

The Unwoman as der Untermensch

A Comparative Analysis of the Totalitarian Rhetorics of *The Handmaid's Tale* and Nazi Germany



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Marit van de Warenburg (5631319)
Supervisor: Cathelein Aaftink
Second Assessor: Johanna Hoorenman

Abstract

Margaret's Atwood dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale* has of recent been connected to the current political climate due to its supposed realistic character. This thesis explores this realistic character with regard to the novel's depiction of totalitarian rhetorics to provide insight in how rhetorics function as a mechanism by which regimes convey and manifest their ideology. It analyses the extent to which the rhetorics of Gilead's regime are exemplary for real totalitarian rhetorics by comparing it to the rhetorics of Nazi Germany. With regard to Nazi Germany, the notion of Edward Said's "Other," repetition and euphemism are discussed as primary aspects of the regime's rhetorics to analyse their totalitarian character. Five key themes of Gilead's rhetorics are discussed, namely biblical metaphors, military language, labels, unsubstantial language and pragmatic metaphors. These categories are used to show the extent to which Gilead's rhetorics are representative for totalitarian language. Furthermore, a thorough appendix on these rhetorics is provided. In a comparative analysis, the way the totalitarian rhetorics of Nazi Germany and Gilead establish and feed their grand narratives in similar manners is explored. The thesis thereby sheds light on the role language plays in the implementation of ideologies, and hence on the importance of alertness regarding totalitarian rhetorics.

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Introduction

“There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia.

Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy,
it was freedom to. Now you are given freedom from.

Don't underrate it.”

(Atwood 34)

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is set in the Republic of Gilead, a fictional country portrayed as a misogynist dystopia. A Christian fundamentalist group has established a totalitarian state under despotic rule, which—after fertility rates dropping for unspecified reasons—forces fertile women, now known as Handmaids, to breed babies for the elite. The novel's protagonist, Offred, is coerced into becoming one of these Handmaids.

Although Atwood's novel was written in 1984 and published in 1985, the work has received increasing attention over the last couple of years. One reason for the story's renewed popularity lies in the airing of Hulu's praised adaptation of the novel in 2017. Moreover, an essential factor in the novel's rise in acclaim can be gathered from the current political climate in Europe and North America. The inauguration of Donald Trump and subsequent developments under his government—primarily with regard to female rights and abortion—has readers and critics making the claim that the novel could foreshadow a dystopian future (Hawkes). In *The New York Times*, Alexander Alter points out that the popularity of dystopian novels boomed right after Trump's election. Such a response arguably reflects the wariness of readers concerning the authoritarian overtones of Trump's rhetorics (Alter). Moira Wiegel writes in *The New Yorker* that “now that there are men in power who speak the language of

overt misogyny, and use religious concerns to justify restrictions on lives of women, fans are invoking the story as a symbol of protest.”

Some critics doubt whether making such comparisons between Trump’s America and Gilead can be justified—since novelists are “neither reporters nor prophets” (Csanady), and progressives are argued to ignore that women’s rights cannot be taken away that easily (Lowry). Nevertheless, many critics acknowledge that the novel depicts a realistic image of former and current totalitarian states and states of mind (Finigan, Laflen, Stillman and Johnson). Thereby, it could be argued that Gilead’s workings could be representative for the way totalitarian tendencies shape contemporary politics.

Atwood herself claims that Gilead’s despotism is “the same as all real ones and most imagined ones” (*PMLA* 513) and that she did not want to “include anything that human beings had not already done in some other place or time” (*Toad Limited*). Many specific details from the novel are inspired by totalitarian regimes and religious states such as 17th century Puritan England, North Korea, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Nazi Germany (Hawkes). Atwood’s work also portrays totalitarian characteristics in a broader sense: “Gilead is always at war with external enemies (and, according to the news, always winning); ... [T]hose who do not fit the society’s norms are re-educated, expelled, or executed” (Stillman and Johnson 70). Furthermore, just like many totalitarian states, Gilead constitutes a grand narrative, as defined by Jean-François Lyotard. Theo Finigan also underscores the novel’s totalitarian features, and points out that the protagonist’s resistance to Gilead’s totalitarian regime seems to amount to an “obsessive search for fragmentary traces of the past,” which, amongst other factors such as memory and materiality, is manifested in language (448).

It is remarkable, however, that secondary literature on *The Handmaid’s Tale* primarily focuses on the protagonist’s rhetorics; especially since ideological rhetorics are a significant aspect of totalitarian politics, and—in a more contemporary view—the concerns with regard

to Trump are often based on his daunting language. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the language Offred uses to describe her life as Handmaid enables her to hold on to her memories and keeps her sane. Rather than adopting Gilead's rhetorics, Offred keeps to her own words and at the same time consciously contemplates Gilead's argot, thereby practicing a type of resistance writing. It is relevant, however, to also consider what rhetorics Offred is trying to counter through this resistance. Do these rhetorics resemble the language of real totalitarian regimes? Exploring this matter can help determine whether claims regarding the realistic character of the novel are also viable when it comes to the novel's totalitarian rhetorics. Comparing the novel to a real totalitarian regime provides a more thorough insight in this matter.

In this study, the totalitarian rhetorics of Gilead and Nazi Germany are compared. Although the novel was inspired by many totalitarian regimes, the reason for comparing it to Nazi Germany lies in the significant role rhetorics played in Hitler's national socialistic regime. Karin Doerr argues that Nazism permeated the "flesh and blood of the people through single words, idioms and sentence structures which were imposed on them in a million repetitions" (27). Due to the great implication the totalitarian rhetorics had in Nazi Germany, this specific regime serves as a viable example for the purposes of this research.

This thesis investigates the realistic character of Gilead's totalitarian rhetorics, and compares them to the rhetorics of Nazi Germany. This approach results in a comparative analysis of Nazi German and Gilead's argot. The main question is: to what extent are Gilead's rhetorics in *The Handmaid's Tale* exemplary for totalitarian rhetorics? This question is further investigated by a comparison to Nazi German, which leads to the sub-question: to what extent do the totalitarian rhetorics in *The Handmaid's Tale* resemble the rhetorics of Nazi Germany? Answering these two questions provides insight in how rhetorics function as a mechanism by which regimes convey and manifest their ideology.

In this study, totalitarian rhetorics are defined as language relating to the politics of the totalitarian state, which in its implementation promotes the state's ideology and obscures unwelcome interpretations. Specific characteristics by which to recognise totalitarian rhetorics are primarily gathered from W.I.M. van Calcar's *Totalitair Taalgebruik*. The first chapter of this thesis discusses the language of Nazi Germany and approaches its totalitarian characteristics. It discusses three elements of Nazi German, namely the use of "Othering," euphemisms and repetition. Throughout the chapter, the detrimental effect of these rhetorics is displayed. In the second chapter, an analysis of totalitarian rhetorics in *The Handmaid's Tale* is provided, whereupon the extent to which these can be considered a realistic representation of totalitarian rhetorics is discussed. The chapter proposes five key aspects of Gilead's totalitarian rhetorics: biblical metaphors, military language, labels, unsubstantial language and pragmatic metaphors. The third chapter combines the findings of the first two chapters, thereby resulting in a comparative analysis which seeks analogies between Gilead and Nazi Germany, and sheds light on the role of rhetorics in the implementation of totalitarian ideologies. It argues how the totalitarian rhetorics articulate and feed the grand narratives of the regimes, and demonstrates the role of continuity in shaping these. These findings illuminate the way totalitarian rhetorics are of importance in implementing ideologies, and may provide insight in the relevance of rhetorics in contemporary political contexts.

Chapter 1

Nazi-Germany and Its Ideological Rhetorics

The Nazis employed language as an instrument through which they implemented their ideology. This chapter gives insight in how and to what effect the national socialistic regime implemented these rhetorics. Later in this thesis, these results are compared to Gilead's rhetorics. This chapter addresses three key concepts present in Nazi German: Edward Said's notion of "Othering," euphemisms and repetition. Although these three elements provide a somewhat concise overview of Nazi German, they underscore how rhetorics were essential in the implementation of the regime's ideology.

In his influential work *Orientalism*, Said introduces a binary relation of hierarchy whereby one's own culture is opposed to an inferior other (65-7). In the case of *Orientalism*, the Western world portrays the Orient as being inherently strange and different and therefore "Other" (65-6). This idea of "Othering" also played a significant role in the rhetorics of Nazi Germany, and had considerable impact on the indoctrination of the German people. The rhetorics were so pervasive that they affected the thinking of the nation and subsequently had an irreparable effect on its victims (Doerr 27). In her work on anti-Semitism and the Holocaust, Beth Griech-Polelle draws on the ideas of political scientist Jacques Semelin. Semelin traces the development of the extermination of enemies, and states that rhetorics adhering to extermination revolve around the themes "identity," "purity" and "security" (Griech-Polelle 1). Griech-Polelle argues this results in an "'Us' versus 'Them' world," tying in with the notion of "Othering," where insiders are coerced into believing that the outsiders—in Nazi Germany amongst others non-Aryan people, such as Jews, and political opponents, such as communists—seek to destroy the coherence of the insiders (1). Since there was a long-established tradition in which Jews in particular were depicted as threatening outsiders, the Nazis could easily argue that Jews had to be eliminated in order to protect the

identity, the purity and the security of the German *Volksgemeinschaft* (Griech-Polelle 2,7). “Othering” successfully deemed non-Aryan people and political opponents as enemies that had to be pursued, for the Nazis implied they were only acting in self-defence (Griech-Polelle 2). According to Griech-Polelle, the “Other,” in reference to Jews, was portrayed in rhetorics suggesting that Jews were “dirty, foreign, corrupt, corrupting and never to be trusted” (2); Jews were perceived as *Volksbazillen* (bacteria threatening the nation; Doerr 31). These stigmas were often exaggerated with a significant characteristic of totalitarian rhetorics, “pragmatic metaphors,” whereby people are reduced to things or issues (Van Calcar 118). The infamous example *Untermensch*, meaning as much as “subhuman creature,” to describe anyone non-Aryan, perhaps best indicates how the Nazis advocated “Othering” through their rhetorics.

In addition to “Othering,” euphemisms also played a significant role in Nazi German. Although outsiders were explicitly presented as threatening enemies, the regime did not as specifically formulate their solution for these enemies. Although the step the Germans took towards genocide meant a step towards a language of persecution and murder (Doerr 33), this language was of a euphemistic, distorted and opaque nature. It has become known as *Nazi-Tarnjargon* (*Tarnen* meaning to camouflage) or *Exekutionsvokabular* (33), and could be considered a mask for the regime’s criminality and violence against their enemies (Young 53). The most infamous example of *Tarnjargon* might be the term *Endlösung der Judenfrage*. Even though the phrase translates roughly as the “final solution for the Jewish issue,” it implied a scheme for mass murder and genocide. Further examples such as *Arbeitslager* (work camp), *Umsiedlung* (resettlement) and *Sonderbehandlung* (meaning “special treatment,” but indicating murder) also served as euphemisms which disguised the actual impact of the Nazis’ conduct. *Tarnjargon* added a level of secrecy to the acts of the government, thereby withholding the truth from the German public. In doing so, the regime

permitted itself to employ its schemes more freely. Since the people believed—at least initially—that the *Endlösung*, and all subsequent development regarding the extermination of the “Other,” had no connotation to mass murder, resistance to adopting Nazi rhetorics was relatively minor (Griech-Polelle 2).

Another typical phenomenon of Nazi Germany was repetition (Van Toorn qtd. In Van Calcar 124). In Nazi Germany, phrases such as *Juda verrecke!* (Jews, be damned!) and *Juden raus!* (Jews out!) were continually repeated. Doerr states that such repetition certainly amounted to linguistic manipulation in the Third Reich and contributed to the isolation of Jews from German society (31). The phrase *Heil Hitler* and the numerous *Treueide* (loyalty oaths) such as *Führer befehl, wir folgen dir!* (Führer, command and we will follow you!) and *Meine Ehre heißt Treue* (My honour is—synonymous to—loyalty) were continually repeated as well. These were employed at all levels of German society, from the *Hitlerjugend* to the SS (31). Since repetition brings about a continual refreshing and re-using of terms through which their validity is affirmed (Auestad 24), repetition resulted in a persistent acknowledgement of national socialistic words and phrases. The emphasis on their validity in its turn affirmed the ideology they served (24); subsequently, this persistent reminder of the ideology also affirmed its validity.

The three concepts discussed above were effective instruments in the implementation of the national socialistic ideology. They were not merely separate mechanisms but also interacted: “Othering” was made successful through the use of euphemisms. The continual repetition of phrases, but also of *Tarnjargon* and terms regarding “Othering,” emphasised and validated the regime’s ideology. Following this overview of Nazi German, the next chapter provides an analysis of Gilead’s totalitarian rhetorics.

Chapter 2

The Totalitarian Rhetorics of Gilead

This chapter sheds light on the totalitarian rhetorics of *The Handmaid's Tale* by presenting five key aspects of Gilead's rhetorics.¹ The totalitarian rhetorics of Gilead are primarily present in the Gileadean argot, a language representative of today's language only altered when it comes to linguistic deviation adhering to the ideology of the regime, which is articulated in terms such as "The Ceremony" and "Commander's Wives" (Ketterer 215). Since Atwood allows her narrator to delight with words, the novel draws very specific attention to language (Stillman and Johnson 75). Therefore, the distinction between Gilead's totalitarian rhetorics and Offred's "own" language use is quite evident. In analysing the language deemed totalitarian, the focus lies on instances in Offred's account that specifically present words or phrases which reflect the rhetorics of Gilead. The totalitarian rhetorics discussed in this chapter are biblical metaphors, military language, labels, unsubstantial language and pragmatic metaphors.

Totalitarian rhetorics tend to break down a state's former discourse by imposing new rhetorics and eliminating aspects of the former discourse (Glowinski qtd. in Keers 157). In Gilead, the new discourse demonstrates biblical influences. The use of biblical language in totalitarian states is not uncommon: "[A] nation sanctifies itself, and its state, through the transcendental. It sees itself as God's ally ... its state as the political manifestation of His religion" (Abulof 520). Such nations hold religion and God as necessary and sufficient legitimation for their actions, a view which manifests itself—amongst other factors—in rhetorics (518). The idea of "political religion" as discussed by Uriel Abulof can be applied to Gilead; its ideology is primarily based on its interpretation of the Bible. For instance, "The Ceremony"—a term which in itself connotes with religion—is legitimised through Genesis

¹ Not all instances of totalitarian rhetorics are discussed, but an extensive description and interpretation of all the elements can be found in the Appendix.

30:1-3. In the Bible, Jacob's wife, Rachel, was infertile, and therefore suggested that Jacob had children with Rachel's servant, a handmaiden. These children were then raised by Rachel and Jacob (Ketterer 210). In Gilead, before the Ceremony takes place, the Commander reads Genesis 30:1-3 to his Wife, his Handmaid and the rest of his staff (Atwood 101). It serves as a reminder for the function of the Ceremony: everyone has their duty, and the Commander's duty—as a Son of Jacob (See Appendix A)—is to provide Gilead with healthy children. Besides such specific uses of the Bible, religion is also woven through the accepted discourse of Gilead. Handmaids are taught to greet each other with the phrases “Blessed be the fruit” and “May the Lord open” (Atwood 29) (See Appendix C). The accepted farewell greeting “Under His Eye” (Atwood 54) emphasises the omnipresence of God's eyes—and hence the regime—in Gilead's society. The greetings operate as a means of control: by enforcing an obligatory response, the Handmaids constantly act as each other's spies. The workings of Gilead are arranged as to please God, and thereby, are legitimised.

Military language is another important aspect of Gilead's rhetorics. In *Totalitair Taalgebruik*, Van Calcar introduces martial metaphors, that is, metaphors that use terms deriving from war to describe ordinary events or things (118). In Gilead, the hierarchy has a military character which is primarily articulated in language, whereby many martial metaphors are used. From high to lower ranking, Gilead's society is roughly divided in Commanders, Angels, Commander's Wives, Aunts, Guardians, Handmaids, Econowives and Unwomen (See Appendix A). Strikingly, many of the higher ranking classes display a military character, but do so only on a rhetorical level. For instance, although *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines “commander” as “[a] person in authority, especially over a body of troops or a military operation” (OED), Gilead's Commanders are, although unmistakably persons “in authority,” not as involved in military operations as their title suggests. They are politicians, primarily concerned with law making and not connected to Gilead's army.

Nevertheless, the title has a connotation of power, and therefore constitutes an effective martial metaphor. Additionally, the Commander's Wives and Aunts have titles adhering to military language as well. Although the Wives are inferior to their husbands, they appear to have a considerable amount of power, especially over Handmaids. Their title, a combination of the more subjugated term "wife" and the rather dominating and martial term "commander," underscores their paradoxical role, but at the same time clearly indicates their position in society. With regard to the Aunts, Pilar Somacarrera argues that their function is to "disseminate the doctrine among women, [by] exercising a matriarchal power which is disguised as a spirit of camaraderie, similar to that of the army" (53). The novel's epilogue explains that the Aunts' names, such as Lydia and Elizabeth, derive from commercial products available in the immediate pre-Gilead period as to sound familiar and reassuring to the Handmaids (Atwood 321). From the epilogue can be gathered that the Commanders arguably made this choice as to promote the doctrine amongst women on a more indirect level. Additionally, the camaraderie Somacarrera identifies leads to unity, which Van Calcar deems a significant objective of martial metaphors (118).

Furthermore, Van Calcar points out that totalitarian rhetorics tend to impose labels in order to categorize society (120). Labels can occur in two different ways: one-sided—meaning that they are used to make a group of individuals equal—and two-sided—meaning that the labels oppose groups to one another, thereby also tying in with Said's notion of the "Other" (Van Calcar 120, Said 65-7). The above discussed ranks are all exemplary for one-sided labels; the social groups in Gilead are equalised and not opposed to one another as to keep order in society. When it comes to Gilead's enemy, however, there are two-sided labels at work. The regime uses the term "Unwomen," as opposed to "normal" women, for women who have been determined to be useless for Gilead. Unwomen are mostly infertile, older women, but can generally be any woman questioning or resisting Gilead's rule. Unwomen are

for instance feminists, who advocate women's rights and thereby oppose Gilead's patriarchal society, and lesbians, who, according to Gilead's regime, ignore God's teachings. Unwomen are sent to The Colonies, a banishment which represents a death sentence. A two-sided label, such as this one, through which a term connotes with immorality and uselessness, and eventually death, urges women to behave in such a manner as to avoid falling into this category. The mere term serves as a means of control over Gilead's female society.

Moreover, the novel displays several instances in which Gilead's regime has changed the meaning of a word or has given several different meanings to a word in order to legitimise certain aspects of the regime (See Appendix E and F). Van Calcar refers to such rhetorics as "unsubstantial language," or, in other words, language that is deceptive (118). In the re-education centre, the Aunts teach the Handmaids new morals which are at times presented through unsubstantial language. For instance, with regard to the word "freedom": "There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are given freedom from. Don't underrate it" (Atwood 34). Although Aunt Lydia acknowledges that there was a different kind of freedom in the past, she immediately connects this type of freedom to anarchy. Even though the pre-Gileadean nation was not anarchist, Aunt Lydia gives the past definition of "freedom" a negative connotation. In this light, "freedom from," meaning given *to* the Handmaids *by* God, and by association the regime, is presented as the better option. Another significant instance of unsubstantial language is underscored when Offred's doctor reveals to her that most Commanders are sterile, whereas Gilead promotes the notion that only women can be infertile (Atwood 71). Offred is shocked at hearing this: "[A]lthough [she] seems to know intuitively that the Commanders are sterile, her shock ... demonstrates how easily people can accept as a social fact even what they know is a lie" (Laflen 88). Offred remarks that men are never

“sterile” in Gilead: “There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that’s the law” (Atwood 71).

This example also underscores another instance of totalitarian rhetorics in Gilead, namely rhetorics by which people are reduced to things or issues. In the case of “barren,” women are described by a term usually indicative of land too poor to produce any vegetation. Gilead’s inhabitants, and women in particular, are regularly objectified in terms such as this one. An ubiquity of Van Calcar’s “pragmatic metaphors” are presented throughout the novel (See Appendix A, D, E and F). Handmaids are fruitful “seeds,” who can be “allotted” or “issued” to men, after which they have to adopt a name combining the preposition “of” and their Commander’s first name, as is the case for Offred (Atwood 27, 28, 32, 101). As a result, the members of Gilead’s society are inevitably reduced to their function. If they are not individuals but things, and thereby without emotion, their role and what they are subjected to is justified. If Handmaids are fruitful seeds who are allotted to Commanders, so by association “of” them, their role is clear: they have to give them children.

A remarkable amount of Gilead’s rhetorics can be categorised based on characteristics typical for real totalitarian rhetorics. The way the Bible is implemented through everyday language provides a striking characteristic of totalitarianism since complete subservience to Gilead’s interpretation of the Bible—therefore to its ideology—is obligatory. The military language used in Gilead’s hierarchy indicates totalitarianism, and the ranks underscore categorisation and thereby control over people. This is furthered by the implementation of labels. The unsubstantial language undoubtedly functions as totalitarian language; it serves as a method to make the public believe certain “truths,” by implementing these in rhetorics. Finally, pragmatic metaphors are effectively used to remove the notion of the individual. To solidify the idea that Gilead’s rhetorics resemble real totalitarian rhetorics, the next chapter provides a comparative analysis of Gilead and Nazi Germany.

Chapter 3

The Unwoman and Der Untermensch

In this chapter, the totalitarian rhetorics of Gilead and Nazi Germany are compared. The comparison revolves around the impact the respective grand narratives of the two regimes have, and seeks to analyse how the rhetorics of the two states serve as instruments in shaping and maintaining these grand narratives. First, a concise overview of the two separate grand narratives is provided. These are then compared to propose an interpretation of the regimes' rhetorics. Then, two primary themes these two grand narratives share, "Othering" and obedience, are discussed to illustrate how the grand narratives are manifested and maintained in the rhetorics of the regimes. This provides insight in the mechanism of language in totalitarian regimes, and how this mechanism is depicted in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

In Gilead, the grand narrative is of a religious nature. The Bible serves as a legitimation for the regime's ideology, and at the same time evokes the notion of a long, consistent historical and spiritual foundation. In this grand narrative, God is the patriarch and the driving force; through his long, established authority Gilead can claim a justification of its power. Anyone who opposes the ideology is deemed immoral, since rejection of the regime implies a denial of a religious history. In Nazi Germany, a different grand narrative serves as a legitimation. An important difference compared with Gilead is the absence of a holy entity as the explanation for history. The Nazi regime evades the necessity of a holy authority by constructing its own notion of a higher purpose. Essential to this purpose is the idea of a teleological history of the Germanic people and their struggle to obtain their rightful realm. In this struggle, the Germanic people are opposed to a range of enemies, including Jews. Tying in with this semi-mythological narrative, Hitler, as a *Führer*, embodies a Messiah-like function (BBC). In this interpretation, the phrase *Heil Hitler*, similarly to "praise the lord," echoes the presence of a higher power.

In both Gilead and Nazi Germany language plays an essential role in establishing and feeding their grand narratives, since these narratives are made believable through totalitarian rhetorics. Part of this plausibility is achieved by imbedding continuity in language. In Nazi Germany, “Germanisation”—the introduction of terms with Germanic origin to stress the presence of Germanic history in the Third Reich (Doerr 28)—was used to establish continuity. Furthermore, proverbial manipulation, that is, the manner in which the Nazis misused and distorted well-known proverbs and sayings to appeal to the public, played a significant role (34). Wolfgang Mieder argues that through this proverbial manipulation a nation’s heritage and collective of common wisdom was tampered with in Nazi Germany (32). For instance, *Arbeit macht frei* (Work sets you free), a commonly known phrase in Germany, was in Nazi Germany deliberately used as a slogan at the gates of concentration camps. In this case, the widely accepted notion that work eventually brings virtue was used to underscore the alleged purpose of concentration camps. This use of collective wisdom provided the grand narrative with a justified foundation; the public was led to believe that the grand narrative fitted their existing knowledge.

In Gilead, a similar notion of historical continuity is implemented through everyday rhetorics. As a result of the ubiquitous presence of the Bible in American culture—and hence pre-Gileadean times—the use of religious imagery in Gilead’s rhetorics evokes a sense of familiarity. If the rhetorics convey the regime’s ideology through familiar language, the language comes across as uncontroversial. Furthermore, the names of the Aunts are meticulously chosen to evoke a sense of familiarity. The devised nature of this example suggests the presence of a thought-out language system to implement a new discourse. This new discourse advocates Gilead’s ideology without breaking too explicitly with the former discourse. In both regimes, the notion of continuity, expressed through familiarity, is stressed in the totalitarian rhetorics.

Two key themes of the totalitarian rhetorics of Gilead and Nazi Germany can be used to illustrate this statement. The first theme relies on the notion of “Othering” (Said 65-7). The manner in which the regimes “other” their enemies rests on historical stereotypes that are appropriated into their grand narratives. By posing the “Other” as an obstacle for the regimes’ purposes, and thereby an opponent of a “right” history, the regimes successfully present their enemies as a threat. The regimes thus solidify the legitimacy of their fight by presenting themselves as the good side in a long historical struggle against evil.

In Nazi Germany one of the main enemies were the Jews. Jews had traditionally been “othered” in a variety of anti-Semitic representations. The Nazis continued this historical trend through their introduction of the term *Der ewige Jude*. The use of the word “ewige,” meaning eternal, paints the picture of a longstanding historical enemy. This picture legitimised the Nazis’ fight against the Jews; they would finally resolve the teleological conflict between good and bad. The Nazis emphasised that they had to fight an almost subhuman enemy in their historical semi-religious battle, by describing the Jews in terms as *Volksbazillen*, *Seuche* (epidemic) and, most strikingly, *Untermensche* (Doerr 31). Through their strong rhetorics the Nazis underscored familiar anti-Semitic stereotypes, but also furthered and fed these stereotypes by harshly depicting the Jews as threatening “Others.”

In Gilead, Unwomen are presented as the epitome of everything the Bible opposes regarding women, thereby making them the enemy. Initially, Unwomen were feminists, advocating in favour of sexual freedom and anti-conception. This makes them, in the eyes of the Gileadean regime, responsible for fertility rates dropping and childbirth declining. Again, “othered” stereotypes, this time with regard to feminism and female emancipation, are employed in the grand narrative. Unwomen deny the true teachings of the Bible—as interpreted by Gilead—and thereby pose a threat to the system. The Unwoman is the opposite of Gilead’s religious ideal of what a “good” woman should be like: not a feminist, not

emancipated and humbly fulfilling the role of mother. Gilead's rhetorics underscore this through terms such as "barren" and "immoral" (Atwood 71, 119). The Unwomen's low status is also stressed in the fact that they are sent to the Colonies, indicating that they do not fit Gilead's teleological purpose. By using rhetorics which link the negative characteristics of Unwomen to the Colonies, the Gileadean regime frames these women with a bogeyman-like image. This frightening example, primarily imbedded in language, conditions Gilead's people, and Handmaids in particular, to adhere to the workings of the regime.

There is a striking similarity between the regimes' envisioned resolution for their enemies in Nazi Germany and Gilead. While the regimes, as argued above, use harsh and negative rhetorics to depict these enemies, the rhetorics used to express the manner in which these are to be gotten rid of are clouded in euphemisms and *Tarnjargon*. The two terms "Salvaging" (Gilead) and *durchgeschleust* (Nazi Germany) are illustrative examples of this. "Salvaging" evokes the notion of rescue, which in Gilead arguably implies a rescue from the immoral and therefore a redirection to God. *Durchgeschleust*, literally meaning so much as "guided through," does not have negative connotations either. Nevertheless, both terms unmistakably indicate murder: a "Salvaging" is an execution, *durchgeschleust* means "killed in a camp." Despite their implication of death, these rhetorics maintain the positive role of the regime in the grand narratives: the regimes are on the good side in their grand narratives. Avoiding association with murder through their rhetorics emphasises this.

Obedience is the second theme illustrating how the grand narratives are manifested in the totalitarian rhetorics. In Nazi Germany, the people were obligated to pledge their fealty to Hitler through *Treueide* (Doerr 29). Doerr argues that these oaths lead to a personal bonding, which evoked the notion of common destiny (29), or in other words, a common grand narrative. Furthermore, the phrases reflected a revival of an archaic Germanic mythology, as to verbalize concepts like heroism and sacrificial death of the individual (29). These concepts

were intended to evoke sentiments of mystical blood ties to “make the Germans believe in the transcendental German nation” (29). Slogans such as *Deutschland erwache!* (Germany, wake up!) emphasised that the Germans had to open their eyes to the glorious revival of their *Reich*. These phrases were directed at them to attain an obedient collective (29).

In Gilead, set phrases, like the accepted greetings between Handmaids, similarly evoke a sense of obedience while at the same time stressing the ubiquitous presence of the entity Gilead’s grand narrative is based on: God (see Appendix C). The phrase “Under His eye,” (Atwood 54) for example, not only serves as a constant reminder of the scrutinising gaze of God, embodied by the Gileadean regime, but also reflects the grand narrative. Since not using them deems the agent immoral and an opponent to Gilead’s ideology, the performance of these phrases is inevitable, and thereby, acting out the grand narrative is a necessity.

Through these slogans and phrases the inhabitants of Gilead and Nazi Germany perform their grand narratives. The totalitarian state obliges its people to perform as the ideology requires, and the ideology determines “good” performance. As Lyotard writes, good performance is only judged to be good because it conforms to the relevant criteria: criteria accepted in the social circle of the grand narrative (47).

It can thus be gathered that in both Gilead and Nazi Germany the rhetorics integrated in everyday discourse articulate, and therefore feed, the grand narrative. The grand narratives function as a persistent emphasis on the teleological purposes of the states, and at the same time ensure the tight grip of the governments on their people. Since the regimes’ rhetorics explicitly “other” their enemies in the grand narrative, a persecution of these enemies is legitimised. Furthermore, the accepted discourse activates the public to perform the grand narrative as to participate in a collective purpose. By underscoring a sense of continuity in their ideological rhetorics, Gilead and Nazi Germany more easily incite their public to cooperate in, and accept and adopt the regimes’ ideological rhetorics.

Conclusion

Although most scholarship on language in *The Handmaid's Tale* explores the language of the story's protagonist, this thesis has sought to analyse the rhetorics of the Gileadean regime. The aim of this thesis was to investigate the extent to which the rhetorics of the novel are exemplary for totalitarian rhetorics, as to explore the matter regarding the novel's realistic character. In order to solidify the findings, the novel's totalitarian rhetorics were compared to Nazi Germany. Thereby, this thesis provides insight in the manner totalitarian regimes use the social mechanism of language to convey their ideology.

In an analysis of *The Handmaid's Tale*, five key themes of the regime's rhetorics were identified: biblical metaphors, military language, labels, unsubstantial language and pragmatic metaphors. These elements shape Gilead's rhetorics and enable the regime to maintain tight control over its people by continually implementing its ideology. Insights gathered from scholarship on national socialist rhetorics were used for a comparison between Nazi Germany and Gilead. This comparison shed light on the manner rhetorics articulate and feed the regimes' grand narratives. The findings suggested that the rhetorics of both regimes rely strongly on the notion of continuity; ideological language conveys the sense of a common destiny based on historical foundations. Two central concepts—the role rhetorics play in “Othering” and in achieving obedience—were identified as important similarities of Gilead and Nazi Germany.

The findings of the comparative analysis show that Gilead is exemplary for actual totalitarian regimes regarding rhetorics and could therefore be considered a realistic representation of a totalitarian regime. As discussed in the introduction of this thesis, the sudden boost in popularity of *The Handmaid's Tale* is often ascribed to this realistic dimension; readers have appropriated the novel as a symbol of protest—a protest in particular to Trump's government. In a recent article in *The New Yorker*, Jessica Winter writes that

rhetorics used by the American government to discuss the administration of migrants have taken on an abusive character; the rhetorics include a repertoire of lies, distortions, deflections and belittlements with the phrase “Look what you made me do” as the main argument. Winter writes: “A slow, quiet terror continues to spread through the American populace. We are all being made into complicit bystanders in Trump’s violence.” The findings of this thesis may shed light on how we are complicit bystanders; by accepting and subsequently adopting these abusive rhetorics. Adopting Trump’s abusive rhetorics results in a performance of his envisioned narrative, just as the implementation and subsequent adoption of the national socialistic rhetorics in Germany and the ideological rhetorics in Gilead continually articulated the grand narrative of these regimes. Therefore, *The Handmaid’s Tale* can be regarded an adequate example of a dystopian novel where the danger of—subconsciously or not—adopting a state’s rhetorics is realistically depicted. The novel portrays the relative ease by which a totalitarian ideology can be implemented through rhetorics, and thereby underscores that alertness regarding rhetorics is necessary.

This thesis has provided insight in the realistic character of *The Handmaid’s Tale* regarding its totalitarian rhetorics. Although the limited length of this thesis did not allow for a complete discussion of all identified totalitarian rhetorics, its appendix serves as a useful tool for further research regarding this theme. It should, however, be emphasised that the current project has been marked by limitations. The limited time span only allowed for a comparison of *The Handmaid’s Tale* and Nazi Germany. A comparative analysis with a wider range of totalitarian discourses would have been informative for finding whether linguistic trends found in Gilead are exemplary for rhetorics in totalitarian regimes in a broader view. Such an approach would make a comparison of Gilead’s totalitarian rhetorics and totalitarian rhetorics in real life more valid. Additionally, a comparative analysis of multiple dystopian novels and totalitarian regimes would have provided insight in whether Atwood’s novel is

part of a wider tradition or is pioneering in the field of realistically depicting totalitarian rhetorics.

The current political situation, and especially Trump's America, proves the importance of research on totalitarian language. From Winter's article can be gathered that totalitarian rhetorics sooner emerge than people might realise. It could be argued that through his rhetorics, Trump has already had considerable impact on the American narrative. Awareness regarding this issue is necessary since the workings of totalitarian rhetorics shape the current political climate. This thesis has shed light on the way literature provides readers with insights regarding the mechanism of language. Through its popularity and its original and accurate reflection of the role totalitarian rhetorics play in the implementation of regimes, *The Handmaid's Tale* in particular can communicate these issues to a larger audience. Therefore, it is important to keep researching literary interpretations of political language, and hopefully this thesis will prove to be a tip of the iceberg in this field of study.

Appendix

The Totalitarian Rhetorics of *The Handmaid's Tale*

A - Ranks

| First mention | Word | Description meaning | Totalitarian characteristic |
|---------------|------------------|--|--|
| 14 | Angel | Angels are the soldiers of Gilead and are high-ranking. There are several types of Angels, such as Angels of the Apocalypse and Angels of Light, but the differences in these names or ranks is not specified. Angels are usually very devoted to the regime and are allowed many privileges, amongst which to marry and sometimes to have a Handmaid. This usually only happens if they serve Gilead for several years. | Biblical metaphor. One-sided label. |
| 13 | Aunt | Aunts are a class of women. They are some of the highest-ranking women, who are responsible for training the Handmaids and for overseeing their indoctrination. Besides that, they oversee births and preside over women's executions. | Familiarity. Military language. One-sided label. |
| 93 | Children of Ham | In the Bible, Ham is one of Noah's sons. Ham travelled to Africa and became the forefather of Africa's nations. In Gilead, the term Children of Ham is used to refer to African-Americans. A state TV broadcast mentions that the Children of Ham are being resettled in the Nation Homelands of Gilead. | Biblical metaphor. Justification. Two-sided label. |
| 19 | Commander | Commanders of the Faithful are a class of men and are the highest ranking members of Gilead's society, meaning that they can marry, have Handmaids and Marthas. Commanders work as politicians and make the laws. In the early days of Gilead, the Commanders were the people who supported the rise of the regime. | Military language. One-sided label. |
| 20 | Commander's Wife | Wives are the highest ranking class of women in Gilead. They are subjected to their husbands and are not allowed to work. They have however, a substantial amount of power in Gilead, for example over Handmaids. | One-sided label. Military language. |
| 34 | Econowife | Econowives are a class of women in Gilead. The name is a portmanteau of economy and wives. They are very low in rank. The Econowives fulfil the roles of Martha and Wife and, if they are fertile, Handmaid. Econowives are poor women. | Pragmatic metaphor. One-sided label. |
| 28 | Eye (of God) | The Eyes are the secret police of Gilead. They are responsible for maintaining order and for getting rid of traitors. They drive black vans which they use | Biblical metaphor. One-sided label. |

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| | | when arresting people. They are also at times responsible for interrogation. Anyone could be an Eye. Although the Eyes seem solely made up of men, it is possible that there are women belonging to this group, since it is unknown who is an Eye and who is not. | |
| 22 | Guardian | Guardians are a class of men in Gilead. They are working as the peacekeepers of the cities, foot soldiers in the army and are the bodyguards of Commanders and their Wives (and sometimes of Handmaids). | Biblical metaphor. One-sided label. |
| 29 | Handmaid | A Handmaid is a woman whose task it is to bear children for the elite of Gilead. They have three chances to bear a healthy baby. If they do not succeed, they are sent to The Colonies. Their name title derives from Genesis 30:1-3. | Biblical metaphor. Justification of function. One-sided label. |
| 122 | Jezebel | Jezebel is an old-fashioned term the Aunts used for women who are regarded as evil or morally corrupt. The name is derived from a story in the Old Testament about a Phoenician Princess called Jezebel who encouraged idolatry. The name of the secret brothel in Gilead is Jezebel's. The women working at Jezebel's are mostly women who are given the choice between working as a Jezebel or going to the Colonies; they are Unwomen. | Biblical metaphor. Two-sided label. |
| 19 | Martha | Marthas are a class of women in Gilead. They are domestic servants for the elite (mostly Commanders' families). The name Martha derives from a story in the New Testament. Martha was a woman who focussed on her chores while her sister listened to Jesus and did not bother with domestic work (Luke 10:38-42). Marthas are Econowives. | Biblical metaphor. Justification of function. One-sided label. |
| 210 | Sons of Jacob | The Sons of Jacob are the Christian Fundamentalist group that devised the philosophy for the totalitarian regime and the rise of Gilead. The name is derived from Genesis 30:1-3. Jacob's wife, Rachel, was infertile, but suggested that Jacob had babies with Rachel's servant. These children were then raised by Jacob and Rachel as their own. By calling themselves the Sons of Jacob, the men send the message that they will, just like Jacob in the Bible, populate the country. | Biblical metaphor. Justification of function. One-sided label. |
| 122 | Unbaby | Unbaby is the term used in Gilead to describe babies who are born with physical deformations or other birth defects. These babies are taken away and disposed (but where and how is unknown). | Othering. Two-sided label. |
| 20 | Unwoman | An Unwoman is someone who is determined to be useless for Gilead's needs. Many of these women are older women, who are unable to bear babies or to do | Othering. Two-sided label. |

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| | | domestic work. Unwomen are either killed or sent to the Colonies. Banishment to the Colonies represents a death sentence. | |
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B - Locations

| First mention | Word | Description meaning | Totalitarian characteristic |
|---------------|---|---|------------------------------|
| 37 | All Flesh | All Flesh is the store where the Handmaids buy meat when doing the groceries. It could be considered Gilead's name for the butcher. The name derives from the Bible. | Biblical metaphor. |
| 20 | The Colonies | The Colonies are areas of America that are contaminated by toxic waste and pollution. Gilead often sends criminals to the Colonies to have them clear up as a punishment. | Military language. Othering. |
| 33 | The Commanders' Compound | The Commander's Compound is the place where the houses of the Commanders are located. | Military language. |
| 33 | Gilead | Gilead is the state established by the Christian Fundamentalist Group. Gilead is also the name of two geographic places in the Bible. | Biblical metaphor. |
| 35 | Lilies of the Field | Lilies of the Field is a store where Handmaids can buy their dresses. The name derives from Matthew 6:28. | Biblical metaphor. |
| 173 | Loaves and Fish | Loaves and Fish is a store where the Handmaids get fish. They do not sell loaves here, as most families make bread themselves. The name derives from Matthew 14:17. | Biblical metaphor. |
| 35 | Milk and Honey | Milk and Honey is the main store. The name derives from Exodus 3:8. | Biblical metaphor. |
| 20 | The Rachel and Leah Center (the Red Center) | The Rachel and Leah Center is a center established to train and house Handmaids. The center is named after the biblical sisters Rachel and Leah, whose story provided the inspiration for the role of the Handmaid in Gilead's society. The Red Center is a nickname, and both refers to the red dresses of the Handmaids and to the fact that the center is a Re-education centre (Re-ed → red). | Biblical metaphor. |
| 175 | Soul Scrolls | The store where prayers can be bought and where they are printed. They are reminiscent of Tibetan Prayer wheels, except that the Tibetans have | Biblical metaphor. |

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| | | spiritual belief in the effect of the spinning aspect of the mantras. In Gilead they are mostly for show. | |
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C-Phrases

| First mention | Word | Description meaning | Totalitarian characteristic |
|---------------|---|---|-----------------------------------|
| 29 | Blessed be the fruit | Term by which the Handmaids greet each other. This is said to encourage fertility. | Biblical metaphor. Repetition. |
| 74 | Blessed are the meek | Taken from Matthew 5:5. Term used by the aunts to emphasise that the Handmaids must be humble. | Biblical metaphor. Repetition. |
| 75 | May the Lord make us grateful | Typical grace prayer. | Biblical metaphor. Repetition. |
| 29 | May the Lord open | A reply to the phrase “Blessed be the fruit,” which also underscores the notion of fertility. Open implies an “openness” of the womb. | Biblical metaphor. Repetition. |
| 29 | Praise be | Said to express gratitude. | Biblical metaphor. Repetition. |
| 286 | The torch of the future, the cradle of the race, the task before us | These phrases are part of a speech delivered during a salvaging. | Teleological purpose. Repetition. |
| 54 | Under His Eye | The typical goodbye between Handmaids. By extension implies that someone is always watching. | Biblical metaphor. Repetition. |

D - Traditions and Events

| First mention | Word | Description meaning | Totalitarian characteristic |
|---------------|-----------|--|-----------------------------|
| 134 | Birth Day | A Birth Day occurs when a pregnant Handmaid gets into labour. The other Handmaids are gathered from their Commander’s house and are brought to the house where the pregnant Handmaid lives to support her. The Wives also get together to simulate that it is the Commander’s Wife having a baby. While the Handmaid | Unsubstantial language. |

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| | | goes into labour, the other Handmaids chant words likes “push” and “breath.” | |
| 91 | The Ceremony | The Ceremony is a monthly ritualised sex act in which the Handmaid is supposed to conceive children with the Commander. During the Ceremony everyone remains mostly dressed as the event is supposed to be very clinical and not sensual. The Handmaid lies between the Wife’s legs, her head resting against the Wife’s abdomen, and her arms raised to hold hands with the Wife. The Commander has intercourse with the Handmaid while standing at the end of the bed. | Biblical metaphor. Pragmatic metaphor. |
| 290 | Particicution | Particicution is a portmanteau of “participation” and “execution.” It is a specific type of execution whereby the Handmaids are required to kill the convict. They may do it in any way they like, but they are not allowed to use weapons. To make it more personal for the Handmaids, the men are usually said to be convicted of abusing a Handmaid. | Military language. |
| 31 | Prayvaganza | A Prayvaganza is a mass prayer. It is a portmanteau of “pray” and “extravaganza.” The Prayvaganzas are lead by Commanders and are often held to celebrate marriage. | Biblical metaphor. |
| 31 | Salvaging | Salvaging is the term used for executions in Gilead. The executed people are referred to as having been “salvaged.” The Women’s Salvagings are only attended by women and Handmaids are obliged to kill the person who is sentenced. | Biblical metaphor. Unsubstantial language. |
| 81 | Testifying | Testifying is an activity at the Rachel and Leah Centre. The Handmaids share misdeeds such as sexual activities and abortion, while the other women condemn the speaker in a chant. | Unsubstantial language. |

E – Verbs

| First mention | Word | Description meaning | Totalitarian characteristic |
|---------------|------------------------|---|-----------------------------|
| 32 | To be allotted a woman | If a man is of high enough status he will be allowed to get married, and thus will be “allotted a woman.” | Pragmatic metaphor. |
| 27 | To be issued a woman | See “To be allotted a woman” | Pragmatic metaphor. |
| 21 | Fraternize | Term used to imply that Marthas and Handmaids are not supposed to connect. Offred points out that the meaning of the word is “to behave like a brother” and | Military language. |

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| | | that there is no female equivalent that means “to behave like a sister.” | |
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F – Remaining

| First mention | Word | Description meaning | Totalitarian characteristic |
|---------------|-----------------------|---|-----------------------------------|
| 34 | Freedom | Aunt Lydia says that there are two types of freedom: freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to; in Gilead it is freedom from. | Unsubstantial language. |
| 34 | Habits | The Handmaids clothes are called Habits. | Biblical metaphor. |
| 18 | Privilege | The Aunts emphasise that the situation that the Handmaids are in, they are not imprisoned but in a privileged position. | Unsubstantial language. |
| 26 | Scriptural Precedence | Scriptural precedence is used as a justification. Biblical examples are taken from their context and used to legitimise Gilead’s laws and strictures. One precedent for example, allows Wives to hit Handmaids. | Biblical metaphor. Justification. |
| 28 | Seeds | A term which is used to refer to Handmaids, implying their role of bearing children. | Pragmatic metaphor. |
| 71 | Sterile | In Gilead, men cannot be “sterile,” there are only women who are “barren.” | Unsubstantial language. |

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