Degree Project
Bachelor’s Degree Thesis
A Work of Speculative Fiction: Intertextuality in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*

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Introduction

Margaret Atwood is a highly prized Canadian author who is particularly well-known for her dystopian novel *The Handmaid’s Tale*, which was published in 1985 and which has been adapted into an eponymous and widely acclaimed TV series since 2017. Regarding the novel, Atwood has been praised for her ability to create a worst-case scenario in which North America is partly taken over by the theocratic and totalitarian Regime of Gilead and in which the protagonist Offred struggles to survive. However, while *The Handmaid’s Tale* is seen as a major dystopian work, Atwood herself repeatedly argues that her novel does not belong to the Science Fiction literary genre as the critic Ursula K Le Guin claims (*The Guardian*). Indeed, as Atwood emphasizes in an interview she gave to *The Guardian* on 14 October 2011 and in which she disputes Le Guin’s claim, Atwood argues that her novel lacks one fundamental and essential element of the Science Fiction genre: the events of *The Handmaid’s Tale* do not take place in a foreign or parallel world but within North America and specifically around what was the former University of Harvard. Therefore, Atwood distinguishes the Science Fiction genre from the Speculative Fiction genre, to which she argues *The Handmaid’s Tale* belongs. As she further explains in the interview, Science Fiction novels must necessarily feature elements that “could not possibly happen,” contrary to the Speculative Fiction genre that portrays “things that really could happen but just hadn't completely happened when the authors wrote the books” (*The Guardian*). Therefore, Atwood classifies her novel as an Utopia, a concept and portmanteau word she first coined as, in her opinion, her novel features both dystopian and utopian elements while depicting a society that could possibly exist, especially as *The Handmaid’s Tale* features known locations.

In the fields of cultural and literary studies, a lot of research has been done to analyse how Atwood’s novel thoroughly depicts the American society as it existed during the 1970s and 1980s. In one respect, the novel echoes the Second Wave feminist movement, the rise of American political conservatism (anti-communism and the New Right) and several
environmental issues whose effects can still be felt decades after they happened: the use of 
chemicals during the World Wars and the Vietnam War (chlorodyne gas, Napalm, Agent 
Orange). Strong echoes of popular conservatism are also found in the novel; for example, the 
Christian Rights and STOP ERA movements, which were most active during the 1970s and 
which forbade women means of contraception and the right to abortion. While such research 
illustrates the cultural and political backgrounds of the United States in the 1970s and 1980s, 
Atwood also states in the aforementioned interview that her travels to Berlin, Poland and 
Czechoslovakia enabled her to mix historical facts into the plot of her novel as she “had several 
first-hand experiences of the flavour of life in a totalitarian – but supposedly utopian – regime” 
(The Guardian). Therefore, Atwood’s novel becomes a compendium of historical and cultural 
elements that defines modern North America to the extent that Atwood’s novel is regularly 
studied in American high schools as it offers reflections on contemporary totalitarian regimes 
and on the loss of individual freedoms. Indeed, The Handmaid’s Tale has vastly re-entered 
public debates, especially because of recent new feminist waves with movements like 
“TimesUP” and “#metoo” and the successful TV series that particularly appeals to younger 
generations.

However, while they analyse The Handmaid’s Tale from a cultural point-of-view, 
these academic articles do not particularly dwell on the literary and non-literary echoes that can 
be found in the novel itself as shown in Fiona Tolan’s article “Feminist Utopias and Questions 
of Liberty: Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale as Critique of Second Wave Feminism” 
or Ben Merriman’s article “White-Washing Oppression in Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale”, 
which, respectively, analyse The Handmaid’s Tale from a feminist and a race perspective. 
Interestingly, the New Historicist literary theory enables a close reading of The Handmaid’s 
Tale that focusses on the literary aspects of the novel. Indeed, as Harold Aron Veeser argues, 
New Historicists “seize upon an event or anecdote … and re-read [the text] in such a way as to 
reveal through the analysis of tiny particulars the behavioral codes, logics, and motive forces
controlling a whole society” and thus, the New Historicist approach reveals how in Atwood’s novel, “literary and non-literary ‘texts’ circulate inseparably” (Veeser xi). Therefore, if the interview that Atwood gave in 2011 to The Guardian is considered as an “anecdote” and if Atwood’s claim that her novel depicts a logical future that takes root in our past and our present is also considered, the New Historicist approach appears to be very relevant to understand how Atwood conceived her novel. Indeed, the New Historicist approach of close reading offers readers new interpretations of Atwood’s novel as they may understand how the past influences the present since the present is defined by the past, as New Historicism argues. Moreover, Michele Lacombe’s own interpretation of the name of The Handmaid’s Tale’s protagonist also points towards such an interpretation, as, according to Lacombe, “Offred” could mean “off read” in the sense of “misread”, which strengthens Atwood’s argument that her novel is not a piece of fiction but a depiction of an existing reality (qtd. in Zivkovic 93). Therefore, it is through a New Historicist approach that The Handmaid’s Tale can be read as a novel belonging to the Speculative Fiction genre rather than belonging to the Science Fiction genre.

Peter Barry argues that the term “New Historicism” dates back to the 1980s and Stephen Greenblatt’s book Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare, which was the first book to feature the term “New Historicism” while also illustrating the principles of the theory. As Barry further argues, New Historicism is a literary approach that analyses literary and non-literary texts concomitantly and, thus, New Historicists do not separate literary and non-literary texts into, respectively, foreground and background texts. Indeed, both are considered with equal importance as one text can always be read in the light of another text and thus all textual sources can be read in a system. Moreover, the New Historicist approach offers new interpretations of a text as New Historicist essays “omit customary academic preliminaries about previously published interpretations” (Barry 173). Indeed, as Barry summarizes, New Historicist essays are introduced with an “anecdote” that situates and illustrates the text and, starting from the anecdote and ignoring any previously done research regarding the text, the
New Historicist approach offers a close reading of the text that is made possible through the simultaneous analysis of all the literary and non-literary texts. However, it is important to notice that New Historicism evolved from Old Historicism, which still distinguishes between the literary and non-literary text, as, for Old Historicists, non-literary texts are considered as historical background. Barry also adds that New Historicists follow the Derridean view that nothing save the text itself can provide information on the past, meaning that the non-literary texts analysed simultaneously to the literary texts do not necessarily “represent the past as it really was, but [they] present a new reality by re-situating it” (175). Indeed, the close reading of a text enables New Historicists to “make [the] valid claim to have established new ways of studying history and a new awareness of how history and culture define each other,” as this approach disregards any previously done research about the text and depends on the readers’ personal interpretations (xiii). According to Veeser, one main principle of New Historicism is that “literary and non-literary texts circulate inseparably,” which is a striking feature in Atwood’s novel as literary and non-literary echoes can be found throughout the novel (xi). Therefore, intertextuality plays an important role in Atwood’s novel and readers may wonder what is Atwood’s purpose in adding such echoes in *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

While several important academic articles relating to Atwood’s novel have been produced from a cultural studies approach, less research has been conducted that analyses *The Handmaid’s Tale* from a literary perspective. However, the previously done research that is relevant for this thesis includes Dorota Filipczak’s article “Is There No Balm in Gilead? - Biblical Intertext in *The Handmaid’s Tale*”, which analyses Atwood’s echoes to various biblical texts. In “Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*: Echoes of Orwell”, Earl Ingersoll points out the literary echoes between Atwood’s novel and Orwell’s novel *1984*, while Deborah A. Thomas’s article “Don’t Let the Bastards Grind You Down: Echoes of *Hard Times* in *The Handmaid’s Tale*” illustrates how Atwood’s novel repeatedly echoes Dickens’s novel *Hard Times*. However, as these examples show, these articles focus primarily on one topic. For
instance, the aforementioned article by Dorota Filipczak only analyses the religious references in Atwood’s novel. As of yet, no research has been done to cover multiple intertextual references in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. In using a New Historicist approach to analyse Atwood’s novel, the intertextuality present within the novel can be analysed while also explaining how Atwood manages to depict an American society that appears familiar and believable to her readers. Thus, through this approach that analyses *The Handmaid’s Tale’s* literary and non-literary echoes, it can be argued that Atwood’s novel belongs to the Speculative Fiction genre rather than belonging to the Science Fiction genre.

This thesis shall argue that through the New Historicist approach, intertextuality in *The Handmaid’s Tale* enables Margaret Atwood to write a realistic novel that blurs the line between the Science Fiction and Speculative Fiction genres as she echoes non-literary and literary texts in order to depict a society that seems believable and familiar to her readers. The following thesis shall be structured in three parts: the first section will explain how echoes to non-literary texts illustrate aspects of American culture and military history that are present in the novel; the second section will examine Atwood’s echoes to other literary texts while the final section will analyse the religious echoes present in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. A subsequent conclusion will then close this analysis.

Echoes of Non-literary Texts in *The Handmaid’s Tale*

Since Veeser argues that one main aspect of the New Historicist approach is that literary and non-literary texts are equally relevant, intertextuality becomes the main tool to analyze the multiple textual references that appear throughout Atwood’s novel. “Intertextually” was a term first used by Julia Kristeva who argues that the “literary word … is an intersection of textual surfaces rather than a point (a fixed meaning), as a dialogue among several writings,” which means that one word can always be read in the light of another word as meaning is shaped through plurality (qtd. in Alfaro 268). Danna Nolan Fewell also illustrates this concept of
plurality in meanings when she states that “no texts exist in a vacuum. All texts are embedded in a larger web of related texts, bounded only by human culture and language itself,’” thus, in order to understand a single text, all the references to other texts have to be understood as well (17). Consequently, what the concept of intertextuality offers is that, depending on the reader’s cultural and historical background, one given text can have many meanings as each interpretation of a text depends on the reader’s personal experiences. This plurality of meanings can be laid-out through the New Historicist approach, as it offers a personal and intimate close reading of a text, since New Historicists delve into a text without seeking and considering any previously done research that already forwarded the text with particular meanings. Thus, a given text is read without any previous expectations and only the reader’s personal, cultural and historical backgrounds can shape his or her interpretation of the text. Regarding *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the multiple echoes to non-literary texts enable Atwood to set her novel’s plot and the state of Gilead in an environment that is familiar to most of her readers as Atwood hints to a cultural and historical background that most readers can identify with (i.e. a modern Western society). Thus, intertextuality helps Atwood to blur the lines between the Speculative Fiction and the Science Fiction literary genres.

Interestingly, *The Handmaid’s Tale* opens with the depiction of a military atmosphere that characterises the entire novel as Gilead’s society is divided into classes in which each individual plays a particular role. Simultaneously, such a military portrayal of Gilead’s society strongly echoes past totalitarian regimes. Indeed, Dorota Filipczak compares the Gileadean Regime to Germany’s former Nazi Regime as, according to her, both share the same structure as well as religious and political ideologies (176). Moreover, and in addition to Filipczak’s analysis, Atwood’s use of words like “Shredders”, “Unbaby” and “Unwomen,” are also strongly reminiscent of the Nazi Regime (Atwood 50, 218, 220). Indeed, in Gilead, malformed babies, who are either called Shredders or Unbabies, are secretly disposed of, which is reminiscent of the Nazi “Master Race” (“Herrenrasse”) that deemed itself highest in racial
hierarchy while promoting Aryan racial attributes. Others, among whom Jews and Slavs, were considered by the Nazis as racially inferior and were called “Untermenschen” as they did not share Aryan features, which, in turn, echoes Atwood’s use of the word Unwomen, as these women are shipped to the “Colonies” in order to die, similarly to the Untermenschen that were brought into concentration camps in Nazi Germany (Atwood 220). Additionally to the Nazi parallels, Maria Christou argues that Gilead can be compared to a communist regime as Handmaids wear red uniforms while “they are indoctrinated at what is known as the ‘Red Centre’, where they repeatedly recite the sentence ‘From each according to her ability; to each according to his needs,’” which is an altered version of a sentence taken from Marx (Atwood 123; Christou 412). Indeed, “from each according to his capacity, to each according to his need,” is the slogan Marx used in his Critique of the Gotha Program (qtd. in Christou 422). This communist ideology, which preaches common ownership and the absence of classes, is also a striking feature in Atwood’s novel and can be seen when, for example, Offred takes a bath and sees Gilead’s official logo that has been forcefully tattooed on her ankle. She acknowledges that, like individuals in communist regimes, she has become a “national resource” that can be exploited by the state (Atwood 70). Consequently, Atwood’s echoes to Nazi and communist regimes add to the military atmosphere that characterises her novel as the state of Gilead ultimately infringes on its inhabitants’ rights. The consequences of such a totalitarian regime in North America can effectively be pictured by Atwood’s readers as, to some extent, they are familiar with these parts of history especially as, on top of a military setting, Atwood manages to re-create a contemporary and American environment in her novel that also raises her readers’ awareness.

Indeed, The Handmaid’s Tale offers several references to popular American culture as Offred and the other Handmaids quote the American songs “Amazing Grace” by John Newton as well as Elvis Presley’s song “Heartbreak Hotel”.
While the original lyrics of “Amazing Grace” available on Timeless Truths: Free Online Library are:

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found;
Was blind, but now I see.

Offred changes Newton’s original lyrics into

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound
Could save a wretch like me,
Who once was lost, but now am found,
Was bound, but now am free. (Atwood 60)

Ironically, Offred sings “Amazing Grace” without rendering the emotions and exclamations present in the joyful original song. The context in which Offred sings is ironic as well: Offred is not free under the Gileadean Regime and she is bound to her Commander and has to bear a child for him in order to survive. As Offred replaces “that” with “could” in her version of “Amazing Grace”, she seems to consider herself unsafe in her position while also wishing for freedom. As Offred states, “[she] can’t remember,” if the words are right as “such songs are not sung any more in public, especially the ones that use the words like free” (Atwood 60). While Newton’s song stands for redemption and for hope, Offred sings because she has lost her liberty and has fallen into despair, with suicide being one means to overcome her situation. Indeed, after “Amazing Grace”, Offred immediately quotes Elvis Presley.

The original lyrics of “Heartbreak Hotel” available on Metro Lyrics are:

You’ll be so lonely, baby
You’ll be so lonely
You’ll be so lonely you could die.

However, Offred significantly changes the lyrics into
I feel so lonely, baby,
I feel so lonely, baby,
I feel so lonely I could die. (Atwood 60)

While Presley sings in the future, Offred sings in the present and the change in tempus illustrates how desperate she is. Indeed, Presley’s song was inspired by a newspaper article that reported on a man’s suicide. In Atwood’s novel, the previous Handmaid that stayed in Offred’s room also committed suicide. Thus, a parallel can be drawn between both the man in Presley’s song and Offred’s predecessor as they both committed suicide while Offred herself also thinks of taking her life throughout the novel. Indeed, in Chapter 30, Offred admits she “could use a hook, in the closet [and that she’d] considered the possibilities” (Atwood 199). Again, Offred shows through her singing that she has lost all hope to regain her liberty and to flee Gilead. Additionally, Atwood also provides a typical American background to her novel as Newton’s song has become a popular American folksong since the 18th century while Elvis Presley arguably belongs to one of the most well-known and emblematic American artists, from the 1950s onwards.

Moreover, in the “Historical Notes” that close Atwood’s novel, Professor Pieixoto states that the Aunts’ names are “derived from commercial products available to women in the immediate pre-Gilead period … the names of cosmetic lines, cake mixes, frozen desserts, and even medicinal remedies” (Atwood 310). As Charlotte Templin argues in her article, the Aunts’ names are references to Helena Rubenstein, Elizabeth Arden, Betty Crocker, Sara Lee and Lydia Pinkham (150). These brand names are all American and refer to the Rubenstein luxury cosmetic products, produced since 1902; Elizabeth Arden’s cosmetic imperium, active since the 1910s; Betty Crocker’s recipe and cooking ads, launched in 1921; Sara Lee’s food brand, produced since 1939 and Lydia Pinkham’s menstruation medicine, created in 1875. Atwood’s use of American brand names that are familiar to some of her readers, help her to, again, place her novel in a setting that will thus be familiar to some of her readers and thus, the events
Atwood describes appear to be believable with a potential to exist. Moreover, these products are no longer available to the Handmaids and for most of Gilead’s inhabitants as food is rationed, medical care and treatment are reduced while cosmetics are banned. Interestingly, Atwood’s choice to mention these unavailable products contributes to the military atmosphere that characterises the novel as “[l]ike other things now, thought must be rationed” (Atwood 13).

Therefore, regarding echoes to non-literary texts, the intertextually present in The Handmaid’s Tale that refers to various cultural and political elements creates a sense of familiarity for Atwood’s readers. On the one hand, intertextuality helps Atwood to build a believable and convincing society as her readers can to some extent relate to these cultural, historical and political elements. On the other hand, these echoes can also create a sense of dread as her readers understand that North America has been overtaken by a military and totalitarian regime and, as they can identify with Offred who speaks in a first-person narrative, readers could see the Gileadean regime as a repetition of history. Consequently, Atwood manages to place her novel in the Speculative Fiction literary genre as her readers can place the novel’s events in their own, immediate and contemporary reality.

Echoes of Literary Texts in The Handmaid’s Tale

Moreover, throughout The Handmaid’s Tale, echoes to literary texts can also be found. While at first such echoes might strengthen a fictional reading of Atwood’s novel, the close reading offered by the New Historicist approach highlights how through these echoes Atwood forwards particular meanings to her novel. Indeed, as Drakakis and Fludernik argue, “the New Historicist attempt to speak with the dead also suggests an effort to recuperate the pastness of the past,” meaning that while the historical moment may be different between the contemporary and past text, they have still been produced in the same contexts as “[i]n this context, intertextuality takes on deeply historical significance when one text talks to another in contexts that are inseparable from the cultural/historic moment,” as Lehan claims (Drakakis and Fludernik 501;
Lehan 551). Regarding *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Atwood refers to literary texts that warn of and/or describe ongoing struggles in the societies they portray. Lehan argues that “texts that we often think of as undoing historicism are themselves deeply caught in a historical moment,” as the contexts in which these texts have been produced are similar and can thus be displaced from one to the other (552). Therefore, regarding Atwood’s novel, the New Historicist approach offers the possibility to read *The Handmaid’s Tale* in a similar way to the literary texts that the novel echoes and, thus, Atwood’s novel acts as a warning as Atwood raises her readers’ awareness as to what could possibly happen in the future or to what is possibly already happening. Indeed, Atwood not only echoes several literary texts, she also echoes the contexts in which these texts have been produced. Consequently, as her novel illustrates the future while being written in the present, it might be legitimate to consider that *The Handmaid’s Tale* portrays a possible future and not “fiction in which things happen that are not possible today,” (e.g. extraterrestrial life) (*The Guardian*).

As the title of Atwood’s novel suggests and as Pam Clements points out, *The Handmaid’s Tale* echoes Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* as Atwood’s novel features medieval references and themes while, as stated in the “Historical Notes”, the novel’s title was chosen “partly in homage to the great Geoffrey Chaucer” (Clements 55; Atwood 300). Clements claims that both Chaucer and Atwood focus on the concept of “meaning”, since for them, meaning and truth are relative concepts (56). Indeed, while each of Chaucer’s tales stages an orator who tries to impress his or her audience in telling altered versions of their adventures so as to entertain them and eventually earn a price, Offred admits that her meeting with her Commander “is a reconstruction,” she made up in her mind (Atwood 140). Moreover, Offred acknowledges that “if it’s a story [she is] telling, then [she has] control over the ending,” as she can alter her version of the truth (Atwood 45). The relativity of meaning and truth is further emphasized in the “Historical Notes” as, regarding Offred’s testimony, experts had “to arrange the blocks of speech in the order in which they appeared to go; but … all such arrangements are based on
some guesswork and are to be regarded as approximate” (Atwood 302). Consequently, similarly to Chaucer, Atwood warns her readers that truths are relative and that one must stay vigilant and critical in his beliefs. Through these references to Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*, Atwood manages to point out two facts to her readers: the apparently utopian state of Gilead imposes rules that are actually detrimental to some of its inhabitants (e.g. Handmaids can be sent to their death if they give birth to malformed babies) yet it is impossible for Gilead’s inhabitants to oppose the regime as otherwise they would be considered “like war criminals” (Atwood 39). Moreover, Atwood also shows her readers that, if one considers Gilead as a dystopia, all what she portrays as an author should not necessarily be taken as fictional but as being partly realistic.

The second epigraph that introduces *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a quotation from Jonathan Swift’s widely known essay “A Modest Proposal”. As Karen Stein argues, an epigraph “establishes a frame through which [readers] read the novel, just as a frame around a painting tells [one] to read the enclosed space in a certain way” (57). Therefore, as Swift’s essay is known to be ironic, Atwood’s readers might expect *The Handmaid’s Tale* to be ironic as well. Interestingly, irony is not the only feature that both texts share. Indeed, while Swift’s essay describes the deaths of Irish children because of a national state of poverty, Atwood’s novel describes the disastrous consequences of a theocratic and totalitarian regime in North America and, as Stein points out, the former addresses the issue of overpopulation while the latter addresses the issue of underpopulation (64). A striking similarity between both texts is that both authors commodify children as in Swift’s essay, children are reduced to portion-sizes that will solve Ireland’s state of famine while in Atwood’s novel, children become a means of survival for women, but only if they give birth to healthy babies as thus they will “never be declared Unwoman,” and face deportation (Atwood 133). Therefore, childbirth becomes a means to save the state in both texts as children will either feed the population or ensure the growth of the state. Consequently, intertextuality becomes a means for Atwood to ironically describe the difficulties that Gilead faces (i.e. environmental pollution, underpopulation, political and
religious extremism) as childbirth is linked to all of these issues. Indeed, some babies are born malformed because of “toxic dumps and … radiation spills” (Atwood 251). These environmental issues also affect other parts of the state’s population as some men are “sterile” (Atwood 66). Consequently, children appear to have become the only means to ensure the state’s survival as many of Gilead’s inhabitants try to oppose the regime’s religious ideologies (i.e. illegal abortions, desertions, suicide, etc.). Therefore, in echoing Swift’s essay, Atwood shows how absurd some of Gilead’s decisions are as some rules that are supposed to be necessary will not benefit certain parts of Gilead’s population. This is especially true for the Handmaids as for them, giving birth to a healthy baby is a matter of survival. Moreover, in echoing Swift’s essay, Atwood points out how Gilead’s decisions regarding the state’s benefit can be dangerous and life-threatening to some inhabitants as women are reduced to being “worthy vessel[s],” only (71). Interestingly, Atwood’s readers may wonder how much of what Atwood describes might apply to their own situation as she ultimately describes a modern society.

Moreover, intertextuality is also a shared theme between George Orwell’s novel 1984 and Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale. As Earl Ingersoll argues, one of the main literary parallels between both novels lies within the similarities between Orwell’s “Appendix – The Principles of Newspeak” and Atwood’s “Historical Notes” (71). While according to Ingersoll, Atwood argues that since Orwell’s novel “ends with a note on Newspeak, which is written in the past tense, in standard English – which means that, at the time of writing the note, Newspeak is a thing of the past,” Ingersoll also underlines that “much as they might want to, few readers would follow Atwood’s line of reasoning that the use of the past tense indicates and end of Oceania,” yet “it is clear … that Atwood sees Orwell’s ‘Appendix’ and her own ‘Historical Notes’ as indicative of a future in which Oceania and Gilead are no more” (71, 217). Indeed, readers ignore who wrote the “Appendix” as it is not stated while scientists admit having re-ordered Offred’s testimony as they had only fragments of it and thus do not acknowledge the testimony’s authenticity. Consequently, both novels illustrate how under a supposedly utopian
regime that promises liberty and protection to its citizens, people are in fact spied upon and in
danger if they disregard the state’s rules. As both states have anonymised the authors of these
testimonies, readers understand that the Oceanian and Gileadean regimes erase their
inhabitants’ existence. Both Orwell’s and Atwood’s protagonists are spied upon and become
tools for their states to carry out their political agenda and fulfil their role: 1984 protagonist
Winston has to work as a government employee while Offred has to ensure Gilead’s future
generation. However, if they do not respect and fulfil what the regime expects of them, both
Winston and Offred will die. In her case, Offred risks to get “burn[t] … up with the garbage”
(Atwood 220). Interestingly, as has been done in the past, such practices that undermine
individuals’ existences are still common in some parts of the world (e.g. North Korea’s
totalitarian regime) and the fact that Atwood refers to such practices shows that, in her opinion,
these practices could exist in North America.

Eventually, The Handmaid’s Tale also echoes Charles Dickens’s novel Hard Times.
Indeed, Offred acknowledges that “right now, [she is] halfway through Hard Times, by
Dickens,” and, as Deborah A. Thomas points out, both novels can be abbreviated similarly: HT
(Atwood 188; Thomas 96). In both novels, female characters lose their identity as the teacher
in Dickens’s novel refers to his pupils with numbers while Offred’s name (Of- Fred) shows the
ownership her Commander has over her. Moreover, as Thomas points out, both female
protagonists agree to loveless sexual relationships. Indeed, Dickens’s Louisa marries Josiah
Bounderby to financially help out her brother while Offred accepts to have sex with her
Commander in order to survive. Both Louisa and Offred do not enjoy the company of the men
they are bound to as Louisa acts coldly and like a stone in her husband’s company while Offred,
when she has sexual intercourse with her Commander, “lie[s] there like a dead bird,” pretending
to be aroused (Atwood 256). Interestingly, Atwood paralleling these particular elements of
Dickens’s novel does not contribute to a fictional reading of her own novel as, in this case,
intertextuality enables Atwood to utter the same criticism as Dickens did: in some societies,
women are reduced to objects while having to sacrifice themselves for material needs or plain survival. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, this is precisely what happens to the Handmaids as their only purpose is to give birth to Gilead’s next generations. Moreover, while Dickens’s novel was written in 1854 and illustrates a patriarchal English society, Atwood wrote and released her novel in the 1980s, a decade that saw many feminist movements. Consequently, while Atwood describes a future close to the year “2195”, as she states in her novel’s “Historical Notes”, she raises her readers awareness to the fact that the society she depicts in her novel already existed in the past, exists in the present (i.e. *The Handmaid’s Tale*’s year of release) and may possibly exist in the future (299).

Therefore, in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, echoes to literary texts play an important role as these references enable Atwood to simultaneously describe the Gileadean society and the problems Gilead faces while she also manages to warn her readers about the contingency and relativity of truths and the inequalities in some societies. Therefore, through the concept of intertextuality, Atwood’s novel loses some of its fictional elements as, in order to raise her readers’ awareness, Atwood describes and criticises an American society that could possibly exist. Thus, by using fictional and literary texts of the past, Atwood describes and warns her readers against a possible future for North America while also strengthening her argument that her novel belongs to the Speculative Fiction literary genre as she is able to draw parallels between the past and the present to depict a possible future.

**Echoes of Religious Texts in *The Handmaid’s Tale***

Consequently, as the New Historicist approach suggests, the association of literary and non-literary texts creates meaning in Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*. However, as some people consider religious texts as literary texts while others do consider them as non-literary, this thesis presents a third section that only discusses how Atwood’s novel echoes biblical episodes. Again, through Kristeva’s definition of intertextuality that states that meaning is achieved
through the interacting of several texts, it can be argued that religious echoes play a very
important role in Atwood’s novel as they forward a plurality of meanings to the text. Indeed,
the novel’s religious echoes shape the readers’ expectations as Atwood’s readers are to some
extent familiar with religious history. Interestingly, while these references might at first seem
to be outdated, the fact that Atwood adds these echoes to her novel shows that, in her opinion,
religious events unfold concomitantly to our present as the past is reflected in the present.
Indeed, as Richard Lehan argues, “[t]ime is not language, and language is not time. We can
speak about time in language, but this is not identical with the way we experience time. And
we can experience time in reading narratives” (545). Thus, the New Historicist approach offers
Atwood’s readers the possibility to draw parallels between both the past and the present as,
according to Lehan, “cultural meaning cannot be divorced from time: as a culture defines its
sense of history, it defines itself; and our texts … cannot be separated from such historical
process,” since religious elements have shaped parts of modern American culture (545).
Therefore, since the past defines the present, both time periods will also define the future as
history can be viewed as an entanglement of events. Thus, the analysis of Atwood’s religious
echoes will result in the portrayal of a possible future for North America while also placing the
novel into the Speculative Fiction literary genre rather than the Science Fiction literary genre.
Indeed, as William Dean points out, “with the new historicism, the imagination is interpretive;
its purpose is to communicate with past historical particulars – not merely to reproduce but to
interact, to initiate, to create, as one does in a conversation,” therefore, the religious echoes
present throughout Atwood’s novel are a means to imitate the past (4). Thus, in adding religious
references into her novel, Atwood forwards particular meanings to her text while also shaping
her readers expectations as it triggers their sense of déjà vu as some of these references are
known by her readers. Additionally, her novel also offers a simultaneous reading of the past,
the present and the future.
Indeed, as Charlotte Templin argues, Atwood “foregrounds matters of names and naming, making them central hermeneutical concerns,” as in using religiously connoted names, Atwood frames her novel into expectations that are familiar to her readers (143). Additionally, Atwood also uses religiously connoted names to create irony. While Templin points out that the name “Handmaid” refers to the biblical episode in which Rachel sends her handmaid Bilhah to her husband Jacob so that he can impregnate her, the name “Martha”, who is given to the housemaids, refers to the biblical episode in which a woman organises her sister’s household as the latter was occupied in speaking with Jesus (147). Moreover, as Templin further points out, objects and places also adorn religious names (143). Indeed, Commanders drive in “Whirlwind[s]”, that is to say cars that are “black … the color of prestige or a hearse, and long and sleek,” which in the Bible stand for an immense and divine power (Atwood 23). Similarly, Gilead’s shop names are also religiously connoted while ironically suggesting abundance in a state characterised by deprivation. Therefore, names as “Lilies of the Field,” “Milk and Honey,” “All Flesh,” and “Daily Bread” contribute to an ironic reading of Atwood’s novel as these names suggest health and wealth while most women actually suffer under the Gileadean regime as food is rationed and all Handmaids live in “reduced circumstances” (Atwood 14, 30-1, 33, 169). Interestingly, Atwood’s religious echoes are all references to power or wealth, attributes that only Gilead’s elite possesses, while the state’s other inhabitants, especially women who act as Marthas and Handmaids, suffer under the strict rules and the infringement on their rights and liberties. Through her religious references, Atwood therefore describes a patriarchal society that forbids women most of their rights and here Atwood not only hints to societies of the past, but she also refers to some contemporary parts in the world where highly religious and patriarchal societies still infringe on women’s rights and freedoms.

Moreover, the first epigraph that introduces *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a biblical quote that hints at the importance of surrogate motherhood that defines the triangular relationship between every Commander, Wife and Handmaid:
And when Rachel saw that the she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, Give me children, or else I die. And Jacob’s anger was kindled against Rachel; and he said, Am I in God’s stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb? And she said, Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children with her (Atwood 3; Genesis 30:1 -3).

Indeed, Offred’s only means of survival is to bear a child for her Commander as, otherwise, she would either be shipped off to the Colonies or end as an outcast at Jezebel, a brothel. In her novel, Atwood also echoes two more passages of the Bible. On the one hand, according to Dorota Filipczak, Gilead’s guardians who are called “Eyes” and whose official slogan is “The Eyes of God run all over the earth,” parody the Bible which states that “the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward him,” as Gilead never leaves one of it subjects out of sight (Atwood 99; qtd. in Filipczak 172). On the other hand, and as Filipczak states again, the Gileadean hymn “there is a balm in Gilead,” is a distortion of Jeremiah’s question “is there no balm in Gilead?” as in the Bible, Gilead represents a type of medicine while in Atwood’s novel, the Gileadean Regime would represent the medicine for the state’s issues of underpopulation, environmental pollution and corruption (Atwood 230; Jeremiah 8:22). Interestingly, in this case, Atwood’s references to religious events show what could be the consequences of misinterpreting the Bible as, in one respect, women are reduced to mere “birth vessels” while the Gileadean regime spies upon its entire society, leaving its inhabitants bereft of any form of freedom. A state that, ironically, claims to cure all the issues that are threatening its inhabitants while it simultaneously bans parts of its population from their rights. However, what Atwood portrays in her novel is not purely fictional as throughout the world, there are still highly religious societies that impose strict rules on their members and Atwood shows her readers what could happen if officials in North America literally applied the Bible and its principles.
Therefore, a New Historicist approach offers Atwood’s readers new ways of understanding the religious echoes she added in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Indeed, the intertextuality between a contemporary text and several-century-old texts enables Atwood’s readers to understand that history can repeat itself and thus that what Atwood describes in her novel could possibly be the future for North America. Moreover, the displacement of religious elements into a totalitarian regime shows what consequences a misreading of history might have as the wrong interpretation of a text can have dire consequences for some people. Interestingly, this may also unsettle Atwood’s readers who are familiar with religious history as they can identify with Offred as they thus share the same cultural and historical backgrounds. Besides, as history seems to repeat itself, Atwood may be arguably right in placing her novel in the Speculative Fiction genre rather than the Science Fiction genre as she portrays a society that could possibly exist.

**Conclusion**

To conclude, as the New Historicist approach reveals, Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* echoes a variety of non-literary and literary texts. Indeed, the echoes of literary and non-literary texts in Atwood’s novel show how Atwood was influenced, on the one hand, by the 1970s and 1980s as elements of these decades can easily be identified in *The Handmaid’s Tale* and, on the other hand, how she has been influenced by texts that date back from several centuries and which therefore show how the past and the present are entwined as both the past and the present enable Atwood to portray a possible future. Moreover, Atwood’s echoes to non-literary and literary texts that can be found throughout her novel enable her to situate the events of *The Handmaid’s Tale* in an environment that seems believable to her readers.

Indeed, *The Handmaid’s Tale* echoes several political non-literary texts to portray the totalitarian aspect of the Gileadean Regime that is strongly reminiscent of Nazi Germany and Stalin’s Communist regime because of the military atmosphere that characterises the novel and
the Handmaids’ struggles to survive in a hostile environment. Atwood’s multiple references to American songs and products of the consumer society are also a means for her readers to displace the Gileadean regime into their own contemporary and immediate reality as some of her readers are acquainted with those cultural elements. Moreover, Atwood’s various echoes to literary texts serve a double purpose. Indeed, not only do these echoes show that the present is an echo of the past, but also that reality and truth are relative and contingent concepts, meaning that not all truths are reliable: what is presented as fiction, might not necessarily be fiction. In one respect, Atwood’s references to past literary texts show her readers that, despite not necessarily illustrating the same events, they still share similarities as they have been produced in similar contexts and can thus be read in a similar manner. Thus, Atwood points out that the present is merely an echo of the past as the contexts in which these texts have been produced can be displaced from one time period to the other without losing their relevance and significance. Additionally, Atwood echoes biblical elements that are often ironic, as, contrary to the Bible that offers hope to its believers, the Bible in *The Handmaid’s Tale* is strictly and literally applied to the extent that it turns Gilead into a theocratic totalitarian regime that does not hesitate to sacrifice parts of its population and to infringe on its inhabitants’ rights.

Thus, Atwood’s aim in writing a futuristic novel that heavily echoes past and contemporary times is to show that the future she describes has the potential to exist and that some events she describes have in fact already happened. Thus, it is paramount for Atwood to maintain a distinction between the Science Fiction and Speculative Fiction literary genres as, in her opinion, *The Handmaid’s Tale* lacks important aspects of the Science Fiction genre. Indeed, “what [Atwood] mean[s] by ‘science fiction’ is those books that descend from H. G. Wells’s *The War of the Worlds,*” while for Atwood, Speculative Fiction novels portray elements that “really could happen but just hadn’t completely happened when the authors wrote the books” (*The Guardian*). To understand how Atwood has built her novel while managing to blur the lines between the Speculative Fiction and Science Fiction genres, the new Historicist
approach is the most relevant to analyse *The Handmaid’s Tale* as it offers Atwood’s readers new ways to understand how she depicts a future that is simultaneously based on our past and on our present. It is through the New Historicist approach that such a reading of *The Handmaid’s Tale* can be made as this approach considers both the literary and non-literary texts as equally important. As Fewell points out, “[w]hat all these readings have in common is that, in one way or another, they challenge consensual readings. They invite us to read texts differently. They invite us to read different texts together. And they invite us to reflect on why we make the connections that we do,” thus the New Historicist approach offers a new and personal understanding of a text as it draws upon the readers’ cultural and historical backgrounds (20).

Therefore, as the New Historicist approach offers new interpretations for Atwood’s readers to understand *The Handmaid’s Tale* in a different light and to gather new meanings from it, this approach also illustrates how Atwood manages to raise her readers’ awareness about a possible future for North America as her novel is built on past and contemporary texts. Indeed, the New Historicist approach argues that one text should never be analyzed on its own but in a system with all the textual references that support the main text. Thus, Atwood’s readers are offered new interpretations of *The Handmaid’s Tale* while this literary approach also strengthens Atwood’s argument that her novel is neither a dystopia nor an utopia, but an Utopia that illustrates some realities of our contemporary world, which, again, supports her claim that her novel belongs to the Speculative Fiction literary genre. Atwood’s novel is therefore not only a compendium of historical and cultural facts, but also a dire warning as it foregrounds one possible future for mankind as Professor Pieixoto concludes: “[a]s all historians know, the past is a great darkness, and filled with echoes” (Atwood 312).
Works Cited


