

## The Sublime Terror in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

“玛格丽特·阿特伍德的《使女的故事》中的极端恐怖主义。”

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تاريخ استلام البحث: ٢٠٢٣/٥/١٤

تاريخ قبول البحث: ٢٠٢٣/٥/٣٠

### Abstract

The present study identifies and analyzes the sublime terror in Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). The concept of the sublime according to Emmanuel Kant and Theodore Adorno will be drawn on in the investigation of life under the totalitarian regime of the Gilead republic. In defining the sublime, the study highlights the difference between the views of the two German philosophers as well as the historical background that inspires this difference. The study sets to investigate the impact of the sublime terror on the heroine's sentiments towards the wall—the site of persecuting convicted Gileadeans – seeking to prove whether these sentiments are static or dynamic. The study handles the issue of reconstruction of episodes told by the heroine to decide the reason/s for such hesitancy. Accordingly, the point of view is investigated to decide its suitability for transmitting her sublime experience. Furthermore, nostalgia is detected in the novel to decide the nature of its effect on the heroine at certain critical moments. Finally, the study offers a reading of the novel's Historical Notes informed by Kant's view on the dynamic sublime. The conclusion detects the novel's implied evaluation of the power of Western democracy and the hidden threats which might erupt putting this democracy to the test.

**Keywords:** the sublime terror, Kant, Adorno, nostalgia, the wall, Offred

المستخلص:

يهدف البحث الى تطبيق مفهوم الهلع السامي عند ايمانويل كانت وثيرودور ادو رنو على رواية حكاية الجارية للكاتبة الكندية المعاصرة مارجريت أتوود. في مقدمة البحث يتم التعريف لمفهوم السامي الجليل واختلاف

الآراء الفلسفية حوله، كما يتناول البحث أثر العوامل الثقافية التي أدت الى هذا الاختلاف. يتبع ذلك تحليلاً لأثر الممارسات الشمولية على بطللة الرواية التي تمثل جموع مواطني جمهورية جلعاد. تركز الدراسة على خاصيتين من خصائص الهلع السامي ألو هما الحنين للماضي والتشوش الذهني الذي تعاني منه بطللة الرواية. وفي هذا الإطار يتم تحليل موقف البطللة تجاه الحائط وهو المكان الذي تنفذ فيه أحكام الإعدام في مناهضي نظام الحكم. أخيراً تقوم الدراسة بقراءة تحليلية لخاتمة الرواية على ضوء مفهوم الهلع السامي عند إيمانويل كانت وأثر البعد الزمني على موقف بعض الشخصيات من معاناة البطللة، ويختتم البحث بمحاولة للحكم على مدى صلابة الحياة الديمقراطية في الغرب.

#### الكلمات الأساسية:

الهلع السامي -- كانت -- ادو رنو -- الحنين للماضي -- الحائط -- اوفرد

### Introduction

*The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) is written by the prominent Canadian writer Margaret Atwood (1939 ---). The novel is set in a dystopian future in America, now given the biblical name of Gilead, it represents life under its totalitarian theocratic regime. Owing to high pollution, the country suffers a seriously low reproduction, so, the new regime decides to recruit fertile women as surrogate mothers for the childless families of the elite ruling class. The heroine, Offred, tells her story as one of the handmaids who lives in the house of a commander solely to conceive a baby. The novel portrays her exerted efforts to both cope with her new life and avoid punishment by the authorities.

In exploring the impact of the sublime terror on the Gileadean protagonist, the study is guided by the critique of ideology. Drawing on Patrick Colm Hogan's views of the critique, answers to the following questions are attempted. How far do the empowered go in the imposition of their ideology on the disempowered? How does the disempowered counteract such an imposition? What is the impact of the regime's deterrent methods on personal narratives? Following Raymond Geuss whose views on ideology debate the falsity of ideological consciousness, Hogan (2000) distinguishes the three senses of ideology: epistemic, functional, and genetic. Yet, Hogan prefers to replace the expression 'sense' with 'component,' and he also replaces Geuss's genetic sense with a telic component. The epistemic and telic components indicate the false ideological beliefs that "function in sustaining oppressive hierarchies" (p.160). They also refer to the empowered targeting the aspirations of the disempowered and directing them into channels that "discourage aspirations outside that system" (p. 161). If the disempowered aspire for higher ranks, their aspirations are not denied by the empowered, they are only adjusted to the demands and

hierarchies of the system. The functional component refers to how ideologies function to “preserve the system of relations of domination” (162), here Hogan corrects the misconception about ideology as celebrating the "dominant class." He sees the possibility of the dominant class aggrandizing the dominated group to control the latter aspirations to improve its position, therefore change the system.

Ever since its publication, *The Handmaid's Tale* has been receiving diverse literary readings. Feminist, political, dystopian and film adaptation approaches are but some of these studies. Reducing the role of women to that of reproduction is one of the issues most tackled in the novel mainly from a feminist perspective (Watkins, 2020, Vickroy, 2013). The novel itself has been acclaimed as a classic feminist work, for instance, S. Rokka (2021) relates the work to recent movements that aim to protect women against sexual harassment. She approaches the novel within the context of the MeToo movement which emerged on social media platforms in 2006, aiming at defending women against sexual harassment. Reingard M. Nischik (2019) tackles the issue of the prohibition of writing and print culture in Gilead and focuses on how women are forbidden to read and write. Thomas Horan (2018) offers a reading of the novel as a projection of the political fiction of the twentieth century. He sees that 1985 *The Handmaid's Tale* predicts the policies of Donald Trump's alliance with the Evangelical right. Linda Hutcheon (2021) tackles the adaptation of the novel into a film, TV series, and opera, the Canadian scholar compares these different adaptations to the novel. Daný van Dam and Sara Polak (2021) tackle the franchising and different adaptations of the novel and define it as a cultural touchstone. Lois Feuer (1997) offers a dystopic reading of the novel in which she compares it to George Orwell's *1984*.

On her part, Atwood (2004) acknowledges being influenced by George Orwell's *1984* while writing *The Handmaid's Tale* (p. 335). Atwood (2017) also insists that the novel is about totalitarianism and that reading history proves that the practices of the Gilead regime echo those of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Puritans of New England, the French Revolution, and some member countries of the Eastern Bloc before the fall of Berlin Wall. The terror created by such regimes is what forces citizens into obedience and submission to both survive and avoid further forms of coercion.

The sublime is related to the sense of grandeur and elevation. It is defined as an embodiment of grandeur and nobility in nature and art which evokes awesomeness in us (Quinn, 2006, p. 403). In philosophy, the sublime is the term given to describe our aesthetic response to the magnificence of nature. Though philosophers offer different views on it, the essence of the sublime is the

evocation of elevated sentiments and awesomeness. On the other hand, tracing philosophers' different views on the concept of the sublime shows that they are influenced by contemporary cultural and political factors. In the classical era, when rhetoric was crucial to politics, Longinus related the sublime to lofty and excellent language (1890, p.2). He believed that sublime language produces sublime effects on the reader; high diction can uplift the spirit (p. 20). However, toward the 18<sup>th</sup> century rhetorical sublime is replaced by the natural sublime. Marjorie Hope Nicolson (1959) notes that the sublime concept shifts interest to the grandeur of nature and its effect on man (31). The Grand Tour allowed the English and Europeans to cross their homeland borders; they wrote expressing their fascination with the awesome Alps. Thus, in the eighteenth-century Edmund Burke first defines the sublime as “Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger” (1998, p. 36). Things that provoke in us the profound emotions of fear and terror are conceived as the sublime, hence, the sublime is terror. Burke, then, relates the sublime terror to nature's magnitude, “The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully, is Astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror” (53). The source of the sublime lies in the pain and danger, and astonishment caused by the grandeur and awesomeness of nature. Burke's views on the sublime both overshadowed and influenced Romanticism which had been on the brink of dominating the literary and artistic scene from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.

About three decades later, Emmanuel Kant (1724-1804) handled the concept of the sublime offering his views in *Critique of Judgment*. He sees that the “**sublime** that which is **absolutely great**” (2002, p. 131, emphasis in original). The greatness of nature is awesome, and our encounter with it is dynamic rather than static, Kant explains human encounters as follows:

For just as we found our own limitation in the immeasurability of nature and the insufficiency of our capacity to adopt a standard proportionate to the aesthetic estimation of the magnitude of its **domain**, but nevertheless at the same time found in our own faculty of reason another, non sensible standard, which has that very infinity under itself as a unit against which everything in nature is small, and thus found in our own mind a superiority over nature itself even in its immeasurability . . . (p. 145)

Relating to nature does not cease at the stage of being overwhelmed by its magnificence. Kant refers to the power of nature and admits human limitation in aesthetically evaluating and perceiving its magnitude, which represents the initial stage of our experience of the sublime. Then, this negative encounter

develops into a positive one. Being a champion of the age of Enlightenment, Kant attributes the second stage of our encounter with nature to the power of reason. Facing nature leads to our acknowledgement of its magnitude, which, in turn, humbles us. He attributes to nature creating in us a moral feeling. When we fail to comprehend its magnitude, or any of its phenomena, a disharmonious relation between our mind and nature is initiated. Thus, the sublime provides us with a sense of negative pleasure created by our acknowledgement of our limitation to comprehend nature's grandeur. Being humbled by this rational acknowledgement elevates reason to nature. Kant (2002)) sees that "that true sublimity must be sought only in the mind of the one who judges, not in the object in nature, the judging of which occasions this disposition in it" (p. 139). Kant's sublime refers to the subject rather than the object because the emphasis goes on how we react to nature's magnitude. The sublime exists in acknowledging our imperfections, rather than nature's power. Thus, as Harvie Ferguson (2004) notes, unlike Burke who sees the sublime in the terrifying external nature, Kant sees that the concept of the sublime exists in the mind rather than any natural phenomenon (p. 8). Our inability to conceive the sublime impacts our belief in our courage and sound judgement, therefore, the sublime is subjective.

On the other hand, Kant offers two types of the sublime: the "mathematical sublime" and the "dynamical sublime." The mathematical sublime is identified as the "**absolutely great . . . beyond all comparison**" (Kant, 2002, p. 132, emphasis in original), this type of the sublime is related to the vast quantity of nature and its magnitude. Philip Shaw (2005) sheds light on Kant's argument by referring to how our imagination is overwhelmed by nature's magnitude, either spatial or temporal (p.80). It involves the mind's frustration at its failure to apply units of measurement to time, place, and infinity, to imagine and comprehend these notions. The second type of sublime is the dynamical sublime, which is of interest to the present study. Kant identifies it as "Nature considered in aesthetic judgment as a power that has no dominion over us . . ." (2002, p. 143). Our aesthetic judgment of the sublime is caused by our recognition of the magnificence of nature's power. Such power stirs fears of being harmed by it, meanwhile, our fears help towards determining and reflecting on nature's grandeur. Kant conditions the dynamic sublime by the profundity of our fear if we are not directly exposed to the phenomenon. As Fiona Hughes (2010) explains, we try to imagine our feeling in case we are stranded in this natural hazard and predict the manner of our coping with it (89). Our fear of the destructive power of natural phenomena such as volcanoes, hurricanes, and the angry ocean diminishes our powers; we become preoccupied with our safety. The pleasure of aesthetic judgment cannot be experienced when we are under the stress and impact of our fear. It can only be attained when we are sheltered and secure while we look at natural hazards.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the German philosopher Theodor W. Adorno (1903 – 1969) offered his views which do not support the belief that nature is the source of the sublime; violence replaces natural phenomena and becomes the source of the sublime terror. He offers views which are directly impacted by the atrocities of the two global wars, especially WWII. Adorno attributes the change of the source of the sublime terror from the grandeur of nature to science. He shares the belief that “The tireless self-destruction of enlightenment hypocritically celebrated by implacable fascists and implemented by pliable experts in humanity compels thought to forbid itself its last remaining innocence regarding the habits and tendencies of the *Zeitgeist*” (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002, p. xiv). Science, which fascinated people and philosophers, in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, Kant included, becomes a source of mass killing in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Adorno’s experience of global wars, which claimed the lives of millions, exposes the dark face of scientific progress; hence, he does not share Kant’s positive views on man’s moral dignity created by reason. The Enlightenment which promised happiness and a bright future created by scientific thinking is demystified. Therefore, he believes that the sublime is not static, rather it is subject to change because it is “[h]istorically produced and conditioned” (Ray, 2020, p. 5). For Adorno, “After 1945, the terrors of global social processes came to eclipse the terrors of raw nature” (Ray, 2020, p. 4). He sees that terror and the sublime are man-made and that the sublime is no longer natural. Political history, in particular its violent conflict, contributes to the change in the sublime. War atrocities and “the genocidal catastrophes of human making displaced the natural disaster as the source of sublime feelings and effects” (Ray, 2005, p. 5). Modern global wars caused a drastic change from optimism about the human reason that ultimately leads to dignity to the pessimism of its being the source of “its degradation and humiliation” (Ray, 2020, P. 5). Faith in human dignity, held by rationalist Enlightenment views, is tarnished because reason, which protected this dignity, is seen to be exhausted in inventing new methods of mass-killing.

In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the Gilead regime seizes power after assassinating the American president and gunning down the congressmen. Gileadean citizens are brought into submission by the dictatorship of the new theocratic regime; arrest and execution of convicted lawbreakers are carried out regularly. The coup and its aftermath epitomise what Ray (2010) labels as the contemporary sublime (p. 170), where the new regime declares a state of emergency and uses coercive measures to protect itself against domestic and foreign enemies. On the other hand, the country, as mentioned earlier, is threatened by a sharp population decline due to pollution. In a desperate effort to solve such a crisis, the regime resorts to annulling second marriages, and the children of the separated parents are given to childless couples of Gilead’s elites. In a further effort to tackle the issue of under population, the wives of these broken marriages are employed as

surrogate mothers for the same class. This crisis leads to defining women mainly in terms of sterility and fertility, or as Offred, the heroine, puts it, women become “two-legged wombs” (Atwood, 2010, p.148). Thus, what is highlighted in the novel is the regime’s reducing women to sheer reproductive agents. The pressure of the sublime terror of the regime, its practices, and the hard-heartedness of its agents, all devastate Offred. This negative impact is represented, first, in her diverse accounts of the wall which is used for executing the convicted, second, in her reconstruction of some of the stories she tells, and finally in triggering nostalgias for her pre-Gileadean life.

Regarding the functional component of ideological critique which focuses on preserving the hierarchical dominant-dominated relationship, the wall in Gilead is a crucial factor in identifying this relationship. Hogan (2000) aptly states that "the use of physical force or threat" (p. 159) are the measures taken to maintain domination. In case they defy the regime, Gileadean women are threatened with being sent to highly polluted colonies where they mostly die from cancer. But the wall is the strongest measure taken to deter the Gileadeans from resistance; it is the culmination of resorting to “physical force” for punishment because death by hanging is instant. Colette Tennant (2019) considers it as “a marquee of vengeance” (p. 73) because the dead bodies of the punished are left hanging for some days to be seen by their fellow Gileadeans. Sarah A. Appleton (2021) relates the effect of the wall on people to Michel Foucault’s view on the deterring function of discipline and punishment. She elaborates on the notion that by regular exposure to the sight of the punished, we avoid committing the same offences to avoid a similar punishment (67). Hence, as death is what the wall epitomizes, this site becomes the pinnacle of sublime terror. Despite its horridness, seeing the wall is part of the life routine of the citizens of Gilead. Offred and the other handmaids pass by it and stand still for a while in moments of contemplation whenever they go shopping.

The wall is described by Offred several times, mostly in an objective manner. Her first description of the site gives details of its history, before and after the coup, its colour, its infrastructure, and the hooks used in hanging the guilty citizens. In another visit to the wall, Offred gives an accurate description of the hung bodies; how their hands are tied, the coverage of heads, and the period they are left hanging on the wall. She understands that leaving the bodies for some time is intentional “so as many people as possible will have the chance to see them” (Atwood, 2010, p. 44). As for the authorities of Gilead, they are keen to remind citizens of the due punishment by hanging in case of breaking the law. The hanging is made public, both by having citizens attend the event and by televising it. The rituals of the executions are highly staged; they are meant,

to humiliate the guilty citizens before hanging them, to underpin the power structure of the Gilead regime.

With regards to the executions of convicted citizens, Offred has attended a few of them taking place, but it is only once that she describes the procedure. Her description is mainly objective; how the accused woman walks, helping her up, putting the noose around her neck, kicking the stool, and the sigh that comes from the audience. The profundity of the scene is only expressed abruptly when Offred expresses her wish that she does not “want to see it anymore” (p. 290). This wish does not involve much feeling, though her objective graphic description of the procedure indicates that she does not want to meet a similar fate. However, the sublime terror created by the wall is evident in her apprehension about the possibility of being caught for knowing about the underground movement of resistance. Offred is demoralized by her fear and, as Sarah Ditung (2019) notes, cognizant of the fact that in her society, only by being dead she can be taken as an uncompromised member (1404).

Offred’s sublime terror reaches its peak because of her apprehensions. Being familiar with coerced confession in Gilead, she feels anxious about the notion that her family might be subjected to these atrocities to force her to some political confession. But what frightens Offred most is that she might end up being hanged on the wall. She expresses her willingness to do anything to avoid such a fate.

Dear God . . . I will do anything you like. Now that you've let me off, I'll obliterate myself . . . I'll empty myself . . . I'll sacrifice . . .

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 doll hung up on the Wall . . . 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. (Atwood, 2010, p. 300)

Offred suffers anxiety about being punished for not reporting members of the underground resistance. Being a citizen controlled by a totalitarian regime, she knows that “resistance to the dominant ideology is muted or contained” (Foss, 2018 p. 239), thus, her fears represent the culmination of the negative effect of the regular visits to the wall. These visits have been implanting in her a dread of the possibility of being one of the hanged bodies. So, despite her earlier objective description of the wall and the bodies hung on it, terror has been unconsciously growing. But since she has not yet defied the authorities, she does not feel threatened by the wall. Offred’s fears come up to the surface just when she experiences doubts about the possibility of being arrested for

conspiring against the regime. She experiences the terror of punishment which she feels unable to control or encounter. The above passage indicates her identification with the hanging bodies that she, so far, has been seeing on her way to the market. In her earlier descriptions of the executed bodies, she hardly expresses her feelings; she exerts an effort so that she “won’t give anything away” (Atwood, 2010, p. 45). Showing sympathy with what the totalitarian regime regards as criminals is a risk. But her anxiety has been growing all the time. Now, what she experiences is the sublime terror of execution and the idea that her body will be like that of a doll: lifeless. And in addition to deriving her to fully express her thoughts on the executed citizens of Gilead, the sublime terror makes her fully accept the regime's agents doing whatever "they like with her." In other words, she submits to the regime's dominance and hints at accepting its imposed ideology.

Kant refers to the force of the sublime and its impact on us as “an affront or outrage to our powers of comprehension” (Shaw, 2006 p. 78). The sublime impacts our understanding; its shock drives us to wonder why it has happened, but often we are unable to reach satisfactory answers. Ray (2005) tackles the “hit” of the sublime and elaborates on its impact on us, he refers to it as “an intervention into the stabilized form of psychic life” (p. 1). We keep wondering and reflecting on its occurrence, and our mental examination of the sublime is characterized by repetition, replaying, re-enactment, return, and rewinding of events. Indeed, this is what Offred often does when she narrates some of her stories. She reconstructs the same story more than once. In contrast to her vividly recalled nostalgia, as will be presently shown, she shows confusion in handling scenes of her present life in Gilead. Regarding these reconstructed stories, Sharon L. Jansen (2011) points out “What we have, instead, is an approximation, an account that may—or may not—correspond to what really happened” (p.193). An example of her ambivalent accounts is that of one of her encounters with Nick, the Commander’s Chauffeur. At first, she says that they act rudely to one another, then, she admits, “I made that up. It didn't happen that way. Here is what happened” (Atwood, 2010, p. 275). Offred offers a second version of the same incident, and once again she admits “It didn't happen that way either. I'm not sure how it happened; not exactly. All I can hope for is a reconstruction” (p. 277). She hopes for a reconstruction that may or may not offer an authentic presentation of their encounter.

In addition to affecting Offred’s mental clarity, the sublime terror impacts her ability to properly tell her stories. She sometimes leaves a story unfinished. The first unfinished story is that of her visiting another commander’s house to attend the event of a fellow handmaid giving birth, but the event, which also includes an absurd mimicking of the labour by the Commander’s wife, exhausts Offred.

On her way home, Offred begins to reflect on her exhaustion, then she abruptly changes her mind and decides on telling the story of her friend Moira's escape from the Red Centre, the residence of the handmaids. Offred offers the excuse of being "too tired to go on with this [first] story" (p.140) before telling Moira's story. The two stories might seem irrelevant, but they epitomize the terrifying ordeal to which all handmaids are subjected. The first story is that of reducing the function of women to reproduction, the second one is that of a handmaid who escapes this dreadful life. On the other hand, in telling the second story, Offred admits that "Part of it I can fill in myself, part of it I heard from Alma, who heard it from Dolores, who heard it from Janine. Janine heard it from Aunt Lydia" (p. 141). The inauthenticity of her version of this story is indicated both in her admittance that she has invented part of it and the mention of the several sources from which she gets the story. Since these sources are liable to either invent or overlook some details, it is unlikely that the final version of the story is identical to the original one.

Offred's ambiguous manner of telling her stories; the reconstruction and the offering of different versions of the same story, is generally regarded as a sign of her unreliability as a narrator. Barbara Garlick (1992) refers to the "equivocality of narration" (p.162) of *The Handmaid's Tale* and labels the narrator as "unreliable" (p. 163). Both Fernanda Nunes Menegotto and Elaine Barros Indrusiak (2021) have a similar view; they see that Offred has "tricked" the reader, and in consequence, they also label her "an unreliable narrator" (p. 590). Concerning these negative views, it is noteworthy that Offred willingly informs the reader about her reconstruction of some stories and filling the gap in others. This transparency releases her of the accusation of mischievous unreliability. Yet, the pressure of the sublime on her, seen by Kant as a source of "frustrat[ing] judgement" (Shaw p. 78), often grows stronger to the extent that she feels unable to identify the nature of what she tells. This is evident in her admittance that "It isn't a story I'm telling. It's also a story I'm telling, in my head; as I go along" (Atwood, 2010, p. 51). Offred shows confusion which reduces barriers between fact and fiction in what she intends to tell. She is not decisive enough, therefore, not sure if she is telling stories created by her, or some psychic experiences, because she refers to a narrative that goes on in her "head." Only at the end, in the epilogue of the Historical Note, the reader discovers that she has recorded this period of her life on cassette tapes, which are recovered by university academics. Thus, the whole narrative could be an act of defiance of the totalitarian regime of Gilead, or an attempt to relieve herself of the burden of her sublime terror.

Offred's distress, her negative sublime, triggers nostalgia. Nostalgia is seen as an affectionate and sentimental longing for past times and places. (Routledge, 2016, p. 48, and Niemeyer, 2014, p. 1). It represents the retrieval of pleasant memories and evokes good times we once lived and cherished. Regarding

Adorno, he attributes to nostalgia the effect of “deriv[ing] from the past the lost sense of *hope*” (S. D. Chrostowska’s 2013, p.95, emphasis in original). Of the many nostalgias which Offred has, it is that of her daughter, in their pre-Gilead life, trying to decide on an ice cream (Atwood, 2010, p. 176). Offred recalls in detail helping her little girl in viewing the ice cream vets, and their delicate multiple colours. It is noteworthy that Offred is deprived of her daughter and has no access whatsoever to any information on her. This memory is retrieved at a time when it is hot and Offred is distressed by her inability to share her thoughts with her companion, Offglen, because conversations and friendships between handmaids are almost forbidden for fear of inciting sedition. Offred further regrets her inability to wear summer dress and sandals, the way it used to be in pre-Gilead time. However, after Offred’s reminiscences of her little daughter, her mood improves, and she feels at ease; the following segment of her narrative expresses her experience of comfort in the company of Offglen (p.176). The improvement that Offred experiences enhance the notion that "nostalgia might serve as a coping mechanism or regulatory resource that people employ to counter negative states" (Routledge, 2016, p. 26). By retreating to the pleasant memory of her little daughter, Offred manages both to protect herself against her distress, and gain a feeling of comfort with her companion.

Another instance of the positive role of nostalgia is that it represents a kind of resistance. Adorno suggests that it acts as a way of resisting the present (Chrostowska, 2013, p. 94-5). Offred, like the rest of her fellow Gileadeans, can never criticize the authorities, if she takes the risk, she is due to be punished for combating the regime. On their part, the authorities in Gilead, which van Dam and Polak (2021) call “the hyperreal patriarchy-as-terror-regime” (173) organize weekly sessions for the handmaids that aim to “excluding nostalgia for the past or a yearning for the future” (Staels, 2001, p. 119). In these sessions, movies that show women in horrid conditions remind the handmaids of "what things used to be like" (Atwood, 2010, p. 130) in the pre-Gileadean age. Regarding the epistemic and telic components of ideology, these sessions are meant to brainwash the Gileadean women. The goals of pre-Gilead era demonstrations are also targeted by the system. The weekly sessions sometimes show documentaries of these past feminist demonstrations that are labelled by the regime’s agents as “Unwoman” (p. 130). The aim here is to insert the false ideological belief of the futility of their past life.

Furthermore, by tarnishing the image of women’s pre-Gileadean life, the regime seeks to eventually wipe it away from memory. Such a fascist practice targets a past that is often cherished by the victims of injustice, which accords to Adorno’s view that the purpose of dictators is to “close the books on the past . . . even remove it from memory” (2005, p. 89). Ironically enough, these sessions function as triggers of nostalgia for Offred’s high school geography classes, which, though “faintly boring” (130), provided a feeling of comfort. The

Gileadean sessions also intensify the experience of the real chasm between her present life in Gilead under its totalitarian regime, and her past life; she longs for enjoying the freedom and family companionship. Offred indulges in the nostalgia of her mother and husband when the three of them are engaged in a discussion that is both humorous and serious. It is noteworthy that this nostalgic scene is by no means idealized; the mother ironically expresses her view that men are often absent-minded and do not contribute to the progress of humanity (Atwood, 2010, p. 133). The mother's view, though indicates her disappointment, marks the freedom of expression of which her daughter, now, is deprived. This nostalgia represents Offred's silent resistance to the regime, as well as self-comfort to cope with her bleak life.

The novel concludes with an epilogue entitled A Historical Note which mainly functions as a revelation of the nature of the tale told by Offred. It turns out that all the events are secretly recorded by Offred on cassette tapes that are discovered by the academics of the university of Denay after the fall of the Gilead regime. Two hundred years later, the university organizes a conference that debates life in Gilead.

Kant, as explained earlier, conditions the dynamical sublime by being protected from the mighty forces of nature. Temporal or physical distance, or both, are necessary to experience the dynamical sublime; being safe and away from nature's unpredictable threats allows us to contemplate its grandeur, because anxiety about our safety will only intercept our reflections. In the novel, Offred goes through a first-hand experience of the sublime terror; thus, she does not experience the dynamical sublime. She does not tell that she has survived her terrifying life in Gilead, or even if she has, it is not mentioned in her tale, which only closes with an uncertain hint of her survival. The novel does not represent her life in a post-Gilead age, for this would have necessitated her contemplation on her Gileadean life. Those who experience the contemplation of the dynamical sublime are the academics of Denay University who organize a symposium on the Gilead regime and the attendees. They experience the sublime terror from a different position, and it is a distant safe one.

Dynamical sublime contemplation is represented both by the number of studies conducted by the scholars of the university of Denay, and the events devoted to the history of the Gilead republic. The university has founded the Gileadean Research Association which has already sponsored twelve international symposiums on Gilead studies. The present symposium, held in the year 2195, as Professor Crescent Moon informs the audience, includes several sessions with topics on aspects of life in Gilead such as religion and civil wars. In addition, comparative studies between the republic and its contemporary regimes are conducted. The notable number of symposium attendees suggests a

high interest in this epoch of American history. Also, Professor Pieixoto's examination of the recorded tapes of the Handmaid's Tale, and the conclusions that he and his fellow professor have reached, suggest a strong interest in this horrendous epoch. The speculations of this academic team shed light on the ideological practices, discussed earlier, of the Gilead regime. Pieixoto acknowledges that Offred's tapes have helped in filling some gaps in the history of Gilead. The severe penalties received by members of resistance movements are scrutinised both by him and his fellow members of the Gileadean Research Association.

Furthermore, the atmosphere of the keynote speaker session is that of complacency and ease. Professor Maryann Crescent Moon cheerfully addresses the audience and expresses her "pleasure" and "delight" in introducing the conference's keynote speaker. She also jokingly tells him "to keep within his time period" (Atwood, 2010, p. 314), when he gives his keynote speech. The conference audience shares this cheerful mood as they often laugh at the keynote speaker's jokes. The attendees enjoy listening to him, and anticipate the scheduled entertainment events, though they attend a session which describes and discusses the sublime terror experienced by the Gileadeans. They are not subjected to a similar experience, but they are aware of the horrendous practices of the regime. And the fact that the sublime terror, i.e., the horror of the Gilead republic, is now a thing of the past, makes all the symposium attendees feel untouched safe and relaxed, therefore, capable of experiencing dynamical sublime.

However, the audience is not immune to a similar Gilead experience. Putting in mind that this future America is not apocalyptic, as some science fiction feature it, there is the possibility of the emergence of a similar radical group that abuses science and puts an end to this democratic life. Gilead's abuse of science is shown in using machine weaponry in assassinating the American president and the congress members. Further, drugs, another product of science, are used to make members of the resistance confess to taking part in conspiring against the regime while being led to the noose. Abuse of science could help toward having a similar experience of the twentieth-century global wars and the dictatorial theocratic Gilead republic which ultimately subject humanity to the sublime terror.

## **Conclusion**

In their handling of the concept of the sublime, both Kant and Adorno see that it signifies a profound feeling of terror, repulsion, and frustration. The difference between Kant and Adorno is that the former attributes a moral effect of nature's sublime on man, whereas the latter sees that the sublime terror is the consequence of human degeneration because it is created by man's abuse of

science. This study identifies the sublime terror in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and scrutinizes its impact on the Gileadeans, represented by Offred.

Firstly, the wall in the Gilead republic is identified as the crux of punishment; it is the ultimate instrument of terror which establishes boundaries between the dominant and the dominated. The study traces Offred's attitude toward the wall during her routine visits. At first, her attitude seems to be neutral as she offers an objective description of it and its purpose. The study shows how, despite her apparent indifference, she has been anxious all the time about the wall and what it represents. Only when she is overcome by her apprehensions of being suspected and arrested by the authorities, she reveals her sublime terror of being hung on the wall. Secondly, based on Kant's view that sublime terror negatively impacts our comprehension, the study elicits the destabilizing effect of sublime terror on Offred. One feature of this negative impact is Offred's reconstruction of stories: her uncertain narration of episodes of her experience of the regime's practices. Thirdly, the study investigates nostalgia, to which Offred resorts, as a way of coping with her dreadful life, resistance, and self-protection. But in contrast with her ambiguous narration, her nostalgias are not reconstructed because these narrated cherished memories belong to her pre-Gilead life when she is not subjected to the hit of the sublime terror.

Drawing on Kant's concept of the dynamical sublime, the study finally focuses on the epilogue of *The Handmaid's Tale*. It justifies the cheerful atmosphere of the conference opening session which tackles the totalitarian practices of the Gilead regime. Living in a post-Gilead era, the audience never experiences the sublime terror of the Gilead regime, but they have a rich knowledge of its horrendous practices. The fact that they are now living two centuries after the fall of Gilead, provides them with a sense of being safe from its terror. Now they can, academically or otherwise, reflect on this epoch in American history. However, there is no guarantee that modern science, which led to the invention of machine weaponry used in the Gilead coup, and drugs used in pacifying its citizens, would not be abused again by another radical group leading to a similar experience of the sublime terror.

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