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THE SYMBOLIC POWER OF RED IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of Honors

By

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There are few symbols as prevalent or filled with meaning as the color red in our society. J. E. Cirlot writes, “red [is] the color of the pulsing blood and of fire, for the surging and tearing emotions” (“Colour” 53). Yet, at the same time, red is associated with love and compassion in the western world. Red was symbolic of divine light and favor in ancient Roman and Arabian society, but “throughout much of the world, red represents events and emotions at the core of the human condition: danger and courage, revolution and war, violence and sin, desire and passion, even life itself” (Greenfield 2). Although many historical associations with the color red exist, it is clear that red epitomizes human vitality, and above all power. Whether it is emotionally or physically manifesting, red undoubtedly is the color connected to power.

The power that is associated with the color red is the central focus of this thesis, or more specifically, the observations of the power relationship between the red-cloaked handmaids and the rest of the society of Gilead. In my examination of this power relationship, I will use historical symbolism of the color red to discuss the significance of red motifs in *The Handmaid's Tale* to the text as a whole. Examining key symbols like lit cigarettes and flowers, I will discuss the relationship of those who possess these objects to their relative positions of power. Furthermore, I will convey how the subjected handmaids' social position is depicted through Offred's desire for these red objects that represent power. Within Margaret Atwood's novel, red functions as the signifier that encompasses the relationship between an individual's desire and their ability to fulfill those desires within the totalitarian regime of Gilead. However, before further analyzing the nature of red and its relation to power in this novel, it is necessary to understand the roles of handmaids and the political, social, and religious parameters that govern Atwood's dystopian world.

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is a dystopian novel that depicts a futuristic setting in which one Christian sect has risen above all others to create a patriarchal theocracy that

is completely controlled by the government. In this society, only men are allowed to work, drive, or govern the land. Women are subjected to the domestic life of producing or rearing children and banned from all forms of [the] written word. In addition, nuclear fallout, environmental pollution, and mutated STDs have caused rampant sterility and led to a sharp decline of healthy infant births. Offred states,

The air got too full, once, of chemicals, rays, radiation, the water swarmed with toxic molecules...your very flesh may be polluted, dirty as an oily beach, sure death to shore birds and unborn babies (Atwood 143).

As a result of the population decline, the government of Gilead draws upon a mixture of biblical verses and religious propaganda as justification to force women into becoming handmaids, government mandated surrogate mothers. The Biblical example for handmaids comes from chapter thirty of Genesis, "Give me children, or else I die... Behold my maid Bilhah. She shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her" (*Reference Edition Bible* Gen. 30.1-3). This scene of Rachel offering her maid to Jacob forms the model for these handmaids who are expected to produce offspring for the childless couples in Gilead.

These handmaids are expected to engage in monthly sexual intercourse with high ranking Commanders whose wives are unable to conceive children of their own. The men receive the handmaids because, as Offred states, "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." (Atwood 79). The government chooses the handmaids from unmarried women or the women who had married divorced men before the rise of Gilead. Using the biblical reasoning that only a first marriage is true in the eyes of God, the women are taken from their husbands, homes, and their children, as in the case with Offred, and are given to the wives of Commanders. The handmaids are then expected to produce a child for a Commander within a few years' time. If

she fails to conceive after three Commanders, the handmaid is sent off to clean up nuclear fallout as an “Unwoman.” The handmaids have strictly regimented diets and rules that govern their lives, including the caveat that if they do successfully produce a child it will be given to a Commander’s wife and the handmaid will be sent to another Commander to repeat the process. However, she will be spared from becoming an Unwoman.

Within the highly structured and totalitarian regime of Gilead in the novel, there is a complex social caste system that allows the government to function. Men are divided into soldierly ranks with uniforms, while the women are grouped by their social status. These distinctions among women are most significantly shown through color. Women have six separate social castes that are each associated with a color. The wives of the Commanders don lavish blue dresses, the Marthas, or servants, wear green dresses, the Econowives of the poor men wear blue and green striped dresses, the young daughters of the Commanders wear white, the Aunts in charge of the Red Center wear khaki dresses, and the handmaids wear red.

The handmaids’ red wardrobe is the first point I will address because it is the most apparent example of the social status of these women. The handmaids are easily recognized by the scarlet that encases them from the red veil to the tent-like, billowing dress. Offred states, “Everything except the wings around my face is red: the color of blood, which defines us.” Indeed, the red of their ensemble means more than simple clothes or social status: the red defines who they are as people, where they can go, what they can say or do, and what they can eat. The red of their dresses and veils immediately signifies their identity as handmaids and their function within society to onlookers. This red serves as a uniform denoting position as surely as an orange jumpsuit denotes a prisoner. All citizens of Gilead are able to recognize a handmaid by her uniform, and the handmaid is trapped by this symbolic red, unable to escape her identity or duty.

It seems significant that the red of Offred's dress serves as a symbol of her own powerlessness in *The Handmaid's Tale* when red has strong traditional ties to being a symbol of the power of the wearer. Amy Butler Greenfield in her book *A Perfect Red* states, "Elusive, expensive, and invested with powerful symbolism, red cloth became the prized possession of the wealthy and well-born" (3). Historically, kings and cardinals wore red, such as the shah of Persia or the leaders of Rome. This is because up until the nineteenth century, the source of the most brilliant scarlet cloths was a dye made from the cochineal beetle in Mexico. The dye was very costly and showed status and wealth for the wearer. Consequently, rulers such as Charlemagne set laws and regulations on what colors lower class people could wear and how much they were allowed to spend on clothing so that red would remain a sign of prosperity (Greenfield 10).

Bright red cloth was reserved for aristocracy, and more specifically, male aristocracy in medieval Europe due to its associations with "heat and vitality" and connections to violence and war (Greenfield 2). Red was associated with courage, passion, and ferocity during battle, all predominately male virtues. In accordance with these virtues, the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V was painted in red and black clothing on his war horse (Greenfield 79). Likewise, J. E. Cirlot describes the Parsifal of Chrétien de Troyes, a legendary 'red knight' in *A Dictionary of Symbols*, "He was clothed in garments stained with blood,' for he had come through war and sacrifice" ("Blood" 30). These are just two examples of royal figures who don red to epitomize their prowess in battle and courage against foes. Additionally, Elizabeth I, who surrounded herself with servants and maids dressed in scarlet, was responsible for fulfilling the role of both king and queen to England. Therefore, the red around her seems to emulate the masculine presence of a male monarch to make up for her unmarried rule (Greenfield 79). The red served as a symbol to subjects in the medieval era that their leader was fierce and passionate and as a warning to foes.

So, with these ties to masculinity and figures of power donning red as their color, it seems important to examine why Atwood would use this color to clothe the powerless, female handmaids. She uses red first of all to highlight the power relationship between those who wear red and those who control the handmaids, and second of all to draw upon sexual connotations of the color red. The second point I will discuss in more depth later, but right now I will examine the power relationship between the handmaids and the Commanders and Aunts who control their fate. Similar to the behavior of Elizabeth I, it seems that the government forces the handmaids to wear red to showcase their power to control others. First of all, it shows the masculine power of the government through its power to take away the wills of these women, but it also shows the facsimile of authority that handmaids have over their own lives, namely the decision to choose to be a handmaid.

In this sense, the red is ironic because it shows the handmaids power to choose to become powerless. The handmaids do have the pretense of a choice: become a handmaid or work with the Unwomen and die of radiation poisoning. Offred even states, "...nothing is going on here that I haven't signed up for. There wasn't a lot of choice but there was some, and this is what I chose" (Atwood 121). So with this small choice made, Offred has some small power; she obtains the power to continue living, but she lives the life of a sexual soldier for the cause.

Greenfield discusses the uniforms of Roman soldiers, "the red tunic signified a man who had taken the soldier's oath and no longer lived under normal laws; at this commander's order, he could kill without fear of punishment" (20). In this sense, the handmaids are also soldiers, but a different brand of soldiers. The red here marks a woman who has taken an oath, not to kill but to bring forth life for the Commanders without being punished for the crime of adultery. In the same way that a soldier will go off for training, these women go to the Red Center and abandon their former identities to take the red veil. They forego their former notions of power and

“freedom to” act as their own person to accept their new “freedom from” decisions or choices (Atwood 33). Aunt Lydia explains their new “freedom from” in these terms, “Now we walk along the same street, in red pairs, and no man shouts obscenities at us, speaks to us, touches us. No one whistles” (33). Her point is that, as tools of the government, handmaids are freed from decision making, sexual advances, and lack of respect from men. Their function to the state is clearly shown through their uniform, and as soldiers to the state, they are given respect and dignity they did not receive before. However, ultimately, like soldiers, they must acknowledge that they no longer have the “freedom to” act on their own authority because they answer to a higher order now. These sexual “soldiers” choose to become handmaids to save themselves, but then must submit themselves to the Commander and the state to accept their position of supplication.

The red dress also masks individual identity by making the women virtually indistinguishable from each other. Offred describes the first sighting of another handmaid in the story, Ofglen, her shopping companion, in these terms, “a shape, red with white wings around the face, a shape like mine, a nondescript woman in red carrying a basket” (Atwood 25). Offred shows the lack of identity among handmaids through the descriptions of her companion. Ofglen is described as “nondescript” and “a shape like mine,” indicating that this dehumanization of handmaids occurs even among the ranks of the handmaids. The handmaids first lose their identity when their name is replaced with the derivative of their commander’s name, such as Ofwarren, Ofglen, and Offred, but their identity is lost a second time through their mandated uniform. Instead of individual expression, the handmaids are draped with fabric so that they become one recognizable caste separate from society.

Offred suggests that the required red outfit may be in part due to aesthetic appeal. When walking with Ofglen to the Women's Prayvaganza, Offred comments on the uniformity of the handmaids around her,

We must look good from a distance: picturesque, like Dutch milkmaids on a wallpaper frieze...or anything that repeats itself with at least minimum grace and without variation.

Soothing to the eye, the eyes, the Eyes, for that's who this show is for (Atwood 275).

Offred implies that the desire for sameness among the handmaids stems from the government's wish to mass Offred and other women into this one unvarying category. Within this category, this is no room for deviation or individual identity, and this is depicted by the identical red women walking together. It seems very plausible that the Eyes and Commanders in charge crave this universality among handmaids as a symbol of governmental power. The identical women in neat groups are representative of the desire for strict order among the society of Gilead.

Deviation would show weakness within the system; therefore, it is crucial that Gilead officials maintain displays such as this uniformity to confirm their positions of power.

The aesthetic appeal of the red cloaks is also demonstrated by the Aunts and their desire for universality in appearance among the handmaids. At the Red Center, the Aunts would pose the handmaids identically for prayer and walk through with cattle prods to enforce the positions. Offred comments, "Part of her interest in this was aesthetic: she liked the look of the thing. She wanted us to look like something Anglo-Saxon...regimented in our robes of purity" (Atwood 251). The women hung at the Salvaging are also arranged to be visibly pleasing, "Beneath the hems of the dresses the feet dangle, two pairs of red shoes, one pair of blue...They look arranged" (356). In both of these examples, the Aunts lower the handmaids to sub-human status. Instead of people, the handmaids are objects to be ordered into a picturesque arrangement.

The relationship between those with power and those without power is clearly seen through the arrangement of handmaids into a concise group. The Commanders, Eyes, and Aunts have the power to dress and arrange individuals so that they meld together into a caste that looks and acts the same. These women lose all identity as individuals and as people. The handmaids are given matching uniforms and forced to follow the rules of their order. It is dangerous for handmaids to have individual thought or behave in a way that is outside of their assigned role.

This is seen again when Offred experiences conflicting emotions after the Commander asks her for a kiss and states, “You can think clearly only with your clothes on” (Atwood 185). She is confronted by a request from a Commander who has all of the power in their relationship, who asks her to act outside of the regimented rules of her caste. Focusing on her clothes forces her to remember who, or what, she has become as a handmaid. Her clothes are symbolic of her powerlessness as an individual and helplessness if she goes against the norms laid out for her. Her naked body underneath the clothes represents her as a human with human desires and needs. As a woman with power, she might act upon the desires and kiss the Commander passionately or kill him with equal passion, “I think about the blood coming out of him, hot as soup, sexual, over my hands,” but her wardrobe expresses that she is not a woman with power (181). The clothes draws her back to her responsibilities and allow her to think clearly about what the Eyes could do to her for disobeying the laws of her station and what the Commander could do to her for going against his wishes. With her reason in check, Offred understands the dangers of expressing her passion and keeps herself in check by fulfilling the Commander’s request for a kiss but not allowing her desires to overwhelm her.

Another purpose of the red clothing is to highlight the sexual function of a handmaid and symbolically mark her as a “fallen woman.” While men wearing red were symbolically putting their courage or passion on display, women and red have a more scandalous historical affiliation.

By the late 1830s, red had become a disreputable color for respectable women to wear. “In their minds, scarlet stood for sin, especially sexual sin...for as red’s association with male power has waned, its age-old identification with passion and sexuality came to the fore” (Greenfield 218). This connection was strengthened also by the publication of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* that connected the adultery of Hester Prynne to the scarlet letter of shame that she was forced to wear. Greenfield goes on to give many literary examples of sexual scandal tied to red, surmising it all with the statement, “In fiction, the red dress became a fixture, a sure sign that a woman was an adulteress, an adventuress, or headed in some way for a sexual fall” (254).

Biblically, also, there is a strong connection between the color red and sin, particularly sins of the flesh. Hell and Satan are both associated with burning red flames. The book of Isaiah states, “...though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool” (*Reference Edition Bible* Isaiah 1.18). The red description of sin here implies that the color red is a taint upon the soul that must be washed clean. This taint in respect to handmaids separates them as unclean or impure. The handmaids are now covered in the sins of adultery and fornication. Consequently, like Hester, they are required to wear their dishonor through red clothing every day, powerless to escape their shame.

This association between Biblical sin and red continues through the book of Revelations where the antichrist is depicted as a great red dragon consorting with the Whore of Babylon, ...I saw a woman sit upon a scarlet coloured beast, full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns. <sup>4</sup>And the woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet colour... having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication: <sup>5</sup>And upon her forehead *was* a name written, MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH. <sup>6</sup>And I saw

the woman drunken with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus...(*Reference Edition Bible Rev.* 17.3-6).

Greenfield theorizes that the connection between sin and red, as shown through the red clad Whore of Babylon “may explain why some cities required courtesans and prostitutes to wear a red scarf, gown or badge” (22). While Offred and other handmaids do not have a monetary value, they are required to engage in forced sexual intercourse each month. Within the biblical based society of Gilead, this act of fornication is required, but still condemned through the clothing that symbolizes the sin that these women take upon themselves. Although these women are fulfilling a societal obligation, they are also marred by the sin of fornication and adultery.

Offred’s clothing and the connection to this scene from Revelation are further made apparent in the scene between Moira and Offred at the gentleman’s club, Jezebels, yet another reference to an impure woman in the Bible. Offred is in a place where former handmaids still perform sexual acts with men, but without the objective of procreating. When Offred first sees Moira, she is sharing a cigarette with a woman in a red devil costume, reminiscent of the great red beast in Revelations. (Atwood 311). In addition, Offred observes about the women wearing makeup that “their mouths [are] too red, too wet, blood-dipped and glistening” (305). This is clearly evocative of the whore who drinks the blood of the saints. Finally, upon seeing Offred in her purple, spangled costume, lipstick, and purple rental bracelet, Moira declares, “You look like the Whore of Babylon” (314). Atwood utilizes the purple in this scene as a stand in for the red clothing that Offred typically dresses in, but the allusions to the “purple and scarlet” that is worn by the actual Whore of Babylon are apparent. All of these references to this “Mother of Harlots” who is surrounded by red clearly show how the direct correlation between the required red of the handmaids and the symbolic red of their sexual sins of adultery and fornication.

The connection between red and inability to fulfill sensual desire can also be examined through the uniform of the handmaid. In regards to lust, however, the red of the dress seems to function as a metaphorical warning or stop sign to those who might be tempted to approach this forbidden area. The scene that shows this point most clearly is Offred's first encounter with the young guards at the barrier. Offred imagines that they watch these handmaids with unattainable desire and imagines them sharing her musings, "What if I were to peel off my shroud and show myself to them, by the uncertain light of the lanterns?" (Atwood 29). These men cannot actually show attraction to or desire for the handmaids because the red wardrobe of the handmaid is a message to them: stop (27). Offred is aware that she is forbidden, and because of that, feels a rush at tempting these men by moving suggestively in her red dress. She describes the encounter,

They touch me with their eyes instead and I move my hips a little, feeling the full red skirt sway around me. It's like thumbing your nose from behind a fence or teasing a dog with a bone held out of reach, and I'm ashamed of myself for doing it, because none of this is the fault of these men, they're too young. Then I find I'm not ashamed after all. I enjoy the power; power of a dog bone, passive but there. I hope they get hard at the sight of us and have to rub themselves against the painted barriers surreptitiously (30).

Offred wants to take advantage of the small sense of sexual empowerment that she gains at the thought of being wanted. Like the iconic red apple in the Garden of Eden, Offred is forbidden knowledge for these guards, and therefore desirable.

This sensuality connected to red also manifests in relation to the cosmetic references. The tourists, who stop to ask Offred and Ofglen whether or not they are happy, are wearing western clothing and makeup like these handmaids would have once worn. "They wear lipstick, red outlining the damp cavities of their mouths, like scrawls on a washroom wall, of the time before" (Atwood 38). This description of the lipstick, in addition to the aforementioned description of

lipstick from the scene at Jezebels, describes the lips as being red and wet. The red lips bring to mind cultural female sex icons, such as Marilyn Monroe with large, shining, red lips. Likewise, the wet has a very suggestive quality to it suggesting a woman excited or wet lips ready for a kiss. The red of the lipstick is clearly erotic, especially when juxtaposed with the demure red cloaks of the handmaids that mark them as unattainable. This lipstick suggests promiscuity, and free kisses like the lip prints that might have been on a bathroom mirror in the time before handmaids. This promiscuity mentioned in conjunction with the red lip stick speaks to the era before when women could be more than whores or mothers and were able to display their own sensual desires instead of hiding them under red cloaks.

In addition to the lipstick, Offred also makes red associations to perfume twice in the text, connecting it to former female sensuality. Upon smelling Serena's perfume, Offred states, "It's the scent of prepubescent girls...the smell of white cotton socks and white cotton petticoats, of dusting powder, of the innocence of female flesh not yet given over to hairiness and blood" (Atwood 103). This passage describing Serena's perfume seems suggestive in regard to females right on the verge of adolescence, during the time when they are discovering their changing bodies. The sensual appeal lies in Offred's own desire to again be innocent in the time before hairiness and blood, but this also suggests the time in a girl's life right before her own sexual awakening. This passage takes Offred back to her own days, before becoming a wife or a handmaid, when she still had the allure of innocence and less knowledge about men and desire.

Offred's own sexual encounters were also described with perfume. Before the rise of Gilead, Offred stated that she would, "dab behind my ears with perfume, Opium it was. It was in a Chinese bottle, red and gold" (Atwood 67). This bottle of perfume was connected to Offred's former romantic rendezvous in hotels with Luke. The bottle was red and its origin and name both speak of indulgence or luxury. She could afford little indulgences like the perfume in the time

before, and she could use them to appeal to men. The perfume leads Offred to reminisce about her romantic entanglements with Luke when she still had the power to love and make love at her own behest. However, perfume, like love and innocence, is a luxury no longer afforded to Offred in her present state.

Connected to Offred's reminiscence about sensuality and desire to excite others is her own craving to be touched and loved, embodied through the display of red. I have already mentioned that love is the color linked to passion, but more specifically, red is the color of love. Throughout society, love is depicted in the form of a glowing red heart. Sex, love, lust, and kisses are all strongly connected with the color red. Also, red is the color of a blush, like a blushing bride or the first blush of young love. The color is present in the text even when Offred thinks about love, "I kneel on my red velvet cushion. I try to think about tonight, about making love" (Atwood 351). Red is unequivocally tied to love and the passions of the soul.

With this in mind, it is perhaps a cruel joke to Offred to be perpetually cased in red, the color of love, but denied any form of expression for her love. Her desires extend beyond swaying her hips in front of the guards at the barrier; Offred craves the love and caresses of someone that loves her. In the words of Aunt Lydia from the Red Center, "Love, ... Don't let me catch you at it. No mooning and June-ing around here, girls. Wagging her finger at us. *Love* is not the point" (Atwood 285). Indeed, the "point" is not love; it is strictly for reproductive purposes. It is for this reason that Offred [describes?] intercourse with the Commander in these terms, "My red skirt is hitched up to my waist, though no higher. Below it the Commander is fucking. What he is fucking is the lower part of my body. I do not say making love, because that is not what he's doing." (121). There is no room for love in this arrangement; the only purpose is to produce a child.

Understanding her situation, however, does not stop Offred from feeling the loss of love in her life. This is shown in the conversation between Offred and the Commander, “You’re an intelligent person, I like to hear what you think. What did we overlook? Love, I said. Love? said the Commander. What kind of love? Falling in love, I said” (Atwood 284). Offred shows her desire for love in this passage; but, as a handmaid, she is powerless to rectify the situation, as seen in the Commander’s response, “Oh yes, he said. I’ve read the magazines, that’s what they were pushing, wasn’t it? But look at the stats, my dear. Was it really worth it, falling in love? Arranged marriages have always worked out just as well, if not better” (284). The Commander trivializes Offred’s desire for love to something from a magazine and further belittles her by referring to her as “my dear.” To Offred, love is everything, in her own words, “nobody dies from lack of sex. It’s lack of love we die from” (131-132). That is why she is not satisfied with mandatory sex, she wants to love, be loved, and make love on her own terms.

Her desire to be loved and touched is first seen in the text when Nick bumps his foot against hers while she is kneeling in the sitting room, “Is this on purpose? Whether it is or not we are touching, two shapes of leather. I feel my shoe soften, blood flows into it, it grows warm, it becomes a skin. I move my foot slightly, away” (Atwood 104). The language in this passage is highly eroticized. Offred speaks of her foot as if it has become a sexual organ through the description of it softening and blood flowing as the two become one, until it “grows warm” and like a skin. In addition, the language also utilizes red imagery to describe this small sensual encounter. The shoe is red and the crimson blood that flows into it produces heat. The red blood describes the passion that Offred feels at being touched and the heat of her desire, but the red shoe functions as a stop sign. Despite this sensual response, Offred reacts by moving her foot.

As a handmaid it is not her place to have sensual pleasure of any variety. She does not possess the power to overcome the red of her wardrobe to embrace the red of her passions. This

is perhaps why Offred imagines Nick taking off her dress in her first version of how events unfolded in Nick's room,

He's undoing my dress, a man made of darkness, I can't see his face, and I can hardly breathe, hardly stand, and I'm not standing. 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 (338).

Unlike the sex with the Commander, she refers to what is happening in this room as "love." However, the love can only happen after he first takes off the dress that represents her position as a handmaid. Atwood shows that this love is impossible by having Offred follow this description with, "I made that up. It didn't happen that way" (338). The reality of the situation is that love is impossible; the red of Offred's position prevents it. "Neither of us says the word love, not once" (347). In reality, Offred knows that, "there are to be no footholds for love. We are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (176).

The function of being a "sacred vessel" is also significant in discussion of red because of the many connections between the color and childbirth. A red Birthmobile collects all of the red-clad handmaids to take them to the home of a woman in labor. The birth scene with Janine further establishes this connection to red, "The smell is of our own flesh, an organic smell, sweat and a tinge of iron, from the blood on the sheet, and another smell, more animal, that's coming, it must be, from Janine" (Atwood 158). This animalistic smell of blood and childbirth shows the biological connection because the senses are filled with a heavy sense of red; Offred can smell and see the blood in the room, but she can also sense it on an instinctual level. The red blood fills the women with a sense of anticipation, on a very animalistic level, for the child that they know will be coming. When the baby does arrive, "it slithers out, slick with fluid and blood" followed by the red after birth (162). In addition to being covered in blood, the baby's head is described as

“purple,” implying that the blood of the baby has left its skin stained with a purplish hue (162). This whole scene is filled with red in the form of blood, birth, and the crimson wardrobes of the envious handmaids watching Janine give birth.

The connection between the red of the handmaids and birth highlights the nature of the power relationship between the handmaids and the rest of society. Handmaids are no longer free to think of themselves as people, but must think of themselves as governmental incubators. Offred discusses the power she possessed before the rise of Gilead, “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... There were limits, but my body was nevertheless lithe, single, solid, one with me” (Atwood 95). In contrast, since becoming a handmaid, Offred is forced to consider herself under a different light. She is no longer worth the sum of her parts, but the viability of her uterus and ovaries. She states, “Now the flesh arranges itself differently. 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” (95). Offred's view of herself is limited to a shell that wraps around her reproductive parts. Her uterus that “glows red,” signifies potential life, while her body fades to a “cloud” or “translucent wrapping.”

Her identity is limited to the ovaries and uterus that will either be her salvation or her demise, depending upon their ability to produce a healthy baby. The healthy baby is shown soaked in blood and purple hued because of the healthy red blood pulsing through its veins, symbolizing life for the baby and the freedom to continue living for the mother. The baby is representative of power for the handmaid to avoid a dismal future. However, the baby is ultimately passed on to another because handmaids are not meant to keep power. Regardless of the birth mother's inability to keep the child, this red-soaked baby means that, “she'll never be sent to the Colonies, she'll never be declared Unwoman” (163).

This idea of salvation goes back to the Biblical quote used early in the novel, “Give me children, or else I die” (*Reference Edition Bible* Gen. 30.1-3). Offred’s life hangs in the balance, and the indicator on whether or not she will be saved is a monthly appearance of red. Offred describes her monthly cycle in these terms,

Every month there is a moon, gigantic, round, heavy, an omen. It transits, pauses, continues on and passes out of sight, and I see despair coming towards me like famine. To feel that empty, again, again. I listen to my heart, wave upon wave, salty and red, continuing on and on, marking time (Atwood 95).

Offred’s vivid description of ovulation and menstruation show how she dreads the arrival of her period. She describes the “despair” of being “empty” as feeling like a “famine”. If she is not able to conceive, she will be sent off to work until she dies of radiation poisoning. Unlike the Biblical precedent, this situation is in fact life or death. This is yet another red situation in which Offred is powerless to save herself. In addition, her heart beats out the same “salty wave” of red that shows that she has, yet again, failed to get pregnant, symbolizing the despair that radiates throughout her whole body. Offred lacks any power to control the flow of her body to produce a child; consequently, she is unable to alleviate the waves of red despair that wash over her.

The situation remains, however, that even if Offred were to produce a child, as a handmaid, she would be unable to keep it. The desire she feels to possess both her daughter that was taken and any child that might be born is shown most poignantly through the flowers that Offred also desires to take, but cannot have. These flowers represent the desires that Offred possesses but is unable to satisfy because of her powerless position. Offred states that flowers are the “genital organs of plants,” and uses this knowledge to connect the flowers out of reach to her daughter that was taken away (Atwood 106). Looking out at Serena Joy’s domain of red tulips, Offred reminisces, “I once had a garden... Time could pass more swiftly that way... From a

distance it looks like peace” (Atwood 15-16). In the time before Gilead, Offred once had a garden, just as she also once had a peaceful life and a child to care for. As a handmaid, Offred does not have the luxury of being able to grow flowers or care for her own daughter. Instead, she watches Serena care for the flowers in the same way that she will care for Offred’s baby.

This desire for the fruits of cultivation is shown when Offred decides that she will steal a flower. When Offred decides to steal something she reasons, “What should I take? Something that will not be missed... A withered daffodil, not one from the dried arrangement. The daffodils will soon be thrown out, they're beginning to smell” (Atwood 126). She wants to take something to prove that she is alive and that she still has some control over her own life and desires. These desires center around flowers because they represent the beauty, love, and reproductive solidarity denied to her. However, Offred is not able to steal the beautiful red tulips or living flowers in the garden because she does not possess the power and autonomy that those flowers embody. Consequently, the flower that Offred tries to steal is a “withered daffodil” that “will not be missed.” Instead of being full of life and vitality like the blood red tulips, these flowers are close to death and putrid smelling. Offred cannot have a living flower or any life she produces.

In “(F)lorality, Gender, and the Environmental Ethos of *The Handmaid’s Tale*,” Deborah Hooker uses Offred’s statement while standing in the garden, “metamorphosis run wild. Goddesses are possible now and the air suffuses with desire,” to connect Offred’s yearning for her daughter to the mythological story of Persephone and Demeter (Atwood 196). Within the summer heat of the garden, Offred imagines a world where anything is possible and the air that “suffuses with desire” brings forth the memory and desire for her own daughter. Similar to the tragic mythological figure, Demeter, Offred has been separated from her daughter and uses flowers as a symbol for that loss. “In the *Hymn to Demeter* the natural object by which the Muses formerly endowed the good ruler with an erotic eloquence is used to entrap the daughter,

who is herself identified with ‘the narcissus/ which Earth grew as a snare for the flower-faced maiden/ a flower wondrous and bright, awesome for all to see’ (lines 7-10)” (Hooker 283).

However, it is not Offred’s daughter that has the desire for the narcissus in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, but Offred who longs for the daffodil, a common name for the same flower. Perhaps, Offred’s longing stems from a desire to connect with her daughter and stealing the flower was a way to briefly be reunited with her daughter and to maidenhood.

Hooker discusses how Offred’s memories of her daughter are frequently connected to flower imagery, such as Offred recalling a “small green nightgown with the sunflower on the front” that her daughter once wore (Atwood 139). Later in the story, Offred remembers making rings and necklaces from dandelions and smelling buttercups, ending the memory with, “It was daisies for love though, and we did that too” (276). The flowers that Offred associates with her daughter are all yellow flowers, not red. Cirlot states that, “. . .because of its shape, the flower is an image of the ‘Centre’, and hence an archetypal image of the soul” and “The significance would be adapted according to the colour of the flower” (Cirlot 110). This makes sense when considering the way that Offred passed her time among the yellow flowers with her daughter. She would use them to make rings, “crowns and necklaces, stains from the bitter milk on our fingers. Or I’d hold one under her chin: *Do you like butter?*” (Atwood 276). These images show younger, freer times of youthful innocence. Likewise, the yellow daisies are associated with love, but in the past tense, “we did that too.” The yellow innocence and love here are specifically connected to the daughter and Offred’s soul’s desire for the return of youthful happiness from the time before the revolution. That is why when Offred first see flowers, she focuses on the red tulips instead, stating, “. . .the daffodils are now fading and the tulips are opening their cups, spilling out color” (Atwood 16). The season of youthful innocence and time with her daughter is over, to be replaced by the mature reality of the handmaid.

Returning to the image of the garden, it is important to note that although Serena Joy is the care taker of this garden full of red flowers, she is associated with the color blue, not red, in the text. Instead of being associated with the blood colored tulips or bleeding hearts that are, “so female in shape it was a surprise they’d not long since been rooted out,” Serena is connected to the “irises, rising beautiful and cool on their tall stalks, like blown glass, like pastel water momentarily frozen in a splash” (Atwood 196). The red flowers here denote life and heat through the color and comparison to the body. The blue flowers, on the other hand, are described as “cool” and “frozen” like the reproductive system of Serena. Offred comments on this connection when she sees Serena wearing a blue dress with embroidered flowers, “Even at her age she still feels the urge to wreath herself in flowers. No use for you, I think at her...you can’t use them anymore, you’re withered. They’re the genital organs of plants” (104-105). Unlike Offred, Serena has no use for her genital organs; so instead, she dresses herself in them as a reminder of her own days of fertility.

Flowers depicting sterility are also used in the scene where Offred and the Commander are engaging in intercourse in Serena’s bed. The canopy of Serena’s bed is “a cloud sprigged with tiny drops of silver rain, which, if you looked at them closely, would turn out to be four-petaled flowers” (120). The flowers on Serena’s bed are silver and lifeless, just like Serena’s womb, which is why she must use Offred as a surrogate mother. Cirlot states that while “red flowers emphasize the relationship with animal life, blood and passion,” in contrast, “the ‘blue flower’ is a legendary symbol of the impossible,” which in this case represents Serena’s ability to produce a child (“Flower” 110). Consequently, Serena is the care taker of the red flowers, just like she houses the handmaid. Then, any child that comes, like any flower that grows, will be hers to care for and nurture because she has the power to keep life, but not create it.

This system of receiving the fruits of another's labor is depicted in the scene after Janine gives birth where "the Commander's Wife looks down at the baby as if it's a bouquet of flowers: something she's won, a tribute" (Atwood 163). Despite being able to receive a baby, like a flower someone else has grown, this does not prevent the resentment and humiliation on Serena's part at having to rely on a handmaid. This is shown through the scene where Serena Joy is cutting the seed pods off of the red tulips.

She was snipping off the seed pods with a pair of shears...She was aiming, positioning the blades of the shears, then cutting with a convulsive jerk of the hands. Was it the arthritis, creeping up? Or some blitzkrieg, committed on the swelling genitalia of the flowers? The fruiting body. To cut off the seedpods is supposed to make the bulb store energy. Saint Serena, on her knees, doing penance (195).

The seedpods are symbolic of the handmaid's role within society, the red women who reproduce for the benefit of others. In this scene, Serena is not merely trimming plants, she is violently cutting the "swelling genitalia" of the red flowers because she mentally connects the red flowers to the handmaids and resents their existence. However, she is described as "doing penance" because this is her punishment for being sterile: she must house and nurture another woman and share her husband in order to have a baby.

Despite relying on Offred, Serena is bitter about the sexual nature of the relationship, which is why she snips so violently. The flower is red, the color of love, but the name of the flower implies even more sensual connections. The tulip phonetically sounds the same as two lips, implying a kiss from two lips. Likewise, the tulip could symbolize the two red lips of a woman's vagina, in regard to "swelling genitalia." Both of these explanations would aid in understanding why Serena cuts the plant savagely, because she wishes to remove all sensuality from the handmaid's position. Serena is sexually separated from her husband and her own womb

has failed her. Consequently, she attacks the red seedpods because they symbolize Offred who can engage sexually with the Commander and reproduce when Serena could not.

As I have already suggested, Offred pays special attention to the tulips that “are opening their cups, spilling out color” because they are symbolic of the handmaids and their function in Gilead (Atwood 16). The tulips are described as “opening their cups” as if they were waiting to be filled, and indeed, Offred desires to have her womb filled with a child. However, they are also “spilling out their color” which implies bleeding. As I have already mentioned, the presence of menstrual blood is hugely detrimental to a handmaid. This passage, therefore, shows that Offred, despite wanting to be filled, is unable to overcome this “spilling” of blood, or has yet to become pregnant.

These red tulips continue to serve as a representative of Offred’s reproductive status throughout the story. Initially, they are “opening their cups” because Offred has just arrived and is trying, unsuccessfully, to get pregnant. Later, Offred states, “The tulips along the border are redder than ever, opening, no longer wine cups but chalices; thrusting themselves up, to what end? They are after all, empty” (59-60). The tulips are now even redder and fully opened, however, like Offred, they are empty. This echoes Offred’s statement, “What we prayed for was emptiness, so we would be worthy to be filled: with grace, with love, with self-denial, semen and babies” (251). This change in the tulips shows Offred’s physical change, she is still fertile, but running out of time until she faces a similar fate of the flowers where, “they turn themselves inside out, then explode slowly, the petals thrown out like shards” (60) She is fully “open,” but powerless to be filled.

Offred’s allotted time as a handmaid is drawing to an end. In the final scene where Offred sees the tulips, she states, “The tulips have had their moment and are done, shedding their petals one by one, like teeth” (195). In this passage, Offred is projecting to the future because she has

not become pregnant yet and her time is almost up. The tulips to her represent what her condition will be if she does not become pregnant immediately: she will be declared Unwoman and sent to clean up radiation until her teeth fall out from poisoning. Serena is aware of this too, which is perhaps the source of her violence as she cuts the seedpods from the tulips. Serena has already given up on her husband as a source of sex by this point, and has possibly already asked Nick to be her new “seedpod” to impregnate Offred before the time is up (339).

Returning to the tulips “spilling out color,” Offred also uses the color of tulips to refer to the blood of martyrdom. The blood references violent acts, but also represents her inner desires. In the first case, Offred and Ofglen look at the red wall where the martyrs are hung and see six bodies, “but on one bag there’s blood, which has seeped through the white cloth, where the mouth must have been. It makes another mouth...A child’s idea of a smile” (Atwood 43). The red “smile” catches Offred’s attention and leads her to comment,

I look at the one red smile. The red of the smile is the same as the red of the tulips in Serena Joy’s garden, towards the base of the flowers where they are beginning to head.

The red is the same but there is no connection. The tulips are not tulips of blood and the red smiles are not flowers, neither thing makes a comment on the other (44).

As Madonne Miner states in her article, “‘Trust Me’: Reading the Romance Plot in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*,” “I think we must question her claim that ‘there is no connection’... Obviously, Offred herself sees a connection; she yokes the two together metaphorically: the red is the same” (151). Miner argues that both “suggest a type of sensual pleasure; both convey positive connotations” for Offred (151). However, Offred separates the two because “such metaphorical representations of her dismal situation can make Offred only more dismal” and she denies the red to “protect herself from the hardest truths in her life” (152).

While the bloody smile and tulips might have positive connotations for Offred, they do not “suggest a type of sensual pleasure.” Instead, they are representations of her innermost desires that she pushes down so she will not have to face her own powerlessness. More specifically, the tulips represent Offred’s inability to bear and raise children and the bloody smile is symbolic of Offred’s inability to kill herself. Both of these desires are out of Offred’s reach. I have already discussed Offred’s separation from the products of reproduction, so I will now examine Offred’s desire to kill herself that she cannot fulfill.

It seems clear enough that Offred has thought about ways to end her life before based on her reaction upon seeing the hooks, “...how could they have overlooked the hooks? Why didn't they remove them? Too close to the floor? But still, a stocking, that's all you'd need.” (Atwood 69). She even states later on, “I’ve considered the possibilities” (252). Her desire to commit suicide is also clear in how she refers to others who have killed themselves. The man on the wall is described as smiling, even if it is with blood. Likewise, when Offred imagines the handmaid before her who killed herself, Offred states, “I look up at the ceiling, the round circle of plaster flowers...That's where she was swinging, just lightly...the way you could swing as a child...She was safe then, protected altogether” (274). The descriptions of death in these scenes are happy, like a peaceful release from Offred’s trying life and a return to youthful innocence.

Additionally, both of the death scenes depict flowers, which Offred frequently takes note of to remember past happiness. Offred even states, “I've tried to put some of the good things in as well. Flowers, for instance, because where would we be without them?” (Atwood 344). Referring to flowers as a “good thing” makes it implausible to believe that Offred would use flowers to describe anything that she found “dismal.” Rather, she uses flowers to describe her inner most desires that are sometimes painful because she does not have the means to see them to fruition. For example, she uses flowers to describe stains on her mattress, “Like dried flower

petals. Not recent. Old love; there's no other kind of love in this room now" (68). She also refers to her dialogue with Nick as "faded paper flowers" because it only echoes of real romance (339). Both flower examples show past love that cannot exist and are separated by saying "dried" or "faded paper flowers." So, in contrast to Miner's point, Offred is not disassociating herself from her life, but avoiding the shame of not having the fortitude to end it.

Cigarettes function like the dress and flowers to show the power of the color red, embodied here by the lit red end of a cigarette. However, to properly grasp the relationship between cigarettes and power, it is necessary to look at how the perception of smoking has evolved over time. According to the BBC documentary, *The Century of the Self*, the cultural meaning of cigarettes today can largely be contributed to one man, Edward Bernays, who worked in the 1920s to "persuade women to smoke. At the time, there was a taboo against women smoking, and one of his early clients...asked Bernays to find a way of breaking into the market." Psychoanalyst A. A. Brill explained to Bernays that, "cigarettes were a symbol of the penis and of male sexual power." The documentary goes on to state that "if he could find a way to connect cigarettes with the idea of challenging male power, that women would smoke because then they would have their own penises."

Bernays accomplished his plan by convincing rich debutantes to hide cigarettes under their clothes, then light them up while walking in the annual Easter Parade. At the same time, he told the press that a group of suffragettes were protesting by lighting up "torches of freedom." This symbolic act created "the idea that if a woman smoked, it made her more powerful and independent," an idea that is still prevalent in this story, based on the fact that all of the female main characters smoke.

Bernays' influence continues throughout *The Handmaid's Tale* in the sense that cigarettes symbolize power for those who possess them. Atwood uses cigarettes to establish

figures with authority early on because cigarettes are technically illegal, so anyone smoking had power to obtain things. In her first meeting with Offred, Serena establishes her dominance by pulling out a cigarette and smoking it. Offred comments, “She then was a woman who might bend the rules. But what did I have to trade? I looked at the cigarette with longing. For me, like liquor and coffee, they are forbidden” (Atwood 19). This encounter sets up the relationship between Serena and Offred: Serena has the power to bend the rules, while Offred is subject to the restrictions placed on her by her position and symbolized by her wardrobe. Serena’s power is further established when she extinguishes her cigarette with “one jab and one grind, not the series of genteel taps favored by many of the Wives” (21). She exerts her power and sovereignty over the household while Offred looks on longingly.

Nick also establishes his positions through the “cigarette stuck in the corner of his mouth, which shows that he too has something he can trade on the black market” (Atwood 24). Likewise, almost every scene after this shows Nick smoking or with a cigarette behind his ear. With relative power established by ability to bend the rules, Nick is very well situated. In contrast, Moira, like Offred can only look on at the smoke while she is a handmaid. Her lack of power is seen through her first statement upon meeting Offred again, “God, do I need a cigarette” (95). Moira, forced into a position of female supplication, craves the former control over her own life that she used to possess. This is why her small climb in power by becoming a prostitute at Jezebels is marked by her being able to smoke again.

This loss of power for Moira and Offred becomes more significant when compared to the freedom to smoke that they both experienced before the fall. Offred prized Moira on her ability to bum and borrow cigarettes without drawing resentment, and she is always shown smoking one while exhibiting her female autonomy. Moira discusses plans for hosting an underwear party while smoking a stolen cigarette, “You know, like Tupperware, only with underwear. Tarts’

stuff. Lace crotches, snap garters. Bras that push your tits up” (Atwood 73). In this section of dialogue, Moira casually discusses clothing that showcases female sexuality, items that are later outlawed in Gilead, while smoking a cigarette.

Offred also freely smoked in the time before Gilead when she retained her power as an individual. In fact, the scene where Offred first realizes the new status of women in her society occurs while trying to buy cigarettes. She begins the scene with her prior sense of power fully intact. She states that she is “at the store where I usually bought my cigarettes,” showing that not only did she smoke, but she had the ability to procure her own cigarettes (Atwood 226). Slowly, the reader is able to see the shift of power from Offred to the male cashier as the scene progresses. Offred begins to get agitated, “I drummed my fingers on the counter, impatient for a cigarette, wondering if anyone had ever told him something could be done about those pimples on his neck” (227). Here Offred has the desire to insult the clerk in order to establish her authority as the one with the power in this transaction. However, after her account pops up as invalid, he is the one who talks down to her, “It’s not valid, he repeated obstinately. See that red light? Means it’s not valid” (227). Offred, trying one last time to retain her authority makes him put the number in again while she watches, but it is clear to see who leaves the exchange as the dominant party after this exchange, “See? he said again, still with that smile, as if he knew some private joke he wasn’t going to tell me” (227). After that, Offred was forced to leave the cigarettes on the counter with the knowledge that she had begun to lose power as an individual.

It is because Offred exists as such a powerless figure that the transference of something as trivial as a cigarette seems to restore her identity. Only after Moira gives Offred a cigarette at Jezebels are they able to speak to each other as friends, like they did before they were handmaids (Atwood 315). Likewise, Nick eases Offred into their shared sexual misconduct with the statement “Have a drag” (338). This cigarette makes Offred think of sexual culture before Gilead

and they sit quoting old romance movies before they make love. However, the most remarkable transference of power occurs when Serena gives Offred a cigarette in exchange for agreeing to sleep with Nick. For Serena, the cigarette is a small gesture; Offred imagines her “thinking: cheap. They’ll spread their legs for anyone. All you need to give them is a cigarette” (340). To Offred however, the cigarette gives her the feeling of power that she has not possessed for years. Her power comes from her realization that she can resist the “rich dirty cinnamon sigh” and keep the cigarette and match (270). By not smoking the cigarette, she is maintaining her sense of male sexual power; but, more importantly, she is holding onto an unlit match. She realizes, “I could burn the house down. Such a fine thought, it makes me shiver. An escape, quick and narrow” (271). This return of power through the cigarette and unlit match allow Offred to once again feel independent, because with the power of red fire, she finally has some control restored to her life.

Flames and fire also make a few appearances within the text in connection to fire. There were bonfires and protests in Times Square where large amounts of lingerie were burned, with “the manufacturers and importers and salesmen down on their knees, repenting in public, conical paper hats like dunce hats on their heads, SHAME printed on them in red” (Atwood 298-299). An earlier fire with Offred’s mother features women burning pornography. Offred states about the women, “Their faces were happy, ecstatic almost. Fire can do that” (51). This fire gave them the feeling that they had the power to end objectification of women by burning pornographic magazines. In both cases, the flames give the responsible parties a feeling of control, of the power to destroy those things that offend.

A connection to flame, lava, also appears in this story as a metaphor for the power that rises up within Offred. After Moira manages to break out of the Red Center, she becomes a symbol for the other handmaids. Offred states,

Nevertheless Moira was our fantasy. We hugged her to us, she was with us in secret, a giggle; she was lava beneath the crust of daily life. In the light of Moira, the Aunts were less fearsome and more absurd. Their power had a flaw to it (Atwood 172).

Like lava beneath the earth, a sense of resistance grows in Offred and the other handmaids because Moira shows them how the Aunts' power is limited and gives them the hope of freedom. Offred has a similar experience after the Commander makes himself vulnerable to her by asking her for a kiss. She describes, "...the laughter boiling like lava in my throat...I'll choke on it. My ribs hurt with holding back, I shake, I heave, seismic, volcanic, I'll burst. Red all over the cupboard...oh to die of laughter" (189-190). The Commander does not seem so powerful when he is making such trivial requests as to be kissed, "As if you meant it" (181). In both cases, the Aunts and the Commander betray their power by showing weakness, allowing the handmaids to experience the most dangerous feelings of rebellion, mirth. What once was terrifying is now absurd, and the people in positions of authority lose their control once they can be ridiculed.

This mirth, the matches and cigarettes, the flowers, the blood, and the dress are all red and symbolize the lack of power in the life of Offred. Her dress is mandated uniform that she cannot separate herself from. The flowers also show her powerlessness to possess the products of her womb. Likewise, the blood of martyrdom represents her inability to end her life and seize her desire of a safe place. The banned cigarettes are symbolic of the masculine sense of dominance and the match is the desire for destruction and control. All of these red things in her life show how she is powerless to form her own identity and deviate from the rules, a symbolic stop sign that prevents her from becoming her own person. It is only after Offred gains the power of red objects through the cigarettes, the match, and her laughter like lava, that she is able to form an identity separate from her caste as a handmaid. These red objects remind her of who she was in the time before Gilead and lead her back to her personality that was buried beneath the

oppressive red. Finally, she gains power over these red symbols and is able to see the weakness within Gilead. Instead of quivering under the red cloak of rules, she is able to let out a laugh, like a volcano erupting at the absurdity of the regime's power.

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