piece of clothing you are picking, rather it is about personality, identity and openness (Cardon, 2021). The freedom to wear what you want is a source of empowerment, and by taking this away from people, Atwood is creating a very close and real dystopia to our modern world. Atwood shows how the modern world enjoys having choices in what to wear and how to express ourselves which we can do through the infinite options of contemporary fashion (Cardon, 2021). By using this uniform, identity and values are removed and will therefore help create the dystopian world where everything is as bad as possible.

Conclusion

This thesis aimed to research the how clothing in dystopias contributes to the oppression of female characters in *The Handmaid's Tale* written by Margaret Atwood. By exploring specific excerpts from the novel and underpinning the analysis with a revision of secondary sources on fashion, religion, women's rights and dystopia, the thesis has shown how oppression is performed systematically through clothing in the totalitarian world of Gilead. This has been shown through a detailed examination of the primary text itself, by highlighting relevant passages and quotes from Offred breaking down the meaning of attire in the chapters studying the dress.

To summarise the main key points from this research, in the first chapter of the discussion, the dress of the Handmaid Offred was analysed, finding that it separates the women from each other and separates women from men to gain control. The shape and coverage of it was concluded to be of religious value, in part to desexualise women as skin is seen as private in the world of Gilead. Colour symbolism was then looked at, more specifically the colours red and white. In this chapter, red was found to be of symbolic value to blood and birth, but also as a signal colour to be visible. The white of the headpiece

indicates purity as well as separation from others. The headpiece was then broken down and as the novel shows, it acts as blinkers for the Handmaids to make them focus on their tasks and to separate them from the peripheral world. In addition to this, the wings are used to remove identity from the women by hiding a large part of their face. Moving on, indoctrination through the use of a uniform is key to *The Handmaid's Tale*. Gilead achieves a lot of their control by enforcing a use of a uniform that puts women into homogenised groups and masses without individuality, which are easier to control. The mental indoctrination showed how the government has control over the mind of individuals such as Offred, although she shows acts of defiance through her storytelling which is important to remember as this study has not focused on the attributes of resistance to the regime. The dual exercise of control focused on in this thesis has shown how control over external elements such as clothing then subsides individual thinking and personality. The last chapter investigated why using clothing in literature is beneficial in a dystopian novel to symbolise oppression and control, and to underline the dystopian genre. Here, the personal dystopia becomes important and by removing the freedom of clothing, Atwood makes the reader reflect on personal freedoms.

While this study focused mostly on the attire of Offred and the group of Handmaids, it would be interesting to apply similar questions to study the other groups of women such as the Marthas or the Wives. One could apply the same research done in this dissertation and see how it would reflect different aspects of women's oppression. The relevance of research around religion and headpieces might be adapted in a different manner to the other groups of women. This study was also limited to the cis white woman Offred which is not representative of all women. The topic of non-white or non-cis women was considered and it is a topic recommended of further study as it has great potential. Therefore, it would be a valuable point to take off from to further study the indoctrination and sexism within attire in a dystopian world.

The thesis applied fashion history, fashion theory, religious studies and politics to the subject of clothing in dystopian literature. This study has explored why it is relevant selecting the uniform of the character Offred, and to draw attention to this area of literature. Colour symbolism is a theme that has been researched in literature, but by expanding this to the shapes of dresses, analysing headpieces, looking at colours as hierarchy and how indoctrination of a certain way to dress can change one's mentality, one gains a different

perspective on a written text. The thesis also shows the importance of attire in our life, ranging from subliminal messages in uniform or ideologies and indoctrinated beliefs surrounded other people's clothing. This thesis contributes to the ongoing field of literature and fashion, the former when looking at *The Handmaid's Tale* in terms of oppression through uniforms, and the latter exploring how something as physical, tactile and routine as clothing has an effect on an individual within a fictional dystopian world.

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