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(Margaret Atwood, 1970)

Florality: A Mouthpiece for the Oppressed and the Power of Words in Margaret Atwood's Speculative Fiction

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Enchanting the Pollinator: Historical Developments Behind the Making of Atwood's Florally Enhanced Dystopias

Each of Margaret Atwood's three works of speculative fiction, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and *The Year of the Flood* (2009) employ complicated systems of florality in order to communicate her greatest social and environmental concerns. The flower imagery in the first of the novels is tied together by the floral wreath, which functions as a symbol under which the more complex notions of ignorance, pain and forced domestication in a patriarchal theocracy are united. On the other hand, the traded rose, in *Oryx and Crake*, represents concern about the system of exchanges that has been established in a capitalistic patriarchy that values science over art, and profit over morality. Lastly, *The Year of the Flood* focuses on the healing properties of poppies and mushrooms, the roses of the unseen world, to convey Atwood's cure for the severe political systems described. Though the three dystopian novels reference different flowers in various ways, their meanings, when viewed as a whole, constitute a distinct message regarding the importance of language and environmental harmony for the oppressed.

Though the famed French literary critic and theorist, Roland Barthes, is known to have said that "that author is dead" to those analyzing literature, Margaret Atwood's biography is without doubt a necessary component in understanding her fervent employment of florality in the three aforementioned novels. It would be difficult to examine her life, however, without assessing both the lives of her parents, and the way in which their parenting style shaped the Canadian novelist and poet.

Margaret Eleanor Atwood, the second of three children, was born to Carl Edmund Atwood, an entomologist, and Margaret Dorothy Killam, a former dietician and nutritionist, on

November 18, 1939 in Ottawa. As a government employee studying tree-eating insects, Carl Atwood's career prompted the family, from the time Margaret was six months old, to relocate, in the warmer months, to the wilderness of Northern Ontario (Cooke, *A Biography* 21). Such a lifestyle prevented Margaret, oftentimes affectionally referred to as Peggy, from attending school until the fifth grade. While Atwood's mother tutored her in the mornings, the most influential aspect of her early years was undoubtedly the outdoor exploration and prolific reading that occurred in her free afternoons (22-3). Atwood began with an interest in comic books, like those depicting Wonder Woman, from which she gathered that superhuman ability has both its advantages and disadvantages (that, perhaps, women are not encouraged to be both strong and independent while still adhering to stereotypical gender roles). She eventually moved on to the Grimms' fairy tales and, ultimately, Edgar Allan Poe, an author that inspired her interest in the gothic, a common thread in her many works (24).

Even though it was her father's career that carried her into the wilderness, encouraging her passion for the outdoors and allowing time for self-guided reading, it was her mother, Margaret, and *her* family that instilled in Peggy a sense of the powerful, do-it-all woman. While it may seem trivial, a brief consideration of a seventeenth-century Puritan, Mary Webster, an assumed ancestor on Atwood's mother's side, is most enlightening when discussing the impressive strength and autonomy of the Killam women. Mary was accused of practicing witchcraft in 1684 and "hanged...in Connecticut," but when they "cut [her] down the next day, she was, to everyone's surprise, not dead." Protected under the law of double jeopardy, Mary went free. Atwood, in an interview with Nathalie Cooke, suggested that "Mary Webster provided one of the lessons of the Killam legacy - in order to survive, a woman must have a tough

neck” (51). Pertinently, “[a]s a young girl, Atwood was subjected to one important message of the times: society expected women to choose between career and family. In fact, this was *the* lesson of the times, but somehow the Killam women had both acknowledged and ignored it” (43). Her own mother, who put herself through teaching school, established herself in her career, *then* had a family, initially rejected Carl Atwood’s first proposal because she “didn’t want to be tied down” - a symbol of anything but “helpless femininity” (43-4). In addition, Kay Cogswell, Peggy’s “Aunt K.,” obtained an M.A. in history from the University of Toronto before going on to marry a doctor and give birth to six children (44). Joyce Carmen Barkhouse, “Aunt J.,” became a writer despite her marriage to Milton Barkhouse and the presence of their two children. Finally, her Great-Aunt Winnie was the first woman to receive an M.A. from Dalhousie and was, unfortunately, yet unsurprisingly, socially condemned for her decision to never marry (45). With these strong-willed women as her role models, it was inevitable that Margaret Atwood would eventually restructure societal expectations as well, insisting both on a notable writing career *and* a family. After all, she grew up with feminism.

However, Margaret Atwood’s education also undoubtedly played a substantial role in her formation as a writer. In the early 1950s she attended Leaside High School in Toronto. Graduating with excellent marks and a stellar list of extracurriculars (having participated in basketball, the United Nations Club, and a school choral group), Atwood enrolled in Victoria College, University of Toronto in 1957 (Davey 10). She maintained her high level of activity by participating in dramatic productions and the debating club, and publishing poetry and prose in the college magazine, *Acta Victoriana*, winning the E.J. Pratt medal for her suite of poems “Double Persephone” (11). Studying under Jay Macpherson, Northrop Frye, Kathleen Coburn

and Millar McClure, Margaret's years at Victoria College were significant. Atwood, who graduated with an honors degree in English literature, at one point remarked that "unlike the English department at the supposedly radical and freethinking University College, [the Victoria English department] hired women...allowing [her] to witness the spectacle of women who were not only supporting themselves, but thinking" (Cooke 58). After receiving her B.A., she accepted a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship to "begin a Masters degree in Victorian literature," which she completed, at Radcliffe College (Davey 11). Although she began doctoral work at Harvard in 1961, she never finished her dissertation on 'Nature and Power in the English Metaphysical Romance of the 19th and 20th Century,' likely due to her accelerating creative writing career (Slettedahl Macpherson 2). Atwood went on to lecture at various universities, write countless poems, short stories and novels, and start a family. Unlike the other Killam women, who seemingly prioritized their families first, and their own careers second, Atwood put her career first, experiencing wild success and unexpected popularity. While Margaret Atwood unquestionably gained her own success, the moral guiding forces behind her work are well-balanced products of her parents' influence and her valuable education, without which she might never have said, "You aren't and can't be apart from nature. We're all part of the biological universe: men as well as women" (Howells 2).

That Atwood not only received a masters in Victorian literature but originally planned to write her doctoral dissertation on nature and power in 19th and 20th century works of fiction is key to establishing her connection both generally to the florality she employs in her dystopian novels, and more specifically to her potential knowledge - and thereby conscious, or unconscious, utilization in her work - of the language of flowers. As will be shown below, the

language of flowers, though preceded by centuries of development, emerged in her favored time period, the Romantic era. According to Bobby J. Ward, author of *A Contemplation Upon Flowers: Garden Plants in Myths and Literature*, “Flowers and gardens have been objects of contemplation for writers from the beginning of recorded history. The beauties and mysteries of the horticultural world inspired early historians, clerics and poets everywhere, from Greece (Homer in the ninth century BCE) [and] Rome (Virgil in the first century BCE) [to] England (Chaucer in the fourteenth century)” (15). Along the same vein, Carole Rawcliffe points to the historical application of plants for medicinal purposes when she says, “In an age before the development of the microscope and the advent of modern medicine, gardens constituted a frontline defense in the battle against disease.” She maintains that Englishmen and women, for example, “were also becoming increasingly familiar with Classical Greek medical theory, which emphasized the close relationship between health and the environment” (3). While both the utilization of flower imagery in literary works and the medicinal application of plants have persisted for centuries, the dissemination of literature by means of newly developed printing technology in the Late Middle Ages, alongside further advances made in the botanical sciences during the Renaissance, prompted an interest in the abundance of depicted flowers.

This newfound curiosity ultimately resulted in the nineteenth century development of what Beverly Seaton, in *The Language of Flowers: A History*, terms “sentimental flower books” (16). Even though the language of flowers’ history focuses, not specifically on florality in literature, but the cataloguing of flowers and the eventual appearance of reference guides and literary studies of the topic, it proves vital to understanding floriculture in literature as the development of these books encouraged writers to more passionately incorporate references to

plants in their works (Ward 15). Influential women writers such as Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) and Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) both of whom, albeit one after the other, lived in and among the nineteenth century flower boom employed flower imagery. These women undoubtedly had a great impact on the young Margaret Atwood. It is clear, however, that to understand her use of florality, one must first comprehend the evolution of the language of flowers.

In her book, Seaton explores the portrayal of flowers as it relates to the transition from paganism to Christianity. In Greek and Roman times, flowers held significant symbolic meaning and were frequently arranged into garlands to be used in either religious ceremonies (such as the offering of flowers to pagan gods) or as reminders of love and the fragility of physical beauty. Seaton asserts that “the most serious sort of flower meaning is expressed in the metamorphic stories,” the pagan tales of Narcissus, Hyacinthus and Clytie. It is without surprise, then, that early Christian church fathers were highly suspicious of flowers used in symbolic ways. Obviously, however, this distrust did not persist. By the fourth century, flowers “became common in religious and ceremonial uses for Christians” and by the Middle Ages, they “were an established part of Christian worship, their symbolic meanings having developed as well” (43). The rose, for example, was first associated with Mary in the Christian tradition, “an easy transition from its [pagan] connection with Venus” (43). In addition, the “popularity of allegory in medieval literature assured symbolic flowers an important place in poetry and prose alike” (44). As the Middle Ages concluded and the Renaissance began, the invention of the printing press in 1440 by Johannes Gutenberg signaled not only the distribution of literature to the masses, but the initiation of the language of flowers.

The Renaissance brought with it both the association of flowers with love, as seen in poems imitating devotional hymns, and the revival of classical period florality by way of humanism. These symbolic associations, together with the rise of science, in particular, the advancement of scientific botany, propelled flower meanings in the Renaissance from medieval religious, to secular scientific (44). Seaton claims that “all across Europe, as the Renaissance evolved into the Enlightenment, literary flowers were disenfranchised by the newly grandiose humanism,” but that by the end of the eighteenth century, “the status of flowers had changed, so flowers could take on literary and artistic importance once again and thus be suitable for a language of flowers” (49). Before flowers recovered their expressive abilities, however, a number of scientific and horticultural events intersected to bring flowers back into fashion. Public interest in the scientific achievements of botanists like Linnaeus, who were, both in Europe and America, not only “engaged in the major project of classifying and naming plants” but actively bringing sex and flowers together by “studying and popularizing their reproductive methods,” is evidenced by the increased number of amateur botanists at the time (50-2). Furthermore, gardening exploded in the eighteenth century with the popularization of landscape and picturesque gardens (51). Flowers became associated with social moralities and cultural conventions, and were frequently the center of floral verse fables addressed to women and children (53).

Amy King develops further not only the cultural, but also the political importance of flowers in the late eighteenth century by examining what she calls “botany’s gendered controversies” (50). So interested had the public become in botanical development that “political writers assumed botany was a topic of general understanding and significance, and the currency

of botany, in combination with the sexual language that formed its classification system, made botany a topic through which questions of social and sexual import could be discussed” (51). The focused concerns of various political writers were extensive as “both radical and conservative writers took up botany for their cause”: Mary Wollstonecraft employed botany to argue for modified gender roles, Erasmus Darwin advocated female education, and Hannah More and Richard Polwhele both worked to negate the former (50-1). According to King, “opposing sides on issues as complicated as female education, female citizenship, and democratic revolution invoked botany as a good.” Situating these controversial issues within the context of the botanical sciences allowed feminist and anti-feminist activists to state their opinions with “the impunity granted to the rational pursuit of science” (51).

Clearly, flowers were well established in society, and, by extension, in literature, at the onset of the romantic period. Their “scientifically based sexuality” had reintroduced them to the conditions of romantic love, and their moral connotations gained them “proper nineteenth-century respectability in England and America” (Seaton 60). Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s assertion, in the eighteenth century, that “[t]here is no flower without a verse belonging to it” gathered momentum as flowers pushed their way into every aspect of nineteenth century living (Ward 20). Sentimental flower books, “focused on the language of flowers...religious prose works using flowers, collections of flower poems, various literary studies of flowers and sentimental botanies,” all of which were directed toward female readers, have their origin in France (Seaton 16). Seaton points to B. Delachénaye, the author of one of the earliest flower books. According to him, lists of flower names and their associated meanings, sometimes referred to as “vocabularies,” were circulated in handwritten form in early nineteenth-century

France (69). He proposed that “artists used flowers in combination to spell out words” with insects acting as accent marks and pansies as punctuation (69). Through this far-fetched theory, it becomes clear that producers of the French language of flower books primarily intended to “package the concept of a language of flowers in a consumable form” (78).

French flower books were originally produced for the upper classes, but by the time printing technology made production of such books profitable, the middle and lower classes were also involved. While class distinction as it related to the language of flowers in the nineteenth century is no doubt interesting, what is most applicable to the discussion of flower imagery in the works of women writers is the fact that these sentimental flower books were directed toward “fair” female readers (16). Seaton argues not only that “Western culture has typically identified women with nature” but that flowers are seen as a “suitable aspect of nature to represent women...reflecting as they do certain stereotypical qualities of female being.” She goes on to assert that the primary associations of flowers, as established in the sentimental flower books, are love and death, experiences that defined women in the 1800s. For marriage and children were her fate, and although marriage was meant to bring love, childbirth frequently brought death, either for the mother or the child. Finally, the use of flowers for devotional purposes aligned with a woman’s main work outside her home - her religious duties (17). Although it is unclear whether women actually read these books, they were often given as gifts, reinforcement of the nineteenth-century belief that the ideal woman is one who is close to nature, “practicing her role in life by working with her flowers” (19).

Margaret Atwood’s summer travels through England and France in her mid-twenties prove particularly relevant in establishing her connection to the language of flowers (Cooke

121). Clearly both Atwood's upbringing, namely camping in the Canadian woods with her entomologist father, and her interest in the the depictions of nature in nineteenth and twentieth century romances, has likely contributed to her employment of flower imagery. Be that as it may, her plausible exposure to women writers such as Emily Dickinson, Virginia Woolf, Ann Sexton and Sylvia Plath, some of which were directly targeted by the sentimental flower book, and all of which exhibit a utilization of florality in their works, suggests not simply her knowledge of the language of flowers, but the possibility that she knowingly refers to it. A canonical feminist writer (though she resists the term), Atwood's reliance on flowers to communicate her message is plainly a crucial key to understanding the modern language of flowers. For Beverly Seaton maintains that "each culture uses flowers to express its own perspectives on life," that "every age writes its own language of flowers in its literature and its customs" begging the question: What language of flowers is Margaret Atwood currently writing? (60).



(Anna and Elena Balbusso, 2012)

The Plaster Wreath: A Symbol of Confronted Passivity, Artificial Domestication and Death in *The Handmaid's Tale*

The first of Margaret Atwood's post-apocalyptic novels is *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), a bestselling work of fiction that earned her both a considerable readership and a firm literary platform. Of course, to summarize the text is to do the oft-considered feminist masterpiece a great disservice. With that said, however, one must certainly understand the general storyline in order to appreciate the significance of the specific, seemingly intentional, flower laden scenes at work in the novel. Lee Briscoe Thompson effectively summarizes the main points of *The Handmaid's Tale* when he says that it “envisions a white, right wing, theocratic coup having

taken place in the northeast United States of the early twenty-first century. An autocratic elite, alarmed by a precipitous decline in Caucasian birth rates and by the degeneration of a ‘traditional’ American society, has masterminded the murder of the president...and [suspended] all civil rights” in order to form the totalitarian, gender prejudiced state of Gilead. All women, stripped of their jobs and financial independence, are filtered into eight, color-coded positions that are designed to reintroduce them back into the domestic realm of the home, and in which wives of the elite (blue) and Handmaids (red) are included.

Even though the Handmaids lack any sort of power, completely forbidden, as they are, to even read or write, they are central to the structure of Gilead inasmuch as they function as sexual surrogates to the likely sterile Commanders and their wives. They refer to themselves as “two legged wombs” that are undoubtedly necessary to strengthen the Caucasian population (Atwood 136). The tale is purported to be “the transcript of one Handmaid’s description of her life in the early days of the Gilead regime” (Thompson). The novel opens with Offred being assigned to fulfill an open Handmaid position for an elitist Commander, Fred, and his wife, former TV personality Serena Joy. In the course of the narrative, Offred not only enriches her report by incorporating flashbacks to her life in the time before, but begins a curious relationship with the Commander - a development that allows for her gathering of power through illegal exposure to words - halfheartedly commits herself to the “Mayday” resistance and secretly has an affair with her employer’s chauffeur, Nick. The evolution of the plot is greatly enhanced by the flower imagery present in the text. For Atwood laboriously engages three central themes in *The Handmaid’s Tale*: the loss of innocence, or more accurately the destruction of ignorance, death, and the forced and artificial domestication of women. Even though extensive passages of flower

imagery bracket the narrative's main events, the plaster wreath most often described as hovering above Offred's bed, functions as a thread throughout the novel, connecting the three dominant themes in a never-ending ring of florality.

While the briefly described instances of framing florality, especially toward the beginning of *The Handmaid's Tale* may, at first glance, appear random, and most importantly, independent of one another, this is hardly the case. Upon closer inspection, the reader becomes aware of the interconnectedness of the imagery. The florality present in the first fifty pages of the novel unquestionably serves as a substantial foundation upon which coming events may be assembled. The flowers described in the first two sections of the text, "Night" and "Shopping," work together to produce in the reader a concrete understanding of the importance of flowers in relation to the novel's greatly oppressed female characters. Furthermore, this complex system of florality engenders a sense that blossoms function as a language of sorts for those without access to words, a private vocabulary used to express the pains of forced subjugation and containment, a theme often communicated in the novel through flowers' associations with death.

Interestingly, toward the beginning of the novel specific flowers, namely the blue iris and the red tulip, are aligned with the text's central female characters, Offred and Serena Joy respectively. It is important to once again note, here, the color coding of societal roles within Gilead. While the Handmaids wear red to symbolize their own fertility, a point reinforced by Offred's self-description as a "Sister, dripped in blood," the Commanders's Wives wear blue. Offred makes this especially clear when she examines a hat-and-umbrella stand at the bottom of the stairs, "There are several umbrellas in it: black, for the Commander, blue, for the Commander's Wife, and the one assigned to me, which is red" (9). That Serena Joy, a privileged,

albeit infertile Wife, is associated with a red blossom at the same time that Offred, a Handmaid, is aligned with a blue flower is perhaps evidence of the way in which the seemingly separate imagery, and obviously incompatible women, are in fact intertwined. It may be done, too, to indicate that there is both fertility and infertility within the characters of both women. Serena Joy is fertile in her ability to maintain a fake, fictional front of fertility by owning/employing a handmaid who can birth a child for her, and Offred is infertile in her inability to be the one-time wife, the mother to that which she will fertilize.

Though friction between Serena Joy and Offred remains consistent throughout the entirety of *The Handmaid's Tale*, the seeming camaraderie between red and blue flowers toward the beginning of the novel establishes for the reader a sense that they are united in their plight. Of course, it should be mentioned that the narrator's connection to flowers is established first. As will be shown below, she importantly begins the second chapter by discussing the "relief ornament in the shape of a wreath" plastered on the ceiling above her bed (7). More relevant to the current discussion, though, is the way in which the reader is implicitly instructed by the protagonist to identify the blue iris as her companion flower. She describes her new room as having, "on the wall above the chair, a picture, framed but with no glass: a print of flowers, blue irises, watercolor" (7). The blue of the iris is then echoed in the letters on a apparently homemade cushion in her room, which has the word "FAITH, [embroidered in faded blue] square print, surrounded by a wreath of lilies" (57). Offred's assumed reference color, blue, once again makes an appearance when, in the second chapter, she details the Commander's "Late Victorian" home. She remarks that "[a]t the end of the hallway, above the front door, is a fanlight of colored glass: flowers red and blue" (9). Interestingly, the co-dependent relationship between

the red tulip and the blue iris is made before the reader becomes aware that Serena Joy is aligned, later in the novel, with the former. For only a few pages later, the heroine describes the property's garden, which "is the domain of the Commander's Wife." Among the many blooms, the red "tulips are opening their cups, spilling out color" (12). Though Offred's connection to the blue iris eventually fades, Serena's red tulips remain a crucial symbol in the story, and will be addressed in greater detail later in this section.

That the bulk of flower imagery in *The Handmaid's Tale* is concentrated, for the most part, toward the beginning of the work is critical as it becomes increasingly apparent that these instances of florality foreground, in a way, allusions to wreaths that run consistently throughout. While the specific flowers described, such as the tulip and the iris, no doubt provide significant meanings to the narrative, complementing it with unavoidably intense and meaningful concentrations of imagery, the wreath threads together the text's major themes, making it perhaps the most important symbol in the novel. What is most intriguing about the constant presence of the wreath is the fact that it easily goes undetected, blending into, instead of defining, Offred's surroundings. As was previously mentioned, it makes its first appearance when the narrator thoughtfully describes the details of her new room, "Above, on the white ceiling, a relief ornament in the shape of a wreath, and in the center of it a blank space, plastered over, like the place in a face where the eye has been taken out. There must have been a chandelier once. They've removed anything you can tie a rope to" (7). So dominant is the facial and suicidal imagery in this passage, that the wreath is, almost without thought, pushed aside. For the blank space that the wreath encompasses, not the wreath itself, is highlighted for the reader as the only aspect worthy of attention. The uninhabited area simultaneously emphasizes both the presence

and absence of an eye. The way in which the space is associated with an eye at all, especially considering the Gileadean spy force and execution squad, synonymously named the Eye, implies to the reader the Handmaid's paranoia of being unknowingly watched, regulated in even the private space of her own bedroom. Equally as important, however, is the way in which the eye is unambiguously missing. The blank space where an eye once was, stands perhaps for an implied rejection of the regime's Eye, and thereby serves as a symbol of Offred's silent resistance to Gilead and its leaders.

Later in the story, the blank space is once again prioritized over that which encompasses it. When Offred compares "the wreath on the ceiling floating above [her] head, like a frozen halo, a zero" to a "space where a star exploded. A ring, on water, where a stone's been thrown. All things white and circular" (200). Things once present but suddenly destroyed take precedence over what physically remains, the wreath. The star and the stone are objects that have gone missing, like the women, and the blank space left behind signals their absence. Crucially, however, the blank space could not exist if not for the wreath that surrounds it. In this way the two function very much in relation to each other. The wreath is a wreath, not a circle, only because of the blank space it encompasses. Regardless of this fact, however, it can be reasonably argued that the recurring wreath is, more often than not, overlooked in favor of the smooth, plaster "eye" that it surrounds. Offred frequently describes herself as lying on her bed, "under the plaster eye" (37) or as looking "up at the blind plaster eye in the ceiling" (52).

It does, however, become apparent, as the storyline advances, that the plaster wreath symbolizes a number of things. On a basic level, it unequivocally represents the suicide of the previous Handmaid assigned to Commander Fred's household, the former Offred. Having hinted

at this conclusion previously in the novel, “I know why the glass in the window is shatterproof, and why they took down the chandelier” (52), the protagonist ultimately imagines the death of her predecessor, “I look up at the ceiling, the round circle of plaster flowers. Draw a circle, step into it, it will protect you. From the center was a chandelier, and from the chandelier a twisted strip of sheet was hanging down. That’s where she was swinging, just lightly, like a pendulum” (211). Significantly, the wreath of “plaster flowers” overpowers, for the first time, the blank space that it has, thus far, only encircled, implying perhaps that the vacant area is previously emphasized as a symbol for the death that Offred was not yet ready to acknowledge. Now that Offred has confronted the death of her predecessor, addressed the very real possibility that her suicide looms in the background potentially foreshadowing her own, the floral wreath prevails.

As a parenthetical note, a round mirror that hangs in the hallway, which is described as having “dusty-rose” carpeting resembling “a path through a forest,” is, like the wreath, reliably compared to an eye (8-9). Upon first inspection, Offred claims that the mirror resembles “the eye of a fish” (9) but later elaborates that it “bulges outward like an eye under pressure” (49). The Handmaid’s description of the hallway, and the eye that seemingly watches her, alongside her mandatory red attire and fascination with flowers seem to evoke a readerly connection to the fabled character of Little Red Riding Hood. The tale of the virginal girl who steps off of the directed path to pick flowers is undoubtedly a tale of sexual exploration and a loss of innocence, and though Offred has clearly lost her virginity and innocence already, her cataloguing of flowers throughout the story, almost as if to mentally collect them, and her obedience to Gileadean law, points to the fairytale as a potential inspiration for the narrator’s character. For her apparent

compliance, her inability to fully commit to rebellion, forces the path within the novel, and the wreath-like eye in the hallway, to create a tension within the storyline - will she ever step off to fight the patriarchal power that oppresses her, to pick the flowers of resistance?

Atwood began writing her best-selling novel in 1984, and is known to have said that her inspiration for the work came from “one logical outcome of what she termed the ‘strict theocracy’ of the ‘fundamentalist government’ of the United States’ Puritan founding fathers” (Neuman 857). The work was published directly on the heels of the 1970s, a turbulent time in North America in which, among other things, gender roles were forcefully challenged. When, in the 1980s, post-feminism began, and the daughters of women’s rights activists started rejecting their mothers’ progress, Atwood likely feared the potential of an endless regression, a reversion to eighteenth century ideas of women. It should, then, come as no surprise that Offred, a post-feminist, no doubt, and her fellow characters, are “a fictional product of 1970s feminism” placed within a sexist dystopia (858).

It is evident that the characters in *The Handmaid’s Tale* were inspired by the 1970s women’s movement, but it is crucial to note that the women depicted in the story all exhibit varying degrees of, and different approaches to, feminism. Even more intriguing is that Offred, the main character, a woman who eventually escapes from the oppressively theocratic state that is Gilead, is the most weak-willed, while her unflinching companions, namely her best friend Moira (who seems, in a way, to stand for Offred’s Gileadean travel partner and fellow “Mayday” resistance member Ofglen and her proactive feminist mother), decay under the very regime they so diligently resist. The juxtaposition, in Margaret Atwood’s first post-apocalyptic novel, of Offred’s hushed obedience, her passive acceptance of a misogynistic leadership, and Moira’s

unconcealed rebelliousness when defending women's rights affects not only the novel's message, but the reader's understanding of the feminist movement that so influenced the writer.

Offred presents her story from a subjective point of view, and consequently functions as an untrustworthy narrator. Unreliable or not, though, Offred frequently portrays Gilead, and all that it stands for, in a negative light. Toward the beginning of the novel, for example, Offred elaborates on the former life of the Commander's wife, Serena Joy, saying that "[h]er real name was Pam...Her speeches were about the sanctity of the home, about how women should stay home. Serena Joy didn't do this herself [but] she presented this failure of hers as a sacrifice she was making for the good of us all" (Atwood 45). Offred points to the contradiction of Serena Joy's actions, and by extension implies her belief that Gilead itself is hypocritical. Even though the novel is defined by Offred's skewed reports, this example serves as evidence of her unsure disapproval of Gilead, her indirect bitterness toward her captors, and aids the reader in somehow accepting her chronic spinelessness. For regardless of whether or not she actively rejects it, so long as Offred detests Gilead as the reader does, she remains a victim of the regime, a sympathetic character.

However, Elisabeth Hansot, in her article, "Selves, Survival, and Resistance," makes the case that "it is clear from the outset that Offred intends to be a survivor" (57), quoting her as saying "I try not to think too much. Like other things now, thought must be rationed. There's a lot that doesn't bear thinking about. Thinking can hurt your chances, and I intend to last" (Atwood 8). Hansot makes the argument that Offred develops a number of coping mechanisms to outlast Gilead, to survive, including a "laborious construct[ion]" of selves. She claims that these selves are "potential acts of hidden resistance...they are attempts to weld

together thought and feeling” (59). Regardless of the “potential” of Offred’s constructions, though, Hansot asserts that they certainly fall short of a dramatic, or even effective, resistance. It would seem that the literary critic is about where she began, with an ineffective Offred, but this is hardly the case. It is clear that Offred does not outwardly resist Gilead, she does not fight for the release of all women from the chokehold of the regime. Instead, what Offred resists is insanity, the take-over of her own mind, “Sanity is a valuable possession: I hoard it the way people once hoarded money” (Atwood 109).

Be that as it may, one can surely be a survivor, a protector of one’s own sanity and wellbeing, while still playing the role of a fighter. It is instead Moira who is the mouthpiece for the feminist movement, and it is through Offred’s remembered arguments with her that the ideas influencing the novel, that is, those associated with second-wave feminism, make themselves known. One such instance involves Moira’s claim that living solely with other females would surely solve many of the problems women were currently facing. Of course, what truly stands out, though, is Moira’s refusal to be netted into working as a Handmaid, a position she is convinced is self-demeaning and detrimental to her character. Moira’s first attempt to escape from the Handmaid training center concludes in her being taken into “the Science Lab...Afterwards she could not walk for a week, her feet would not fit into her shoes...It was the feet they’d do, for a first offense. They used steel cables, frayed at the ends....[her feet] looked like lungs” (91). Unlike Offred, who, in the face of such an event would surely cower, Moira refuses to abandon thinking, to develop multiple selves, and contrastingly becomes more uncooperative, more insistent on her own autonomy as the Aunts attempt to wrestle her into submission. True to herself, and defiant as ever, Moira persists in her desire for freedom, and

after restraining Aunt Elizabeth and putting on her clothes, “Moira stood up straight and looked firmly ahead...[she] marched straight out the front door” (132). It is precisely this attitude of defiance, determined escape, that sets Moira light years apart from Offred.

It should come as no surprise, then, that Moira is the quintessential feminist. She is strong, independent, and progressive. She is a warrior, and Offred looks up to her, admires her. In fact, upon Moira’s arrival at the Center, Offred remarks, “It makes me feel safer, that Moira is here” (71). Furthermore, after Moira’s permanent escape from the Center, Offred proves that she empowered the other Handmaids-in-training when she says, “Moira was our fantasy...In light of Moira, the Aunts were less fearsome and more absurd. Their power had a flaw to it” (133). But in calling her a “fantasy” Offred puts Moira out of reach somehow, as though her influence is mythical, and in this way seems to claim that she is incapable of Moira’s feminist independence, and again backs away from any potential power or control.

In addition to her radical viewpoints and fiercely independent demeanor, Moira’s ability to boldly face the reality of the coming Gilead rule is a sign of her daringness: “Look out, said Moira to [Offred], over the phone. Here it comes...They’ve been building up to this. It’s you and me up against the wall, baby” (174). Her courage, however, is starkly contrasted against Offred’s ignorant denial, and is further evidence of the crucial dichotomy in *The Handmaid’s Tale*: “She was not stunned, the way I was....Ours is not to reason why, said Moira...They don’t want us going anywhere, you can bet on that” (179). As will be shown below, the irony of the polarity between the two characters’ reactions is most painful as Moira’s acceptance, her bold disobedience to the new regime, paves not her *own* road to freedom, but Offred’s.

Offred's encounter with Moira at Jezebel's, a whore house disguised as a night-club, is a traumatic blow to not only Offred, but to the reader. Strong, independent Moira, "dressed absurdly, in a black outfit" with two ears attached to her head, a tail and a bow tie, is beginning to deteriorate in Gilead, working as a prostitute for the very men who hold her captive (238-39). After having been "underground for eight or nine months," and failing to escape from Gilead, she was given a choice: banishment to the Colonies or prostitution. While Moira is undoubtedly still logical, her unemotional reaction to her current predicament is startling as she begins to justify her forfeiture of rights, "You should figure out some way of getting in here. You'd have three or four years before your snatch wears out...The food's not bad and there's drink and drugs...and we only work nights." Even Offred is taken aback by Moira's metamorphosis, "She is frightening me now, because what I hear in her voice is indifference, a lack of volition." Perhaps most important of all, however, is Offred's self-confessed cowardice, her admission that she relies on Moira to be the woman that she is too afraid to be, "I don't want her to be like me. Give in, go along, save her skin...I want gallantry from her...Something I lack" (249). Here, we see that Offred has been dependent upon Moira's heroism as a justification of sorts for her own diffidence.

That Offred's loss of interest in Ofglen's "Mayday" resistance, and her increased attraction to Nick coincide with her outing to Jezebel's and her run-in with the waning Moira is key. Immediately afterward she has her first liaison with Nick, the chauffeur, which she dangerously seeks to repeat, "I became reckless, I took stupid chances" (268). Simultaneously she begins to ignore Ofglen, "I hardly listen to her, I no longer credit her," and feels "relief" when "Ofglen [gives] up on [her]" (270-71). In addition to this, she becomes even less reliable

as a narrator, often spinning elaborate lies, sometimes paragraphs long to negate them only by saying, “I made that up. It didn’t happen that way. Here is what happened” (261) or even, “It didn’t happen that way either. I’m not sure how it happened; not exactly” (263). Though she is sure to rectify such episodes, the reader finds it difficult to trust in the corrected version of the story. Of course, this is to be expected, as Offred makes a point of saying, early on in the novel, “When we think of the past, it’s the beautiful things we pick out. We want to believe it was all like that” (30). Offred’s reckless sexual desire, shattered dependability and rejection of Ofglen and the Mayday resistance all seem to point to a loss of stability, an identity crisis. Without Moira’s continuation of her spunky hunt for female rights, Offred falters, loses control as though her legs have been broken. She has been balancing on Moira’s strength, depending on her defiance as if Moira’s actions would be sufficient to protect them both.

One might also argue, though, that Offred’s increased recklessness is a byproduct of the time she has spent with the Commander and the illegal exposure to words that is a part of her meetings with him. For Fred gets some sort of pleasure out of watching Offred unlawfully employ words in games of Scrabble, “[t]o be asked to play Scrabble...as if we were an old married couple, or two children, seemed kinky in the extreme, a violation in its own way.” The narrator goes on to say that her “tongue felt thick with the effort of spelling. It was like using a language [she’d] once known but had merely forgotten” (155). But the Commander not only derives pleasure from Offred’s participation in games of Scrabble, he enjoys teasing her with old magazines, and then watching her read them, “I felt the Commander watching me as I turned the pages. I knew I was doing something I shouldn’t have been doing, and that he found pleasure in me doing it” (157). Even though Offred’s illegal exposure to words and her coming recklessness

may be merely a coincidence, it might also signal a the protagonist's sudden empowerment, her desire for independence. For words have thus far been forbidden, their absence functioning as a sort of power over the Handmaid. In accessing these words, Offred in a way takes back the power that had been stripped of her.

Regardless, Offred self-admittedly works to consciously ignore the circumstances that surround her, "We lived as usual, by ignoring. Ignoring isn't the same as ignorance, you have to work at it" (56). Here, Offred implies that ignorance is something that comes naturally, while ignoring is a skill. As was previously discussed, there can be no denying that Offred intends to survive, but it is her method of survival, her refusal to get her hands dirty, that is so upsetting to the reader. Shirley Neuman elaborates on this idea in her article, "Just a Backlash': Margaret Atwood, Feminism, and *The Handmaid's Tale*." She writes that "[Offred's] willed ignorance [in the time before] anesthetizes any impulse to resist the increasingly repressive actions leading to the coup that establishes Gilead." She goes on to say that Offred "is sister to victimization and to passive acceptance of blame for what is done to one" (862). What Neuman asserts, although brutally honest, is nonetheless true. Offred makes a habit of victimizing herself to the reader, and though she is able to do so in her own story, it feeds back into her increasing unreliability as a narrator, and is further evidence of her dependence upon characters like Moira for salvation.

Of course, none of this is to imply that Offred is not also a feminist character, but it is to say that her approach, should one venture so far as to call it that, to feminism is vastly different from Moira's (and her mother's and even Ofglen's for that matter), and that she relies on the work of others to escape from a world that she, at times however rare, seems to accept, even enjoy. Neuman writes that "[s]he...recognizes and acknowledges her enjoyment of her own small

exercises of power, however ignoble” (863). It is clear that Offred has transformed from an adolescent, embarrassed by her mother’s participation in women’s rights rallies, to a woman that understands having her liberties totally stripped, her work made illegal, and her earnings given to her husband. However, even these events are not enough to shock Offred into defiance, into taking a hands-on approach. On the contrary, Offred at one point says, “I think of the others, those without. This is the heartland, here, I’m leading a pampered life” (Atwood 65).

Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* is an interesting commentary on the feminist movement, or, more accurately, the nature of all movements. As Offred’s mother asserts in an argument she and her daughter have at one point in the novel, “You young people don’t appreciate things...You don’t know what we had to go through, just to get you where you are...Don’t you know how many women's lives, how many women's *bodies*, the tanks had to roll over just to get that far?” (121). Offred rests throughout the novel, allowing others to sacrifice themselves for her, to resist Gilead for her. Two instances stand out as particularly revelatory for the reader in understanding Offred’s method. The first is Offred’s response to Ofglen’s suicide, her expeditious decision to end her life so as to prevent degrading torture and eventual death for her resistance to the Eye. Offred reports, “So she’s dead, and I am safe, after all...I feel a great relief. I feel thankful to her. She has died that I may live. I will mourn later” (286). At another point in the story, Offred ponders an assumed opposition, “There must be a resistance, a government in exile. Someone must be out there, taking care of things” (105). Instead of wondering how she can contribute to the movement, Offred assumes that someone will “take care of things” for her, and for these people, people like Ofglen, her mother, and most relevant to this discussion, Moira, she pointedly decides to mourn their sacrifices “later.” Everything having

been taken away from Offred, she's turned up lazy. Maybe she is aligned with the blue iris, the less noticeable of the two flowers, because, at heart, she is a true handmaid. She could have never been a Serena Joy. And perhaps Serena has the red, spilling-with-color tulip because she is at her core, a true Wife, fertile. She's only in the position she's in because of the passage of time. Moira would have been aligned with the red tulip. Offred is a weak character. Her clothing color is not her meaning, but the flower associated with her is.

Atwood is communicating to the reader an unfortunate truth through the dichotomy of Moira's bravery and Offred's timidity: the resisters, the fighters, pave the way for the spineless, for those who choose to passively wait, to rely on others for their own freedom. Resistance movements, then, are cyclical, like the wreath, in that either all roles (submissiveness, ignorance, and assertiveness) must be played for its success, or that the resisters reach around for the ignorant to cover the gaps. Significantly, Offred *has* made *some* progress in her views of feminism, and in this way too, feminism comes full circle. Though once just a backlash, Offred has, with more experience, come to vaguely understand the importance of resistance. In the end, though, Offred's escape from Gilead is not her own doing, but a man's, Nick's. *The Handmaid's Tale* is not solely a backlash of the 1970s feminist movement, it is also Margaret Atwood's call to action, it is her plea to the spineless to stand up, to fight with the Moiras of the world. Shirley Neuman quotes Atwood as saying, "We the readers are to deduce what a good society is by seeing what it isn't" (865). Could it be that Atwood was not only referring to dystopias vs. utopias, but strong character vs. weak character, fighters vs. survivors? For perhaps, if *all* fight, fewer will be sacrificed for the cause. Had Offred also resisted, been stronger and less dependent, Moira could have not only been a paver, but herself saved.

Of course, the wreath doesn't stand only in connection to the challenging of ignorance, but references the desperate desire of the domesticated and marginalized women of Gilead to find a way out, even if it means suicide. Two instances in *The Handmaid's Tale* are particularly relevant to this discussion. Firstly, when describing the Commander's Wife, Offred spitefully comments on Serena's "sky blue" dress with "embroidery in white along the edges of the veil" by remarking that "[e]ven at her age she still feels the urge to *wreath* herself in flowers. No use for you, I think at her...you can't use them anymore, you're withered. They're the genital organs of plants" (81-2, italics mine). That Serena Joy, an infertile woman in a state valuing nothing but fertility, feels the need to "wreath" herself in flowers is perhaps evidence of her attempt to surround herself with fertility, to produce a facade of fecundity. But the way that she is described as being "withered" lightly alludes to death, and is, when considering the plaster wreath on Offred's ceiling, possibly suggestive of a desire to escape Gilead through suicide. At still another point in the 1985 work, Offred reveals, "I look up at the ceiling, tracing the foliage of the wreath. Today it makes me think of a hat, the large-brimmed hats women used to wear at some period during the old days: hats like enormous halos, festooned with fruit and flowers, and the feathers of exotic birds; hats like an idea of paradise, floating just above the head, a thought solidified. In a minute the wreath will start to color and I will begin seeing things" (128). The image of a hat, adorned with fruit, flowers and the feathers of exotic birds is intriguing as it implies the domesticity of the wearer. Such a hat is either decorated by the woman herself, or bought for a special occasion. One cannot help but think of nineteenth century housewives attending tea parties and luncheons in their free afternoons. Additionally, the angel connection is made once again, as Offred describes her boredom during one of the later ceremonies in the novel, "Just do

your duty in silence. When in doubt, when flat on your back, you can look at the ceiling. Who knows what you may see, up there? Funeral wreaths and angels...There's always something to occupy the inquiring mind" (221). Once again the connection between death and the wreath is made clear when Offred likens the now familiar wreath on her ceiling to a "funeral wreath." Considering Serena Joy's desire to "wreath" herself in flowers, this association is no doubt key.

Shortly after being appointed to the Commander's home, Offred settles into her daily routine, namely the partnered shopping excursions that provide her fertile, and thereby valued, body with fresh air. As she leaves the home, she "go[es] out by the back door, into the garden," the Commander's wife's garden, and after briefly mentioning the willow, catkins, and daffodils settles on a more elaborate description of red tulips, flowers whose presence, as previously mentioned, frequently coincides with the once independent and powerful Serena Joy. Offred reports that "[T]he tulips are opening their cups, spilling out color. The tulips are red, a darker crimson towards the stem, as if they have been cut and are beginning to heal there. This garden is the domain of the Commander's wife...I often see her in it...Many of the Wives have such gardens, it's something for them to order and maintain and care for" (12). What is so interesting about this passage is the fact that tulips, flowers that bloom in spring and thereby generally evoke a sense of awakening life, are described as having been wounded, cut and made to bleed. That the tulips are personified, specifically in Serena Joy's garden, perhaps proves Atwood's utilization of them to actively communicate the Commander's wife's personal pain. For, having been not only stripped of her own agency, her successful career and independence, and shoved into a role of submission, made to bow to a strict patriarchy, Serena Joy has failed at her only remaining responsibility: bearing a child. The garden is her "domain" because it is the only thing

she is trusted to care for, it is a plot upon which she can practice for her expected role as a mother. Furthermore, one might be inclined to assume that the Wives' interest in gardening is in fact the result of their infertility, that they subconsciously surround their barren, aging bodies with the beauty of fertile life and moreover that they groom and maintain said life so as to figuratively produce a child of their own. The way in which the flowers not only seem to represent fertility and life in *The Handmaid's Tale*, but also personify feelings of violation, infertility (death) and pain is curious. In this way, the garden comes to reflect the melding together of natural beauty and fertility (frequently considered qualities held at the height of femininity) and the starkly contrasting forced repression of individuality and success that emerges later in a Serena Joy's life.

To better understand the message being communicated to the reader through this flower imagery, one might logically inquire into the meaning of flowers, and in this case the meaning of tulips. According to Bobby J. Ward, author of *A Contemplation Upon Flowers*, "In the language of flowers, the red tulip suggested a declaration of love" (354). Though various flowers have a number of different meanings, Beverly Seaton, in her book *The Language of Flowers: A History*, confirms Ward's assertion. One could then reasonably argue that the tulips in Serena Joy's garden, whilst representing the fertility she lacks and the cutting pain of her own submission, declare the love she has for her husband, that they assert, by their very presence, the sacrifices she is willing to make in order to ameliorate her marriage and placate the society in which she lives. Clearly, Margaret Atwood, if aware of the Victorian-era language of flowers at all, has taken the meaning of the red tulip and reshaped it to fit the complexities of a modern awareness of possible reworkings of gender roles.

While the language of flowers is no doubt interesting, providing as it does insight into a potential function of the red tulip in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the flower's shape and lifecycle, its apparent stability or fragility must also be considered. Intriguingly, tulips despite their rather robust frame, are relatively short-lived flowers. They exist at a level of energy, beauty and fertility for only a brief period of time before their deconstruction begins. Petals quickly shrivel in old age and peel away from the solitary stem as tulips most often stand on their own, un-reliant on the lives that surround them. Their perennial nature, however, ensures that they persist, year after year, leaping forward with bursts of energy then withering back into hibernation. What's more, the cup-shaped tulip flower has, in English Folktales, relevantly been used by pixies as cradles for their sleeping babies (Ward 354).

A number of connections can be made between the biological and physical features of tulips, and their role in Offred's story. Much like a tulip, which stands free, erect for only a fleeting moment before the recycling process begins, Serena Joy demonstrated resilience as she endured the suffocating intimidation of looming patriarchy prior to the formation of Gilead. The intense connection between Serena Joy and her red tulips is enforced, albeit rather implicitly, by Offred when she remarks:

That was in May. Spring has now been undergone. The tulips have had their moment and are done, shedding their petals one by one, like teeth. One day I came upon Serena Joy, kneeling on a cushion in the garden, her cane beside her on the grass. She was snipping off the seedpods with a pair of shears. I watched her sideways as I went past, with my basket of oranges and lamb chops. She was aiming, positioning the blades of the shears, then cutting with a convulsive jerk of

the hands. Was it the arthritis, creeping up? Or some blitzkrieg, some kimakaze, committed on the welling genitalia of the flowers? The fruiting body. To cut off the seedpod is supposed to make the bulb store more energy (153).

Like the tulip that wilts under the brightening sun of summer, Serena Joy withers under the pressure of the elite rebels, wilts in the face of her domineering husband. In the same way that the tulips shed their teeth, Serena Joy surrenders her voice. And because she has been conditioned to desire children, forced to return to the realm of domesticity, she hopefully (children would give her purpose), yet resentfully (her agency is what she truly covets), surrounds herself with their cradles. Now, the Commander's wife, like the tulips in her garden, is deteriorating, slowly sinking into old age and desperately clinging to her fertility. Finally, her furious snipping of seedpods may demonstrate not only a storage of energy but her frustration with the very notion of fertility. That the Handmaid is carrying a basket full of lamb chops, quite literally cut-up babies, does not go unnoticed in this context. Serena Joy is surely annoyed that she is infertile, resentful of the implication that she is worth nothing if not for her interest in childbearing, and disgusted by the presence of Offred, a Handmaid who lives in *her* house and sleeps with *her* husband.

At still another point in the novel, Offred once again signals the red tulip as a flower of great importance. As she and a fellow Handmaid, Ofglen, make their way home from their aforementioned daily outing, they stop to gaze upon the wall where, "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...What they are hanging from is hooks" (32). Offred further elaborates on this very public punishment of doctors who once performed

abortions by saying, “But on one bag there’s blood, which has seeped through the white cloth, where the mouth must have been. It makes another mouth, a small red one, like the mouths painted with thick brushes by kindergarten children. A child’s idea of a smile” (32).

Clearly, one must delve still deeper into the complexities of the meaning behind the crimson tulip in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* when she, through her narrator, purposely draws a meaningful connection between the crimson bell-cup flowers and death under a guise of insistence to the contrary:

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. (33)

The implicit connection between the hanged man, that is death, and Serena Joy through the shared crimson color of her tulips, is worthy of examination.

The connection between the wreath, Serena Joy and death is made all the more apparent here. In order for the passage to be the most meaningful, one must remember the plaster wreath on the ceiling of Offred’s room and its reference to the hanging Handmaid. That this man, along with his assumed colleagues, was executed for performing abortions, if not in the present, then at least in the time before, is most significant. Seen as “war criminals” by Gileadean leaders, the doctors hanging on the wall are meant to serve as “examples” to the rest, as evidence of the

punishment surely received for disregarding new theocratic law. The way in which the aforementioned doctor's mouth is emphasized with blood suggests not only the penalty for criminal acts and the consequence of speaking out against Gilead and its patriarchal foundation, but the punishment for abandoning fertility. Much like a woman's menstrual blood, the blood-red flower on the hanged man's mouth indicates bareness, the emptiness of the womb. One might assume that this is the reason why the blood is linked, as the wreath, back to Serena Joy and her tulips. For despite her own frustrations with fertility, a baby would provide purpose, would validate her as somehow still worthy. The abortion of a fetus is, to Serena Joy, perhaps the most horrific act. For, this doctor once allowed women the opportunity to choose, to decide whether a life of motherhood, a life defined by patriarchal gender roles, was the appropriate fit for her. He hangs on the hook more as a warning to Gilead's female subordinates, a reminder of their strictly enforced position within society. Agency, the ability to make decisions and stand in charge of one's own life, is no longer an option: motherhood is not a question of choice, but fertility.

With that said, the following section provides one with crucial information regarding Margaret Atwood and her writing process that will undoubtedly shed added light on the significance of the crimson tulip in the passage above. While the discussion of red tulips has thus far been grounded in an examination of the textual evidence from *The Handmaid's Tale*, the language of flowers and the physicality and functionality of the tulip, perhaps the strongest affirmation of Margaret Atwood's intended message behind the tulip is a poet that she has, no doubt, been profoundly influenced by, the late Sylvia Plath. Only seven years older than Atwood, Plath was born in Massachusetts in 1932. The similarities between these women's lives are remarkable. Like Atwood's father, Plath's was also an entomologist (he wrote the standard text,

Bumblebees and Their Ways), and though Plath experienced a conventional upbringing, unlike Atwood who spent the first eleven years of her life in the Canadian woods, both women matured during the “pre-liberation fifties [which] dictated that young females seek marriage and thus renounce careers, but Plath wanted both” in the same way that Atwood did (Parisi 219). Plath’s life, though, took a different turn than Atwood’s when she married Ted Hughes and devoted a year of her life to ensuring that *his* literary career was successful. After giving birth to her first child, Plath had a miscarriage followed by an appendectomy and the birth of her second child, and some argue that she drew inspiration for her work from these experiences. Her poem “Tulips” is one such example and is, conceivably, the inspiration not only for Atwood’s inclusion of these specific flowers in her novel, but the very construction of Serena Joy. Additionally, Atwood likely saw the latter part of Plath’s life as a tragedy. Hughes was found to be having an affair and soon left Plath, who wrote furiously for a short period of time before putting her head in the oven and asphyxiating herself in February of 1963, when an impressionable Atwood was just 23 years old. It should come as little surprise that the sacrifices made by Plath resemble those made by Serena Joy, who also had a career, gave herself to a man, and now spends her life devoted to the idea of children.

Even though “Tulips” was apparently written about Plath’s experience in the hospital directly following her appendectomy, many interpret the poem to relate more closely to her preceding miscarriage. Plath first describes her surroundings, the nurses filtering in and out, the white walls and notably the family photo of her husband and child smiling, their smiles described as “catch[ing] onto [her] skin, little smiling hooks” (21). In a shocking consideration of tulips, Plath then writes:

The tulips are too red in the first place, they hurt me. / Even through the gift paper
 I could hear them breath / Lightly, through their white swaddlings, like an awful
 baby. / Their redness talks to my wound, it corresponds. / They are subtle: they
 seem to float, though they weight me down. / Upsetting me with their sudden
 tongues and their color, / A dozen red lead sinkers round my neck. (36-42)

That Plath utilizes the same images of red tulips, smiles, hooks, and wounded flowers that Atwood does in the above quotations can hardly be merely coincidental.

In all probability, Atwood likely suspected that some readers of her 1985 novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, would have been at least partly familiar with Sylvia Plath's work, and vaguely aware of the contents of her poem "Tulips." It is not then, unfounded to say that while the connection between Sylvia Plath and Serena Joy is implicit, readers in the 1980s especially might have subconsciously aroused images of a tortured Plath when confronted with consistent allusions to wounded crimson tulips. Taking into account both Plath's miscarriage and her eventual death, it is only logical that Atwood, who is so clearly familiar with Plath's poem, draws a connection between the wounded red tulip associated with Serena Joy and death. For, Serena Joy has figuratively lost her life, her agency, and furthermore is incapable of creating life via procreation. At her age, impregnation, however unlikely due to her probable infertility, would in all probability, result in miscarriage. That Atwood denies the connection between the color red (plainly meant to represent menstrual blood, but also the draining of life), tulips and death in the above passage, whilst employing other key images from Plath's poem, suggests that she is in fact requesting that the reader more closely inspect her words. For Sylvia Plath and Serena Joy, the crimson tulips and all that they represent are better left "behind bars like dangerous

animals” (59), because even though the tulips “from a distance [look] like peace,” up close, they are at war (Atwood 12).

Finally, it is necessary to also momentarily consider Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*. Offred’s creation of multiple selves as a means of resistance was mentioned earlier in this section.

Remarkably, Esther Greenwood, Plath’s own double in the *The Bell Jar*, arguably does the same thing. This parallel becomes exceptional only when one realizes that Esther’s primary double, Joan, commits suicide by hanging at the end of the novel, in this way making the wreath imagery in *The Handmaid’s Tale* suddenly relatable to *The Bell Jar* and by extension to Sylvia Plath and her poem “Tulips.” The most convincing evidence that Atwood drew from Plath, however, comes when she mirrors a line used by the latter in *The Bell Jar*. Esther affirms her existence toward the end of the Plath’s only novel by proclaiming, “I am, I am, I am” (243) and Offred correspondingly repeats, “*I am, I am. I am, still*” to remind herself, as she says, that she “remain[s] alive” (281, italics Atwood’s).

The plaster wreath in *The Handmaid’s Tale* represents the previous Handmaid’s death, which is in turn related to the hanged man’s smile, and thereby Serena Joy’s crimson tulips. It has already been demonstrated that the wreath also stands for the nature of resistance movements and the way in which all women are connected. But that the women in Gilead must also cloak themselves in false domesticity, base their entire lives around the notion of fertility is very much the figurative death of female independence and uniqueness of character. References to the plaster wreath are well-hidden under the complexities of the novel’s events, but their powerful meaning, which loiters around every corner in the work, greatly enhances Margaret Atwood’s already feminist masterpiece.



(Embley, 2010-13)

**The Bartered Rose: Exchanging Art for Science, the Environment for Profit and Women
for Sex in *Oryx and Crake***

Margaret Atwood's second post-apocalyptic novel, *Oryx and Crake* (2003), was written nearly eighteen years after *The Handmaid's Tale*, and focuses not simply on feminist and environmental issues, but on cultural concerns as well. Jimmy - who renames himself Snowman, after the Abominable Snowman, in the post-catastrophe world - has been entrusted, by his old friend and stereotypical mad scientist Crake, to look after the Crakers, a genetically perfected peoples designed to live harmoniously with the dilapidated environment in the plague-stricken

world. As Coral Ann Howells points out, “For the first time, Atwood has chosen a male narrator, or rather, a male focaliser, for the story is told not in the first person but through third-person indirect interior monologue, which shifts restlessly between the narrative present and Jimmy/Snowman’s memories of his own and other people’s stories in a series of associative leaps” (173). Through a series of flashbacks, the reader comes to understand that, having grown up in the Compounds, wealthy biotech communities separated from the impoverished and chaotic pleeblands, and guarded by the CorpSeCorps (corporate security corps), Jimmy and Crake’s adolescent years are spent searching porn and playing violent computer games. It is during one of their porn-searching escapades that they first see Oryx, a child porn star who stands in the novel as a mysterious female presence and a love fascination for Jimmy. After graduating from high school, Crake, who is the top of the class, is recruited to attend the premier scientific University, Watson-Crick Institute, whereas Jimmy, who is a “mid-range student, high on his word scores but a poor average in his numbers columns” is allowed entrance into Martha Graham Academy, a liberal arts college (Atwood 173). In the narrative present, Crake is remembered by Snowman as a curious young person, intensely smart yet eerily disconnected. The former’s strange behavior is culminated when he designs BlyssPlus, a pill that is marketed to “protect the user against all known sexually transmitted diseases” and, at the same time, “provide an unlimited supply of libido and sexual prowess” whilst “prolong[ing] youth” (294). With the Craker project complete, Jimmy is enlisted by his friend to employ his liberal arts degree by directing the marketing campaign for BlyssPlus, which is, in actuality, designed to wipe out the human race. The sad irony of the story is that Jimmy and Oryx, relatively ignorant characters, are manipulated by Crake to help in the spread of disease.

While many, no doubt, crucial events worked together to shape Atwood's *new* vision of a not-too-distant future, in this case 2025, two stand out as particularly important. Gina Wisker first points to the fact that "*Oryx and Crake* was published in the same year as the fiftieth anniversary of Crick and Watson's discovery of the double helix structure of DNA, which details and maps the code of all living organisms" (148). For a novel that focuses not only on the promotion of science over art, but on the modification, arguably the destruction, of the environment via genetic engineering, this event is undoubtedly important. In addition, Theodore Sheckels reports that "Atwood was in the midst of writing *Oryx and Crake* when her travel plans came to an abrupt halt on September 11, 2001, at Toronto's Lester Pearson Airport. She - and all others - saw that day the violence in the world's future. Atwood, however, saw that the real dangers might not be terrorists hijacking airplanes...but in the power dynamics that were behind such 'dry' topics as scientific research and pharmaceutical marketing" (143). While her fear of unconstrained science is again made apparent, here, the severe brutality of the 9/11 World Trade Center attacks surely informed Atwood's writing of *Oryx and Crake* as well. For the dramatic elevation of grisly violence in her second post-apocalyptic novel is plain to anyone familiar with *The Handmaid's Tale*.

It is important to note, here, that Atwood once again sets her perception of future chaos on the East Coast of the United States, reinforcing her speculated support for the notion of the virus of Americanism, an oozing and infecting spread of the American fascination with consumption and the resulting corruption. Brooks J. Bouson elaborates on the idea by saying that the virus of Americanism is "the American culture of violence and corporatization and commodification and unbridled consumption," which has spread across the globe as the tool of

degeneration that destructs both the environment and mankind, implying that “scientific advances will lead not to a progressive utopian future but instead will result in humanity’s reversion to a savage dystopian (even pre-human) past” (15-16).

Oryx and Crake largely neglects the flower imagery that is obviously central to *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Though still present, florality exists primarily in a few concentrated chapters. With that said, Margaret Atwood makes her personal development evident in the 2003 novel by muddying further the flower associations that represented her clear visions of women and their potential future in 1985, a theory based on the then fresh second-wave feminist movement. Sean Murray reveals that “[u]pon the original publication of *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood described the novel as a ‘book end’ to *The Handmaid’s Tale*” (115). He goes on to assert, “Certainly, the two works share the same bleak atmosphere frequently found in speculative, dystopian, and apocalyptic subgenres, but more specifically, they both condemn societies that have simultaneously oppressed women and poisoned the natural world” (115). Upon closer inspection, however, the reader becomes immediately aware that *Oryx and Crake* juggles not simply feminist issues as *The Handmaid’s Tale* essentially does, but a genuine fear of the consequences to come from abusing the environment and devaluing art. One might say that Atwood aims to depict women, the environment and art as commodified objects of little worth in a society driven by profit. While *The Handmaid’s Tale* illustrates the damaging effects of a male-dominated theocracy, *Oryx and Crake* focuses more on the results of a patriarchal capitalism. With the CorpSeCorps, Atwood makes explicit her critique of private enterprise, unmistakably conveying the potentially dreadful effects of a disconnected government that allows for the takeover of privately owned companies. Murray affirms this claim when he says, “In *Oryx and Crake*...the

tale eventually takes on a decidedly anti-corporate/consumerism cast that is not as evident in *The Handmaid's Tale*" (115). Theodore Sheckels expands on this idea by speculating what the political realm depicted in the 2003 novel actually looks like, "It is not entirely clear whether one gigantic corporate entity has emerged or whether numerous corporations have allied, but, either way, an entity known as CorpSeCorps, originally just a security firm, has become the police arm of whatever corporate political body exists in the parts of the world the novel focuses on" (Sheckels 154).

Even though flower imagery in *Oryx and Crake* is limited, the chapters that do employ the rose as a symbol, localized to the first half of the novel, establish clear associations between the traditionally romantic bloom and the condition of both art and women in the highly capitalistic, pre-apocalyptic world. For the rose comes to simultaneously represent the exchange of art for science, and the commodification of both the environment and women who must trade their images and bodies for money. The notion of exchange that pervades the novel, the idea that "everything has a price," is explicitly reinforced by the work's female luminary, Oryx, a woman who has been sexually objectified for the bulk of her life (Atwood 139). However, before she straightforwardly points to unequal trade as the dominating theme, Jimmy and Crake's brief interest in a computer game, "Blood and Roses," prepares the reader for the coming revelation.

During their high school years, Jimmy and Crake immersed themselves in online computer games, which they would play, under the facade of doing homework, on two computers in Crake's room, "with their backs to each other, one at each." Though Jimmy effectively maintained perspective, realizing the fictionality of said games and participating simply for the entertainment value, "Crake would get fixated on a game, and would want to play

it and play it and perfect his attack until he was sure he could win” (77). After briefly amusing themselves with a game called “Barbarian Stomp,” in which “[o]ne side had the cities and the riches and the other side had the hordes,” Crake “switched his loyalty to Blood and Roses” which had a larger field of battle (77-8). Significantly, Blood and Roses “was a trading game.” While the Blood side played “with human atrocities for the counters, atrocities on a large scale: individual rapes and murders didn’t count,” the Roses side fittingly “played with human achievements. Artworks, scientific breakthroughs, stellar works of architecture, helpful inventions. *Monuments to the soul’s magnificence*, they were called in the game” (78). The game was relatively simple, a virtual dice was rolled by one of the players, and “either a Rose or a Blood item would pop up. If it was a Blood item, the Rose player had a chance to stop the atrocity from happening, but he had to put up a Rose item in exchange” (78).

Blood and Roses is, on the whole, overlooked by literary critics more interested in the environmental significance of the still-to-come game of Extinctathon. But in the context of florality, especially as it pertains to the juxtaposition of art vs. science in the novel, the game is of great value. Snowman remembers that the problems with Blood and Roses were that “it was easier to remember the Blood stuff...that the Blood player usually won, but [that] winning meant you inherited a wasteland” (80). The connection between flowers, specifically roses, and art is made explicit, here. Furthermore, flowers are one and the same with the environment. The reader, in this passage, sees then the way in which art and nature are simultaneously shoved down by a system that is defined by the desire for power, the inhumane idea that human atrocity is more beneficial than human achievement. The collocation of art and science is a theme that dominates the storyline, and though flowers are not explicitly used to communicate this

comparison, *Blood and Roses*, which is discussed early in the novel, serves as a platform to which the juxtaposition refers back.

The epidemic that Crake, as the symbol for science, plainly initiates as a means of eliminating the human race, lingers in the background of the novel as the possible consequence to “making all science completely commercial...with no watchdogs” (Halliwell 261). The most basic level on which art is contrasted with science in the text is the juxtaposition of Jimmy and Crake. Atwood makes a point, throughout the story, to reinforce the fact that Jimmy is “tender-hearted,” (189), empathetic (321), and nostalgic (198), an obvious divergence from the more technical-minded individuals that surround him in the Compounds. In her interview with Halliwell, Atwood mentions that “Jimmy is out of step with his times. He’s not a math genius. He grows up in a world of science and math where top points go to people who are good at those things and he is not gifted in that way” (256). Jimmy’s consistent assertion that he is a “word person” and not a “numbers person” as Crake, his father and the other scientists in the Compounds are, marks him as different, the other (25). Heidi Slettedahl Machpherson argues that “Jimmy’s role throughout the novel is to side with artistic achievements, to see the importance of words and thoughts; to hold onto the past in some form” (79). In a way, Jimmy is the antithesis of the Compounds’ mentality, he undoubtedly has a sensitive character. Shannon Hengen points out that “a more courageous Jimmy might have functioned like the bold artists who...are capable of showing science its heart, of revealing the motives behind, for example, current transgenic research” (82). Hengen makes two very important points, here, as she suggests that art and science are dependent upon one another (science on art for moral centering, and art

on science for inspiration), and implies that Jimmy himself functions in the novel as art personified.

Conversely, Crake is the embodiment of science. Howells points to him as being, “the biological scientist, who espouses a purely empirical approach which devalues imagination, morality and art” (Howells, *Margaret Atwood* 177). He is first introduced as “generat[ing] awe...exud[ing] potential,” but Jimmy often finds himself questioning Crake’s unemotional and highly analytical approach to life (Atwood 75). While watching gruesome videos online, recording things such as assisted-suicides, “Crake grinned a lot...For some reason he found it hilarious, whereas Jimmy did not. He couldn’t imagine doing such a thing himself, unlike Crake, who said it showed flair to know when you’d had enough” (84). Even through his mother’s death, Crake maintains his logical demeanor, nonchalantly remarking that “Froth was coming out” of his mother’s body, as happens when you “put salt on a slug.” Mortified, “Jimmy didn’t understand how he could be so nil about it - it was horrible the thought of Crake watching his own mother dissolve like that” (177). Colette Tennant rightly argues that “Crake is the epitome of the egotistical, mad scientist,” as he ultimately inflicts upon humanity a fatal epidemic (99). At one point in the novel, Crake asserts that “humans are nothing more than faulty “hormone robots” (Atwood 166). It is here that his maniacal tendencies toward the destruction of mankind make themselves known, and that we as readers understand, that a stronger Jimmy may have been capable of playing the role of the artist, the watchdog and, in the end, have prevented Crake from carrying out his apocalyptic plan.

The dichotomy between Jimmy and Crake is only intensified by their being accepted to two, very different, academies: Martha Graham and Watson-Crick. Martha Graham, an academy

“set up by a clutch of now-dead rich liberal bleeding hearts from Old New York as an Arts-and-Humanities college,” is “falling apart” (185-6). On the other hand, Crake’s Watson-Crick Institute is decorated with wide, smooth cement walkways which students and faculty “beetled along...in their electric golf carts,” huge “fake rocks” that “absorbed water during periods of humidity and released it in times of drought,” and butterflies with “wings the size of pancakes” that were a “shocking pink” (199-200). Martha Graham, on the other hand, is an academy working to keep the arts alive in society that lacks investors, interest, and is therefore literally crumbling while the high-tech Watson-Crick, an institute defined by its rejection of art, nature and morality, flourishes.

Perhaps most important, however, is an argument that Jimmy and Crake have while Crake is at the Institute, an altercation that stands as the first (chronologically) attack of science on the arts in *Oryx and Crake*. The scuffle begins when Crake asserts that humans are “imperfectly monogamous,” naturally inclined to partake in a “series of biological mismatches, a misalignment of the hormones and pheromones” causing “needless despair” (166). When Jimmy asks, “What about art?...All that mismatching you talk about. Its been an inspiration...Think of all the poetry - think Petrarch, think John Donne, think the *Vita Nuova*,” Crake responds in a way that “alarm[s]” Jimmy, the “word person,”: “Who’d write if they could do otherwise?” (166-7). The boys, who had previously gotten along, jived on an intimate level, are seen, as Atwood puts it, going “in two different directions at that time,” just as art and science inevitably do in the novel, and Jimmy, “almost as an act of stubbornness, focuses his attention on words - words that are becoming of less relevance in the so-called ‘real world’” (Halliwell 256). It becomes

undeniably evident, here, that Jimmy functions in the novel not only as a defender, but a reviver of the arts, making his survival of Crake's plague all the more ironic.

Like Martha Graham and Watson Crick, the pleeblands and the Compounds are set side by side so as to demonstrate if not the dichotomy of art and science, then at least the environments which inspire the two opposing things. While the Compounds are, unsurprisingly, eerily suburban and highly secured against the outside world, the pleeblands are rumored to be chaotic, a place where “kids [run] in packs...wast[ing] themselves with loud music and toking and boozing and fuck[ing] everything including the family cat, trash[ing] the furniture, shoot[ing] up and overdos[ing]” (Atwood 73). Significantly, Jimmy, the mouthpiece for art, is intrigued, one might even say inspired by the pleeblands, at various points remarking that they are “[g]lamorous” (73), “mysterious and exciting” (196). While Crake claims that art leads to the invention of “idols, and funerals and grave goods, and the afterlife, and sin, and Linear B, and kings, and then slavery and war” (361), Colette Tennant asserts that the role of the artist is “not [to] cause violence in society,” but to digest it and produce artwork that is reflective of it (143). It would seem, then, that art is not a catalyst for human disaster, but an indication of the human condition. The pleeblands are, for an artist such as Jimmy, full of inspiration. In this way, they very much stand for art while the Compounds represent science, the barricading against art, the rejection of it. That Paradise, driven, of course by Crake, wages a war against the pleeblands, depositing the epidemic around the world, suggests quite literally that science is attacking art.

In a key, albeit short, passage in *Oryx and Crake*, Snowman addresses the separation of the body from the mind and the soul. After wondering when the “body first set out on its own adventures,” Snowman asserts that “[i]t must have got tired of the soul's constant nagging and

whining and the anxiety driven intellectual web-spinning of the mind, distracting it whenever it was getting its teeth into something juicy or its fingers into something good” (Atwood 85). Significantly, the body, here, is naturally inclined to moral corruption, it resents the moral guiding force that the soul and the mind impose on its ability to fulfill its own desires. The body had, according to Snowman, “dumped the other two back there somewhere...while it made a beeline for the topless bars, and it had dumped culture along with them: music and painting and poetry and plays” (85). Clearly a metaphor, the body is meant to represent science while the soul and the mind stand for art. While these two elements are contrasted against each other, the body as self-fulfilling and depraved, and the mind and soul as virtuous and reflective, what is most intriguing is their co-dependent relationship, the fact that the body, science that is, is shown as being completely immoral when left unchecked by the mind and the soul, the arts. Jimmy concludes “that the body had its own cultural forms. It had its own art. Executions were its tragedies, pornography its romance” (85). Even the body’s cultural forms are what we would, today, view as profoundly immoral.

This easily translates to the notion of the closed-in compound, an area left completely uninfluenced by the outside world, by humanity. This science-dominated enclosure loses control behind the walls that separate it from the pleeblands, from human expression. As Danette DiMarco asserts, “in removing barricades, we remove the desire to only look inward. We arrive at a point where we may look outward too - to others” (193). Art (and all that it represents) is, therefore, very much what Atwood herself referred to as the “watchdog” of science, when shut out, science slips into the “moral vacuum,” a state which “allows [it] to extend to its logical conclusion despite the risks involved” (Macpherson 80).

It is interesting to note that each of the characters in the novel that fundamentally disagree with the work done in the Compounds, are, in their own ways, artists. Jimmy, while not explicitly challenging the unfettered scientific experiments, does suspect that, “some line has been crossed, some boundary transgressed” and wonders, “How much is too much, how far is too far?” (Atwood 206). Even though he, at times, falters in his adherence to a moral life (most specifically when he becomes a womanizer at Martha Graham, and then again when he falls for the part that Crake has so disturbingly designed for him to play in his catastrophic Final Solution), he is, overall, the moral basis around which the story is constructed. His post-apocalyptic self, Snowman, is even more so that way. For, while he is surely resentful of his position as guardian of the Crakers, he makes every effort to secure for them a safe and fulfilling life. Furthermore, he is not only the personification of art in the novel, but himself an artist, as will be shown below. Jimmy’s mother, Sharon, before fleeing the scientific compounds and escaping into the pleeblands, cried out, “You’re interfering with the building blocks of life. It’s immoral. It’s....sacrilegious” (57). Years later, Jimmy spotted his mother on TV protesting at the “Happicupa head-office compound in Maryland...clutching a sign that read A Happicup Is a Crappi Cup...her frowning eyebrows, her candid blue eyes, her determined mouth” (181). Even though Sharon’s medium is not necessarily typical of an artist (words, paint, clay, etc), her work as a protestor of the Compounds’ genetic splicing places her not only as the “watchdog,” but also as a performance artist. Finally, Amanda and her roommates, all from the pleeblands, determined that the “human experiment was doomed” that “[h]uman society...never learned, it made the same cretinous mistakes over and over, trading short-term gain for long-term pain” (243). Amanda, an “image person” is, perhaps, the novel’s most obvious artist, the creator of “Vulture

Sculptures” (244). What these three characters demonstrate is a clarity of mind, an objectiveness of sorts that allows them to act as moral pointers in the novel, and Atwood’s positioning of them as artists indicates a commentary on the position of art in society as having a tie to morality.

Art’s tether to nature is difficult to miss in *Oryx and Crake*. Amanda’s “Vulture Sculptures,” which are the result of taking “a truckload of large-dead animal parts to vacant fields...and arrang[ing] them in the shapes of words, wait[ing] until the vultures had descended and were tearing them apart, then photograph[ing] the whole scene from a helicopter,” while shockingly gruesome, use only nature as material. The four-letter words that she had already vulturized - pain, whom and guts - were gradually killed by the very process that brought them to life: vulturizing. A powerful statement regarding the nature of existence, Amanda’s sculptures also call into question the nature of interpretation. In addition, Snowman’s narrative, itself the largest presence of art in Atwood’s novel, “points towards the soul as a repository of important values, among them a sense of awe at nature’s power” (Hengen 84). Snowman spends much of the narrative commenting on the wildlife that surrounds him. Significantly, much of the “nature” that he sees, is the byproduct of the mingling of science and nature, or more precisely, science’s unnatural manipulation of nature. The Crakers, who were designed to be environmentally compatible, are “neither hunters nor agriculturalists hungry for land” and eat “nothing but leaves and grass and roots and a berry or two” (Atwood 303). Despite being, it seems, one with nature, the Crakers are the product of science. The wolvoogs, pigoons, and rakunks function in a similar way, regardless of the fact that they were not intended to roam free among nature. Unlike Amanda who pulls inspiration for her artwork from nature’s processes, Snowman is stimulated by science’s imitation of nature.

Crake, at one point, says that, “Nature is to zoos as God is to churches.” Because art’s relationship with religion is not explicit in *Oryx and Crake*, its presence must be inferred. That Crake would declare that religion’s only place is in the church, that “those walls...are there for a reason....to keep [it] in,” implies that he, the embodiment of science, feels threatened by the presence of religion, by an opposing explanation, dare I say by competition for the position of the muse (206). Moreover, that he works so diligently to rid the Crakers of the so-called “G-spot in the brain,” the cluster of neurons that is, according to Crake, God, proves that he is perhaps disapproving of God as a leader (157), “*watch out for the leaders...first the leaders and the led, then the tyrants and the slaves, then the massacres*” (155). No matter the reason, Crake’s approach to religion mirrors his method with the pleeblands: put up walls and shut it out.

What is remarkable about art’s connection to Nature is the important fact that Crake, again the personification of science, rejects it. Crake openly admits to Jimmy that he does not believe in God, and continues on to say that he does not “believe in Nature either...Or not with a capital N” (206). In addition, Crake’s capacity to extinguish human life, to discretely administer a plague via a “vitamin” that caused “high fever, bleeding from the eyes and skin, convulsions, the breakdown of the inner organs [and] death,” is proof that he not only turns his back on humanity but morality as well (325). It is obvious, then, that Crake despises everything art-related, which, in reality, is everything human-related. So, when he casts an epidemic against humanity, what he is essentially looking to destroy is art.

Stephen Dunning maintains that “Atwood ensures that we do not miss the telling irony” of art ultimately persisting in Crake’s post-apocalyptic world (95). Crake’s appointment of Jimmy as the Craker’s guardian is highly paradoxical as he “embodies precisely those qualities that

Crake rejects” (96). Jimmy’s status in the novel as both a defender and a reviver of art makes Crake’s decision all the more baffling. Dunning questions whether it is possible that Crake does “not realize that to secure Snowman’s position in his new world is also to guarantee a place for all those things he seeks to eliminate” (96). While this is a valid question, we as readers, understanding of Crake’s meticulous and future-oriented mind, must, without question, reply no. Of course Crake understood the potential for Jimmy/Snowman to revive the arts in his new world, but it must be assumed that he underestimated Jimmy’s (and by extension, art’s) tenacity, his determination to live rather than die.

Despite Crake’s underestimation, Snowman does begin influencing the innocent Crakers, passing along words and ideas of religion and art. Sharon Rose Wilson argues that, “Crake’s supposedly perfect species develops in directions he did not foresee” (46). While Snowman is surely responsible for the introduction of new words such as “toast,” and the deification of Crake, a process that he, an individual against the notion of God, would no doubt be “disgusted by” (Atwood 104), the Crakers’ chanting and construction of a graven image comes as a shock even to him. After returning from his expedition to Paradise, and finding them “sitting in a semi-circle around a grotesque-looking figure, a scarecrowlike effigy” the women crooning “*ohhhh*” and the men “*Mun,*” Snowman frantically wonders, “Is that *Amen*? Surely not! Not after Crake’s precautions, his insistence on keeping these people pure, free of all contamination of that kind” (360). It would seem, then, that in spite of Crake’s research, his painstaking efforts to rid the Crakers (who are already deeply imbedded in the nature aspect of art) of all religious and artistic inclinations, the desire to know one’s origins, to express the tensions of existence is far beyond the grasp of genetic modification. Apparently, art will, with or without Snowman’s

influence, persist. Snowman remembers Crake's warning: "*Watch out for art...As soon as they start doing art we're in trouble. Symbolic thinking of any kind would signal downfall*" (361). Again, Crake is proven wrong as the development of symbolic thinking, in the case of the Crakers, signals not a "downfall" but an advancement.

The fact that the Crakers will revive art on their own, as a basic, innate impulse, is not to say that Snowman's presence in *Oryx and Crake* is not of the utmost importance. On the contrary, his narrative, his "love of words...his decision to collect and shape them into the story we read," becomes the most significant evidence of art's persistence in the novel (Wilson 41). As Eleonora Roa argues, "The act of storytelling...is a means of survival that allows Snowman to avoid sinking into a world where words lose their consistency, use and meaning. [His] narrative is also therapeutic in that it helps him to cope with the oppressive sense of guilt for merely witnessing Crake's dangerous plan without acting" (111). We see here, that Snowman's post-apocalyptic narrative, as a work of art, is not the precursor to "kings, and then slavery and war," as Crake asserted, but a reaction to the very destruction that a world without the moral guiding force of art is capable of inflicting, it is a means of coping. Stephen Dunning maintains that, "As the quantitative technological society advances, it reduces both our need of, and capacity for, linguistic subtlety, emotional precision and nuance, indeed for all those skills that permit and preserve fulfilling embodied collective human existence" (92). Dunning's argument is intriguing as it suggests, when put in the context of *Oryx and Crake*, that it is Crake's own self-elimination, that is, the destruction of science, that permits the revival of art. Even though Snowman struggles to "[h]ang on to the words...The odd words, the old words, the rare ones" because "[w]hen they're gone out of his head, these words, they'll be gone, everywhere, forever," it is actually this

need to hold on to linguistic skillfulness that enables him to narrate his own story, to produce art. So, while Crake attempts to obliterate art, the cause of humanity's downfalls (racism, slavery, wars, etc), by terminating the human race, what he actually does is foster an environment in which the artist, Jimmy, thrives, un-oppressed and literally living in inspiration. In fact, one might argue that Crake's death itself becomes art, as his body is later described as being "vulturized," much as Amanda's four-letter words are (Atwood 335).

Oryx and Crake is surely a commentary on art's declining presence in society and science's expanding influence on our lives. Atwood's juxtaposition of Jimmy and Crake, art and science, works to prove the devastating effects that the rejection of art can undoubtedly have, and proves that an attack on art is, in fact, a plague on humanity itself. That art, symbolized by the rose, is traded for science but ultimately returns in the Crakers, bolsters Atwood's belief that art is inherent, that perhaps it has the power to outlast the capitalistic system that attempts to exchange it.

Another instance of explicit and meaningful florality in *Oryx and Crake* comes when Oryx recounts the tragic events that defined her childhood. The flower imagery in the chapter "Roses," and those surrounding it, harkens back, in a way, to the more simplistic take on florality in *The Handmaid's Tale*. With that said, while the imagery in Atwood's 1985 novel mimics the actions of a perennial, bursting forth toward the beginning, spring of the tale only to fade in the dark middle and ultimately explode upward again into the light, florality in *Oryx and Crake* is, for the most part, condensed into a few short chapters and placed almost directly in the middle of the novel. In this way, flowers and the messages they communicate can be seen as central to the text, as the climax, perhaps not of the storyline but of the novel's purpose. The blooms used to

color the events described are three-fold. They function simultaneously to communicate the commodification of the environment, Oryx as a female individual, and sex in a world of business transactions and exchanges.

Oryx, who is assumed to be of Asian descent, begins her story by recounting the settlement in which she grew up. Though the exact location of her birthplace remains untold, it is detailed as “[s]ome distant foreign place...a village...with trees all around and fields nearby, or possibly rice paddies. The hutch had thatch of some kind on the roofs - palm fronds” (115). Here, Atwood successfully illustrates Oryx’s native land as substantially underdeveloped (especially when considering the highly modernized, gated communities of Jimmy’s Compounds) and consequently more vulnerable to the natural world. That Oryx is a product of such a natural environment, that she does, in a way, represent a peoples living if not in harmony, then at least in forced cooperation with Mother Nature, will no doubt prove important. But perhaps more relevant to the current discussion is the way in which the ideals of capitalism seem to have penetrated even this far-removed land, seeped over as a last resort for a powerless society.

Oryx goes on to elaborate upon the process by which she was sold. Justifying a mother’s decision to sell her child, make of her a commodity for profit, she questions Jimmy, “Besides, if [children] stayed where they were, [in the village,] what was there for them to do? Especially the girls, said Oryx. They would only get married and make more children, who would then have to be sold in their turn” (116). This passage signals to the reader a deeply ingrained view of harsh gender roles within Oryx’s native society, implying a strict patriarchy that values women only for their ability to serve as wives and mothers. The community, though seemingly more closely aligned with nature, sustains itself only by a system of exchanges, and sees in capitalism a

potential savior. It is apparent, here, how the virus of Americanism has seeped into even the remote and relatively natural world. This point is further reinforced when Uncle En, an assumedly Asian native who nonetheless stands in the novel as a personification of capitalism and the Virus of Americanism, is described as giving the fathers and the mothers “a good price” in “exchange” for their children (118-19). Even more remarkable is the way in which he “wasn’t regarded as a criminal of any sort, but as an honourable businessman who didn’t cheat, or not much, and who paid in cash...He was the villagers’ bank, their insurance policy, their kind rich uncle, their only charm against bad luck” (117). As a reference back to the themes prevalent in the first half of this section, these people, Oryx’s family, incidentally do not, perhaps justifiably, prioritize what they have created either, do not promote their art over the profit that a capitalistic system guarantees. Granted, Oryx’s family needs the money that she can be traded for, but she is just that, traded. She is, just as human achievement in *Blood and Roses*, exchanged for the atrocity that she will soon experience, for the violation that does not “count” because it is singular. Oryx is very much herself a bartered rose.

Interestingly, the status of the worn environment seems to directly correspond to the subjugation of women in Oryx’s homeland. As nature is taken advantage of by a capitalistic model (be it in America or elsewhere), global warming causes it to become unreliable, as was the case when Oryx was sold, “the weather had become so strange and could not longer be predicted - too much rain or not enough, too much wind, too much heat, and the crops were suffering” (117). When men, the group exercising power rather than resistance, find themselves no longer capable of turning a profit, they assign the duty to their female subordinates, individuals believed valuable for producing nothing but children. Women’s bodies are then

objectified as a means of production, as is the case with the environment, and are employed to bear commodities to be sold, which by no coincidence are most generally female, as Oryx asserts, “Fewer boys were sold than girls” (121). After all, as Oryx’s story makes clear, males are more valuable to the system of patriarchal capitalism that the village both relies on and fundamentally supports. For while “[h]er mother had a number of children, among them two older sons who would soon be able to work in the fields” (115-16), only she and her brother, who was too young to work, to be profitable in the village, were sold. “But they had a money value: they represented a cash profit to others. They must have sensed that - sensed they were worth something” (126).

In his analysis of the political system depicted in the dystopian world of *Oryx and Crake*, which, to be fair, focuses far more on the wealthy, powerful Compounds than on any other aspect of the world’s population, Theodore Sheckels asserts that, “The prevailing structure is quite hierarchal. Those at the top [that is, those living in the Corporations’ compounds, such as Jimmy and Crake] receive many benefits. Those in the ‘pleeblands’ consume - perhaps to excess, and the corporations, of course, profit. Those in the less-developed world [such as Oryx’s family] trade their bodies, as guinea pigs, for the few benefits the global corporations might provide” (145). He elaborates by claiming that “[t]he structure is tied to exchanges, but these exchanges are not fair. Those with more power are able to gain more from them than those with less” (146). As we see in the case of Uncle En, he is a provider for the consuming public at the cost of individuals from the still very much developing world, like Oryx. Most importantly, however, is the fact that Jimmy and Crake, members of the so-called “top” benefit from this process in that they watch the child pornography that Oryx is ultimately involved in. Sean

Murray drives this point home when he maintains that “while there’s no heavy-handed finger-pointing for these environmental woes, it gradually becomes evident that the entire culture, driven by profit and wallowing in vapid entertainment and consumerism, holds little respect for the natural world” (117).

The purity of the environment, the seemingly more natural world from which Oryx originates, is sharply juxtaposed against the unclean, dirty and corrupt city as Oryx and her brother, who have been sold by their mother into a so-called “apprenticeship,” arrive in the unknown world. The city is described as “chaos, filled with people and cars and noise and bad smells and a language that was hard to understand,” and Oryx, along with the other children who were sold by their parents to Uncle En are portrayed as feeling “shocked...as if they’d been plunged into a cauldron of hot water - as if the city was physically hurtful to them” (127).

As Oryx’s story continues to unfold, the reader comes to understand that the children do in fact sell flowers on city streets, but that this activity is perhaps an initiation of sorts into the far more devastating arena of child prostitution and pornography. Relevant to the current discussion, though, is the way in which the selling of roses very much represents a selling of innocence. Oryx, at this time somewhere between the ages of five and seven, is taught to consciously deceive in the name of higher profits. She herself becomes a commodified object, a model of the way in which women, in all three of Margaret Atwood’s dystopian novels, cloak themselves, both literally and figuratively, in the superficiality of male desire in order to sell themselves for profit (Moira practices prostitution in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, and similarly Ren works as an exotic dancer in *The Year of the Flood*). Upon arrival in the contrastingly impure city, Oryx and her brother are “taken to watch the more experienced children selling flowers...roses, red and white

and pink [which] were collected at the flower market early in the morning. The thorns had been removed from the stems so the roses could be passed from hand to hand without pricking anyone” (128-29). Interesting, here, is the fact that the flowers seem to originate from, or are at least grown for, the market, that they are never intimately connected to nature. Moreover, the children were instructed to “loiter around the entranceways to the best hotels - the banks where foreign money could be changed and the expensive shops” (129). One might once again see in these related passages the way that aspects of the environment are commodified for the shallow basis of capitalism - consumption. The natural roses are abused, shorn of their thorns, their defense mechanisms and made to pose instead, much like women, for profit. That the children are encouraged to stand in front of likely privately owned businesses, the very engine of capitalism, and flaunt violated flowers (an assertion of power over the environment, a cheapening of it), is further proof of the manipulation and disarming of the natural world so as to produce a commodity.

On the other hand, one most certainly sees in Oryx’s exploitation of tourists both a loss of her own innocence and a hint of the psychology behind consumption. Uncle En directs Oryx in the most effective, and of course profitable, approaches to selling flowers, “When you saw a foreigner, especially one with a foreign woman beside him, you should approach and hold up the roses, and you should smile...If they took a flower and asked how much, you should smile even more and hold out your hand...they would always give you more - sometimes much more - than the flower was worth” (129). Other than Oryx’s purposeful deception of supposedly naive tourists, what stands out in this passage is the implication that her target customer is male. When Uncle En says that she should especially approach tourists accompanied by a female, he makes a

clear distinction between her intended consumer (male), and the company that buyer keeps (female). This is key when reflecting on Oryx's success as a flower salesgirl, "[She] was good at selling roses. She was so small and fragile, her features so clear and pure... 'Adorable,' the foreign ladies would murmur, and the men with them would buy a rose and hand it to the lady, and that way the men would become adorable too" (129-30). Atwood makes clear, here, that at least many of the tourists buy roses not because they are themselves irresistible, but because Oryx's feigned naiveté is. Men are represented as buying her image so as to sexualize themselves, surely for their female companions, but plausibly for Oryx as well. Additionally, it can be said that what her customers are actually buying, is not the rose itself but the interaction with purity and innocence, with the less-developed and thereby more natural world, all unquestionably coveted characteristics in a world made up of their antitheses.

As Sean Murray maintains, the environmental conditions in *Oryx and Crake* are "far out of balance," pointing to Snowman's allusion to "tins of motor oil, caustic solvents, plastic bottles of bleach...scalding liquids, sickening fumes, poison dust" as evidence of Nature once being treated as an overused and uncared for manufacturer of higher profits in the novel. Nature has turned vengeful, and instead of offering solace to the stranded Jimmy, it greatly offends him. Not only is the natural world littered with the "remnants of a consumer culture," it is now penetrated by a "punishing" sun, assumedly due to a widening ozone hole, "the sky is a bleached blue, except for the hole burnt in it by the sun" (11). Jimmy is illustrated, throughout the novel, as cloaking himself in a sheet, sporting a red baseball cap and a pair of sunglasses that are missing one lens in a desperate attempt to shield himself from the harsh sun, the unforgiving environment as if it is angry with him. Nature is portrayed not as benevolent, but as a cruel and dangerous

force to be aggressively wrestled into submission. This point is bolstered by Snowman's daily urination on the grasshoppers residing at the bottom of his tree. His daily routine is described a number of times, each day he begins by "piss[ing] on the grasshoppers, as usual" and watching "with nostalgia as they whirl away" (372).

Notably, approximately halfway through the novel, Jimmy exchanges his plain albeit "tattered" (169), "decaying" (6), and "filthy" white sheet for a flowered one (232). Having been rarely associated with flowers, and never depicted as showing consideration for nature of any kind all through the rest of the novel, this seemingly insignificant swap holds much weight in terms of Jimmy's changing proximity to the message the flower imagery communicates in *Oryx and Crake*. In a post-disaster world where money no longer holds value, Snowman simply "locates the linen closet in the hall and exchanges his filthy sheet for a fresh one, this time not plain but patterned with scrolls and flowers. That will make an impression among the Craker kids. 'Look,' they'll say. 'Snowman is growing leaves!' They wouldn't put it past him" (232). Meaningfully, Snowman takes great care in not destroying his new, flowered, covering as he leaves the abandoned home, "He throws his stick out through the broken window, then climbs out himself, taking care not to rip his new flowered sheet or cut himself or tear his plastic bag on the jagged glass" (234). The respect Snowman displays for his new sheet, though not necessarily nature, can be seen as a pivotal moment in the relationship between the protagonist and Nature. For the first time, Jimmy is shown as willingly protecting the environment. Moreover, the way in which he opts for the flowered sheet, which he knots into a sarong, over a pair of shorts, signals to the reader the possibility that his experiences, both in the time before and after, both when he was marginalized for his interest in words and now, as he stands as an unusual specimen to be

gazed upon, have prompted him to identify both with women and the environment. For while his status as a “words person” instead of a “numbers person” has always been an alienating force, marginalizing him in the Compounds, his realization that the words he so dearly loves no longer have meaning, that the Crakers cannot comprehend the complexities of his language, that he alone holds the fate of once glorified words, forces him to understand that he is trivialized in the new world. Snowman, then, in putting on the sheet, taking care to protect the flowers that now define him, identifies with both the environment and women that he himself once made irrelevant. For these things, like Jimmy’s words, are not to be exchanged in favor of higher profits and bigger companies. They are to be valued.

It is important to clarify that Atwood does not work to hypocritically devalue science in *Oryx and Crake*. One must recall that she came from a scientifically inclined family, that she grew up in the woods of Canada, alongside her entomologist father, and that her brother is now a scientist. Rather, she aims to communicate the serious consequences of these dichotomous fields disrespecting and belittling one another. As was the case when writing *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Atwood sees in present-day America indications of a society headed in another wrong direction, a peoples pushing aside some of its most influential cultural elements in favor of higher profits and larger business models. Warnings against subjugating women and the environment are still present in her second dystopian work, but the inclusion of the potentially negative side-effects of science consistently taking precedence over art is a new development. Though the novel is anything but uplifting, the way in which Jimmy, a male liberal arts major in a time when attention to words is nonessential, ultimately identifies with suppressed women and the downtrodden environment proves the interconnectedness of the three. A system that pushes

women and the environment down, surely devalues art at the same time. The things that adorn human's lives, give it true meaning and pleasure, are exchanged, as the rose, for a system that values profit above anything else.



(Renee Nault, 2009).

The Healing Poppy: A Solution to the Ramifications of Patriarchal Capitalism in *The Year of the Flood*

Although Margaret Atwood's final work of speculative fiction, *The Year of the Flood* (2009), is *Oryx and Crake's* sibling, running alongside it in both time and narration, it seems, in a way, to return to the themes of *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) in that women and the environment once again receive her full attention, while the depreciation of art is mostly pushed to the side. Nevertheless, the juxtaposition of art and science in the preceding novel lingers in the background, especially as it relates to the Gardener's intentional withholding of information from

the CorpSeCorps. As is the case with the other two dystopian novels, *The Year of the Flood* oscillates between narration of the present and flashbacks to the past. For the first time, though, Atwood affords the reader not one, but two female perspectives: Toby's and Ren's. J. Brooks Bouson argues that the 2009 text "is a feminist, anti-corporate and ecological work in which Atwood, in sharing her fears of and outrage against current trends in contemporary society, also wishes to prod her readers to meaningful political thought and action" (23). Sean Murray expands on Atwood's concerns by arguing that "[m]any of the business allusions in *The Year of the Flood* document an intensifying consolidation of power within the hands of a few elite corporations" (118). Despite these contributions, there is very little scholarship offered on *The Year of the Flood* at this time, likely due to its relatively recent publishing date, but certainly influenced as well by the coming of the third novel of the trilogy in the fall of 2013. Viewing the three related dystopian works alongside each other will no doubt inspire many literary critics to contribute academic writing on the work.

Toby and Ren are former members of the God's Gardeners, a religious sect devoted not only to harmonious living with the environment, but preparing for, what they believe to be, the inevitable and soon to come "waterless flood." Set not in the compounds, but the pleeblands of Jimmy's pre-apocalyptic world, the group works to directly resist the societal values spread by the virus of Americanism across, if not the entire world, then at least the East Coast of the United States. Instead of functioning within the capitalistic world that surrounds them, the Gardeners are self-sustaining and do not, for the most part, have a need for money or rigid and distinct hierarchies. They are gender-neutral in that they are unprejudiced when selecting Adams and Eves, the teachers of the group, and they exist almost entirely outside of the dominant

system that surrounds them, operating in the margins. It is through the two female narrators that the reader gathers a rather complete picture of the goings on both in the pleeblands before the BlyssPluss outbreak and in the religious order of the God's Gardeners. Even though florality is a key component throughout *The Year of the Flood*, the imagery is neither strictly aligned with specific characters, nor concentrated in a few short chapters. Instead, flower imagery runs continuously through the work and typically communicates physical healing literally, and social healing figuratively. For the Gardeners make use of Nature to remedy their medical needs, while at the same time tirelessly safeguarding their knowledge by erasing the material evidence of their words. They control their message, amass their own power, and in this way have found a solution, or cure, to the ruling patriarchal capitalistic system that promotes the sexual objectification of women and the commodification of the environment.

Interestingly, Atwood revisits a paradigm already established in her first post-apocalyptic novel - feminism versus post-feminism - by examining the lives of Toby and Ren. Both survive Crake's BlyssPluss plague and each recollect their past as the narrative unfolds, making clear to the reader the ways in which they have been sexually objectified, and, in the case of Toby, raped, by men in the pre-apocalyptic world. Toby is rescued from her sexual enslavement by the religious group, but becomes outwardly desensitized to life by the event. She is frequently described, by the rooftop adolescents, as being "tough and hard," and nicknamed the "Dry Witch" because she was so "thin and hard" (Atwood 74). Ren, on the other hand, spends formative years with the Gardners, but is later forced to return to the Compounds with her mother, Lucern. Even though Ren is not violently abused, she becomes a sex object when she chooses to work at Scales and Tails, a sex club and prostitution house, later in the novel.

Parenthetically, the similarities between Ren's employment at Scales and Tails and Moira's, at Jezebel's in *The Handmaid's Tale*, are remarkable. Much like Shirley Neuman, who considered Offred's mother a second-wave feminist, and Offred little more than a backlash, Bouson identifies the middle-aged Toby as a feminist, well-aware of the "potential brutality of male-female relations," and the younger Ren as a post-feminist who "seemingly chooses, or at least accepts, her own sexual commodification and humiliation" (14).

That *The Year of the Flood* opens with the older of the two female characters, Toby, encourages partiality toward her instead of Ren. This allows, in a way, the reader to align herself with the more feminist, as opposed to post-feminist, protagonist. Toby's experience at SecretBurgers, where she finds employment after the death of both of her parents and the forced abandonment of her own identity, is perhaps the novel's most horrific scene, easily justifying Blanco's status as the story's main villain. He had "been a bouncer at Scales, the classiest club in the Lagoon...But...had blown it big time...He'd ripped up a Scales girl - not a smuggled illegal-alien temporary, they got ripped up all the time, but one of the top talent, a star pole dancer" (43). As a result, he was installed as manager of a SecretBurgers restaurant by the CorpSeCorps, and he hated his new job. He figured, though, that the "girls [who worked there] were his perks. He had two pals, ex-bouncers like himself, who acted as his bodyguards, and they got the leavings. Supposing there was anything left" (43).

On her first day of work, Toby learns from Rebecca, an impending Gardener, that Blanco is "doing that girl Dora, and he mostly does just the one at a time," but that she should keep her head down so as to prevent him from going after her next (42). Disturbingly, Dora, who had "begun as a plump optimist" begins "shrinking and sagging" in the following weeks, and is

described by Toby as having bruises on her arms that “bloomed and faded” (43-4). Flowers here, are associated with the mistreatment of a woman without a voice, without any options. Dora stays working at the restaurant, allowing Blanco to sexually abuse her because she understands that to leave would be to so offend his heightened ego, his belief that women are mere playthings for men, that he would kill her. In a sadly ironic twist, she is murdered anyway. After Blanco has discarded the overused Dora, he calls upon Toby to be his newest sex object, demanding from her a “thank you after every degrading act.” Over the next few weeks, she describes herself as, day by day, growing “hungrier and more exhausted” and as having “her own bruises now, like poor Dora’s” (46). It can be reasonably assumed, here, that Toby’s bruises also “bloom and fade.” Her circumstances mirror Dora’s in that she lacks any other option but to stay, to allow Blanco to violate her until there is nothing left. Flowers speak for those without a voice.

Thankfully, Toby is figuratively rescued by Nature when the God’s Gardeners liberate her from SecretBurgers and her male assailant. Exhilarated by the outward resistance to CorpSeCorps power - the pleeblands are, as was alluded to above, operated by the private company - Toby “kicked Blanco’s head,” and escaped with the Gardeners, who protectively “surrounded” her as they led her back to their welcoming home - the rooftop garden (50). Toby is surprised by the garden’s beauty, describing it as populated “with plants and flowers of many kinds she’d never seen before...from nearby came the vibration of bees. Each petal and leaf was fully alive, shining with awareness of her. Even the air of the Garden was different” (52). Toby finds “herself crying with relief and gratitude” and describes her entrance into the garden by saying that “[i]t was as if a large, benevolent hand had reached down and picked her up, and was holding her safe” (52). One cannot help but assume that the embrace she describes is one with

Mother Nature as she is surrounded by plants, by evidence of a natural world treated with respect. She finds in the garden a haven from her sexual commodification and abuse by Blanco. Although she at times struggles with the Gardeners' religious beliefs, she immerses herself in the nature that surrounds her, ultimately becoming Eve Six and specializing in the healing properties of flowers.

Ren, on the other hand, reverts instead of progresses in terms of her objectification. Having spent many years with the Gardeners as a child and adolescent (her mother, Lucern, left her scientist father in the Compounds to have an affair with Zeb, an Adam to the Gardeners), Ren nevertheless finds herself working as a dancer at the aforementioned prostitution club, Scales and Tails. Her acceptance of her own sexual commodification is perhaps best communicated in her relationship with her boss, Mordis. Locked in the sticky zone, a quarantined room designed to confine potentially disease-infected dancers, in the days leading up to the BlyssPluss outbreak, Mordis calls her on her videophone to see if she is okay. Ren recalls that "he missed me, because no one could work the crowd like me. 'Ren, you make them shit thousand-dollar bills,' he said and I blew him a kiss. 'Keeping your butt in shape?' he said, so I held the videophone behind me. 'Chickin' Lickin' good," he said. Even if you were feeling ugly, he made you feel pretty" (66). The way in which she finds Mordis's gross remark flattering is evidence enough of her status as a post-feminist, a girl that does not understand, as Toby does, the "potential brutality of male-female relationships" (Bouson 14). She is easily aligned with *The Handmaid's Tale's* Offred in her apparent ignorance. Like Offred, she too comes to gradually, albeit never fully, grasp the importance of resistance to such treatment. The dichotomy between Toby and Ren is further

proof of Atwood's attempt to express her concerns about a reversion to pre-feminism ways in her dystopian novels.

The generational divide in *The Year of the Flood* is a concern first established in Atwood's 1985 best-selling novel, but words have also clearly been a focal point in her previous works of speculative fiction as a source of power. While prohibited access to language in *The Handmaid's Tale* forces Offred into a role of submission, the devaluing of words (and, of course, other art forms) in *Oryx and Crake* prompts Jimmy to feel irrelevant and thereby marginalized. In *The Year of the Flood*, Atwood's interest in language as power once again makes itself known. This time, however, she depicts the Gardeners not as being forbidden to use words, as the Handmaids are, or as being trivialized for their interest in language, but as hoarding their own source of power by staunchly protecting their knowledge. Their refusal to leave physical evidence in the form of written words of their affairs, their relatively successful resistance to patriarchal capitalism, grants them a special source of power over the CorpSeCorps, a potential apparently so threatening, that they are declared "off-limits" by the private company that controls not only the businesses in the area, but the mobs. The Gardener's most important policy is recounted by Ren, in one of her many flashbacks. In fact, Ren first introduces herself to the reader by monologuing about the sect's belief that the written word should be fiercely guarded.

Although the first chapter opens with Toby, the second chapter of the novel is devoted to Ren. She begins by recollecting one of the God's Gardener's most important policies, "*Beware of words. Be careful what you write. Leave no trails*" (7, italics Atwood's). There are two particularly fascinating things about this small excerpt. The first is that this chapter is the only one in the book that opens with an italicized lesson from the Gardeners. The italics are evidence

of the fact that Margaret Atwood is attempting to ensure that the message about language does not go unnoticed by her reader. Secondly, Ren points to the Gardeners' withholding of words from the CorpSeCorps as a way in which they have mastered the system. She elaborates by saying that the Gardener children were taught to "depend on memory, because nothing written down could be relied on," and told that "writing...was dangerous...because your enemies could trace you through it, and hunt you down, and use your words to condemn you" (7). In school, the gardener children, who "wrote on slates" were required to wipe them off "at the end of each day because the Gardeners said you couldn't leave words lying around where our enemies might find them." Fittingly, Ren calls to mind the way in which the children "spent a lot of time memorizing things and chanting them out loud" (72).

Additionally, Ren's friend, Amanda Payne makes a brief appearance in *Oryx and Crake* as Jimmy's fleeting love-interest. Her artistic "vulture sculptures" are undoubtedly important in the context of the theme of art vs. science that commands that novel, but her role is much greater in *The Year of the Flood*. Amanda's sculptures make yet another appearance in the second book of the soon-to-be trilogy. This time, however, they are offered up to the reader in the context of a still more specific message. As has just been discussed, the God's Gardeners are taught, from adolescence, to guard their words by erasing the physical evidence of their existence, and Amanda's vulture sculptures creatively encapsulate this idea. Ren, immediately prior to the BlyssPlus outbreak, describes her friend as residing in the Wisconsin desert, assembling her newest word by, "dragging...cow bones into a pattern so big it could only be seen from above: huge capital letters, spelling out a word." In a slight divergence from the description offered in the previous novel, Amanda's "vulture" sculptures are depicted as involving not large

carnivorous birds, but insects, “[l]ater she’d cover it in pancake syrup and wait until the insect life was all over it, and then take videos of it from the air, to put into galleries” (67-8). This distinction becomes particularly relevant when Amanda reportedly affirms that “It had rained, the desert flowers were in bloom, there were a lot of insects, which was good for when she’d pour on the syrup.” Margaret Atwood offers no explanation as to why she chose to rewrite the nature of Amanda’s art, but this example is one of many in support of Atwood’s focused rewriting of *Oryx and Crake* in *The Year of the Flood*. It may, perhaps, be assumed that Amanda’s aesthetic has simply evolved since dating Jimmy, or maybe even that Jimmy, self-absorbed as he was, inaccurately remembered her work. Just as likely, though, is that Atwood found the consumption of words by insects to be far more relevant to the symbols present in *The Year of the Flood*. For the mention of flowers and insects brings to mind the bees, mushrooms and poppies that Toby, as will be shown below, tends to on the rooftop garden. Amanda even makes this reference to the Gardeners clear when she jokingly claims that her project “was inspired by the Gardeners because they’d repressed [she and Ren] so much about writing things down.” Either way, Amanda’s predilection for watching “things move and grow and then disappear” no doubt stems from her time with the God’s Gardeners and the suspicion that her words would somehow betray her (68).

Perhaps the best way to discuss the ideas of language presented here is through two feminist literary theorists, bell hooks and Toni Morrison. Though they both examine the power relations of feminism through the lens of race, their ideas are nonetheless relevant. Both women touch on the distinction between silent and silenced. To be silenced is to be shoved into an intimidating space of resistance, a space in which the powerful dominate and the powerless are

left with few defensive mechanisms. On the contrary, to be silent is to voluntarily withhold information, to understand the power that comes with this omission and to embrace one's status of resistance, making of it not a weak but a strong position. bell hooks goes as far as to claim that marginality is "much more than a site of deprivation...it is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance." She goes on to say that marginality is not a position "one wishes to lose - to give up or surrender as part of moving into the center - but rather a site one stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one's capacity to resist. It offers one the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternative, new worlds" (239).

The God's Gardeners, then, embrace their position of resistance, and thereby gain some small yet sufficient power through choosing to remain silent. The group silences itself so as not to be silenced by the dominant power, the CorpSeCorps. Amanda silences her art, so as not to be silenced by science. That they are "off limits" to the CorpSeCorps, to, in a way, capitalism itself, proves their mastery of the system through the guarding of their knowledge, their words. The elective space of resistance that the Gardener's inhabit, allows them a unique perspective, the ability to "imagine" an "alternative world." For they see the waterless flood coming when not even Jimmy, who is involved in the marketing of the BlyssPlus plague, does. They are prepared. Those who exist within the system are not. Toni Morrison maintains that "[c]ultures, whether silenced or monologic, whether repressed or repressing, seek meaning in the language and images available to them" (267). Though the Gardeners are voluntarily silent, existing beyond the binary of repressor and repressed, they do lack access to traditional language. Therefore, they turn to "the languages and images available to them" to communicate their solution to the system: flowers.

The healing properties of plants are a focal point in *The Year of the Flood*, and while they certainly are utilized to treat, for example, Lucern's migraines, Toby uses "extract of Willow, followed by Valerian, with some Poppy mixed in" (Atwood 135), and Pilar's physical pain, "a little Willow and Poppy" (213), they are also representative of the harmony achieved between the Gardeners and the environment and their apparent ability to exist outside of capitalism's strict walls. It is important to note that the flowers employed in the novel are all wildflowers, existing naturally in the environment, unlike the roses Oryx sold, which were seemingly grown either in the market, or for the market. In any case, the poppy is the most frequently employed flower in the novel and is each time mentioned in reference to healing. Though in small doses it can be used to treat pain, in large doses it is lethal. Based both on allusions to opium and the book's cover, which is adorned with a red poppy, it can be reasonably assumed that the red poppy is in fact that flower that Atwood had in mind when writing the novel. According to Bobby J. Ward, the red poppy, in the language of flowers, denoted consolation (300). This is especially remarkable when one considers the way in which Toby views the garden as a haven of a sorts, a comforting entity that allows for her escape from sexual commodification.

The mushroom, too, is provided with much attention in *The Year of the Flood*. It functions alongside the poppy in offering medicinal solutions to the wounded and sick. Though not technically flowers, mushrooms are seen as such by Pilar, who describes them as "the roses in the garden of that unseen world, because the real mushroom plant [is] underground. The part you could see - what most people called a mushroom - [is] just a brief apparition. A cloud flower" (Atwood 120). This is the first time that Atwood has used a food as a flower in her speculative fiction, pointing to her development as a writer. Obviously interested in expanding

her sphere of reference, readers can likely expect a broadening of flower associations, like this one, in the coming novel. All the same, the time Toby spends with Pilar is surely informative. She learns that “[t]here [are] mushrooms for eating, mushrooms for medicinal uses, and mushrooms for visions. These last were used only for the Retreats and Isolation Weeks, though sometimes they might be good for certain medical conditions, and even to ease people through their Fallow states, when the Soul was refertilizing itself” (120). Again, the physical and mental healing properties of flowers, in this case the rose of the unseen world, dominate in *The Year of the Flood*. For the harmony achieved by living in accordance with the environment (and, as was previously demonstrated, outside of the capitalistic system) produces a healing effect.

Nature is benevolent if treated with respect and kindness. It is not an aggressively malicious force, as Jimmy initially would have had his reader to believe, but a haven for subjugated women like Toby and a potential cure for the tyrannical systems that Atwood depicts in the two preceding novels. For florality is rampant in *The Year of the Flood*, reinforcing its presence on nearly every page, and even though its meaning is less convoluted than the floral wreath in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, and more common than the bartered rose in *Oryx and Crake*, its message can be seen as a solution to the culmination of problems presented in the first two works. As a cure to physical ailments, it can easily be assumed that Nature, and the healing poppy in particular, functions in *The Year of the Flood* as a cure to systems of female marginalization and strict exchanges, and a language of sorts for those who choose to remain silent.

Pollinating the Flower: Concluding the Fertilization of Florality in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Oryx and Crake*, and *The Year of the Flood*

When viewed linearly and with the author's development in mind, the messages of Margaret Atwood's three works of speculative fiction, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), *Oryx and Crake* (2003), and *The Year of the Flood* (2009), progress in a rather logical way. Though convoluted by a complex web of imagery, the florality present in the dystopian novels can be seen as communicating a gradual conclusion to Atwood's social concerns. For while she still very much considers the oppression of women, the devaluation of art and the commodification of the environment to be the most troubling aspects of modern society, she offers a solution to these problems in the last of the three post-apocalyptic works.

Florality in *The Handmaid's Tale* is obviously abundant, but the message that the flowers communicate is in no way positive. The tulip, aligning itself with Serena Joy, and the Iris, associated with the narrator, Offred, are united by the plaster floral wreath on the ceiling in the protagonist's room. Clearly, these harshly oppressed and silenced women equally share the pain that results from their forced domestication and abandoned independence. The wounded crimson tulip stands in the novel as a symbol for the climax of pain and frustration. On the other hand, Atwood largely neglects explicit references to flowers in her male-narrated text, *Oryx and Crake*. Nonetheless roses foreground the theme of exchanges that runs throughout the novel. Representing art in the juxtaposition of art and science - creative Jimmy very much struggles against being silenced by science - and the selling of Oryx's innocence and purity for money, the rose, though mentioned only a number of times, very much defines the 2003 book. Lastly, *The Year of the Flood* is frequently enhanced by the healing properties of the poppy and the

mushroom. The Gardeners are illustrated as a peoples living simultaneously in harmony with the environment and on the margins of patriarchal capitalism. Their approach to language, their decision to remain silent, grants them a substantial platform from which they can resist the CorpSeCorps. Flowers, in the last novel, are a language of sorts for those living outside of the generally accepted, albeit horrific, system. Through wild blooms, in *The Year of the Flood*, Atwood communicates the cure to the dangerous political systems she has, for nearly three decades, depicted: power over language and environmental harmony.

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