

*No Light Without Shadow: The Control of Language
and Discourse in Margaret Atwood's Dystopian Fiction*

ANNA DE VAUL

Introduction

Margaret Atwood is a Canadian author whose most recent dystopian novel, *The Heart Goes Last*, was published in 2015, nearly thirty years after her first book, *The Handmaid's Tale*, in 1986. Although these two novels were written decades apart and the circumstances leading to the formation of the dystopian societies within the novels differ, there are a number of common threads running throughout the stories and worlds. These common threads include environmental concerns, ideas about the commodification of sex, portrayals of the dangers of allowing personal belief to influence power, and a focus on the vulnerability of women. However, the most striking and significant common threads, to me, are her focus on the relationship between eutopia and dystopia and her emphasis on the control of discourse by each of the regimes.

Eutopia vs. Dystopia

As with many dystopian worlds, each of Atwood's dystopian societies has its roots in an attempt to create a perfect society: a eutopia, meaning "a good place", as opposed to a utopia, meaning "no place" or a nonexistent world which can be either eutopian

or dystopian (Claeys and Sargent 1999: 1)¹. Atwood refers to dystopia as the “evil twin” of (e-)utopia and states that both can be used to “explore proposed changes in social organisation in graphic ways, by showing what they might be like for those living under them” (Atwood 2004: 515). In Atwood’s vision, this equates to suffering, at least for some; her protagonists exist in dystopian worlds, though the societies were initially conceived of and presented as eutopian and do function as such for a portion of their residents. As Eugene Goodheart points out, the attempt to create a eutopia “[...] becomes problematic, even pernicious, when it enters the historical realm with ambitions to transform the political and social order according to an idea”, inevitably leading to dystopia, as is true in both of Atwood’s novels (Goodheart 1973: 103).

As Goodheart’s comments indicate, eutopia and dystopia are intrinsically related. What is intended to be eutopian may, in practice, turn out to be less than ideal for some or all of its members. This has been true throughout the history of utopian experiments and literature, including in Thomas More’s famous utopia: “[...] More offers not an ideal state but a type of an ideal state—an imagining of a society that is ideal by certain standards and criteria” (Houston 2007: 435). It is not surprising, then, that these criteria and the state they lead to “are shown to be unsatisfactory [...] rather than offering a solution to the ills of the world, *Utopia* is deliberately enigmatic, and sceptical about the possibility of an ideal human existence in this life” (Houston 2007: 435). More’s *De optimo reipublicæ* sets the stage for the destabilization of the idea of true eutopia being possible; if the society is ideal for only some of its members, it is inherently flawed. It follows, then, that if societies continue to seek and enforce a particular imagining of the ideal, some of the members of those societies will suffer. When this enforcement is taken to extremes, as in Atwood’s novels, a dystopian experience is born.

In *The Heart Goes Last* and *The Handmaid’s Tale*², Atwood asserts that the distinction between eutopia and dystopia centres around discourse; in both novels language, speech, and literacy are tightly regulated in an effort to control how residents

¹ Claeys and Sargent define eutopia as a society “the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably better than the society in which they lived”, while a dystopian society is intended to be viewed as “considerably worse” (Claeys and Sargent 1999: 1-2).

² While the *MaddAddam* trilogy—*Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009), and *MaddAddam* (2013)—and *The Blind Assassin* (2000) also contain dystopian elements, Atwood argued that the society in *Oryx and Crake* was not a classic dystopia, in part because it does not show the reader “an overview of the structure of the society” but rather is limited to individual experience (Atwood, 2004: 517). *The Blind Assassin* is likewise difficult to categorize; though the pulp-in-

discuss and perceive their society and themselves in relation to it, which in turn affects how each of these is discussed and perceived by outsiders. By exerting control over the discourse both within and about their societies, the regimes of Gilead and Consilience are able to effectively maintain the myth of eutopia.

In the case of *The Handmaid's Tale*, a religious group has masterminded the takeover of the USA and installed a faith-based government run by men and reinforced by a strict and gendered class system. The narrator, referred to as Offred, is the eponymous handmaid. For the purposes of formalised, pleasureless procreation, she is assigned to a Commander, Fred, who is a member of the government's upper echelon. In a surveillance culture where free thought and the expression of opposing or unorthodox opinion usually results in death, the narrator must walk a careful line. Though the Republic of Gilead is a good place to be for the religious men who run it, it is not for her.

The Commander attempts to explain and justify the genesis of the Republic of Gilead in a series of illicit conversations with the narrator. "I'm interested in your opinion. You're intelligent enough, you must have an opinion," he says to her. "I try to empty my mind. I think about the sky, at night, when there's no moon. I have no opinion, I say" (Atwood 1986: locs. 2602-2605). The Commander's reply touches on one of the central ideas in Atwood's vision of dystopia:

You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs, is what he says. We thought we could do better. Better? I say, in a small voice. How can he think this is better? Better never means better for everyone, he says. It always means worse, for some (Atwood 1986: locs. 2606-2608).

In *The Heart Goes Last* Atwood addresses this same idea, though much more directly. Stan and Charmaine, reduced to living in their car while trying to avoid violent gangs due to widespread economic collapse, are offered the chance to start a new life in Consilience, a walled community where jobs, houses, and peaceful neighbourhoods are guaranteed. There, residents spend half their time as citizens of Consilience and half as inmates in Positron prison, around which the town is centred. Both Stan and Charmaine accept the argument that this structure assures the availability of jobs and economic viability of the town; it is not until after they have been in

spired worlds of the novel-within-a-novel are undoubtedly dystopian, the framing narrative is not. Therefore, this chapter focuses on the novels that Atwood herself unambiguously identified as dystopian (*The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Heart Goes Last*), though it is worth noting that the commonalities discussed in these two are apparent in the others as well.

Consilience for some time, they discover that the success of the community also depends upon other factors such as the harvest and sale of organs and the commodification of women who have undergone a lobotomising procedure. Once the dark truth that lies behind the Positron project is revealed to the public, bloggers and pundits have a field day discussing the events that went on behind the black-glass walls of Consilience:

[...] others said that the twin city idea had been a good one at first; who could sneeze at full employment and a home for everyone? There were a few rotten apples, but without them it would've worked. In response, some said that these utopian schemes always went bad and turned into dictatorships, because human nature was what it was (Atwood 2015: loc. 4965).

In both cases, Atwood demonstrates that it is impossible to achieve true eutopia; the society will always, eventually, be dystopian for some, if not all, of its members. Eggs will be broken, apples will turn out to be rotten, and, human nature being what it is, those who have the least control over the society or authority within it will suffer most. In Atwood's vision, the distinction then is not whether the society is eutopian or dystopian but rather how dystopian it is, and for whom it is dystopian. As critic Dominick Grace argues, "while the opposition between alternate societal models in utopian fiction often serves to provide a simple binary between eutopian and dystopian possibilities, Atwood instead offers degrees of dystopia" (Grace 1998: 481) both within her fictional societies and between the different dystopian worlds she creates. Thus Stan and Charmaine and the other resident of Consilience are able and willing to look the other way when they encounter early indicators of the rotten apples in the town; it is still better than the world outside, at least at first. Similarly, the narrator and other women in *The Handmaid's Tale* may dislike their situations, but they mostly accept them because it is better than the alternatives. Complacency is shown to be a key factor in experiencing less extreme levels of dystopian suffering.

Control of Discourse: Literacy, Vocabulary, and Memory

In both *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Heart Goes Last*, the protagonists undeniably suffer despite living in societies that are, in name if not in reality, eutopian. And in both novels, the protagonists are kept from expressing their dissatisfaction, and

thereby from personally organising a successful resistance, by a rigid set of rules governing discourse, enforced through extensive surveillance and a violent and largely unaccountable police force.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, this is taken to the Orwellian extreme. All women aside from the elite group of quasi-military Aunts who train the Handmaids are forbidden to read, write, or even hold a pen: "I can feel its power, the power of the words it contains. Pen Is Envy, Aunt Lydia would say" (Atwood 1986: location 2325). As in many instances throughout history, the power of the written word is recognised as volatile, revolutionary. Even the Bible, the basis for the strict laws and mores of Gilead, is kept under lock and key. The narrator frequently thinks she notices additions or deletions to what she remembers of the text, but is not able to verify these. Like Winston Smith in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, she knows that to question this re-writing will result in punishment or death.

The attempt to limit the discourse of the inhabitants of Gilead is an attempt to control or at least restrict their thoughts. Access to the past, and to memories of it, is also denied to the inhabitants of Gilead, just as it is in Orwell's Oceania. After all, "language is the foundation for thoughts and those who can control the language can also restrict the thought" (Kouhestani 2013: 612). Memories are meant to fade away, and they do, through indoctrination, the passage of time, and the fear of reprisal. Discussing the past or negative impressions of the present is forbidden. Moreover, the language of the past has been replaced by Gilead's institution of its own form of Newspeak³. The regime's enforcement of its linguistic code is intended to make "all other modes of thought impossible [...]. Where meaning is singular and final, ambiguity of meaning and variety of experience are excluded" (Staels 1995: 230). Gormon L. Beauchamp, writing about what he called "the central dystopian criticism of utopia's effect on language"—the idea that it limits ideas and thought to only what is officially allowed—refers to Newspeak as "the linguistic result of utopian uniformism employed for life-denying ends" (Beauchamp 1974: 464, 468). As Finigan describes, by manipulating and destroying the past, the regimes hope to control the present

³ Orwell described Newspeak, a variation of English created by the regime that controls the state of Oceania in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, as "the only language in the world whose vocabulary gets smaller every year" as ambiguous and 'unsavory' words and ideas are purged and vocabulary with new, regime-specific meaning is added (Orwell 1960: loc. 776). In this way Newspeak becomes "language purified of all heretical thought, in which thought-crime will be quite simply unthinkable" used as means of attempting to control the thoughts and perceptions, and through them the actions, of the populace (Courtine and Willett 1986: 69).

(Finigan 2011: 4480). When Atwood's narrator references the word Mayday, with its double connotations of fertility/non-Christian ritual and of a call for help, another handmaid replies, "»That isn't a term I remember. I'm surprised you do. You ought to make an effort...« She pauses. »To clear your mind of such...« She pauses again. »Echoes«" (Atwood 1986: loc. 3537). It is at this point that the narrator realizes she has become too free with language and that it may cost her life. Yet it is these echoes that sustain her—these echoes and her struggling attempts to reconstruct herself through language, albeit silently, in her head. By doing so, she seeks to revive "the capacity for individual spiritual and emotional life" (Staels 1995: 233). In Gilead this is a punishable form of resistance, one in which the narrator knowingly engages, though she is seemingly unaware of how insidious that Newspeak is, as she still, despite her efforts, thinks in its terms—"unwomen", "unbabies", fetuses as "it" until they are declared to not be "unbabies", and so on. Unlike her friend Moira, she has unknowingly internalised the discourse of the regime even as she recognises its indoctrinating power, so that her attempts at resistance are peppered with it or accomplished, as when she rewords the Lord's Prayer or the hymn *Amazing Grace*, within its confines. As Stillman and Johnson show (1994), ultimately this internalisation of the discourse of the regime leads to a reluctant acceptance of her place within it.

In Consilience, as in Oceania and in Gilead, the authorities attempt to control how the past is remembered by its inhabitants. In its most mild form, this is accomplished through the way the world outside the black-glass walls is described in Town Meetings, and through the use of devices such as the theme song played in the romantic restaurant Together, with its references to white-trash clothes and so on, meant to remind them of how much better life on the inside is. But, as in *The Handmaid's Tale*, there is also a specialised vocabulary; for instance, Charmaine does not execute prisoners, she performs "Special Procedures" in which they are "repurposed" (Atwood 2015: loc. 2364), and she thinks of the victims not as people but as "Procedures" themselves (Atwood 2015: loc. 1285). When she is forced to repurpose Stan, her husband, she is manipulated into a form of Orwellian Doublethink as a form of reality control and constantly reminded that he died while heroically saving his co-workers and a bunch of chickens from an electrical fire—until she starts to think in those terms (Orwell 1950: loc. 517):

Stan died to save his fellow workers. And to save the chickens. And he did save them: no chicken had perished... But why is she even thinking about Stan saving chickens? That fire was made up, it had not

in any way happened. Stop dithering, Charmaine, she tells herself. Get back to reality, whatever that turns out to be (Atwood 2015: loc. 3344).

By seeking to control how residents remember the past and speak of the present, the Gilead and Consilience regimes seek to control how they conceive of the present and the societies in which they live. This is accomplished through controlling not only how they speak and what forms of discourse are available to them but also through what information is available to be discussed.

Control of Discourse: Information and Images of Society

As with the Bible, access to non-essential information is tightly controlled in Gilead. Aside from the Commanders and their Wives, few members of the society are allowed to watch or listen to the television and radio that now play nothing but the news and edited broadcasts of Prayvaganzas and Salvagings. It is widely, though silently, acknowledged that most of this news is fake, the clips of battles and arrests likely staged, but still the narrator is “ravenous for news, any kind of news; even if it's false news, it must mean something” (Atwood 1986: loc. 261). She tells her imagined audience, “I believe in the resistance as I believe there can be no light without shadow; or rather, no shadow unless there is also light. There must be a resistance, or where do all the criminals come from, on the television?” (Atwood 1986: loc. 1278). The narrator, and much of the rest of the society, are reduced to depending on likely falsified official discourse and unreliable sources of rumour for information about the politics and conditions within the portions of Gilead to which they do not have direct access.

In its role as a basis for comfort or hope, information thus becomes something of value, something to be shared, exchanged, or bartered. Each class of women (Handmaids, Wives, and Marthas) functions as a discourse sub-community with its own interpersonal relay of information, wherein what the women know and share is limited by their social status and the circumstances of their daily lives. Sharing information between the sub-communities is relatively rare because it is dangerous; therefore, information gleaned in this way is treasured. In the absence of any significant knowledge of events inside or outside the country, something as trivial as the knowledge of the presence of oranges in the market becomes a valuable commodity that the narrator withholds from the household servants (Marthas) until it suits her to share it. It is to such trivialities that exchanges of information are mostly limited.

Nevertheless, such information or knowledge becomes for the women, just as it is for the men running Gilead, a form of power, valuable both in and of itself and also as a form of breaking the silence and isolation to which the women have been consigned (Johnson 1996: 42-43). In this way, the possession and dissemination of knowledge becomes a form of subversive resistance to the totalitarian regime and its all-encompassing ideology (Johnson 1996: 45), much as Winston perceives the sharing of the Goldstein text in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Similarly, in *The Heart Goes Last*, access to the world outside of Consilience is forbidden. The town has closed email and mobile phone networks, and visitors are not allowed. All links to the past must be severed when members sign onto the project. The televisions, which à la Orwell turn out to record as well as transmit videos, play only non-violent 1950's-era films and the propagandised Town Meetings, where the CEO, Ed, tells them that production rates on commodities like eggs and rabbits are up, just as the telescreens in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* continually announce more pig iron or shoelace are being produced (Orwell 1950: loc. 43) (Atwood 2015: locs. 2347, 851, 1431-1432) (Orwell 1950: locs. 31, 4451). There is no independent news network or other media outlet to investigate events or act as a voice for the people. The residents of Consilience are only allowed to know about the world inside their town, and even that information is strictly controlled, and as Charmaine and Stan discover, falsified in much the same way as in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

By controlling the information available to residents, the regimes of Consilience and Gilead control how their residents are able to conceive of their societies and of their places within them. Faced with falsely binary accounts of others either settling in and living happily or being punished, usually via disappearance or death, residents are manipulated into thinking that they must fit within one or the other model. In such situations, the overwhelming majority, as we see in both novels, choose acceptance of their roles—acceptance of the lesser degree of dystopia rather than the dangerous unknown of the greater degree. With forms of discourse tightly controlled and limited, they have little opportunity to discover whether and how many others feel as they do, and so are pressured to accept the idea that they are the misfits keeping their societies from being truly eutopian. By controlling presentation of the society within the society, the regimes effectively control how the residents perceive and formulate their own dissatisfaction and dissent.

The images of Consilience and Gilead portrayed to the outside world are likewise carefully constructed. The shadowy “they” who run the Positron project can

choose what and who any outsiders see by virtue of the fact that they control access to the town. When journalist Lucinda Quant visits Positron Prison, Ed takes her on a tour and orchestrates her experience, ensuring that she sees what he wants her to see and hears what he wants her to hear, as when she meets the women working in the laundry:

'You've been happy here, haven't you?' he says. 'Since coming to the Project?' 'Oh yes,' says Charmaine. 'It's been so, it's been so...' How can she describe what it's been, considering everything, such as Max and Stan? Is she going to cry? 'Excellent,' Ed says. Lucinda Quant gives Charmaine a sharp glance from her beady, red-rimmed eyes. 'Cat got your tongue?' she says. 'It's only...I wish I could've been on your show.' And she does wish that, because then maybe people would've sent in money, and she and Stan would never have felt the need to sign on (Atwood 2015: loc. 2069).

This is an echo of a scene in *The Handmaid's Tale*, when the narrator and another handmaid encounter a group of Japanese tourists who are being escorted by an interpreter. This interpreter, a member of the Eyes (the Gileadan secret police), mediates the tourists' experience of Gilead. When asked if the tourists can take their picture, the women decline, knowing that to allow themselves to be photographed is to be symbolically violated, which is therefore forbidden. The interpreter passes it off as a quaint local custom, and then translates another question:

'He asks, are you happy,' says the interpreter [...] There is a silence. But sometimes it's as dangerous not to speak. 'Yes, we are very happy,' I murmur. I have to say something. What else can I say? (Atwood 1986: loc. 403).

The emphasis on happiness in both texts is telling; Consilience's Ed and his lackeys, like Gilead's Eyes and Commanders, are all working to show the rest of the world that their residents are content and willing participants in their societies. Exposing outsiders to common people who say that they are happy can only serve to support and strengthen the carefully-constructed eutopian façades both regimes seek to project. By controlling the presentation of their societies to the outside world, the rulers of Gilead and Consilience control perceptions of those societies. In the absence of audible dissenting voices, they are able to define and present their societies as successfully eutopian.

Conclusion

In both Consilience and Gilead, the protagonists have no privacy, and thus have no means of writing down or preserving their memories of the past or their questions and thoughts about the present. In fact, we eventually learn that the handmaid's tale is an oral one, reconstructed and recorded on old cassette tapes as she hides at a stop on the Underground Femaleroad during her attempt to escape from Gilead. This lack of ability to accurately preserve the past, coupled with the lack of ability to question the present, leaves the protagonists with little ability to question or attempt to change their societies, or even the ways in which they view them. Their voicelessness is further exacerbated by the necessity of communicating within the confines of the specialised discourse of their communities, wherein the language necessary for protest, and their access to it, is being eroded. By controlling the discourse of and surrounding their residents, the authorities running Gilead and Consilience essentially control how their residents interact with their societies and, to a certain extent, conceive of their experiences within those societies; they are continually reminded that they live in a eutopia, just as they are continually reminded that perceiving it, and most certainly that speaking of it, as a dystopia will have immediate and disastrous consequences. Exerting this level of control also enables the Gilead and Consilience regimes to more easily control how their societies are viewed and judged by the rest of the world. In this way, the boundary between eutopia and dystopia becomes, then, primarily linguistic or discursual. That is to say, it depends on who is telling the story and, more importantly, who controls the discourse through which it is told and interpreted.

We must question, then, Atwood's intent in presenting these "good places" gone wrong, wherein the despotism and dystopian visions she presents are "the same as all real ones and most imagined ones" (Atwood 2004: 516). As critic David Ketterer points out, "It is usually assumed that the author of a dystopia is concerned with describing the horrors of life if present trends continue, *If This Goes On*". However, the cyclical nature of *The Handmaid's Tale*, with its closing "Historical Notes", depicting a deeply flawed and perhaps wilfully blind future society commenting on their assumed superiority to Gilead, calls into question the idea that dystopias are meant to or are able to act as dire warnings to save us from ourselves (Ketterer 1989: 212). Likewise, *The Heart Goes Last* offers little hope, either for Stan and Charmaine's future or for our own; while the couple have a new house and moderate economic

success at the end of the novel, it is implied that the darker Positron activities are being continued and replicated elsewhere, just as it is implied that the events of the novel have already begun in the real world. In both novels, as in her other dystopian works, Atwood presents eutopia and dystopia as two sides of the same coin, a cycle in which the proportions of “darkness and light” may be inverted temporarily, but one which we must, like Atwood, rather fatalistically accept all the same (Ketterer 1989: 214). The only hope she offers to counteract the darkness about which she writes is “ordinary human decency” (Atwood 2004: 517); having argued that eutopia can exist only in name, she concludes that kindness and compassion, along with the free flow of discourse and information, are the keys to understanding and limiting the degrees of dystopia present in our own world.

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