POSTMODERN REFASHIONING OF THE GOTHIC IN MARGARET ATWOOD’S NOVEL *THE HANDMAID’S TALE*

MA Paper

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POSTMODERN REFASHIONING OF THE GOTHIC IN
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This MA Paper is submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for the
degree of the MA in English Philology

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I declare that this study is my own and does not contain any unacknowledged work from any
source.

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the M.A. thesis “Postmodern Refashioning of the Gothic in Margaret Atwood’s novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* is to disclose the postmodern transformations of the Gothic elements in a postmodern novel. Besides, via the analysis of postmodern refashioning of the Gothic in the novel the research aims to gain a glimpse into the literary strategies used by the writer regarding the heroine, the question of her identity, the society of Gilead…

Taking a postmodern approach towards Margaret Atwood’s novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* broadens the outlook on two different but, as it later transpires, so much interconnected literary trends: the Gothic and Postmodernism. Although, the novel undoubtedly hinges on postmodernist techniques: intertextuality, fusion of narrative voices, fragmentation, reality and fantasy and non-fixity of the ending, it has obvious gothic elements: signifying intense human emotions, horrifying secrets, women oppressed by men, a distorted sense of the self…Thus the reader can notice that Margaret Atwood’s book *The Handmaid’s Tale* opens new possibilities for interpretation of fiction in general.
INTRODUCTION

Canadian writers such as Margaret Atwood, Michael Ondaatje and Carol Shields have lately been very successful on the international scene. Lists of bestsellers, a number of winners in competitions just prove that Canadian literature is today one of the most successful among the New Literatures in English. However, Canadian literature has become multifaceted and diverse over the last thirty years. In the 1970s and ‘80s, a popular introductory approach to Canadian writing restricted itself to a number of themes that were supposed to be prevalent. One of such themes was that of survival, on which Margaret Atwood focused. And she claimed that survival in a hostile environment was the basic theme in Canadian literature.

There are always some perdurable themes that again and again appear in the texts. As such could be distinguished the preoccupation with the writing and the construction of Canadian history and identity. They have been important and popular throughout the literary history of Canada, even and especially in contemporary forms such as the type of postmodern writing that problematizes the writing of and about history (Jansohn, 2002).

According to J. Wakeman (1980), Canadian writers have tended to draw characters who end as victims – of their society, of American power, of their own weakness, or, most often, of their harsh climate and landscape. Therefore, Canadian literature is the one that centers on mere survival because there is an element of complicity in this national habit of mind, an immature willingness to accept the role of victim rather than struggle for self-respect and self-definition.

As J. Sturrock (1997, 71) claims, “Canadian nationalism coincided in the 1960s with the upsurge of feminism, and novels by women tended to explore women’s issues within a nationalist framework”. “The 1970s were a strongly political decade, in which relations between Quebec and the other provinces became fractured over constitutional issues. It was also a decade which saw the consolidation of ‘English-Canadian’ and feminist traditions in Canadian writing” (ibid., 72).

Hence we may conclude, that Canadian history has influenced Canadian writers a lot, therefore today’s Canada can gasconade about a good number of super eminent writers. Among them is Margaret Atwood, one of the brightest stars in modern Canadian literature.

Margaret Atwood was born in 1939 in Ottawa and grew up in northern Ontario, Quebec, and Toronto. She received her undergraduate degree from Victoria College at the University of Toronto and her master’s degree from Radcliffe College. Atwood spent a large part of her childhood in the Canadian wilderness. At the age of six she began to write poems, morality
plays, comic books, and an unfinished novel about an ant. At sixteen she found that writing was “suddenly the only thing I wanted to do” (20).

Her first novel, *The Edible Woman*, was published in 1969 to wide acclaim. Atwood continued teaching as her literary career blossomed. She has lectured at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, taught English at Sir George Williams University in Montreal and served as chair in the writing departments at the University of Alabama, New York University, Macquarie University in Australia and Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas. As well as that, Atwood held the presidency of the Writer’s Union of Canada in 1981 and was the President of International P.E.N. Canadian Centre from 1984-1986.

Margaret Atwood is an international literary star. In her thematically diverse and best-selling novels, she has anticipated, explored – and even changed – the popular preoccupations of our time. Writing about issues on both personal and worldly scale with a knife-edge precision, Atwood has been called, by *The Sunday Times*, “one of the most inventive, enthralling and accomplished authors writing in English” (24).

She is a rare writer whose books are adored by the public, acclaimed by the major critics, and studied even in such varied places as the universities of Alabama, New York and Berlin. Besides, “a recent survey suggests that Atwood is now the second most widely read living novelist at British universities” (Sturrock, 1997, 66). Her books include *The Edible Woman, Surfacing, Lady Oracle, The Handmaid’s Tale, Cat’s Eye, and Alias Grace*. Furthermore, Atwood’s books have been translated into over thirty languages, and she has received many international awards, including *The Giller Prize* and *The Governors General’s Award from Canada; The Booker Prize* and *The Sunday Times Award for Literary Excellence from the UK; The Dashiell Hammett Award from The United States and the Le Chevalier dans l’Ordre de Arts et Les Lettres from France* (24). All in all, Atwood has received 60 Awards for her writing and 14 honorary degrees (20).

Some of Margaret Atwood’s books have been adapted for the stage and screen. For example, *The Handmaid’s Tale* was adapted for the screen by Harold Pinter, released in 1990, and is now being staged as an opera by Poul Ruders.

“During the feminist revolution of the 1970s, Atwood echoes the sentiments of women’s rights in all of her books, asking tough questions about where we are going and where we have been. Atwood never shies away from hard-hitting political statements like unfettered, unguided nationalism, the penchant for violence in the Americas and antiabortion demonstrators in her work.” (20)

Being Canada’s most eminent novelist and poet, she also writes short stories, critical studies, screenplays, radio scripts and books for children, her works having been translated
into over 30 languages. Moreover, Atwood’s reviews and critical articles have appeared in various eminent magazines and she has also edited many books, including *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English* (1983) and, with Robert Weaver, *The Oxford Book of Canadian Short Stories in English* (1986) (21).

She is perhaps best known, however, for her novels, in which she creates strong, often enigmatic, women characters and excels in telling open-ended stories, while dissecting contemporary urban life and sexual politics.

In interviews, Margaret Atwood has often commented that “when she started writing in the late 1950s and early 1960s, “Canadian literature” was considered a contradiction in terms. Arguably, as a novelist, poet, critic, and literary/political activist, Atwood has done more to put Canada on the literary map than any other author. While Atwood is an accomplished poet – and the interconnections between her poetry, short fiction, and her longer works are both rich and complex – it is primarily as a novelist that she has gained an international reputation. Preoccupation remains central in all her subsequent fiction: power politics, and in particular, sexual politics” (Schlager & Lauer, 2001, 43).

In such novels as *The Edible Woman* (1969), *Surfacing* (1972), *Lady Oracle* (1976) and *Life before Man* (1979), moreover, she presents individuals questing for personal integrity and for a more harmonious relationship with the natural world. Besides, what critics notice in her novels are comic or grim analyses of the self when, in isolation, which confronts a fractured or distorted image of itself (Gilbert & Gubar, 1985).

Atwood’s fiction often attempts to provide what she calls, in one book title, *Procedures for Underground* (1970), where the underground is understood as the other side of what has been defined as normal by a given culture. Frequently this journey into the interior offers a visionary solution to the psychosexual problems Atwood associates with modern technological society. Whether her central character is pioneer woman or an author of Gothic romances, she seeks some form of control over an environment that is seen as alien or alienating (ibid.).

Because in Atwood’s view, Canadians have viewed themselves as victims of either English or American imperialism, and because women have perceived themselves as victims of masculine privilege, Atwood implies that cultural colonization and sexual subordination are parallel, if not identical situations. Both the humor and the tenderness of her most recently published work indicate how writing continues to empower Atwood herself to defy colonization (ibid.).

Nick Rennison and Kenneth McLeish (2001, 11) cognized that “many writers have tackled similar themes, but Atwood’s books give a unique impression that each moment, each
feeling, is being looked at through a microscope, as if the swirling, nagging ‘real’ world has been momentarily put aside for something more urgent which may just – her characters consistently put hope above experience – make sense of it”.

Although Atwood’s work deals with murder, emotional cruelty and religious totalitarianism she is never crass, sensational or transparently provocative. Like Graham Greene, she writes intelligent and beautifully crafted books that are also compulsively readable. It is a rare talent (21).

She places her characters in complex, challenging situations, which allows her to ruminate on the way we live and act towards one another. She moves with deft ease from the particular to the universal. She creates (mostly) female protagonists who are forced to remake themselves, to achieve a courage and self-reliance in their attitudes and relationships with others and the world around them. Although she writes of pain and suffering and the essential cruelty at the heart of human behaviour, her ever present sense of the absurd rescues her from an overt and distressing bleakness (ibid.).

According to The Columbia Encyclopedia, her writing treats contemporary issues, such as feminism, sexual politics, the fate of Canada and Canadian literature, and the intrusive nature of mass society. Atwood is a skilled and powerful storyteller whose novels have sometimes made use of such popular genres as the historical novel, detective tale, and science fiction (19).

Atwood wrote *The Handmaid’s Tale* in West Berlin and Alabama in the mid-1980s. The novel quickly became a best-seller. *The Handmaid’s Tale* falls squarely within the twentieth-century tradition of anti-utopian, or “dystopian” novels. Novels in this genre present imagined worlds and societies that are not ideals, but instead are terrifying or restrictive. Atwood’s novel offers a strongly feminist vision of dystopia. She wrote it shortly after the elections of Ronald Reagan in the United States and Margaret Thatcher in Great Britain, during a period of conservative revival in the West partly fueled by a strong, well-organized movement of religious conservatives who criticized what they perceived as the excesses of the “sexual revolution” of the 1960s and 1970s. The growing power of this “religious right” heightened feminist fears that the gains women had made in previous decades would be reversed (24). That is why influenced by those events Atwood, in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, explores the consequences of a reversal of women’s rights.

Dystopia – is a vision of a future society in which the conditions of life are miserable, characterized by human misery, poverty, oppression, violence, disease, and/or pollution. It is a culture where the condition of life suffers from deprivation, oppression, or terror. The
writer’s view about the future is overshadowed by stimulating fears of the “ugly consequences of present-day behaviour” (Calinescu, 1987).

In the context of dystopia the narrative investigates how the human’s striving to create a perfect world goes awry when he/she tries to make it a reality. The society is depicted as negative and undesirable.

According to Supryia M. Ray (2003), dystopia comes from the Greek for “bad places,” the opposite of a utopia. A dystopia is usually set at some point in the author’s future and describes a society in which we would not want to live. Writers presenting dystopias generally want to alert readers to the potential pitfalls and dangers of society’s present course or of a course society might conceivably take one day. Accounts of dystopias inevitably conclude by depicting unpleasant, disastrous, or otherwise terrifying consequences for the protagonists as well as for humanity as a whole.

Atwood’s novel also paints a picture of a world undone by pollution and infertility, reflecting 1980s fears about declining birthrates, the dangers of nuclear power, and – environmental degradation (24).

Some of the novel’s concerns seem dated today, and its implicit condemnation of the political goals of America’s religious conservatives has been criticized as unfair and overly paranoid. Nonetheless, The Handmaid’s Tale remains one of the most powerful recent portrayals of a totalitarian society, and one of the few dystopian novels to examine in detail the intersection of politics and sexuality. The novel’s exploration of the controversial politics of reproduction seems likely to guarantee Atwood’s novel a readership well into the twenty-first century (24).

The Handmaid’s Tale is a good example of how a postmodern novel transforms the Gothic mode. Singularity of Margaret Atwood’s novel is that so much transfused by postmodernist story also foregrounds a number of Gothic elements. Thus the analysis of The Handmaid’s Tale leads to the distinction of the Gothic mode in the postmodern novel in order to figure out their meanings and functions in the narrative.

This M.A. thesis is written resorting to literary criticism and theory reviewing subsistent elements in postmodern and Gothic literature. The work centres mainly on the following literary critics: Ch. Jansohn, J. Wakeman, J. Sturrock, N. Schlager, J. Lauer, S. M. Gilbert, S. Gubar, etc.
The theoretical part presents the ideas extracted from critical reference literature, books as well as essays. The practical part provides a deeper analysis of the elements noted in the previous part of the thesis. And conclusions presuppose individual findings, inferences and generalizations.

The research problem has a professional significance as it extends the existing knowledge and tests the theory. Besides, the study contributes to the detailed analysis of the specific features characteristic of postmodern and Gothic literatures as well as their interconnections in terms of postmodern refashioning of the Gothic. Moreover, the analysis of postmodern refashioning of the Gothic in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* could be used by English language and literature teachers in their classes to deepen their students’ understanding of the novel analyzed.

The aim of the thesis is achieved by solving the following tasks:

* presenting a general concept of postmodernism and the Gothic and stating their concrete characteristic features;
* analyzing the story through postmodernist transformations of the Gothic.
1. POSTMODERNISM

1.1 The Concept of Postmodernism

Postmodernism is hard to define, because it is a concept that appears in a wide variety of disciplines or areas of study, including art, architecture, music, film, literature, sociology, communications, fashion, and technology. Furthermore, it is hard to locate it temporally or historically, because it is not clear exactly when postmodernism begins.

It must be realized though, that postmodernism has many interpretations and that no single definition is adequate. Different disciplines have participated in the postmodernist movement in varying ways, for example, in architecture traditional limits have become indistinguishable, so that what is commonly on the outside of a building is placed within and vice versa. And in literature, as Wynne-Davies (1989, 25) states, “writers adopt a self-conscious intertextuality sometimes verging on pastiche, which denies the formal propriety of authorship and genre”.

As well as that, much depends upon whether we are defining a postmodernism, a break from the aesthetic formations of the early twentieth century, or a postmodernity, a break from the entire culture of modernity and modernization since at least the Enlightenment and perhaps before. The first definition is usually discussed in terms of works of art and items of culture, the second in reference to global-economic categories of the most momentous kind (Simpson, 1995, 15). In other words, postmodernism is the cultural and intellectual phenomenon while postmodernity focuses on global social and political outworkings and innovations. For example, the postmodern by Jennifer Wicke and Margaret Ferguson “the way we live now,” and as an “umbrella term for the cultural, social and theoretical dimensions of our period” (Simpson, 1995, 1). Thus, we can draw an inference that anything fast, image centered, any thing that shocks or no longer keeps the tradition in itself can be considered postmodern.

According to R. B. Kershner (1997), at least since the 1960s some critics have proclaimed the arrival of a new form of writing (and of the other arts as well), although the term postmodernism was not consistently used for this event until the 1970s. Other critics insist that we are still working out the modernist project and that what some people call postmodern is only an exaggeration of certain typically modernist characteristics.

All in all, a great variety of spheres of life in the second half of the twentieth century, especially in the last quarter of the century, is related to postmodernism. Postmodernism is a phase in the history of mankind, society, culture, and the individual’s thinking, in which
classical traditions, the idea of absolute truths, stable universal moral values as well as the traditional humanist understanding of a human being are rejected.

1.2 The Main Features of Postmodern Literature

Postmodernism signifies a period in the development of philosophical thought which has exerted a strong influence on postmodern literature. The postmodern philosophical paradigm, successfully developed by such philosophers as Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger, appeared at the beginning of the nineteenth century and became established in the second half of the twentieth century. It emerged “as a critique of the discourses of modernity, or the rationalism of the Age of Enlightenment, when it was believed in the individual’s ability to rationally explain and systematize the world, as well as to create it a better one. Postmodern philosophy rejects the metanarratives of modernity in the belief that there is no singular conceptual system or discourse through which we can understand and explain the totality of the world. Instead, local narratives, perspectivism and relativism of all knowledge and values are advocated” (Miniotaitė, 2007, 6).

According to D. Miniotaitė (2007, 7), in postmodern philosophy the world and reality are understood as chaotic, relative, undefined, unstable, or as interpretations, which are created by language, social, ideological, and cultural discourses. “History and society are explained as fragmented and split. Universal truths and traditional moral values are substituted by relative ones which are regarded as human constructs. The individual’s cognition is understood as always contextual. Postmodern philosophy is marked by the deconstruction of logocentric thinking based on binary oppositions: subject/object, rational/irrational, culture/nature etc., characteristics of modernity”.

Thereby, as it is maintained by R. B. Kershner (1997, 71), when trying to single out the features of postmodernism a long series of suggestive oppositions between modernism and postmodernism can help in doing that:

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However, postmodernism like modernism, follows the ideas of rejecting boundaries between high and low forms of art, rejecting inflexible genre distinctions, and emphasizing parody, irony and playfulness. It regards distinctions as undesirable and even impossible, so that an almost Utopian world, free from all constrains, becomes possible. The most extreme postmodernists urge us to forget certainty and learn to live without explanations.

John Barth was the first to explain the term of literary postmodernism in his famous essays *The Literature of Exhaustion* (1967) and *The Literature of Replenishment* (1980). In Barth’s opinion, post-war literature faced the dilemma: “to be or not to be” and “how to be?”. Thus postmodernism in literature is one of the answers. The author considers literature preceding World War II as “exhausted” that is why a contemporary writer can only create new combinations of literary genres, forms, structures, well-known plots. Nowadays literature is overfull of various styles that’s why, according to the author, it is time for considering its imitation or reinterpretation. By “exhaustion” he means the used-upness of certain literary forms or the exhaustion of certain possibilities. Individual readers belong to certain historical periods and the meaning of art depends on it. But still, the art as such can not be “exhausted”. Therefore, forms and methods of art are inseparable from a certain point in the history of mankind. When the time changes, art conventions change together with it as it can no longer convey the spirit of the new age and have to be destroyed, transformed or even employed against themselves to create a new vital work. “In this respect, postmodern literature becomes the literature of “replenishment” because it transforms the old aesthetic categories of literature and art, and in such way shows their field of possibilities.” (Miniotaitė, 2007, 15) Therefore, D. Miniotaitė (2007), on the basis of Barth’s essays claims, that the writing of postmodern literature becomes something courageous.

Postmodernists in all disciplines reject conventional, academic styles of discourse; they prefer audacious and provocative forms of delivery, vital and intriguing elements of genre or

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style and presentation. The distinctness and specificity of postmodernism itself is certainly, in part, a function of these characteristics. Such forms of presentation shock, startle, and unsettle the reader. They are explicitly designed to instigate the new and unaccustomed activity of a postmodern reading. But the postmodern emphasis on style and presentation does not signify an absence of concern with content (Rosenau, 1992).

M. Klages (2007) tends to think that postmodernism, in rejecting grand narratives, favours “mini-narratives”, stories that explain small practices, local events, rather than large-scale universal or global concepts. Postmodern “mini-narratives” are always situational, provisional, contingent, and temporal, making no claim to universality, truth, reason, or stability. So, as it was mentioned before, the idea of any stable or permanent reality disappears.

On top of all that, postmodernism focuses on alternative discourses and meaning rather than on goals, choices, behavior, attitudes, and personality. Postmodernists support a re-focusing on what has been taken for granted, what has been neglected, regions of resistance, the forgotten, the irrational, the insignificant, the repressed, the borderline, the classical, the sacred, the traditional, the eccentric, the sublimated, the subjugated, the rejected, the nonessential, the marginal, the peripheral, the excluded, the tenuous, the silenced, the accidental, the dispersed, the disqualified, the deferred, the disjointed. Postmodernists, defining everything as a text, seek to “locate” meaning rather than to “discover” it (Rosenau, 1992).

As E. Elliott asserts (1991, 701), “to read a postmodern novel is to be surprised and frequently to be overwhelmed; it is to have expectations thwarted and strategies of interpretation anticipated, attacked, parodied, or simply taken on as topics of discussion within the fiction. Postmodern novels tend to initiate the agonistic struggle with their implied audiences, inviting tactics that will lead to narrative impasses and cognitive confusion”. Thereby, it can be maintained that if to write is invariably to replicate what one has read and thus to reread, to read is also to rewrite. Besides, metafiction, which is fiction about fiction, that is so typical of postmodernism makes the reader explore the language of a text, draws his attention to creative process itself, to external problems of human communication and makes him think about himself. Thus postmodern literature tries to disturb readers, force them to scrutinize their own values and beliefs.

In general, the postmodern novel emphasizes plot rather than character. Postmodern plots tend to be labyrinthine, difficult (even impossible) to follow, contrived, often entrapping. In a number of works this emphasis on plot seems to entail a corresponding
diminution or flattening of character. Characters are often stereotypes and can be drawn from other high or low cultural narratives (Elliott, 1991).

According to E. Elliott (1991), characters in postmodern novels are also likely to be fragmented or multiple. Postmodern protagonists tend to be passive, manipulated by a plot they perceive as already inscribed in their fictional universes. This passivity is consonant both with the self-referential theme of a world that comes to acculturated subjects already textualized and with the more overtly political exploration of what it means to live in a period where power is increasingly global in its scope and diffused in its manifestations.

Besides, “narrative voices are permeated by period and class-coded slang or the catchphrases of media cliché, and there can be enormous tonal shifts within a single narrator’s account. Perhaps because postmodernists tend not to separate the aesthetic from other kinds of discourse, there is less markedly “fine writing” in postmodern novels” (Elliott, 1991, 706).

According to Supryia M. Ray (2003, 360), “much of postmodernist writing reveals and highlights the alienation of individuals and the meaninglessness of human existence. Postmodernists frequently stress that humans desperately cling to illusions of security to conceal and forget the void over which their lives are perched”.

Speaking about the meaning of human existence in a postmodern world, there could be distinguished two possible beings: individual’s orientation to his inner world and orientation to outer values. In this sense, the second existence is led by a depersonalized, alienated individual, a victim of the stereotypes of industrial mass consciousness of the second half of the twentieth century postmodern society. In a society like this, a person often has a feeling of inauthenticity which is one of the feelings most often discussed in postmodern literature (Miniotaitè, 2007, 8). Besides, very often the postmodern literature shows the individual “as a fictitious construct who is portrayed as a weak, faceless mediocrity of mass society ruled by technology and bureaucracy, and unable to resist its forms of power” (ibid., 9). In postmodern literature a character usually seeks the fulfillment of life and is portrayed in constant change, always assuming new roles. It follows that the character’s task is as if not to discover but constantly create himself or herself.

However, postmodern literature is not interested in the deep level of character, which was so typical of psychological realism and modernism. Instead of it, the literature puts the emphasis on individual mentality as a complex integrity of mental and spiritual orientations of literary character, author and reader. “Thus postmodern literature projects only generic types of mentality, such as loneliness or longing, which are common to and recognizable by everyone. There is no monolithic unity, no story as event, but the fragments of vocalized and
objectivized “human situations”. The writer’s focus is not an individual human destiny, but
the human situation, a sense of human self that is beyond the personal” (ibid., 27p.)

In addition, postmodern literature is marked by a high degree of intertextuality which is
foregrounded in the text. The term “intertextuality” signifies that “a literary text is inseparably
interlinked with other texts by its open or covert citations and allusions, by its assimilation of
the formal and substantive features of an earlier text or texts, by its unavoidable participation
in the common stock of linguistic and literary conventions and procedures” (Miniotaitė, 2007,
24).

Intertextuality is a modern literary and cultural theory which has its origins in twentieth-
century. The term intertextuality was initially employed by poststructuralist theorists and
critics in their attempt to disrupt notions of stable meaning and objective interpretation. In the
Postmodern epoch, theorists often claim, it is not possible any longer to speak of originality or
the uniqueness of the artistic object since every artistic object is so clearly assembled from
bits and pieces of already existent art. Authors of literary work do not just select words from a
language system, they select plots, generic features, aspects of characters, images, ways of
narrating, even phrases and sentences from previous literary texts and from the literary
tradition. Thus intertextuality foregrounds notions of relationality, interconnectedness and
interdependence in modern cultural life.

Postmodernist works frequently combine aspects of diverse genres thus it can include
such genres as the Absurd, the antinovel, concrete poetry, and other forms of poetry
challenging the ideological assumptions of contemporary society (Supryia, 2003).

Intertextuality, as a term, is not restricted only to the literary art. Similarly to
postmodernism, it can be found in cinema, painting, music, architecture, photography…
Therefore the concept of intertextuality is associated with postmodernism. They both focus on
the relationship between reality and representation, fact and fiction. The same point is made
by Linda Hutcheon, a major theorist of the relationship between postmodernism and
intertextual theory and practice. She argues that “what characterizes postmodern literature is a
double-codedness. This double-codedness questions the available modes of representation in
culture whilst recognizing that it must still employ those modes” (Allen, 2000, 188).

As Graham Allen (2000, 185) maintains, “the perceived saturatedness of present cultural
forms and styles, the sense that culture cannot constantly ‘Make It New’, is not a cause for
concern and does not mean that contemporary art is a weakened, irrelevant, and parasitic
phenomenon.”

Intertextuality reminds us that all texts are potentially open to the reader’s own
presuppositions and lack clear and defined boundaries. As well as that, it refers to the
impossibility of singularity and unity. That’s why it questions, disturbs and even subverts the dominance of already established forms. As theorists claim, no text can be original and unique in itself. All of them use references and quotations from other texts. It follows thence that text’s meaning is shaped by other texts.

It is natural that each literary text possesses some meaning and the reader’s task is to extract that meaning from it. Texts, however, are viewed by modern theorists as lacking any kind of independent meaning. They are what theorists now call intertextual. To interpret a text is to trace textual relations. Meaning becomes something which exists between a text and all the other texts to which it refers and relates. Thus, the text becomes an intertext which encourages the reader to resist a passive reading of texts from cover to cover. But it is universally accepted that there is never a single or correct way to read a text, since every reader brings with him or her different expectations, interests, viewpoints and prior reading experiences.

Supryia M. Ray (2003) defines the term of intertextuality as the condition of interconnectedness among texts, or the concept that any text is an amalgam of others, either because it exhibits signs of influence or because its language inevitably contains common points of reference with other texts through such things as allusion, quotation, genre, style, and even revisions. The critic Julia Kristeva, who popularized and is often credited with coining this term, views any given work as part of a larger fabric of literary discourse, part of continuum including the future as well as the past. Other critics have argued for an even broader use and understanding of the term intertextuality, maintaining that literary history per se is too narrow a context within which to read and understand a literary text. When understood this way, intertextuality could be used by a new historicist or cultural critic to refer to the significant interconnectedness between a literary text and contemporary, nonliterary discussions of the issues represented in the literary text. Or it could be used by a poststructuralist to suggest that a work of literature can only be recognized and read within a vast field of signs and tropes that is like a text and that makes any single text self-contradictory and undecidable.

Sometimes it seems that postmodern writers do not ‘have a story to tell’ at all. Writers may use their novels to explore their own personal views about life or morality. These days, we can expect novels to air almost any issue: incest, sexual ‘deviance’, euthanasia and religious fanaticism…

Such deliberate choices of themes, structure, narrative technique or language can sometimes, though not always, be overt in postmodern novels and provide plenty of ideas to discuss and analyse. On the other hand, their plots and themes may be obscure. They are less
likely to fit into patterns or have predictable – especially happy – endings, and may leave us with more questions than answers (Croft & Cross, 2000).

Thus postmodernism can be considered as a reproduction of earlier writing traditions which resists the idea of boundaries, rejects the idea of novelistic outright character representations, disregards the typical plot and on the whole it subverts the conventions. Postmodern art overlaps and interacts with the present and the past. It is a mixture of any tradition with that of the immediate past. It plays with and mixes forms and styles from what were previously perceived as ‘high culture’ and ‘popular culture’.
2. THE GOTHIC MODE

2.1 The Concept of the Gothic

According to various sources, the gothic novel is a literary genre which is said to have been created in 1764 when Horace Walpole wrote his novel *The Castle of Otranto* which contains essentially all the elements that constitute the genre. In addition, Walpole’s novel was imitated not only in the eighteenth century and not only in the novel form, but it has influenced writing, poetry, and even film making up to the present day.

The term ‘Gothic’ was originally used to describe Art and Architecture. Besides, this term originally implied medieval or rather a fantasized version of what was seen to be medieval. Later, ‘Gothic’ came to cover all areas of the fantastic and supernatural. Accordingly, Gothic novels were given a genre of their own primarily because of their emotional extremes and their dark themes. And this mode dealing with tales of the macabre and supernatural reached the height of popularity in the 1790’s.

By about 1840, the Gothic mode had played itself out and this was partly due to writers who were developing the genre into the horror fiction. The Gothic genre did, however, have a long lasting effect. As an example, it had an influence on Charles Dickens who read Gothic novels when he was younger and later put the Gothic melodrama and gloomy atmosphere into his own books (23).

However, by the 1880’s, the Gothic novel was revived and many authors of the time such as Robert Louis Stevenson, Arthur Machen and Oscar Wilde all wrote Gothic fiction. Also, it was about this time that the most famous Gothic villain appeared in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* in 1897 (23).

According to Ch. Jansohn (2002), many of the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century literary works now classified as Gothic can also be seen to offer ways of understanding the past, and the relations between past and present. The Gothic as a new literary form emerged out of the revaluation of an indigenous aesthetic, defined in opposition to a rule-based neo-classicism.
2.2 The Main Features of Gothic Fiction

Gothic as an adjective is meant to signify the baser human emotions, or the decay and collapse of human creations. Intense human emotions, such as despair, love, and horror, are the main ingredients of gothic fiction. Goth literature is a combination of romance, horror, and historical fiction, what creates a different sort of effect on readers (22).

In the Gothic novels it is common that unprivileged heroes and heroines compete, even for their survival, against a whole host of designing aristocrats. The admittedly ludicrous settings of some of these novels still effectively mark their contrast between an old enforced and artificial order, on the one hand, and an emerging individualism, on the other (Davidson, 1986).

The Gothic can subtly challenge the status quo of the so-called traditional or premodern society while also criticizing the inherent problems of the so-called modern society, especially progressive philosophical or economic theories (liberalism, deism, rationalism) based on a notion of human perfectability. The struggling individual has, in the Gothic world, a remarkable potential for good but an equally powerful motivation (and opportunity) for corruption. Mind is infinitely susceptible to benevolence and fellow feeling, and is simultaneously prey to superstition, delusion, or its own deviousness. Moreover, class privilege only extends the abuses of individuals by giving them the authority to assert their will over others. The Gothic, in short, focuses on the systemic possibilities and problems of postrevolutionary society and of the postrevolutionary self in action in that society. The comic tone that characterized most picaresque novels yields to melodrama and sensationalism, and the sentimental novel’s challenge to the social structure begins to take on philosophical and even metaphysical dimensions (Davidson, 1986, 215).

The main features of Gothic novels include terror, mystery, the supernatural, doom, death, curses and madness (23). As well as that, this genre delineates the horrifying secrets, the brooding presence of the past, and the permeation of ordinary experience with the supernatural (Kershner, 1997, 111).

Most often Gothic setting is a castle, deep forest, strict academies, haunted mansions, ruins or dungeons. Many of the settings are continental. Just as the Gothic explores the inner recesses of the mind – the places where nightmares dwell – so it explores wild and remote worlds. In Gothic fiction there are deep valleys, high mountain peaks and wild forlorn wastes which awe and intimidate us by their vastness. These landscapes evoke the sublime – the feeling of overwhelming awe and fear in the presence of natural immensities. Gothic interiors
are often dark and labyrinthine – cloisters, vast abbeys, long corridors, castle halls, paneled bedrooms and secret passages (Watson, 1994).

Gothic atmosphere is that of mystery and suspense (the work is pervaded by a threatening feeling, a fear enhanced by the unknown. Often the plot itself is built around a mystery, such as unknown parentage, a disappearance, or some other inexplicable event). Those immense landscapes and darkened rooms arouse fear, horror and terror. Night scenes are common. ‘Gloomy’ is perhaps the most-used adjective in the creation of Gothic atmosphere (Watson, 1994).

Gothic writers frequently employed exaggeration and emotional language and it was typical to emphasize story line and setting over character and characterization (Supryia, 2003).

Furthermore, high, even overwrought emotion is typical. The narration may be highly sentimental, and the characters are often overcome by anger, sorrow, surprise, and, especially, terror. Characters suffer from raw nerves and a feeling of impending doom. Crying and emotional speeches are frequent. Breathlessness and panic are common.

As an appeal to the pathos and sympathy of the reader, the female characters often face events that leave them fainting, terrified, screaming, and/or sobbing. A lonely, pensive, and oppressed heroine is often the central figure of the novel, so her sufferings are even more pronounced and the focus of attention. The characters in Gothic fiction are wandering maids, amnesiac mysterious women with exotic features, ostracized royalty, noblemen with secrets, etc. The villains could be ghosts, sorcerers, vampires, murdering dukes or earls, skeletons, or werewolves (22). Gothic characters are restricted in range and hardly memorable. Gothic characterization is carefully built on a set of clear contrasts. Conventionally, the central figure is a threatened heroine, whom, the reader hopes, will be rescued by the absent hero. The hero’s binary opposite is the very much present villainous contriver. He is usually aristocratic and often lives in a sinister castle (Watson, 1994).

On the whole, as N. Watson (ibid.) notices, plot and characterization in Gothic fiction is simple: the plots are digressive and characters often function as binary opposites.

One more Gothic feature is women threatened by a powerful, impulsive, tyrannical male. One or more male characters have the power to demand that one or more of the female characters do something intolerable. Basically, women are often placed in the bad light of society where they may either be weak or corrupted and treated badly by male characters. However, their roles change as society progresses.

In early Gothic, women are depicted as foolish and helpless as they are often under the oppression of men. In Gothic literature women are portrayed as indecisive and submissive
(23). This shows how weak women are as they do not have their own stand. Moreover, women are also often depicted as vulnerable and lost. This is due to the oppression of men whereby the women always try to escape from their clutches (23).

The Gothic makes women central. It is possible to read Gothic as a parabolic exploration of the constricted and even threatened life of women. A frequent image is the lonely maiden threatened by sexual violence. Another is the incarcerated victim (Watson, 1994). There was even the contemporary perception that those were novels written by women for women, in particular by and for scullery maids (Kartan, 2006).

Referring to the vocabulary of the Gothic, atmosphere and emotion are pushed to the extreme. Hence as R. Gill puts it, words such as ‘apprehension’, ‘dread’, ‘fear’, ‘horror’, ‘loathing’ and ‘terror’ are frequent. In the Gothic mode, light is not merely ‘dim’ but ‘gloomy’, silence is ‘deep’, and characters ‘muse’ rather than ‘think’ (Watson, 1994). So the language is both excessive and literary.

The Gothic is a surprisingly ambitious genre. It dwells on what is subjective and extreme, on what appalls and allures. It opens up questions about the family and society, the religious issue of Creation and responsibility, the human capacity for violence and the place of women in a male-dominated world (Watson, 1994). Gothic also touches on the metaphysical questions about nature, and good and evil. Violence, both threatened and actual, often features in Gothic works. Gothic violence has a strong sexual element (ibid.).

In summary, Gothic refers to a genre characterized by a general mood of decay, action that is dramatic, violent or disturbing, loves that are destructively passionate, and gloomy or bleak settings. And even today Gothic elements that evoke an atmosphere of brooding and terror are still common in literature.
3. **THE HANDMAID’S TALE AS A POSTMODERN NOVEL**

3.1 Significance of the Setting

As it has been noted above, a large variety of articles and books depict the Gothic novel as a controversial literary genre where even the term “Gothic” itself in the eighteenth century implied a wide range of meanings: barbarous, medieval, horrid, supernatural, exaggerated, grotesque. Besides, the Gothic novel sometimes can be defined as a specialized form of the historical romance, a form of fantasy about past history and alien cultures which has a meaning for its present audience through a variety of cultural and political reflexes.

A number of writers perceive modern life of the late twentieth century as strange, extraordinary, distorted and unnatural which causes fear, disbelief and makes it close to fantasy. Thus it is not a surprise that contemporary authors have again started resorting so much to the Gothic mode as a particular vision of life, a manner of coping with the present realities. We live in an age of insecurity and unease about real and fancy threats, facing terrors of uncertainty, all of which can be found in the Gothic reflecting confusion. As well as that, the main Gothic function to shock, to express inscrutability remains because nowadays the world is transfused with mystery, terror and lots of inexplicable phenomena.

Accordingly, it can be noticed that the Gothic used by Margaret Atwood as if attempts to interpret traditional Gothic themes and images of horror in terms of anxieties of the contemporary psyche. The Gothic included in Margaret Atwoods’ work is concerned with the horrors and distortions of the present which very often can be interpreted as the historical past. Thus the history is seen from a different perspective – the way the past is depicted can be treated as an interpretation of the modern world.

These above mentioned aspects of the Gothic are usually transformed beyond recognition by postmodern writers including Margaret Atwood. She professionally manifests well known but modified Gothic elements in her novel.

Therefore, **The Handmaid’s Tale** can be read as a Gothic horror story. The mere title of the novel hints to the reader of a possible medieval romance which right from the start turns into a medieval horror story set as if in a modern day where Atwood’s heroine (the Handmaid) is trapped in the bizarre, absurd and irrational. The evil existing in the world is predominant in the novel as well as the problem of survival. Furthermore, the novel is as if based on two contrasting forces – light and darkness. The examples of the writer’s ability to write in postmodern manner using Gothic romance elements confirm that nothing in the literary field settles down for long. Each epoch brings something new which naturally manifests in literature.
Margaret Atwood uses a first-person narrator for *The Handmaid’s Tale*. So, the narrative comes to us through the voice of a Handmaid. Writing in the first person, the author takes on the role of a character and tells the story ‘from the inside’. This strengthens the illusion that the novel is ‘real’, by making us, the readers, feel involved and able to empathize with the character.

The narrator in *The Handmaid’s Tale* is Offred, a woman living in a future society in which people are restricted to very narrow, specific roles. Offred is a handmaid, a character in the function ascribed to her by the society in which she is forced to exist. Her job is to ‘breed’ to ensure the survival of her nation, while other women are responsible for domestic chores and some carry out the formal duties of a wife. Much of her narrative is a monologue, a form in which the writer aims to give a sense of how a character’s mind works by tracking her thoughts as they flow from one topic to another. We have to piece together our impressions of Offred from what she reveals by her thoughts and feelings, her actions, and her attitudes to other characters.

The heroine cannot be labelled as a classic character. First of all, the mere proper name has a significant function in the narrative. The character is dehumanized into the mask. Offred is not herself, she wears the mask of a Handmaid. Hereby a fictional world is created which looks totally bizarre, distorted and monstrous. The author creates the overall effect of defamiliarization.

Atwood projects the tale into the end of the twentieth century, when the Republic of Gilead was produced, the repressive totalitarian state in what was formerly New England. The writer uses real components which are turned to almost fantastic and terrifying elements. According to R. Rudaiytė (2000), at first nothing unusual or abnormal seems to be happening apart from some newspapers being closed down, the appearance of road-blocks and identipasses allegedly for security reasons: “*Newspapers were censored and some were closed down, for security reasons they said. The roadblocks began to appear, and Identipasses*” (Atwood, 1996, 183) (all the following quotations will be taken from this novel thus only one page of the book will be indicated). But gradually life becomes more and more terrifying due to the strange and absurd things going on which reverse the normal order of reality: the women in Gilead are deprived of money, and of the right to own property; finally they lose their jobs – i.e., they are deprived of their voices. There are no lawyers anymore, the university is closed: “*Doctors lived here once, lawyers, university professors. There are no lawyers anymore, and the university is closed*” (33p.).
The narrative as a whole swings back and forth between forced action and withdrawal, between furtive risk taking and fearful pulling back. As well as that, the writer surprises not only by a large variety of narrative strategies which are presenting bizarre and monstrous events but by the abundance of textual games. Atwood evokes the cultural experience inscribed in the Bible and draws as if an apocalyptic vision of our world’s near future when women are forced to reproduce children for elite childless couples and when religion becomes the main power discourse tool for consolidating authoritarian regime. Besides, the narrative tries to persuade that there’s life outside Gilead, that as if an unknown reader is the ‘mirror’ of it.

The disintegrative features of the postmodern human-being are mirrored in breaks of the narrative, unpredictable changeability of focalization, indefiniteness of point of view, deviations in grammar and diction. The character’s voice merges with that of the narrator, creating a metafictional narrative. Such a postmodern feature is used to see the imaginative and critical writing as unified. This makes an imaginative world closer to reality. The changing focalization full of interpretations and disconnected clauses makes the story difficult, and the reader has to re-read pieces of the metafictional narrative to make sense.

The compositional structure of this text can be considered as an amalgam of a self-reflective, disintegrated narrative fluctuating between illusion and irony. For example, the dream of an escape from the cruel repression of the state seems to be only an illusion for the protagonist though the reader can expect character’s salvation in the course of this novel. And till the very end it is not clear whether the character struggles herself free or not, which is so ironic.

As well as that, the writer adopts fragmentation. The new methods of fragmentary writing, very often resorting to the rejection of a logical compositional structure subvert not only the hierarchy and order of ideas but also reject any textual sequence of logical plot and the story. Mixing illusion and reality, experimentation with language propose new insights into the human essence and mark fresh approaches to the novel’s discourse.

Disconnected voices and the fickleness of the story lead to a dissipated narrative. The traditional search for meaning loses its sense. Besides, the narrator as if plays a trick and makes the reader ask what is real and what is fictive. The fairy-tail and realism confront each other.

The narrative strategies used in *The Handmaid’s Tale* are based on narrative time shifts which are so much characteristic of contemporary novels. Although the story is narrated retrospectively in the past tense, there are moments when the Handmaid slips into the present. From time to time the author tries to preserve the contact with the reader. As well as that, the
sequence of events is connected by associative memory. Besides, the associations in the
narrative are based on constant terrors the Handmaid is facing. This is the main point which
keeps the story coherent.

The society is depicted as negative and undesirable. It’s a vision of a future society in
which the conditions of life are characterized by human oppression, violence, and/or
pollution. It is a culture where the conditions of life suffer from deprivation, oppression, or
terror. Thus it can be called a dystopian society. The dystopia in Margaret Atwood’s novel
*The Handmaid’s Tale* unfolds through the loss of women’s personal freedoms. Women are
slotted into male-controlled categories: wives, servants (Marthas), breeders (handmaids), and
women who enforce the repression of their peers (Aunts). Those who won’t cooperate are
shipped off to the Colonies to perform hazardous labor (cleaning up after unclear accidents or
toxic spills).

The writer’s view of the future is overshadowed by stimulating fears of the ugly
consequences of present day behaviour:

> “The air got too full, once, of chemicals, rays, radiation, the water swarmed with
toxic molecules, all of that takes years to clean up, and meanwhile they creep into your
body, camp out in your fatty cells. Who knows, your very flesh may be polluted, dirty as an
oily beach, sure death to shore birds and unborn babies. Maybe a vulture would die of
eating you. Maybe you light up in the dark, like an old-fashioned watch. Deathwatch. That’s
a kind of beetle, it buries carrion.

I can’t think of myself, my body, sometimes, without seeing the skeleton: how I must
appear to an electron. A cradle of life, made of bones; and within, hazards, warped
proteins, bad crystals jagged as glass. Women took medicines, pills, men sprayed trees,
cows ate grass, all that souped-up piss flowed into the rivers. Not to mention the exploding
atomic power plants, along the San Andreas fault, nobody’s fault, during the earthquakes,
and the mutant strain of syphilis no mold could touch. Some did it themselves, had
themselves tied shut with catgut or scarred with chemicals. How could they, said Aunt
Lydia, oh how could they have done such a thing?” (122p.)

Thus the author as if asks the reader a question about where we are going and draws the
picture of a possible future. At the same time, the narrative investigates how the human being
makes an attempt to survive in the system like this.
The imaginary world of the novel, into which the reader is invited, is much more than simply ‘the place where the story happens’. The physical environment is important in itself and as a backdrop to the action. As well as that, it reflects the main character, her experience and in this way helps to render the ideas the writer wishes to convey. The setting of the novel also portrays a society with its own culture, politics, and values. The whole thrust of a novel, however, depends on the central character being in conflict with the state and the society.

The world of *The Handmaid’s Tale* is set in the future, in an imaginary state in America, The Republic of Gilead. Fearful about declining population and due to man-made environmental disaster, the dictatorship has assigned roles to all people, including particular roles to women. There are so called wives who are idealized and wear blue, while those women capable of the all-important child-bearing are assigned to them as handmaids or breeders, dressed in red. Colours are important in the novel. Blue colour referring to wives marks their authority, the control of situations and it may refer to the feeling of sadness as well. Red usually symbolizes blood, sex, and childbirth. Gilead is a state ruled by terror, in which it is highly dangerous to ask questions or to assert one’s individuality in any way: “Aunt Lydia said it was best not to speak unless they asked you a direct question” (24p.).

However, none of this is made clear to us at the start of the novel. Only gradually as we read Offred’s gloomy narrative we can piece together enough information to understand what is going on and be provided with some background.

All in all, in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the setting is very important. The writer presents aspects she dislikes about her own society in an exaggerated form. This as if enables her to draw attention to these and to protest in an indirect way. Margaret Atwood is concerned about the environment and about women being defined and limited by their traditional roles. The writer creates a world where people are reduced to particular functions. However, she has a hopeful note in that the ‘human spirit’ is not entirely crushed despite such a repressive regime. Through the very telling of her story we find out that Offred is far more than just a body suitable for bearing a child.
3.2 The Construction of Character

Characters are devices which are used by the author and manipulated in order to create a particular effect. Offred, the main character of the story, is not an exception as well.

Offred, as all the other handmaids in Gilead, is dressed in red: "the one assigned to me, which is red" (19p.). Red colour on the whole dominates in the novel: red shoes, red gloves, red bag, red brick sidewalk, red car, red carpet, red curtains, red brick… So not only women, but their surroundings are drawn in red. In human colour psychology, red is associated with energy, heat, and blood, and emotions such as anger, passion, and love. Besides, red is frequently used as a symbol of guilt, sin, lust and beauty. For example it is quite understandable and clear that the main character feels angry considering the system she is forced to live in. Another feeling possible to detect in the novel is that of guilt. Offred would like to experience warm feelings for some man and at the end she does but here ambivalent feelings intertwine: the character cannot fully indulge in her feelings because of prevailing constraints and because of guilt she feels before her husband Luke. She feels that she is betraying him though she is not sure whether she will see him at all. The love-and-marriage plot seems to have no plausibility for the heroine. As it can be seen - all these emotions associated with the red colour are so much typical of the novel. Such associations come from a general Hebrew view inherited by Christianity which associates red with the blood of murder, as well as with guilt in general. Thus red gives a whiff of Christianity to the novel and the Gothic as well. What is more, red in life in general is used in a negative way to indicate danger. As for Offred, during all the time she is in Gilead she is in a constant danger. There is a number of situations when she sets her life on chance.

The Handmaid does not know what had happened to her family. Hence, the obscurity about the past hinders from feeling free and continuing the further life smoothly. What is obscure always frightens and forces the person to feel insecure. So there can be noticed a constant balance between the past and the present: she remembers her husband (“Luke and I used to walk together, sometimes, along these streets” (33p.)), mother (“I admired my mother in some ways, although things between us were never easy” (132p.)), and her life in general before Gilead (“I once had a garden. I can remember the smell of the turned earth, the plump shapes of bulbs held in the hands, fullness, the dry rustle of seeds through the fingers” (22p.)), which is an absolute opposite to the present. The novel covers a wide spectrum of narrative variability in the representation of the Handmaid’s life in Gilead and before it. Hence, the narrator perpetually seeks to remember her previous life in order to sustain her spiritual autonomy to totalitarian power. In her past she led a normal life, she had her family,
a job, everything in order to be happy and enjoy life. And now the writer draws the character in dark colours. The character is in confinement and as a simple thing, an object she belongs to the Commander and his wife. As an object she must perform her function – to bear a child for them. And there is a very clear condition – if she doesn’t, she dies. In this instance, as I. Genienė (2007, 227) claims “the distinction between human and non-human becomes fragile”.

While reading the novel there comes a feeling that the character can hardly find her definite self. Through the entire novel she names herself in a variety of ways. It can be noticed that the further the novel unfolds, the stronger and more emotional self-awareness becomes. Atwood shows the character seeing herself as a property, a piece of furniture (“Possibly she'll put a hand on my shoulder, to steady herself, as if I'm a piece of furniture” (89p.)) or a part of household (“Household: that is what we are. The Commander is the head of the household.” (91p.)). Sometimes she names herself according to her purpose in Gilead (“She said, Think of yourselves as seeds...” (28p.)) or she sees herself just as a sheer nothingness: a shadow (“like the eye of a fish, and myself in it like a distorted shadow, a parody of something, some fairy-tale figure in a red cloak, descending towards a moment of carelessness that is the same as danger. A Sister, dipped in blood.” (19p.)), a cloud (“Now the flesh arranges itself differently I'm a cloud, congealed around a central object” (84p.)) or a blank (“I am a blank, here, between parentheses. Between other people. (...) I am only a shadow now, far back behind the glib shiny surface of this photograph. A shadow of a shadow” (240p.)). Offred starts to envisage herself even as a wimp (“Moira is right, I am a wimp” (307p.)), a wreck (“I take a look at myself. (...)I'm a wreck” (265p.)) or a travesty (267p.). Offred shows a feeling of inauthenticity: “I am a national resource.” (75p.), and her dependence on the other: "If anyone asks you, say you're an evening rental.” (245p.) All these are grim analyses of the self which prove that the Handmaid accepts the role of victim rather than struggle for self-respect and self-definition. Such self descriptions speak of a strong self-deprecation as well. In this way overwrought emotions are transferred which remain almost the same through all the novel. And overwrought emotions are a frequent feature in the Gothic mode.

All these descriptions of herself and the examples of how the people she belongs to treat her hint of her derogation, show her self-awareness. Those quotations assure that the character is highly influenced by the environment. Being under the influence of someone a person changes the attitude towards herself. There appear feelings of meaninglessness, vacuity, self-criticism and the like.
The character seems to be a living creature but at the same time she seems to be so mysterious and fictional. First of all, considering her name, we never find out her real name, never learn much about her appearance. Thus we cannot say we really know this character. The possibility of the reader’s identification with her is eliminated. Even the Handmaid’s ultimate fate remains obscure, the final lines of her narrative are so much controversial as all the rest of the novel: “And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light” (307p.).

So we do not know what really happens to her. In this way Atwood plays with the story telling where the reader is invited to fill in the gaps in the discourse, to supply his own interpretations.

Coming back to what was mentioned before, the proper name is precisely the selfhood. And in the story, young women given to the Commanders and their wives assume their owners’ names: Of-fred, Of-glen, Of-warren. This reminds pasting the labels on some objects in order to identify whom the object belongs to. Hence, the emptiness of character is translocated to a bizarre name. After all, a personal name identifies a specific and unique individual person. That is why Offred strives so much to preserve her own name at least in secret: “We learned to whisper almost without sound. (...) We learned to lip-read, our heads flat on the beds, turned sideways, watching each other’s mouth. In this way we exchanged names, from bed to bed…” (14p.).

The name becomes of a special importance as a means of asserting one’s self. The name is yourself, your personality: no wonder the system prohibited the use of real names:

“My name isn’t Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it’s forbidden. I tell myself it doesn’t matter, your name is like your telephone number, useful only to others; but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter. I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I’ll come back to dig up, one day. I think of this name as buried. This name has an aura around it, like an amulet, some charm that’s survived from an unimaginably distant past. I lie in my single bed at night, with my eyes closed, and the name floats there behind my eyes, not quite within reach, shining in the dark” (94p.).

The loss of the name signals the loss of identity, depersonalization. Without her real name the Handmaid is just an object. Understanding this, Offred entrusts her real name to Nick: “I tell him my real name, and feel that therefore I am known” (282p.). In this way she as if confirms her existence not as a thing, but as a real human being.

Besides the possibility to enjoy hearing and pronouncing her identifying name, which could be treated as a kind of restricted freedom, there are hints that the character as a real handmaid lacks freedom in general:
“Luke and I used to walk together, sometimes, along these streets. We used to talk about buying a house like one of these, an old big house, fixing it up. We would have a garden, swings for the Children. We would have children. Although we knew it wasn’t too likely we could ever afford it, it was something to talk about, a game for Sundays. Such freedom now seems almost weightless.” (33p.)

The irony of the novel is discernible when because of Gilead, Offred understands what freedom was, and how limited it is now when she must risk so much to regain even a little.

However, forced to live in the circumstances, the character as if abides by the rules, of the present situation: “Already we were losing the taste for freedom, already we were finding these walls secure” (143p.). Offred gets used to the situation she is in not because she sees no way out of it or she is too weak to struggle for her better future; she is just provided with a few compensations (Nick’s kisses and hugs) and the life becomes much more lucent: “The fact is that I no longer want to leave, escape, cross the border to freedom” (283p.). It stands to reason. The human being is not made of iron. It is a living organism, who wants understanding, warmth, embrace. And despite the fact, that the system of Gilead strives to suppress or even to eliminate this, it turns out to be powerless: “I hunger to touch something, other than cloth or wood. I hunger to commit the act of touch.” (21p.)

Offred is totally alone: neither her husband nor her mother or friend is with her, when she is out of sorts:

“I was disappointed. I wanted, (...) someone who would understand and protect me.”

(...) “The first time was on television, when I was eight or nine. It was when my mother was sleeping in, on Sunday mornings, and I would get up early and go to the television set in my mother’s study and flip through the channels, looking for cartoons” (26p.).

Because of her horrible present she again and again comes in her thoughts back to the past: “Every night when I go to bed I think, In the morning I will wake up in my own house and things will be back the way they were” (209p.). The Family life in the novel is always in the past.

Offred proves herself to be a complex character who is trapped by male-oriented social orders. Though the Handmaid loses the power as a human being, she is not portrayed as a powerless victim because she still sustains the power as a woman and at least this is left for her which she likes so much: “I enjoy the power...“ (32p.). She knows that men are weak as far as attraction to women and she takes pleasure in knowing this.
In the background there is the assumption that you cannot define yourself any longer in simple opposition to patriarchal attitudes. She is given the law of rules, actions, thinking, attitudes and there is no way to escape from that. Therefore any detail showing the character’s vantage entrances her.

We, as readers, are provided with some direct information about the main character. Direct description helps the reader to better conceive of the heroine: “My name is Offred now, and here is where I live. (…) I am thirty-three years old. I have brown hair. I stand five seven without shoes” (153p.). Though this basic information of the character reaches the reader relatively late. What is more, there can be felt constant instability of the human being: “All you have to do, I tell myself, is keep your mouth shut and look stupid. It shouldn’t be that hard”. (247p.) Every so often the Handmaid gives grim analyses of the self: “I feel stupid and ugly, although I know I am not either” (273p.). The character knows what kind of person she is, that is why she notices that the system has a great influence on her. It changes her thinking about herself: “I used to think well of myself. I didn’t then.” (82p.) She feels lost: “Out there or inside my head, it’s an equal darkness” (204p.) and unappreciable: “There’s hardly any point in my thinking, is there? I say. What I think doesn’t matter” (222p.). As well as that, because of the psychological influence of the Republic of Gilead even the most extraordinary thoughts come to her head: “I could burn the house down. Such a fine thought, it makes me shiver. An escape, quick and narrow” (220p.). Offred is surprised by it even herself.

Permanent control and restrains provoke the odium (“I don’t feel like being kind. (…) If I could spit, out the window, or throw something, the cushion for instance, I might be able to hit him.” (67p.) or jealousy (“But I envy the Commander’s Wife her knitting. It’s good to have small goals that can be easily attained.” (23p.)) Though it is natural that the Handmaid envies what she cannot have or experience herself, what has been deleted from her own life against her will.

The protagonist hates the situation she is in but there is nothing to be changed, therefore from time to time she laughs at herself with irony and tries to envisage at least something positive out of it:

“The fact is that I’m his mistress. (…) It’s my job to provide what is otherwise lacking. Even the Scrabble. It’s an absurd as well as an ignominious position. (…) But even so, and stupidly enough, I’m happier than I was before. It’s something to do, for one thing. Something to fill the time, at night, instead of sitting alone in my room. (…) To him I am not merely empty.” (172p.)
This example shows that though the Commander plays upon Offred’s helplessness the heroine is happy about that, what sounds rather ironic. She is content with the situation because, first of all, meetings with the Commander vary her boring and evenly passing time and, on the other hand, those meetings signify a kind of notice of her as a personality.

Experiencing constant depersonalization the Handmaid does not repine at the present condition and in this way proves herself to be a strong personality. Though Offred herself admits that she is not as strong psychologically as she would love to be:

“That is how I feel: white, flat, thin. I feel transparent. Surely they will be able to see through me. (...) I feel as if there's not much left of me; they will slip through my arms, as if I'm made of smoke, as if I'm a mirage, fading before their eyes” (95p.).

To feel transparent like smoke signifies person’s vacuity. Besides, Offred by the sally of ulterior wishes shows her weaknesses herself directly:

“I want Luke here so badly. I want to be held and told my name. I want to be valued, in ways that I am not; I want to be more than valuable. I repeat my former name, remind myself of what I once could do, how others saw me” (108p.).

The character wants everything back the way it was and she consciously understands that there is no point in such wanting. On the other hand, “to want is to have a weakness”. Thus Atwood establishes a characteristic pattern of self-division.

Though the state does not care how women look like: “There's no longer any hand lotion or face cream, not for us. Such things are considered vanities. We are containers, it's only the insides of our bodies that are important” (107p.), the Handmaid cannot pretend that she is not concerned about it: “What I want is a mirror, to see if my lipstick is all right, whether the feathers are too ridiculous, too frowzy” (245p.). After all, the human being’s appearance reflects her identity.

Neither the room (“The door of the room—not my room, I refuse to say my...” (18p.)) nor the clothes (“I think they're my clothes, but they don't look like mine...” (84p.)) which are as if hers, do not seem to really belong to her. It hints of the lack of control over her own space, appearance and the lack of control over her own life in general.

Her physical (“Usually we walked with heads bent down, our eyes on our hands or the ground” (142p.)) and psychological (“It would have been funny if it wasn't so awful, I said” (189p.)) states reveal her condition and opinion of herself. Accordingly, it can be stated that Offred’s emotions, self-images have no means of outlet and must be kept down in an apparently permanent state of terror.
One of the absolute truths when a person can come out of the closet is friendship. In real life, it denotes supportive behaviour between people. Friends exhibit loyalty towards each other, engage in mutually helping behaviour. Friendship is nothing more than trust. Hence, an assumption can be made that because of all those reasons friendship is forbidden in Gilead: “It's hard to imagine now, having a friend” (35p.). Such a feeling could make a person stronger and more self-confident which is absolutely awkward for the state. That is why the handmaids “aren't supposed to form friendships, loyalties, among one another”.

On the whole the system is similar to that in the army or it resembles a religious sect. Handmaid’s daily rituals remind of the rules of a strict medieval order:

“We aren’t allowed to go there except in twos. This is supposed to be for our protection, though the notion is absurd: we are well protected already. The truth is that she is my spy, as I am hers. If either of us slips through the net because of something that happens on one of our daily walks, the other will be accountable.” (29p.)

It transpires that women are being controlled not only from above but probably unconsciously they control each other. Thus friendship is incogitable.

At least the Handmaid has a friend from her past, which is Moira, who perfectly reflects the main character. Offred does not like her state therefore Moira is as if the epitome of the heroine’s personality. She is just a kind of person Offred would like to be, only because of repression she must repress her very self. That is why the Handmaid admires Moira so much:

“I don't want her to be like me. Give in, go along, save her skin. That is what it comes down to. I want gallantry from her, swashbuckling, heroism, single-handed combat. Something I lack” (261p.).

The reader can notice that for Offred it is even much more pleasant to talk about her friend who is like an ideal for her than about herself:

“I'm too tired to go on with this story. I'm too tired to think about where I am. Here is a different story, a better one. This is the story of what happened to Moira.” (138p.)

The Handmaid is moving away from her own reflection not because she wants to, but because she is forced to do so. On the other hand, both women are experiencing the same conditions of repression, but both are so much different. Offred is obedient, flexible and Moira, on the contrary, is rebellious and maintaining her individuality. That is why only being together both friends experience a sense of completeness, unity and stability. In fact, it is Moira’s behaviour that challenges Offred to escape from Gilead. Hereby, the evolution of self
is dependent on others. For Offred, Moira is as an example of ideal attitude, behaviour and thinking:

“But I like the sensation, the soft cloth brushing my skin. It's like being in a cloud. I have no screwdriver, but if I were Moira I could do it without a screwdriver. I'm not Moira. What would she tell me, about the Commander, if she were here? Probably she'd disapprove. She disapproved of Luke, back then. Not of Luke but of the fact that he was married. She said I was poaching, on another woman's ground. I said Luke wasn't a fish or a piece of dirt either, he was a human being and could make his own decisions. She said I was rationalizing. I said I was in love. She said that was no excuse. Moira was always more logical than I am” (180p.).

Moira stands for the Offred’s self: “She's like my own reflection, in a mirror from which I am moving away” (54p.). And in the story we find out that Offred is not a character of the classical novel, who is usually portrayed as the self-autonomous one.

Information is one more factor which empowers, provides with self-confidence and security, that is why the state controls the quality and the quantity of it. But Offred is still “ravenous for news, any kind of news” (29p.). Reading, as the means of informing and self-discovery, is prohibited as well, except the Bible: “FAITH. It's the only thing they've given me to read.” (67p.) This could be a trace of the Middle Ages when the main factor was Christianity. The Christian Church by that time was very powerful. There was little cultural or social development as well. What’s more it was the epoch when towns were growing. And on the whole it was a period of the biggest human suppression. Just in the same way as it is shown in the novel, sexuality was reprobated and its practice was strictly regulated. Thus the state of Gilead seems to be a Christian theocracy.

The novel depicts a thoroughly inhibited personality. First of all, a person is highly restricted by an outrageous governmental system which disaffirmed all the possible individual’s freedom and rights. The person is kept in bonds physically and psychologically as well. Considering physical subjection, women are not allowed to go wherever they want, to do whatever they would like to…To top it all, the state uses psychological terror. A person is under permanent fear to do something wrong in regard to existing rules and the system.

Human reproduction is vital in Gilead, however, women’s worth in this state as an individual amounts to nothing. Women are completely devoid of any power and they are treated as mere sexual objects or even a kind of breeding machines. Their identity is constructed entirely in terms of their sexuality. Thus Atwood’s heroine is an object of sexual
exploitation. She is reduced to breeding functions. Here the book can imply the danger of surrogacy. This phenomenon created by the cruel policy of the state leads to the preconditions for a barbarism and harm. Thus the sexual intercourse could be understood as the epitome of male cruelty and female vulnerability.

Thus what has real value in the state of Gilead is woman’s sexuality which is regulated. This can be interpreted as interference to the human being’s inner world. So a human-being is controlled not only from outside but from inside as well. The government tries to subdue the person thoroughly. Influenced by all these aspects the human being has no other choice as to do what she is asked to do, to behave in a way, as she is expected to. In this way the human being loses touch with herself. She just loses herself. And the state just strives for that. The political details employed in the novel are the effective elements generating the destruction of individuality. All social groups are under the government control. The state as if attempts to erase even the basic human nature. When there is such a system in the state no wonder there prevail general fear, terror, distrust...which is typical of the Gothic.

There are evident self-contradictions the character experiences. It shows a split personality. Being all the time under control a person as if loses the ability to clearly think and on the whole is not sure what to think:

- Still, it must be hell, to be a man, like that.
- It must be just fine.
- It must be hell.
- It must be very silent (99p.).

In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, society seems to be a destructive evil, which intrudes into a person’s soul and step by step destroys it leaving inner vacuity. The person is decimated as a personality with the identity reduced to “a blank”. In other words, the state annihilates one’s soul, turning the personality into a spiritual desert.

The narrative ranges between repression and desire (“It’s forbidden for us to be alone with the Commanders (...) But to refuse to see him could be worse” (146p.). Offred wants to be loved and to love thus she arranges secret meetings with Nick though it is forbidden. Or, for instance, it is desire and the need for intimacy and for friendship that makes the Commander to break the rules of the state. Secondly, the narrative involves the topics of sterility and fertility. The novel contains a large number of sexual images as a contrast to the prevailing sterility. Besides, the narrative ranges between death and life. Offred takes risk and ventures her life in order to survive which seems to be so ironic.
The paradox of the Handmaid lies in her portraying as a wife. Though at the beginning this character is presented as a homesick person, desperately willing to see her husband Luke but in the course of time she discovers passion for another man about which she feels uneasy herself. Offred as a woman is defined in terms of her sexuality thus the ability to experience sexual pleasure in the novel becomes a means of self-expression.

Everything that is related to human freedom is forbidden thus songs are not an exception: “Such songs are not sung anymore in public, especially the ones that use words like free. They are considered too dangerous” (64p.).

Being nothing she has to do nothing which is so strange and so unacceptable for the heroine:

“There's time to spare. This is one of the things I wasn't prepared for—the amount of unfilled time, the long parentheses of nothing” (79p.). “The strange thing is we needed the rest. Many of us went to sleep. We were tired there, a lot of the time. We were on some kind of pill or drug I think, they put it in the food, to keep us calm. But maybe not.” (80p.)

Such a fact is out of character with the heroine’s naming “handmaid”. After all, reading about the main character who is a handmaid, every reader would consciously expect her to have lots of chores. But here the situation is rather different. Offred has plenty of time for doing nothing which sounds so ironic.

Willing to obtain the intended result the state shows its power not only by restricting women physically but emotionally as well. Physical constraints including person’s motion, wash, intercourse and emotional ones pertaining to communication, feelings, as well as similar examples through the novel help to come to the realization that the destruction of the Handmaid’s personality is the essence of the novel.

The most striking feature of the life in Gilead is its prevailing atmosphere of total vacuity, absence and wasteland:

"There is the same absence of people, the same air of being asleep. The street is almost like a museum, or a street in a model town constructed to show the way people used to live. As in those pictures, those museums, those model towns, there are no children” (33p.).

There prevails a typical gothic atmosphere, that of impending dangers, domination, control.
Particular emotions are evoked through the inclusion of nouns possessing negative meaning which dominate in the novel from the very beginning till the end: fear, boredom, tears, loneliness, blood, crying, night, hooks, death, funeral, ambulance, wreath, secret, ghost, danger, spy, scream, crash, sadness, awkwardness, shame, dismay, falsity, hunger, graves, dampness, lightning, darkness, thunder, weakness, dust, embarrassment, uncertainty, black market, shadow... Such and the like words are used when the narrator describes her feelings, inner/physical state or just depicts the situation. There is also a great number of adjectives which contribute a lot to the creation of generally prevailing mood in the novel: armless, ugly, unknown, dusky, trembling, drugged, sad, embarrassed, forbidden, dangerous, humid, sharp and brutal, frightened, terrified, fake, outrageous, hanged, miserable, puzzled, hazy, dark... or such phrases as large empty looking houses, pain like a stab, black veil, grey shadows, half dead worms, humid air, lonely place, dead branches. And this is only a small part of what can be found in the novel. Normally they express the Handmaid’s state, describe other characters, surroundings or the weather. Verbs perform their role as well. For example such verbs as to betray, to freeze, to kill, to whisper evoke not the most pleasant associations.

Everything has impact on the creation of overall atmosphere which as it is evident from given examples is so close to the Gothic. Her own direct depicting of physical and psychological states contributes a lot to the representation of the mood and the emotions evoked for the readers as well as the creation of a general view of the novel: “I was nervous”, “I am too nervous” (61p.), “It makes me feel slightly ill” (90p.), “I shift, it’s too warm in here, the smell of stale perfume makes me feel a little sick” (91p.), “I feel panic” (100p.), “But it’s panic. The fact is I’m terrified”, “I think I will cry” (147p.), “I shake, I heave, seismic, volcanic, I’ll burst” (156p.), “I feel so alone.” (205p.), “I feel buried.” (222p.).

Dreadful scenes with hanging corpses serve as a warning of what the future holds in store if any of the rules will be set at naught:

“We're supposed to look: this is what they are there for, hanging on the Wall.” (...) they are meant to scare (...) “Each has a placard hung around his neck to show why he has been executed...” (42p.).

For Atwood’s heroine, language is an important source of vitality. It becomes a means of self-defining. By telling her story Offred establishes her identity. She consciously creates her stories at the same time creating herself:

“I wish this story were different. I wish it were more civilized. I wish it showed me in a better light, if not happier, then at least more active, less hesitant, less distracted by
trivia. (...) I'm sorry there is so much pain in this story. I'm sorry it's in fragments, like a body caught in crossfire or pulled apart by force. But there is nothing I can do to change it. (...) Nevertheless it hurts me to tell it over, over again. But I keep on going with this sad and hungry and sordid, this limping and mutilated story, because after all I want you to hear it, (...) Because I'm telling you this story I will your existence” (279p.).

A key phrase "context is all" (pg.154, 202) is repeated throughout the novel. Hereby the author as if takes pains to emphasize the effect of the changing context on the behaviour and attitudes of the individuals in the story. Or it may be a hint for the reader where his/her attention should be directed to.

By using her voice Offred threatens the system and transcends the limitations of patriarchy. She plays language games: “I pray silently: Notile te bastardes carborundorum. I don’t know what it means, but it sounds right...” (101p.). Such mysterious transformations of speech doubtless let the Handmaid get a feeling of something personal, something of her own: “Soft and dry, like papier poudre, pink and powdery...” (101p.). Thus language games become more and more creative: “It sounds like some kinds of dessert. Date Rapé.” (47p.) But not only Offred, other characters in the novel from time to time are making up words as well: “It’s French, he said. From M’aidez.” (54p.) By manipulating words in the novel the author renders them incomprehensible to the reader: “Humungaus, word of my childhood” (37p.). Involving various transformations of speech the author makes the novel more mysterious. Besides, Atwood’s playing with the language could be interpreted as a wish to show the power of a discourse: “The old gravestones are still there, weathered, eroding, with their skulls and crossed bones, momento mori, their dough-faced angels...” (41p.).

Nonetheless, Offred’s language is usually simple and she does not use specific imagery. Many of her sentences are elliptical: “A chair, a table, a lamp.” (17p.), “So. Apart from these details...” (18p.). They suggest that we already know what she is talking about when in fact we know almost nothing about the regime in which she lives. However, there is a constant alternation of the length of the sentences. There can be found such short sentences which consist only of one word or such long ones which take the entire paragraph. On the whole, she likes to play with words and double meanings in a wry, humorous way: “The circumstances have been reduced; for those of us who still have circumstances” (14p.).

It can be noticed that quite emotional language prevails in the novel. It shows valorous use of rather expressive vocabulary: fucking pigs, fuck that shit, garbage, stupid shit, bullshit... As well as that, there are series of repetitions: “Her fault, her fault, her fault, we chant in unison.” “She did. She did. She did.” (82p.) In order to make the language more
expressive the author includes even a slogan: “according to her ability; to each according to his needs” (127p.).

With the intention of making the narrative more effective for the reader, the writer from time to time changes the type of letters. Every so often certain words are given in italics or several sentences are highlighted in capital letters: “EVERY BABY A WANTED BABY. RECAPTURE OUR BODIES.” (129p.)

Intertextuality in this novel is as if the main code of the story. It can be noticed that the author directly invokes biblical references and in this way creates dense space of intertextual relations. The main intertext of the novel which structurizes the semantics of the narrative is the Bible.

Direct allusion to the Old Testament is given in the epigraph of the novel: “And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, Give me children, or else I die...” Such a link to the Old Testament represents the main context and shows the relations of the characters. Offred’s story could be interpreted as a parallel to the biblical Jakob and Rachel family’s story depicted in the epigraph. Rachel cannot give a child that is why she asks Jacob to make love with her handmaid. So Offred in this case can be treated as the metaphor of the biblical character, who has to procreate a child for the infertile wife of the Commander. On the other hand, the direct allusion to the Bible not only develops the personal story line of the narrator but shows ideological system in Gilead which is close to the biblical system. Moreover, repressive structures are based on religious discourse as well (the Bible is the only book allowed to read: “FAITH. It's the only thing they've given me to read.” (67p.)).

Besides, the religious role shows up when Offred talks to another family’s handmaid Offglen: “Blessed be the fruit (...) May the Lord open” (29p.). It is evident that there is interconnection among the Bible and the text of the novel. The language contains common points of reference with the Bible.

Beside biblical allusions the reader is provided with the Handmaid’s monologue as well:

“The difference between lie and lay. Lay is always passive. Even men used to say, I'd like to get laid. Though sometimes they said, I'd like to lay her. All this is pure speculation. I don't really know what men used to say. I had only their words for it” (47p.).

“A story is like a letter. Dear You, I'll say. Just you, without a name. Attaching a name attaches you to the world of fact, which is riskier, more hazardous: who knows what
the chances are out there, of survival, yours? I will say you, you, like an old love song. You can mean more than one. You can mean thousands.” (49p.)

Hereby the author tries to keep a closer contact with the reader, to make the story more real and believable.

Love is usually associated with emotions, different feelings, states and attitudes. That is why it externalizes the person’s identity perfectly. In Gilead, however, there is a rather different understanding about this important feeling or its existence is just simply denied. It is even forbidden: “Love, said Aunt Lydia with distaste. Don't let me catch you at it” (232p.). This kind of author’s narrative method makes for the disappearance of an identity.

The Handmaid wants to love and to be loved. She wants to feel the fulfillment of life. She cannot be impassible notwithstanding all restrictions in Gilead: “This is what I feel like: this sound of glass. I feel like the word shatter. I want to be with someone.” (113p.) In the novel, however, the biological function is stressed when physical intimacy is conveyed only as an act where love does not exist:

“It has nothing to do with passion or love or romance or any of those other notions we used to titillate ourselves with. (…) Arousal and orgasm are no longer thought necessary; they would be a symptom of frivolity merely” (105p.).

Sexual intercourse is seen as a serious business or even as a kind of duty. The Commander has his duty and Offred expects the salvation thereof. But despite all this, love turns out to be rather strong; Offred seems to derive all her strength from desire and love which finally empowers her to flee from her confinement: “His mouth is on me, his hands, I can't wait and he's moving, already, love, it's been so long, I'm alive in my skin, again, arms around him, falling and water softly everywhere, never-ending” (273p.). Though at the very beginning Offred as if believes herself and tries to convince the reader that love is impossible in Gilead: “It's lack of love we die from. There's nobody here I can love, all the people I could love are dead or elsewhere” (113p.). But even under the worst circumstances the Handmaid finds what she starves for. This once again proves Offred to be a strong personality who is struggling for her identity.

Not only love is forbidden. The state restrains any emotions in general: “We've been warned not to look too happy” (96p.). And as the song is usually an expression of happiness in Gilead it is forbidden as well (as it was mentioned before in this paper). The state of Gilead
is inclined to believe that if a person looks happy that means that the system is not effective enough.

In Atwood’s novel the control over the body is relocated from the individual to the statutory domain of politics: “we weren’t allowed out, except for our walks, twice daily, two by two around the football field, (...) The Angels stood outside it with their backs to us. They were objects of fear to us, (...) we thought ... we still had our bodies. That was our fantasy.” (14p.). There are lots of direct hints which prove that Atwood removes the possibility of bodily control entirely from the heroine: “This state of absence, of existing apart from the body,...” (169p.). In The Handmaid’s Tale, power over the body is displaced from the realm of the personal. That power is distributed across mysterious social mechanisms which render women passive. Their bodies are used for authoritarian needs only.

The problem of control is exposed as a struggle of the individual for self-determination and power in the face of hostile social forces: “My nakedness is strange to me already. My body seems outdated. (...) Shameful, immodest. I avoid looking down at my body, not so much because it’s shameful or immodest but because I don’t want to see it. I don’t want to look at something that determines me so completely.” (72p.)

Offred tries to escape her social inscription as mere flesh; constrained by her body, the protagonist also seeks emancipation through it. Suicide could be one of the ways to seize control of the body. Consequently and in order to overcome the temptation to escape "there is no glass" and "the window opens only partly" (18p.). Handmaids are kept as if in a prison. Thus the novel seeks to reject death by moving its heroine towards survival. Offred knows that to have a baby means “salvation” and to be childless is to be useless. Thus, for handmaids there is never any free choice.

In the passage in which Offred turns down the doctor's offer of insemination, she tells that it is "too risky," that "it's the choice that terrifies me. A way out, a salvation" (71p.). The choice being offered, Offred articulates it and then locates its irony: "Give me children, or else I die” (71p.). What is more, Offred recognizes that the offer is not a "way out," but the way into truly abject complicity. More than just the risk terrifies Offred. Her perception of the truly profound irony of her situation is terrifying: the "choice" is no choice; the "way out" is in fact a "way in".

To lose control of one’s body means losing control over identity. The Handmaid can take a step only where she is allowed to and even the time is limited. Every movement is
under surveillance. Such being the case, a person has no autonomy and there can be no talking about the very self.

The treatment of the Handmaid in the novel reinforces the concept of person as property. The emphasis on the biological function of women is carried to the extreme, taken to absurdity: an example can be the scene of impregnation. This violent subjection of the body to alienated modes of control carries Atwood’s analysis out of sexuality and power.

As in the Middle Ages it was believed that the body is a prison for the soul it follows that if human-being’s body is restricted, if it is treated as an object which belongs to somebody, the human-being’s soul as a part of the object belongs to the same person as well.

The Handmaid, however, is a living creature. Though the political system treats her only as a suitable body for producing human species, Offred is not only that. She as every sane person desiderates for love and warmth. Her body longs for another body in the proximity: “Can I be blamed for wanting a real body, to put my arms around? Without it I too am disembodied.” (113p.) It seems though that such a possibility is endowed to her. She makes love to Commander but that is only an enforcement. That is not by her own volition. That is why it cannot be called lovemaking.

The Handmaid not because of her own free will offers her body for the Commander and his wife and they use it according to their needs. There is only physical sexual contact between the Commander and the Handmaid, there cannot be any communication between them. Sexual encounter is just for the process and for the result itself. Thus, no communication or closer interaction is needed. Because of the desire to have a child Serena Joy not only tolerates adultery but she even herself arranges everything. This startling fact proves the degradation of the society’s moral values.

It can be noticed, that heroine’s acquired social status that of a handmaid, stands up and rather patently. She is being ignored. What is allowed and possible for the people from a higher status, the Handmaid can only dream about it: “A sitting room in which I never sit, but stand or kneel only” (18p.). From the body position’s respect Offred is shown as having a lower status as well:

“The sitting room would once have been called a drawing room, perhaps; then a living room. Or maybe it’s a parlor, the kind with a spider and flies. But now it’s officially a sitting room, because that’s what is done in it, by some. For others there’s standing room only. The posture of the body is important, here and now: minor discomforts are instructive” (89p.).
It is so contiguous with the Middle Ages.

Offred understands herself that she lost her body, that she has no rights to control it and be the owner of it anymore: “...as if I'm no longer in my body...” (85p.). In this way is manifested the violation of individual autonomy. The protagonist understands the purpose of her body as it is seen by the state but at the same time she is confident that it is still part of her:

“I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will. I could use it to run push buttons of one sort or another, make things happen. There were limits, but my body was nevertheless lithe, single, solid, one with me” (83p.).

3.3 The Female “Identity” and Access to Power

The author’s narrative method works toward the subversion of a unified character. That dissolution of the Handmaid’s personality becomes the essence of the Atwood’s novel since the complicated poisonous political network in the story is used as an effective device for the subversion of individuality and for generating depersonalization.

The Handmaid is aware of the loss of her identity, which is reduced to a sheer nothingness and she comes to experience herself as an object: “I’m a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping” (84p.). As a result, in the face of depersonalization, Offred tries to construct her identity by creating her private world of reminiscences, nightdreaming and passion as a challenge to the repression and death. As the reality becomes distorted and paranoid, in order to survive the heroine creates her private world as an escape from the evil world which surrounds her.

The Handmaid notices and describes her surroundings in detail, and specific details about her life are given in an interior monologue as well.

The Handmaid is as if imprisoned in the Commander’s house and has no right to leave its boundaries without permission. She is under permanent control and supervision by the Commander’s wife Serena and servants Marthas. The Handmaid lives in a room without a mirror which means she cannot look at her own reflection in it, cannot assert herself. Thus, the complexities of female subjectivity are the focus of the novel.

The idea of one stable mask signifies the end of man’s spiritual and intellectual growth, it denies a sense of responsibility for oneself and other, ignores other people’s choices and
their feelings. A personality becomes nothing more than a repertoire of roles, wearing changeable masks. It surrenders to impersonal anonymity, the loss of authenticity, and even diffusion of character. Offred is forced to hide or even forget her real face and to pretend being somebody else.

The novel as if questions the idea of “wholeness” as it applies to women. Female wholeness is problematized partly through the proliferating dualities of the heroine’s presentation in the novel. At once involved in and evacuated from her own experience Offred is also uneasily split between fascination with and revulsion from her body.

At hard moments the Handmaid spurts and admits the power of the devouring system:

"Dear God, I think, I will do anything you like. Now that you've let me off, I'll obliterate myself, if that's what you really want; I'll empty myself, truly, become a chalice. I'll give up Nick, I'll forget about the others, I'll stop complaining. I'll accept my lot. I'll sacrifice. I'll repent. I'll abdicate. I'll renounce.

I know this can't be right but I think it anyway. Everything they taught at the Red Center, everything I've resisted, comes flooding in. I don't want pain. I don't want to be a dancer, my feet in the air, my head a faceless oblong of white cloth. I don't want to be a doll hung up on the Wall, I don't want to be a wingless angel. I want to keep on living, in any form. I resign my body freely, to the uses of others. They can do what they like with me. I am abject.

I feel, for the first time, their true power." (298p.)

This passage which looks like a pray is the Handmaid’s call for help. Offred appeals to God by pouring her fears and thoughts because there is nobody else she could share them with. She accepts the power over her which means that the state obtained what it had aspired to.

But though the living conditions are not the best ones the character is able to envisage her own power as well. The Commander needs her for communion (“It's difficult for me to believe I have power over him, of any sort, but I do;...”(221p.)) and the wife needs the Handmaid for a child which she herself cannot have (“Also: I now had power over her, of a kind, although she didn't know it. And I enjoyed that. Why pretend? I enjoyed it a lot.” (171p.)) Access to power creates self-confidence, gives wings for future plans and actions.

The state is dominated by men, that is why women are degraded. They are treated as nugatory subjects:

“I almost gasp: he's said a forbidden word. Sterile. There is no such thing as a sterile man anymore, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that's the law.” (71p.)
A means to terrify and submit women are brutal porno films:

“Sometimes the movie she showed would be an old porno film, from the seventies or eighties. Women kneeling, sucking penises or guns, women tied up or chained or with dog collars around their necks, women hanging from trees, or upside-down, naked, with their legs held apart, women being raped, beaten up, killed. Once we had to watch a woman being slowly cut into pieces, her fingers and breasts snipped off with garden shears, her stomach slit open and her intestines pulled out” (128p.).

The narrator may confound the reader by such descriptions but it is just the way she expresses herself. Here is one more evidence that the state is accustomed to practise its most savage restrictions, and it is the oppression which continues to provide the starkest images of its power. Thus it is not only woman’s appearance that is the subject to male control but also their bodies and psyches.

Talking is powerful, that is why women in Gilead are deprived of the right to listen to any accessory talking. Talking is an interchange of thoughts, opinions or information thus it is dangerous for the system:

“They don't play the soundtrack, on movies like these, though they do on the porno films. They want us to hear the screams and grunts and shrieks of what is supposed to be either extreme pain or extreme pleasure or both at once, but they don't want us to hear what the Unwomen are saying” (129p.).

Offred admits the cruelty of the regime: “She could mean that this is a reminder to us of the unjustness and brutality of the regime. In that case I ought to say yes.” (296p.)

Even though the protagonist’s fate is not made clear by the ambiguous ending it seems likely that she was rescued and may have been able to leave the country. Besides that, what really affirms of postmodern technique is the very ending of the novel when Offred's narrative is discussed at an academic conference in the future. And even the final lines of her narrative remain so much controversial and obscure as all the rest of the novel:

“Whether this is my end or a new beginning I have no way of knowing: I have given myself over into the hands of strangers, because it can't be helped.
And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light.” (307p.)
To sum up, the analysis of how the postmodern novel transforms the Gothic mode has demonstrated, that the author uses this technique for structuring the discourse, for character building and development. It has become obvious that Margaret Atwood uses Gothic elements all along in the novel which, are refashioned by postmodernism.
CONCLUSIONS

The research of the postmodern refashioning of the Gothic in Margaret Atwood’s novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* has demonstrated that:

* The most characteristic features of postmodernism are complemented by the transformations of the Gothic.
* Though it emerges that in Atwood’s novel we do not really find the traditional supernatural Gothic terrors but instead the reader is provided with real horrific dangers that the Handmaid is facing.
* The underpinning of the novel is a woman’s, who is rendered to be a reproducer, fate in a futuristic Gilead country where suspicion is suppressed by strict Christian doctrine. Women are subjugated under constraint; therefore, the problem of the human identity prevails.
* The pivot of Atwood’s novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* is the violation of individual autonomy which is suggested from the start by the biblical epigraph.
* Margaret Atwood creates her woman character a true victim of the male world.
* Under the state’s influence Offred undergoes a division of her self. Her self is divided into the narrating self and experiencing self. Thus the narrator and the character are one and the same person.
* Atwood’s text could be treated as an open field of notional games where the reader is invited to combine various interpretational attitudes based on constant dialogue between the reader and the text.
* There are obvious distinguishing features in Margaret Atwood’s novel which prove the book to be a postmodernist novel: interflow of fantasy and reality, ambiguous ending, and fragmentary narrative. Because of these points the book seems to ignore all the codes of the conventional.
* The novel ends with Offred’s resolution to act, rather than a description of her death. Thus the end of the novel presupposes postmodernist non-fixity, inviting multiple interpretations. Most importantly it symbolizes Offred’s gaining of freedom. It is the escape from slavery.
* *The Handmaid’s Tale* is pervaded by irony at every level.
* As it can be seen in the novel fantasy is not an escape from reality. It is based on real historical phenomena and processes, only their forms are distorted.
SANTRAUKA

Magistrinio darbo Postmodernistinis gotikinio moduso perrašymas Margaretos Atwood romane „Tarnaitės pasakojimas“ tikslas yra atskleisti gotikinius elementus postmodernistiniame romane. Be to, moksliiniu tiriamuoju darbu siekiama perteikti rašytojos požiūri į pagrindinę veikėją, jos vaizdavimą kaip asmenybę ir kitus romane keliamus esminius klausimus.

Darbo tikslas pasiektas įgyvendinant užsibrėžtus uždavinius:

- pateikti postmodernizmo ir gotikos apibrėžimus bei būdingiausius bruožus;
- išanalizuoti gotikinio moduso perrašymą postmodernistiniame romane.

Šis darbas parašytas remiantis literatūros kritika ir teorija, apžvelgiant postmodernistinei ir gotikinei literatūrai būdingus bruožus. Darbas susideda iš trijų dalių bei jų poskyrių. Pirmoje dalyje nagrinėjami postmodernizmo literatūrinio diskurso ypatumai ir kritikos požiūriai į šią literatūrą. Postmodernistai neigia tradicinį požiūrį į naratyvo struktūrą, todėl akcentuoja perrašymo problemą, realybės ir fantazijos sintezę, pasakojimo perspektyvos kaitą bei „atvirą“ romano pabaigą, o tai ir randama analizuojamame romane.

Antroje darbo dalyje pateikiami teoretinių išskiriami gotikinio moduso ypatumai, tarp kurių minimas antgamtinumą, fantastika ir emocingumą perteikiantys elementai.

Trečioji dalis gilinasi į Margaretos Atwood romaną „Tarnaitės pasakojimas“, kuriamo ir ieškoma pirmose dviejose dalyse pateikti gotikai bei postmodernizmų būdingų, užslėptų ar akivaizdžių detalių. Šioje dalyje paaškėja, kad analizuojamas postmodernistinis romanas turi nemažai transformuotų ir nepastebimai į visą pasakojimą įsiliejančių gotikinei literatūrai būdingų savybių, tokių kaip emocinga charakterių kalba, psichologinė pagrindinės veikėjos kovą prieš Gilead valstybės sistemą, liūdna vyraujanti atmosfera, baimė, paslaptiškumus ir kt. Visa tai atskleidžiama detaliau patyrinėjus romano pagrindinę veikėją Offrėn, romane gvinčianamas temas bei patį romano parašymo būdą ir turinį.

Magistrinio darbo pabaigoje prieinama prie išvadų, kad Margareta Atwood savo romanu „Tarnaitės pasakojimas“ atveria naujas romano, kaip literatūrinio žanro, interpretacijas. Ir nors romane nerandame tradiciniais laikomų gotikai būdingų antgamtinumo motyvų, skaitytojas visgi gali aptikti šiurpių ir pavojingų scenų, kuriose vaizduojama pagrindinė veikėja tarnaitė Offrėn.
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