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Donna M. Klick
The College at Brockport

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Open Endings and Questionable Liberation in Margaret Atwood's Alias Grace, Cat's Eye, and The Handmaid's Tale

by

Donna M. Klick

A thesis submitted to the Department of English of the State University of New York College at Brockport, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

August 8, 2003
Open Endings and Questionable Liberation in Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace*, *Cat’s Eye*, and *The Handmaid’s Tale*

By Donna M. Klick

APPROVED BY:

Advisor

Date

Reader

Date

Reader

Date

Chair, Graduate Committee

Date

Chair, Department of English

Date
I would like to profusely thank my thesis director, Dr. Earl Ingersoll, for guiding me in my completion of this project. His limitless knowledge consisting of, but certainly not limited to, Margaret Atwood’s writing, has been extremely valuable throughout this process. His words of encouragement, insight, and especially criticism are much appreciated. I would also like to thank my family, who have been nothing but supportive throughout my writing this thesis.
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Introduction

Canadian author Margaret Atwood has achieved worldwide renown for her accomplishments in both fiction and poetry. She is well known as a feminist and a political activist; hence her writing serves as Atwood’s commentary on society. In a recent essay, Atwood described the writing process for her novels, stating that “every novel begins with a what if, and then sets forth its axioms” (Toad). This quotation clearly epitomizes Atwood’s work. The Handmaid’s Tale (1986) and her newest novel Oryx and Crake (2003) both clearly answer the “what if” question, and then some. Atwood bases her fiction on true political, historical, and contemporary events and takes those events to their natural conclusion. In doing so, Atwood portrays how her typically female protagonist is not only shaped by her environment, but also how she develops within that environment. Through this work, I will discuss how Atwood’s protagonists in Alias Grace (1996), Cat’s Eye (1989), and The Handmaid’s Tale attempt to become liberated from oppression within their respective environments, through considering Michel Foucault’s theories on how power and discourse shape the individual and Sigmund Freud’s work on how repetition aids an individual in obtaining power. However, while looking at ways in which Atwood’s protagonists may liberate themselves, it is also necessary to consider Peter Brooks’s work on open-ended narratives to assess if these protagonists truly do become free in their quest for liberation.

In Alias Grace, Atwood researches the history surrounding one of the most notorious Canadian women—that of nineteenth-century criminal Grace Marks—and
creates a narrative, filling in the blanks of what the archives of history have not told us. Within the context of this novel, Atwood illustrates how power and discourse shape truth for society and the individuals within that society. Through this illustration, Atwood demonstrates the ambiguity of innocence and guilt.

*Cat's Eye* also reflects an individual's struggle for subjectivity; however, this novel portrays these attempts through the eyes of a female artist retrospectively looking at her childhood. Elaine Risley attempts to create a sense of selfhood as an adult after a traumatic childhood experience. What she comes to realize is that those who had psychologically scarred her had also been scarred by someone else, hereby coming to understand that in a previous relationship they not only played the role of aggressor, but they had also played the role of victim. Only through her empathizing with those, such as Mrs. Sneath and Cordelia—those who had both been similarly victimized and had used that experience against Elaine as a child—will Elaine be able to develop her own sense of selfhood. Only with empathy will she be able to separate herself from the feelings of inadequacy that she had previously felt were her own, to return them to their rightful owners, Mrs. Sneath and Cordelia.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood creates a futuristic dystopia, offering her readers a horrifying view of things to come based on a prognosis of things as they are. Offred is one of the handmaids who are used to combat the declining birth rate in the Republic of Gilead, a Christian fundamentalist theocracy. Handmaids no longer have a sense of their own identity, having lost the right to read, to write, and even to retain their own names, since by law they assume the patronymic of their temporary
commander, only to assume another name once a new commander takes possession of them. *The Handmaid's Tale* is about one who attempts to overcome deprivation of power and subjectivity to become self-empowered through her taped narrative of her experience as a handmaid.

While considering these specific Atwood novels through multiple lenses—that of Peter Brooks, Michel Foucault, and Sigmund Freud—combining these theories is integral in examining these novels. In “Foucault, Freud, and the Technologies of the Self,” Patrick Hutton best summarizes the differences between Freud and Foucault in saying, “whereas Freud sought to explain how knowledge gives us power over the self, Foucault seeks to demonstrate how power shapes our knowledge of the self” (135). By merging Freud’s notions of repeating to obtain knowledge or mastery with Foucault’s exploration of power and how it shapes an individual, one may more clearly analyze Elaine, who is attempting to obtain mastery over her past relationship with Cordelia; Grace, who is attempting to recreate herself within society’s versions of truth; and Offred, who is attempting to find her own subjectivity within a world which will allow a handmaid such as herself none.

Another way in which to connect these two seemingly divergent ideas is through both Brooks’s and Foucault’s ideology on achieving self-affirmation and self-empowerment through language. In *Volume I* of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault states that “repression operated as a sentence to disappear, but also as an injunction to silence, an affirmation of nonexistence, and by implication, an admission that there was nothing to say about such things, nothing to see, and nothing
to know” (4). Hence, repressive power controls one’s ability to formulate meaning and articulate thoughts through language by its discourse. Linking to this idea, Peter Brooks bases his ideas regarding repetition on Sigmund Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. In his work, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*, Brooks states that “repetition is mastery, movement from the passive to the active, and [. . .] mastery is an assertion of control over what man must in fact submit to [. . .]” (98). In combining Brooks with Foucault then, if an individual is able to gain mastery or power through repetition, but society’s established institutions have eliminated that individual’s ability to articulate thoughts through language, much less repeat those ideas, then society has successfully taken away the individual’s power.

This view is an integral part of the power structures found in the institutionalized educational system, the established legal system, and the standardized medical hierarchical structure; all of which are exemplified in *Alias Grace*. Grace has no authority; therefore, even if she does speak, her voice is unheard. Because of this, she must allow others to speak for her—others with authoritative and patriarchal power—such as her attorney, her reverend, and her psychiatrist. The idea of eliminating one’s ability to express one’s thoughts through language is seen within the tight-knit abusive circle of friends in *Cat’s Eye*, where Elaine is so full of self-doubt that she is unable to articulate her thoughts through language. She becomes negated as a result of this inability to speak out against the girls. In the Gilead regime of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, moreover, the handmaids are prohibited from reading or writing, having lost their access to written language in its
entirety. Therefore, they have lost their ability to articulate through written language and because of their praying for the handmaids' silence through the Beatitudes, the Republic eradicates their ability to articulate through oral language, as well.

Not only are these three novels linked through their explorations of how women develop within the confines of their society, but each also exhibits Atwood's views on our memories. In her interview with Harriet Gilbert, Atwood talks about how we construct and reconstruct our memories in various ways, saying "our memories are much more constructed by us than we often admit to ourselves and they're certainly edited by us [...] How we remember something at twenty is different from how we reconstruct our memory at thirty and forty and so on" (Gilbert). Atwood's fiction reflects this idea, from Elaine's reconstructing her lost childhood memories as an adult in *Cat's Eye*, to Grace's ever-changing narrative surrounding the murders of Nancy Montgomery and Thomas Kinnear in *Alias Grace*, and finally to Offred's taped reconstruction of her narrative regarding her role as a handmaid in Gilead in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Peter Brooks also discusses reconstruction in his work; however, he looks at the reasoning for one's reconstructing memories in relation to Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Brooks states that if we apply Freud's argument of "Remembering, Repeating and Working Through," one of Freud's papers which paves the way for *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, "we perceive that repetition includes the need to reproduce and to work through as a type of remembering, and thus a way of reorganizing a story whose connective links have been obscured and
lost" (98,139). The analytical idea behind Freud’s “Remembering, Repeating and Working Through” is that a person’s need to repeat, rather than simply remember, the past, is a form of remembering wherein recollection is blocked by resistance (Brooks 98). The person’s “compulsion to repeat” is a way in which to either work through a problematic past event or to gain mastery over it (Brooks 98).

Not only do we envision Atwood’s views on how one’s memory is constructed and reconstructed through the protagonists in Alias Grace, Cat’s Eye, and The Handmaid’s Tale, but we also see how Brooks’s transference of Freud’s Beyond the Pleasure Principle to narrative structure comes into play. In Alias Grace, Grace has lost her memory of the actual murder scenes of Nancy Montgomery and Thomas Kinnear. She willingly retells her entire life story to Dr. Simon Jordan, yet her recollections of the past seem to change as Jordan points out the differences from her current telling and that of her past testimonies. While it is hinted that Mary Whitney had possessed Grace’s body during these murders, the idea that Grace apparently never fully recovers her memory of these events indicates that she has not successfully worked through her past nor has she gained mastery over it. Because Grace is such a skilled storyteller, however, the truth surrounding Grace’s recollection of the incidents remains unanswered.

Unlike the protagonist in Alias Grace, Cat’s Eye’s Elaine has successfully worked through her past. It seems that both teenaged Elaine and Cordelia have forgotten Elaine’s near-fatal childhood incident which bound them together in the first place. Not only are their memories obstructed in the case of this particular
incident, but also in the entire crux of their painful power relationship that structured their interaction, as well as that of the other girls. Elaine’s descent from the top of the hill to the bridge, as an adult, is metaphorical for her descent into her repressed unconscious \((CE\ 457)\). She realizes that her childhood problems had always been Cordelia’s, that Cordelia had merely been imitating her father in her aggressive role, and then had been transferring her own emotions onto Elaine.

While Elaine reconstructs her memories in order to work through her past, the entire narrative of *The Handmaid’s Tale* is itself a reconstruction. We read the entire novel before we understand, as Earl Ingersoll states, in his article, “Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*: Echoes of Orwell,” how the narrative exists as a text (66). Her need to retell her story of her nightmare within the Gilead regime exemplifies Brooks’s theories regarding narrative structure in light of Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Offred’s desire to retell her story about her life as a handmaid shows her need to gain mastery over both painful and pleasurable repressed memories. Because the regime effectively eradicates the handmaids’ abilities to overtly express and reflect on their past identities, it was necessary for Offred to covertly repeat events of her past life in her attempt to remember her identity prior to becoming a handmaid. On the other hand, the tapes, wherein Offred tells the story of her entrapment within the Gilead regime after she has escaped, represent her need to express life within this regime, even though these events have clearly been reconstructed from her memory within her realm of recollection.
Returning to Atwood’s statement on how we reconstruct memory as time passes, one must wonder: how true is Offred’s reconstructed story as compared to the events? Does it matter? Because as Marta Caminero-Santantelo states in her article, “Moving Beyond ‘The Blank White Spaces’: Atwood’s Gilead, Postmodernism, and Strategic Resistance,” it is not all that Offred says that is important, but the blanks, the pauses, what she does not say, that is especially important, “the blank white spaces [...] between the gaps” (25). This idea is magnified with the idea of Professor Pieixoto’s transcribing Offred’s tapes, not only in the order in which the tapes should be heard, but in his interpretation of her narrative. He, unfortunately, does not understand the blanks, the pauses, and what she does not say, applying significance only to what she does say; hence, he entirely misses the point of her narrative.

Offred’s eventual escape from the regime and her need to reconstruct her story within the tapes shows her self-empowerment. She reverts to her former self, taking back her original identity; yet her identity has been reconstructed because of her life within the regime. Offred realizes, within Gilead, the privileges of her prior life—privileges she had taken for granted, but would now appreciate and sanction. In essence, it is the reason for her recording her memories of life in Gilead. This is representative of Atwood’s female protagonists who are forced to reconstruct themselves to become more independent and daring as they attempt to establish their relationship to those who surround their lives and the world which encompasses them.
In the majority of Margaret Atwood’s fiction, her typically female protagonists are forced to reconstruct themselves in order to become more independent as they try to build relationships with those surrounding their lives and with that world encircling them. Some critics take this idea even further, claiming that these protagonists have also freed themselves in their transformation. The question is: freed themselves from what, from where, and from whom? One must then consider into what, where, and whom have they changed. Where has this transformation taken them? Without asking these questions, one may be deceived into thinking that Atwood’s protagonists have become liberated and are now stronger, braver, and more independent of social and political bounds. I would state, rather, that Margaret Atwood’s protagonists have recreated themselves within the social and political orders into which they have been established, exchanging their old power relationships for new ones—relationships which we are not able to explore fully due to Atwood’s problematic open-ended narratives.

One such critic who has failed to consider the new role adopted by the protagonists’ transformations is Patricia Goldblatt, who, in her article “Reconstructing Margaret Atwood’s Protagonists,” states that “dissatisfied with traditional knowledge, Atwood’s women again turn inward, now avoiding masochistic traps, fully able to deviate from society’s dicta. Freed from constraining fears, they locate talents, wings that free them”. While it is evident that Atwood’s protagonists appear to have transformed themselves in such a manner as to no longer be manipulated in the same ways, it is too strong to say they are “fully able to deviate
from society's dicta" (Goldblatt). First of all, it is tremendously difficult for any of us to ascertain the degree to which society has conditioned us. While Atwood's protagonists are able to liberate themselves in specific ways in certain situations, to be free from societal conditions and expectations in their entirety would be a utopian view, which is not characteristic of the more realistic Atwood style.

Secondly, while Goldblatt does give evidence to support her claim from *The Handmaid's Tale, Cat's Eye, and Alias Grace*, it is from these novels whence Goldblatt substantiates her claim that this defense unravels. The problematic endings found in these same novels reflect the ambiguity of the final outcome of Atwood's protagonists. As Brooks states, readers long for the end because only at the end will the meaning of the narrative be realized (92). We do not achieve the meaning as Brooks indicates we should in these Atwood novels. Yes, it is obvious, by the end, that these characters have become liberated from the obstacles currently hindering them. Offred escapes from the Gileadean regime, Elaine has turned the tables on Cordelia to become the stronger of the two, and Grace is pardoned for her alleged crime and released from jail.

While we are able to see that the protagonists have become liberated from their current obstacles, we are not able to see where these characters go after the story stops. As Earl Ingersoll says in his article "The Handmaid's Tale as a Self-Subverting Text," "I do not mean the novel ends: it stops" (104). At the end, we do not know what became of Offred, just that she survived long enough to make the tapes; we do not know what became of Cordelia and can only guess how Elaine
would react to her as an adult; nor do we know if Grace was truly innocent of the crime she was indicted for or if she is truly liberated because there is an uncanny resemblance between her relationships with Dr. Bannerling, Dr. Jordan, and her new husband, Jamie.

Because of the open-endedness of these novels, assessing the protagonists' liberation is problematic. In the article “The Calculus of Love and Nightmare: “The Handmaid's Tale” and the Dystopian Tradition,” Lois Feuer states of The Handmaid's Tale, that “we can see that the descent is darker and the rebirth more tentative than in her other novels, in part because of the open-endedness of the ending” (90). All we know at the novel’s conclusion is that Offred escaped from Gilead, but we have no idea of the conditions into which she escaped. This uncertainty is essential to the story. Atwood’s narrative has portrayed the numerous conditions under which women lived, both during and prior to the Gilead regime, thereby showing that escaping from Gilead may not necessarily mean freedom for Offred. The ambiguity surrounding Atwood’s protagonists, then, makes it impossible for us to assume that the protagonist is free of political and social bounds.

Such concepts of associations and roles in power relationships are analyzed by Michel Foucault, in The History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction. In this exploration of sexual discourse, Foucault questioned the “repressive hypothesis”—the idea that we were repressed in the past and now we are sexually enlightened—by arguing that we have merely exchanged our old power relationships for new ones. Atwood’s protagonists, too, engage in this exchange. Therefore, they are not truly
free from social and political bounds in their environment; they have merely reinvented themselves, exchanging their old roles for new ones in which there will be a different type of exchange of power.

One such exchange of power that is evident in Atwood’s literature is the power exchanged within a confession. Such an exchange of power is characterized by spirals of power and pleasure, as described by Foucault. On the one hand, he states there is pleasure for the confessor coming from “exercising a power that questions, monitors, watches, spies, searches out [. . .]” (45). Alternatively, he also states that the confessant receives increasing pleasure from evading the listener’s power by running away from it, fooling it, or by mocking it. There is then, power and pleasure for the confessor in the pursuit of the truth from the confessant, but also power and pleasure for the confessant in two ways: by resisting the urge to confess, yet also through disclosure, feeling a sense of gratification in shocking the confessor with the details of the confession (Foucault 45). Both the confessor and the confessant share power in a confession, whether the confession is forced or freely given.

Confession plays a significant part in *Alias Grace*, *Cat’s Eye*, and *The Handmaid’s Tale*, setting up specific power relationships. In *Alias Grace*, we are privy to the more traditional clinical power structure where the doctor is attempting to obtain a confession from Grace, his patient. Rather than examining the power structure required to extract a confession, *Cat’s Eye* portrays the power to silence through Elaine’s repression by her childhood “girlfriends.” Not only was it the girls’
ability to silence Elaine which ultimately empowered them, but more importantly, her complicity in their abuse helped create and maintain their power over her. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, we see a combination or a culmination of power structures, if you will, from the traditional power structure found in *Alias Grace*, to the repressive silencing power found in *Cat’s Eye*. We see the handmaids’ public and most definitely forced desire to confess the sins of their past lives to the Aunts; the confessions given at the Salvagings, with enforced complicit punishments meted out by the handmaids; the repressive silencing power through Offred’s dealings with the Commander, his wife, other handmaids, as well as that of the Aunts; in addition to Offred’s ultimate confession that her account is a mere reconstruction of what happened while trapped within the confines of the Gilead regime.

The confession is attached to another important aspect linking Brooks and Foucault—that of Brooks’s notions of narrative as a structuring of our desire to know and our reading toward an ending at which we expect to know. Brooks discusses how specific events in the plot are attached to one another, stringing the reader along, creating a balance between increasing desire, and staving off desire for the end. In this essence, there is a sense of semblance directly related to that of Foucault’s idea of power cycles in confession. The reader is much like a confessor, wanting to know the secret, or the end. The author or the narrator is the confessant, the person stringing us along with bits of details, enticing us to read so that we will be privy to the secret they hold, the ending. If there is a problematic ending where the reader does not feel a sense of an obtained confession or a “real ending,” then the reader feels deflated.
While the power structures found within these three novels played a part in my decision of order, it was ultimately the outcomes of their open endings which dictated the order of each novel's placement within this work. *Alias Grace* is first because the open-endedness and distinct similarities between Dr. Bannerling, Dr. Jordan, and her husband, Jamie, force the reader to question Grace's liberation. Grace has been freed from prison, but Jamie's need for Grace's nocturnal confessions for his own sexual gratification inextricably link him to Dr. Jordan, who not only attempted to extract confessions from Grace, but who also had sexual fantasies about her. Jamie must also be linked to Dr. Bannerling, who "treated" Grace, but who had a more forceful way of attempting sexual gratification from Grace. These similarities force the reader to ask if Grace's plight is better or worse since Jamie is her husband.

In counter-chronological order, *Cat's Eye* forms the second chapter of this work. The end of this novel could be considered problematic because Elaine never confronted Cordelia as an adult. However, through the retrospective of her art and her life, she is able to reconstruct the missing pieces of her memories to suit the purposes of her coming of age and to return Cordelia's insecurities to Cordelia, rather than take them on as her own. Hence, we could say that Elaine has found her own subjectivity, whereas Grace's liberation seems questionable.

*The Handmaid's Tale* comes last in this work due to the complexity of this narrative's outcomes. As in the other works, the open-endedness makes Offred's liberation problematic. Yet the last element of power—interpretive power—forces the reader to determine the outcome. Due to the epilogue, one must engage in a
retrospective reading of *The Handmaid’s Tale* in order to gain an understanding of Atwood’s message. Only the readers’ open-minded interpretation will liberate Offred from marginalization; therefore the power lies with the reader. Thus her freedom from oppression is tentative, based on whoever listens to her text. In addition, Atwood is not only cautioning her readers in interpreting Offred’s taped narrative with an open-mind, but is also applying closed interpretations to society, displaying the effects such closed interpretations have through the example of the Republic of Gilead.

*Alias Grace, Cat’s Eye,* and *The Handmaid’s Tale* all exemplify fiction where the need to confess and the desire to know are central to the story. Not only are such power relationships relevant to the plot of the story, displayed through the tensions between the characters and the environment in which they are placed, but also in the interaction between the author and the reader. It is essential to apply these spirals of power and pleasure that are prevalent in a confession not only to the plot unfolding in the text itself, but also to the act of writing and reading and the relationship formed in that process. It makes one realize that not only does the author have the power to capture the reader as confessor, but that the reader, as audience, has power over the author as confessant. Margaret Atwood evokes the power of the audience, not only requesting her readers to be empowered through their interaction, but demanding it. Therefore, I hope to thoroughly explore these power relationships that are formed within the inner circles of the text itself, but also those formed on the outside—between the author and the reader of the text. Atwood’s work hinges upon such a
relationship. Not only does she wish her readers to understand her commentary
woven within the pages of her narratives, but she wants her readers to do something
with that knowledge. Otherwise, why ask, \textit{what if}?
The Subjectivity of Truth in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*

Innocent or Guilty? In Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996), both Grace Marks and James McDermott have been convicted of murdering their employer, Thomas Kinnear. While Grace maintains her innocence, the evidence supplied in her case could sway a jury either way. Within the context of the narrative, Atwood shows us how ambiguous the ideas of innocence and guilt may be, questioning our ideas of truth. What is truth and what process is used to obtain it? Obtaining a confession is one method which society uses to acquire what it deems is truth. In *Troubling Confessions*, however, Peter Brooks, questions the truth obtained through confession, especially in the legal process, stating that confession has become so ingrained in Western societies, that we believe those who fail to confess will be punished more severely within the criminal system, whereas those who fully confess will have a cleansed soul and probably improved sanctions (45). In *Volume I of The History of Sexuality: an Introduction*, Michel Foucault explains that we feel obligated to tell the truth because we will feel a sense of liberation, an obligation which is so deeply entrenched in our psyche that we no longer see it as the effect of “a power that constrains us; on the contrary, it seems to us that truth [...] demands only to surface” (60). What makes *Alias Grace* problematic in this light, then, is that Grace apparently does not feel obligated to confess nor does she feel it necessary to tell the truth. As a matter of fact, her multiple variations of truths and “confessions” suggest she has no comprehension of truth as categorized by the judging, male members of her society. In addition, the institutionalized idea that confession brings about
liberation is complicated by McDermott's confessing in the end because it does nothing to save him, whereas Grace refuses to provide the warranted confession, though placed in several "confessional settings" with both Dr. Jordan and Reverend Verringer, yet she is pardoned for her crime. *Alias Grace*, then, serves as Atwood's commentary on society's methods for obtaining and validating truth, displaying how truth is subject to power.

In *Power and Knowledge*, Michel Foucault describes the relationship between power and truth, suggesting that truth is formed through power and discourse. Foucault claims there are five traits which characterize the 'political economy' of truth in societies like ours:

- 'Truth' is centred on the form of scientific discourse and the institutions which produce it; it is subject to constant economic and political incitement (the demand for truth, as much for economic production as for political power); it is the object under diverse forms, of immense diffusion and consumption (circulating through apparatuses of education and information [. . .] it is produced and transmitted under the control, dominant if not exclusive, of a few great political and economic apparatuses (university, army, writing, media); lastly, it is the issue of a whole political debate and social confrontation ('ideological' struggles). (*PK* 131-2)

Foucault is describing how truth is subject to power—that of scientific, governmental, political, and social institutions—and how through that power's discourse—the
media, writing, film—individuals form knowledge of that society's stated truth. In order to create this definition of truth, Foucault states that each society not only creates mechanisms to distinguish between true and false statements, but that society also creates the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true (131). Grace undoubtedly does not fall within the category of those who distinguish truth from falsity nor does she possess the political power to dictate what society deems is truth. Otherwise, the courts would not have found her guilty, nor would they have sent her to prison. Even though the Governor pardons her later, it is not due to any power she has obtained. It is, rather, the power of Dr. Simon Jordan and Reverend Verringer, both of whom are endowed with power of differing sectors—that of scientific and religious discourse, respectively—that ultimately influences the Governor's decision to pardon Grace.

The issue of Grace's pardon at the end brings up several unanswered questions. Why is she pardoned? Was she never guilty of the crime of murdering Thomas Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery? Were the courts wrong before? How is it that truth has changed—or has it? According to Foucault, power creates truth; whereas "truth isn't the reward of free spirits, the child of protracted solitude, nor the privilege of those who have succeeded in liberating themselves" (PK 131). Rather, truth is subject to power. Atwood is clearly indicating the connections between truth, belief, and power in *Alias Grace*.

The court system perfectly illustrates these relationships among truth, belief, and power, through discourse. Jamie's belief is swayed by the talk among the
townspeople, in addition to the articles run in the newspapers. Not only that, but the attorneys also affect him, making new beliefs form in his mind. Lawyers, by nature, construct and reconstruct testimony as factual statements for their cases, coaching their witnesses on how to ideally portray a scenario, shaping each witness's testimony accordingly, in order to sway the jury's beliefs. Jamie tells Grace about "the lawyers who'd led him into saying things he did not see the results of until afterwards" (451), describing how their words convinced Jamie to alter his belief in Grace and to testify with their words. Jamie allows the lawyers to sway him, allowing them to speak through him at the trial, to suit their own purposes, and because of that discourse, his previous belief in Grace is altered.

After having been coaxed by the prosecutors, it is understandable why Jamie was so upset in seeing Grace in Nancy's clothes. Instead of thinking about the obvious reasons why Grace would have worn Nancy's fine clothing as opposed to her own rags (to appear respectable in a court of law), he thinks of her as the murderess that the lawyers have already created in his mind. Because of his reaction in court, this picture is solidified in the jury's minds as well. After all, Jamie was in love with Grace, a fact the prosecution could not fail to point out to the court. If he believes her guilty, then why should the jury believe her innocent?

Nancy's clothing, paired with Jamie's reaction to her wearing the clothes, places the finishing touches on Grace's murder conviction. In her article, "Crimson Silks and New Potatoes: The Heteroglossic Power of the Object in Atwood's _Alias Grace_," Christie March discusses how Grace's identity is transformed when she dons
Nancy's clothing, stating that Grace inadvertently "slips into Nancy's shoes" in other ways, thereby increasing, instead of decreasing, her appearance of guilt to others.

Instead of appearing respectable, Grace's appearance brings about connotations of not only a sexual mistress, but also someone guilty of attempting to rise above her class (March 71). The combined transgressions of apparent sexual promiscuity and class ascension help to seal her fate in regards to the murder charges.

Because of this transformation through donning Nancy's clothing, Grace has also estranged herself from the only person who could help her case—Jamie. Prior to his affection for Grace, Jamie was smitten with Nancy. However, since Nancy acted as sexual mistress to Mr. Kinnear, Nancy was unattainable for someone like Jamie, who fell below her station. In dressing herself in Nancy's clothing, Grace, too, places herself in this unattainable role for the mere boy, Jamie, but not unattainable for a man like McDermott (March 71). Therefore Jamie punishes Grace for attempting to assume an upper-class standing, one that takes her out of his reach.

Grace used to have power over Jamie, as she was older and he was vying for her affection, yet her social status had placed her in an achievable position for Jamie. At the trial, though, roles are reversed. Through his testimony, Jamie dominates. Believing she had deceived him regarding her feelings for him, he now also believed she was not only capable, but guilty of the two murders. Jamie, feeling jilted, did not desire to believe Grace. Grace's use of Nancy's clothes then, depicts Grace as morally and social corrupt, one who would stoop so low as to steal the clothing off of a dead woman's back—one whom she, herself, had murdered. Her appearance,
combined with Jamie's testimony, devastated any chances Grace might have had for an acquittal.

However damning Jamie's testimony was, Grace's attorney, Kenneth MacKenzie, indicates to Dr. Simon Jordan that Grace's court case was biased from the beginning due to political power, which ultimately shaped the outcome:

Those which supported Mr. Mackenzie and his cause were the only ones to say a good word for Grace. The others were all for hanging her and William Lyon Mackenzie as well, and anyone else thought to harbour republican sentiments [...] Mr. Kinnear was a Tory gentleman, and William Lyon Mackenzie took the part of the poor Scots and Irish, and the emigrant settlers generally. (372)

Because of the politics surrounding the case, Grace was doomed. The real truth of who murdered Mr. Kinnear did not matter. Grace was tried and convicted because "the truth" lay with whoever was in power and that was with those in favor of Kinnear. Grace received a reduced sentence of life imprisonment as opposed to the death sentence only because of the circumstantial evidence surrounding her in regards to Kinnear's murder. In addition, a granted appeal, based on current political forces, was unlikely as Reverend Verringer stated that "the Tories appear to have confused Grace with the Irish Question, although she is a Protestant, and to consider the murder of a single Tory gentleman [...] to be the same thing as the insurrection of an entire race" (80). The jury failed to look at the facts of the case, and therefore, political power took precedence over truth.
MacKenzie also serves to enlighten the reader further about his own sense of truth as he questions how Dr. Jordan checked Grace's facts, commenting, "in the newspapers, I suppose" (373), implying that facts would be found in published works, rather than from Grace, herself. This is ironic because the information in the newspapers was full of discrepancies, such as Grace's supposed confession published in the *Star and Transcript*, and more importantly, in Susanna Moodie's narrative, *Life in the Clearings*. However, Susanna Moodie's publications were regarded as fact, even though MacKenzie stated that she had "[...]
a somewhat conventional imagination, and a tendency to exaggerate. She put some fine speeches into the mouths of her subjects, which it is highly unlikely they ever made" (376). Because Moodie has acquired the people's authority, she can publish material misquoting others like Grace without repercussion. MacKenzie's comments, moreover, are humorous, at best, because not only does he make a living out of telling his clients how to fabricate the truth in order to win their cases, but we also realize through Jordan that MacKenzie probably helped to add to Moodie's story. Moodie and MacKenzie both have power, so they are able to recreate the truth without consequence from someone without power, like Grace.

While the court case was indubitably biased, it does represent a type of coming of age for Grace, as it is here that she comes to see how truth may be changed in various ways. Truth is not absolute. She reflects, "I can remember what I said when arrested, and what Mr. MacKenzie the lawyer said I should say, and what I did not say even to him; and what I said at the trial, and what I said afterwards, which
was different as well” (295). She describes herself at the trial as being “shut up inside that doll of myself, and my true voice could not get out” (295). Because MacKenzie, an authoritative figure, forms the truth that Grace must speak at the trial, Grace learns the importance of appearances. She connects one’s appearance to truth, understanding how, ultimately, appearances form truth, to the point that they form a person’s identity. Because of the evidence linking her to the murder of Thomas Kinnear, she is not only convicted, but transformed into a celebrated murderess. She quickly learns from this court case that her words are not what are important; what is important is her appearance—how she is expected to appear to others and her performing accordingly.

Earl Ingersoll addresses Grace’s performances in his article “Engendering Metafiction in Margaret Atwood’s Alias Grace.” He discusses how Grace indicates that she can reveal herself to Dr. Jordan, yet what she reveals as truth to him is her “performativity, in its way undermining the ‘truthfulness’ of her earlier ‘revelations’” (Ingersoll 395). Grace acts a part she deems appropriate for the occasion, unconcerned with what she may have said in the past, indicating that past truth may easily be overwritten with current truth. When she learns of her pardon from Janet, the warden’s daughter, for instance, Grace says, “I could see that she felt some tears were in order, and I shed several” (442). Now that society deems Grace “perhaps as an innocent woman wrongly accused and imprisoned unjustly” (443), Grace knows she must act according to how society views her, donning an appropriate ‘face’ for those around her. Knowing that she is now looked upon as innocent, Grace says to
Simon in her letter, “it calls for a different arrangement of the face; but I suppose it will become easier in time” (443), indicating how long she has worn another face as the celebrated murderess. This clearly indicates Grace’s ability to assess what society deems is true, to adapt, and reflect that idea of truth to others.

Atwood, too, has assessed what her readers desire to be true and fulfills their desire through the open-endedness of *Alias Grace*. Considering Peter Brooks’ work, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*, one may conceive how we, as readers, are pulled by narrative desire through a novel to the end. Atwood plays on our desires as readers, counting on our wish to know if Grace did or did not commit the murders. Brooks would call this the desire for the end, stating that “the very possibility of meaning plotted through sequence and through time depends on the anticipated structuring force of the ending” (93). Therefore, a reader is pulled by narrative desire to obtain meaning from the end of the story. However, Brooks would find the ending in *Alias Grace* problematic, because our question is left unanswered—was Grace guilty? Moreover, Grace’s liberation at the end of the novel is equally problematic because Atwood suggests distinct similarities between Dr. Jordan, Dr. Bannerling, and Grace’s husband Jamie. Therefore, even though Grace is pardoned and her environment changed, we must ask, has she truly been liberated from her oppressed state?

Readers may find it ironic that the man whose testimony was partially responsible for Grace’s murder conviction would be the same man who would supply her with a home when she was pardoned. Jamie can easily justify this change of heart
because he claims to have felt guilt throughout the years about his role in her conviction. The reader questions Jamie’s honesty here. Did he really feel guilty for his part in the trials or was that a part of his reconstructed truth after he found out about the pardon? Why would he not have written to Grace directly to ask for her forgiveness while she was imprisoned, instead of waiting until she was officially pardoned by someone with more “authority” than he? He never did anything to change Grace’s situation while she was imprisoned, merely writing the penitentiary for information on Grace, not to Grace, under the guise that he did not wish to upset her. Therefore, the reader must conclude that Jamie felt such remorse only after he was informed of her pardon, considering her pardon an official “not guilty” verdict. However, to pardon is to forgive, not a revocation of guilt.

Jamie ignores the idea that Grace could have been guilty, yet still pardoned. Instead, he takes on the role of guilt, himself, using forgiveness for power and sexual foreplay, asking Grace to tell him, in vivid detail, of all the atrocities she underwent, at both the penitentiary and the asylum, asserting her being imprisoned was entirely his fault. Jamie prefers to believe that Grace’s murder conviction was solely due to his testimony as it gives his sexual fantasies an outlet. Imploring Grace to retell her torments also allows Jamie to remain in the top power position because he believes it was his testimony that placed her in these confines. Her lowered class position and sexual degradation on his account allow him to feel a sense of elevation and elation. Not only is he able to punish her for not taking him seriously and thwarting his efforts at obtaining her when he was a boy, but he is also now able to
fill the role of savior because of his providing her with a new life and home. Therefore, his elevated status and continued sexual fantasies hinge upon the belief that Grace’s imprisonment was entirely his fault. Even though Grace tries to make him see the truth—that she probably would have been convicted of murder without his testimony—in his mind, his desired belief in his own responsibility outweighs her truth.

Grace’s willingness to augment her night-time confessions with lurid details for Jamie is telling. Grace realizes that her recounting these stories at night is important to Jamie. She connects these confessions to Dr. Jordan, in her final letter to him, showing how he, too, was elated during these retellings. Grace says, “Now that I come to think of it, you were as eager as Mr. Walsh is to hear about my sufferings and my hardships in life; and not only that, but you would write them down as well” (457). One may make an analogy between the written record of Grace’s confessions to the pictures in a pornographic magazine. Grace is made into a sexual object, where Simon’s act of writing down her confessions would keep them in a permanent record to be read over and over again for future pleasure, without the need of Grace.

This connecting Dr. Jordan with Jamie is important, as Grace has linked them together as confessors—those who obtain pleasure from listening to Grace’s confessions. Grace knows that both Jamie and Dr. Jordan receive satisfaction from hearing her recount her suffering in the jail and the mental asylum. She attempts to oblige each of them, encouraged by their apparent gratification. In her final letter to Dr. Simon, Grace writes, “[. . .] it gave me joy every time I managed to
come up with something that would interest you [...] It did make me feel I was of some use in this world, although I never quite saw what you were aiming at in all of it" (457). Connecting Dr. Jordan with Jamie, Grace says that "I have to tell him some story or other about being in the Penitentiary, or else the Lunatic Asylum in Toronto. The more watery I make the soup and the more rancid the cheese, and the worse I make the coarse talk and proddings of the keepers, the better he likes it" (456). Grace recognizes that these figures are imbued with power; her psychiatrist, and her husband, both obtain enjoyment from her confessions and that in each of these passages, she augments the truth as a storyteller in order to enhance her listener’s pleasure. There is a distinct disparity between the actual truth, Grace’s truth, and that of either of her confessors’ truths. Grace recreates the truth for their benefit—for their desire, telling them what she feels they want to hear.

Such spirals of power and pleasure received through a confessional exchange are discussed by Michel Foucault in his work, *The History of Sexuality an Introduction: Volume I*. Both Dr. Jordan and Jamie are joined as confessors, acting as different types of authority who listen to Grace, the confessant, impart her innermost secrets. Jamie would be her confidante ensconced in the role of husband, whereas Dr. Simon Jordan would play the clinical role of psychiatrist. The clinical confessional sets up specific roles in a power relationship, that of Grace, the patient, and Dr. Jordan, the psychiatrist. This traditional doctor-patient relationship, in addition to the personal relationship between Grace and Jamie, can best be explained through Foucault, who states that there is pleasure for the confessor coming from employing a
power that questions, while the confessant, on the other hand, also receives pleasure through evading the confessor's power (45). Each may gain a sense of power and pleasure in this relationship. The confessor obtains power and pleasure in the action required to pursue the truth from the confessant, as well as in achieving the goal of receiving this much desired end; that of the confession. The confessant, however, may receive power and pleasure through resisting the urge to confess, as well as in giving in to the urge for disclosure, feeling a sense of gratification in shocking the listener with the details of the confession (Foucault 45).

Elizabeth Grosz, in her study “Contemporary Theories of Power and Subjectivity” comments on this idea of gratification in confession, stating “psychoanalysis has developed the ancienrr technique of extracting confessions into a fine art. It binds the subject’s desire into a desire to speak, to tell all, as if confession could in itself be liberating” (84). Jordan, being a promoter of such an idea—that the truth will liberate Grace—is clearly at a disadvantage within this relationship, as she does not adhere to this basic premise. Simon obviously had institutionalized power on his side—that of scientific discourse. It would appear that Grace would be at a disadvantage due to her class and sex, yet the irony comes from the fact that she actually has the upper hand over Doctor Jordan, using her power admirably. She eludes the doctor's every effort to extract a confession. As a matter of fact, it would appear that the doctor loses the battle hands down, in that he nearly has a nervous breakdown by the time he leaves Kingston, whereas Grace is freed without the supposedly required confession. She successfully eludes Dr. Jordan in his attempt at
obtaining her “ultimate confession”—whether or not she was innocent or guilty of the murders.

Even though Grace does not provide the confession Dr. Jordan is searching for, Grace does tell her life story to him. Through this recounting, we learn of the various environments in which Grace has found herself: at home with an abusive parent; in servitude to those of the upper class; in a sanitarium overpowered by the doctors; in a prison where she is sexually harassed by male prison guards; in the home of the governor where she is placed on display as the “celebrated murderess”; in an isolated room within a clinical confessional setting with Dr. Simon Jordan; and later, living as Jamie Walsh’s wife, telling the “dirty secrets” of her life in the asylum and penitentiary. In each environment, Grace must readjust and transform herself, adapting from situation to situation. While each scenario is different, in virtually every role Grace performs, she is marginalized, either by her sex or her class. This is important as we consider the relationship between authority and truth.

Coomi Vevaina makes an important point about this relationship in her article, “Quilting Selves: Interpreting Margaret Atwood’s Alias Grace,” arguing that power politics is about “how power operates and who has power over whom” (8). Within Alias Grace, we see how Grace is marginalized due to her sex and her class and how this marginalization impacts her sense of truth and others’ sense of truth about her. Because of Thomas Kinnear’s economic and political status, the trying and convicting of his murderer, was most important to the town. Since Grace was of the lower class, no one believed her story, even Jamie, who knew her prior to the
murders. Her own attorney did not believe her to be innocent. Public truth dominated because of the power not only backing that truth, but also creating it.

Dr. Bannerling is another authority figure backed by power and one whom we may connect to Dr. Jordan and Jamie. He is a respected physician, and therefore, his truth outranks Grace’s truth. Grace tells Jordan how Dr. Bannerling, the Chaplain, Warden Smith, and the prison guards sexually harassed her and other women prisoners, hinting that employers such as Thomas Kinnear routinely abused their female servants, showing how males dominate women of lower class, vastly abusing their power. It is ironic when Doctor Bannerling, in particular, writes his letter to Dr. Jordan, telling of how Grace’s madness “was a fraud and an imposture, adopted by her in order that she might indulge herself and be indulged” (71). Who was truly being indulged in this scenario? Grace? One thinks not. For Bannerling to say that Grace is “as devoid of morals as she is of scruples” (71), is hypocritical, at best. Rather than recounting Grace in this letter, he is surely depicting himself. He is a doctor abusing his power with his patient. Like Dr. Jordan and Jamie, however, he, too, sees Grace as a sexual object, linking the three men as one.

What is important to note is that while society perceives men such as Doctor Bannerling, the Chaplain, and Warden Smith as respectable authority figures, we are forced to realize the sad truth that if abused women like Grace were to tell of these incidents, society would ignore them. Their truth is not heard, not recognized. They are marginalized due to their position and their sex. Only if another, more powerful, authority figure comes into play will the stories of such abused women be heard and
acknowledged. Therefore, through *Alias Grace*, Atwood is exemplifying the relationship of truth to power, forcing us to realize its very subjectivity.

In Grace’s case, a more powerful authority figure did come into play, that of a new warden and a new governor. Because of these changes, moreover, because of Dr. Jordan and Reverend Verringer’s recommendations, Grace received her pardon. Because of this new power, society’s view of Grace had changed. Truth was transformed because of the belief in this new authority. Even Grace’s truth had changed—her view of herself—her role. Grace thinks, “I felt as if my face was dissolving and turning into someone else’s face [. . .] and was a different woman” (443). Grace quickly realizes that she must adjust to her new role, knowing she must act differently. The idea of knowledge combined with authority seems important here; those who do not know Grace’s story will treat her differently from those who think they know the truth. Whose truth is the question—truth belonging to those such as Reverend Verringer or those such as Doctor Bannerling?

With Reverend Verringer, the veritable leader of his church, and crusader for Grace’s release, one must consider his version of truth. Verringer understands the nature of politics. He leads the crusade of his parishioners in advocating Grace’s release from prison, his parishioners following him in his attempts to save Grace because they supposedly believe in her innocence. However, one must wonder, do they believe or is it because of Verringer’s leadership that they say they do? More importantly, are they merely shepherded by the reverend? Lydia’s comment of “you
killed her, I always thought so” (401), makes the reader believe they are merely following Verringer, without faith in Grace.

While Verringer’s flock seems to bow to his authority, his knowledge of improprieties leads the reader to realize not only that his authority may be unwarranted, but also that his motives may be questionable. Does he believe in Grace’s innocence or is he simply attempting to focus attention on himself as a savior, either trying to gain personal attention from her fame or to distract others from what may lie underneath this façade? Is he a savior or is he compensating for his sinful inner thoughts? It is obvious not only from what he says, but from his actions, that he is less than ignorant of the lustful ways of the earth. His giggling at Grace’s/Mary’s crude comments at the séance astonishes Simon (400), as did his quoting Nathaniel Hawthorne, as Simon notes that Hawthorne was “accused of sensualism, and especially after The Scarlet Letter — of a laxity in morals” (192). One may form associations between the reverend and Jamie, who also wants to act as savior and who displays lustful desires through his need to be talked dirty to by Grace.

Atwood clearly wants the reader to also connect Nathaniel Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter with Verringer here. Not only does she want us to connect Grace with Hester Prynne, but to also connect Reverend Verringer with the good Reverend Dimmesdale. Does his apparent knowledge of lust and sin make him a better reverend, because as Grace says, one would be “bone ignorant” if they did not intimately know sin, or does it make him a hypocrite in being a religious leader—one
who appears to believe in Grace’s innocence—one who appears to be God’s servant? Furthering the connection to Hawthorne, one must consider this apparent need for exposure to sin as portrayed in Hawthorne’s *The Marble Faun*, which clearly indicates the need for the knowledge of sin in order for humans to reach their full potential. Is this the case with Verringer or is he merely a morally corrupt man posing as a holy man?

Another façade, and yet the last form of authority which cements the idea of Grace’s innocence, is the séance. It is ironic that the séance conducted by the fraud, Dr. Dupont, also known as Jeremiah the peddler, and later as Mr. Gerald Bridges, would help to solidify Grace’s innocence in the minds of Reverend Verringer, the Governor’s wife, and especially that of the scientifically oriented Dr. Simon Jordan. The reader knows Dr. Dupont is a con artist, as does Grace, but one who supplies the necessary vehicle to free Grace from her prison.

It is especially important that the reader know this information, because we are clued into what we believe is the absolute truth—that the séance is fixed, and the irony in this fraudulent happening is that the séance is what proves to everyone that Grace is innocent. This unconventional type of “confession” proves the “truth” to Reverend Verringer, to his parishioners, and to Dr. Jordan, in a fashion. Because of the nature of the “confession,” Jordan thinks he “can’t state anything with certainty and still tell the truth, because the truth eludes him” (407). He does not know if Grace was merely acting the necessary part in order to be freed, or if what he witnessed was true. Moreover, he does not want to be dismissed as a scientist.
because of his findings, either. Therefore, he grasps at the idea of double consciousness, which Jerome DuPont throws his way, an attempt at some type of scientific conclusion, merely to escape from his dilemma and to ensure Verringer does not harass him for satisfaction because Reverend Verringer knows he needs Simon’s authoritative recommendation—that of scientific discourse—to free Grace. Therefore, Simon says what he needs to in order achieve his desired end—that Grace is innocent by reason of the scientific double consciousness.

While such an assessment apparently frees Grace from the penitentiary, one must still question if she has been liberated from her marginalized state. The similarities between Grace’s relationships with Dr. Jordan, Dr. Bannerling, and Jamie are too similar to definitively acknowledge Grace’s liberation. Jamie’s nocturnal need to hear Grace’s “confessions” as sexual foreplay is directly correlated to that of Dr. Jordan, who had sexual fantasies about Grace and who also desired to hear Grace’s confessions. In addition, one must connect Dr. Bannerling as well, even though his tactic for sexual gratification was a more forceful approach. Therefore, even though Grace is freed from her prison, she may not truly be liberated from her bonds within the confessional exchange, as her husband, we can assume, will continue to connect these stories with sexual gratification, just as did both Dr. Jordan, Dr. Bannerling, and even, perhaps, Reverend Verringer.

Just as Simon said what was needed in order to achieve his desired end, so do the readers believe what is needed in order to achieve our desired end. We know that the séance is a hoax. The fact of the matter is that we, as readers, do not care. It
is the necessary means to free Grace from her prison. We become like the attorney who is willing to grab at anything to achieve our desired end, to see Grace freed from her prison. We desire for Grace to be innocent—or at least to be proven so—and if she is guilty, we prefer not to know. Atwood has, then, successfully lured us to the end of the novel with our desire to know that Grace is innocent, staving off what Brooks would term a “short-circuit ending,” an ending that will leave readers feeling unsatisfied (109), through various sides to Grace’s story; yet with these alternate versions are also more influences on our preconceived notions of truth. Atwood is tantalizing, if not satisfying, her readers in the end, by leaving an open ending for those who do not want to know Grace is guilty. So while Peter Brooks might disagree with this tactic, believing that only through the end do we obtain meaning, it is important to readers to be ignorant of the truth, especially if it is not aligned with our desire. This point is especially integral to the meaning found within *Alias Grace*—how important is it that we know the *real* truth? We have our own truth. We sympathize with Grace, and even though there is just as much evidence available to condemn her, we want to believe in her and even in the séance which saves her. In this, Atwood extends her readers the power to decide what is true.

This is the final bit of evidence indicating how truth is subjective. Even we, as readers, are willing to exchange absolute truth for our desired truth. There is just as much evidence in *Alias Grace* to indicate that Grace is guilty, yet we desire her innocence and have the power to make it so. Atwood has used us in the end to prove her final point in that real truth does not matter to us. We are all like the attorneys,
the Reverend, the judge, and the doctors. We are willing to look at the truth, but only
if it suits our purposes will we honor it, and if it does not suit our purposes, we will
reconstruct the truth, telling another story that is much more to our liking.
The Repressive Power of Little Girls in Margaret Atwood’s *Cat’s Eye*

*Cat’s Eye* (1989) is one of many Margaret Atwood novels which deal with individual power. Our connecting the works of both Sigmund Freud and Michel Foucault is integral to such an examination. In “Foucault, Freud, and the Technologies of the Self,” Patrick Hutton best summarizes the differences between Freud and Foucault in saying, “whereas Freud sought to explain how knowledge gives us power over the self, Foucault seeks to demonstrate how power shapes our knowledge of the self” (135). By bringing together Freud’s notions of repeating to obtain knowledge or mastery with Foucault’s exploration of power and how it shapes an individual, one may more clearly analyze Elaine, the protagonist, who is attempting to obtain mastery over her past relationship with Cordelia—a relationship which clearly exemplifies what Foucault would deem repressive power—in order to attain a sense of self as an adult. It would appear that such an attainment may be impossible for Elaine, especially if considering *Cat’s Eye*’s open-endedness in relation to Peter Brooks’s theories in *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*, that the end of a novel provides meaning. Brooks would state that the ending is problematic because Elaine is unable to confront Cordelia; hence, she is unable to truly become liberated. However, it is her retrospective of both her art and her life that enables Elaine to recover lost knowledge, to break from her oppressed state, and to finally establish a true sense of identity.

In *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, Foucault discusses institutionalized repression and the effects such repression has upon individuals in a
given society. He states that “repression operated as a sentence to disappear, but also as an injunction to silence, an affirmation of nonexistence, and by implication, an admission that there was nothing to say about such things, nothing to see, and nothing to know” (4). Foucault’s ideology regarding institutionalized repression clearly extends to Cat’s Eye; namely in how the secrecy surrounding Elaine’s repression is not truly a secret, but how it is quite simply, an unmentionable, a taboo. This form of power and the silence surrounding it have been in effect for so long that all females—women and girls—remain silent. Her mother, Mrs. Smeath, and Grace’s Aunt Mildred all have an inkling of what is happening. The other girls at school know, as well, but they keep silent—a direct result of repressive power. Elaine says that the girls “[. . .] look at me curiously, then away. It’s like the people in cars, on the highway, who slow down and look out the window when there’s a car accident by the side of the road. They slow down but they don’t stop. They know when there’s trouble, they know when to keep out of it” (190). It is this silence that grants power.

In his article “Meat Like You Like It: The Production of Identity in Atwood’s Cat’s Eye, Stephen Ahern comments that “[. . .] mothers are complicit in this conspiracy of silence” (11): “There’s a great deal they don’t say. Between us and them is a gulf, an abyss, that goes down and down. It’s filled with wordlessness” (CE 93). Mrs. Smeath and Aunt Mildred condone the actions of the girls. They are unwilling to stop their torture of Elaine because they see her as a “heathen.” In fact, they feel it is acceptable and just for the girls to punish her. While Elaine’s mother represents an atypical mother figure in that she does not follow the conventions followed by
Elaine's friends' mothers, she shares the female inability to communicate to Elaine the repressive power silencing them all. No female talks about it; yet they all know it exists. It is the pact, the secrecy, the silence that gives this situation its power.

The repressive power maintains the silence. However, Foucault also states in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977* that “the individual which power has constituted is at the same time its vehicle” (98), meaning that while the repressive power certainly enforces the silence, those who are repressed certainly contribute to this power cycle, as well. Hence, Elaine takes part ownership in this repressive power structure through her complicity to the girls' abuse, even though their policing power has ultimately manifested internalized negation of her selfhood. Because she, too, refuses to break the silence, she is complicit to the cycle.

Only when Elaine, the silenced, refuses to allow herself to be bullied by the oppressive power of the girls, the silencers, does her oppression end. Only when she stops acknowledging the policing power of Cordelia does she physically free herself from all of them. She realizes, “I don’t have to do what she says, and worse and better, I’ve never had to do what she says. I can do what I like” (*CE* 213). Elaine knows the truth: that only by granting them their power do they hold any. It is at this point that she comes to the realization that her conceding to their demands was an integral part in this power relationship. By not playing her required role of the silenced or the oppressed, the circle is broken. A power structure such as theirs is based on an exchange. By her refusing to exchange, there is no power. As they cry
out to her, she thinks, "I can hear the hatred, but also the need. They need me for this, and I no longer need them. I am indifferent to them" (214). Once Elaine no longer needs them, she is free from the circle of power.

While Foucault discusses repressive power, Peter Brooks discusses repetition in *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*, modeling his narrative theory upon Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical theories from *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Brooks states that "repetition is mastery, movement from the passive to the active, and [...] mastery is an assertion of control over what man must in fact submit to [...]" (98). In linking Brooks with Foucault, then, if one is able to gain power or mastery through repetition, and those representing repressive power eradicate one's ability to articulate those thoughts through language, then that repressive power has eliminated the individual's ability to gain power or to attain mastery. This view is a fundamental part of the power structure found within the circle of the girls. They create Elaine's sense of worthlessness; hence, she no longer has the confidence nor has the ability to articulate her thoughts through language, sensing through her friends' feedback that her thoughts are not valid, that she is not valid. Silence becomes her only defense.

Jennifer Lawn comments on the idea of female subjectivity through silence in her work, "Our Bodies Their Selves: Gender, Language, and Knowledge in Chapter Seventeen of *Cat's Eye.*" Lawn says that there are crucial points in chapter seventeen where "women remain both unspeakable and unable to speak" (273). Women are silenced. Moreover, Anthony Paul Kerby states in *Narrative and the Self*, that self-
narration is “fundamental to the emergence and reality of [the] subject”(4) and “persons only know themselves after the expression”(5). This indicates that the silenced, the oppressed, tend to suffer from “a lack of development, of unity, and of directionality”(40). This is representative of Elaine’s case because she has been repressed into silence by the oppressive power of the girls. Negation of the self is the outcome—an outcome that Elaine carries with her throughout her life, even with her memory loss of the majority of incidents which led her to this feeling.

Because Elaine has forgotten the specifics surrounding these incidents, she has begun reconstructing them to fill in the blank spaces in her memory. More appropriately, however, as Earl Ingersoll states in his article, “Margaret Atwood’s Cat’s Eye: Reviewing Women in a Postmodern World,” Elaine “may seem in a conventional sense to be exploring the truth of her past but [ . . . ] in a truer sense is creating, or writing, a past as she chooses now to see it, rather than as it might have once existed” (18). Ingersoll’s statement exemplifies Margaret Atwood’s views on memories, showing that “how we remember something at twenty is different from how we reconstruct our memory at thirty and forty and so on” (Gilbert). Such a view indicates that our memories are not always factual; we edit them to suit our own purpose. Here, Elaine edits her memories in order to combat her negation and to attain her sense of selfhood.

One such memory that Elaine has blocked is her traumatic burial—her time buried in the hole—and uses “nightshade” to symbolize that time. This
specific scenario exemplifies Elaine's use of repetition to obtain mastery. Elaine ultimately associates the poison of the nightshade berries with the girls. The word "nightshade" and allusions to nightshade appear repeatedly throughout the novel. We first encounter nightshade when Cordelia tells them all to wash off the poisonous juice of the berries, otherwise, "one drop could turn you into a zombie" (82); this foreshadows what will later happen to Elaine. It is not the nightshade, however, rather her close proximity to the girls, which will turn her into a "zombie." In the *Deadly Nightshade* painting, Elaine paints the flowers, but adds the eyes of the watchful girls to symbolize their policing power. Part four of *Cat's Eye* is named "Deadly Nightshade" because this is where Elaine must return to her hometown where her childhood trauma occurred, as well as where we begin to first understand her association of nightshade with the girls. It is specifically in this section of the novel where Elaine describes how the girls essentially attempt to bury her alive. When Elaine thinks back to this day, all she can visualize is nightshade. She thinks, "There is no nightshade in November...I can tell it's the wrong memory. But the flowers, the smell, the movement of the leaves persist, rich, mesmerizing, desolating, infused with grief" (117). The act of the girls burying Elaine in the ground and the associations with flowers, leaves, and an infusion of grief resonates a feeling of death—a funeral burial, to be precise—and in essence, this is what it is. Elaine thinks, "I have no image of myself in the hole; only a black square filled with nothing...the point at which I lost power" (116). It is at this specific moment that Elaine "dies"; her individual power is lost, and she becomes a zombie to Carol,
Grace, and most importantly, to Cordelia. She no longer holds individual power, but becomes a prisoner to the three girls, unable to oppose them in any way. Each of Elaine’s repetitious nightshade memories alludes to this death, this loss of individual power.

In correlation to this loss of identity, the closer their friendship appears to be on the outside, the more Elaine begins to feel negatively about herself on the inside. Nothingness is central, a reflection of Foucault’s ideology on the power of repression. “I say nothing […] reveal nothing […] I have nothing to say” (128). This nothingness represents Elaine’s self-perception, and how her “friends” make her feel. Nothing that she does will ever be quite good enough. Elaine internalizes the policing power of the girls, beginning to sense that her trial will never be over. Even as an adult, she thinks she will have to deal with “friends” who watch her every move, judging her negatively, and feeling that she will never quite measure up.

As a result of these perceived inadequacies, Elaine begins to punish herself when she is alone; peeling her feet, attacking her finger nails, and biting the skin off of her lips. Elaine’s compulsion to inflict pain upon herself to feel a part of reality stays with her as she moves into adulthood when she is living with Jon: “Every move I make is sodden with unreality. When no one is around, I bite my fingers. I need to feel physical pain, to attach myself to daily life. My body is a separate thing” (367). After she returns to Toronto for her retrospective, she chews her fingers once again, indicating her inability to escape her past. This self-mutilation exemplifies Foucault’s internalization of the policing process. Even though there is no one there to punish
Elaine for her endless list of atrocities, she takes on both the role of the punished and the punisher. There is no longer an actual need for the girls’ surveillance as Elaine has internalized their watchfulness already.

There is a direct connection between the girls’ surveillance of Elaine and the decrease in her individuality and self-affirmation. As Nicole de Jong states in her work, “Mirror Images in Margaret Atwood’s *Cat’s Eye,*” “Elaine’s struggle is an endeavor to become free of the female gaze, the gaze of her girlfriends, and in particular the gaze of Cordelia” (98). Elaine must free herself from the female gaze in order to be liberated from their negative definitions of her. Without doing so, she will continue to feel no sense of identity; instead she will continue to be defined by Cordelia, who prevents the formation of her sense of self (de Jong 98). In allowing herself to be vulnerable to them, Elaine loses her identity. Even though her mother says, “you don’t have to play with them” (173), Elaine feels that she must. She thinks that by being friends with them, she will somehow improve, somehow please Cordelia, already internalizing their criticism in believing she needs improvement.

Attached to this idea of the female gaze and being objectified is desire. The girls only hold power over Elaine because of her desire, her need for them. Cordelia uses this need against Elaine, banking on it with each new facet of her wrath. Elaine says, “Cordelia doesn’t do these things or have this power over me because she’s my enemy [...] she likes me, she wants to help me, they all do. They are my friends, my girl friends, my best friends. I have never had any before and I’m terrified of losing them. I want to please” (131-32). Because of Elaine’s desire to maintain the
friendship, Cordelia realizes her own power. She knows that Elaine needs to be her friend more than Cordelia needs to be hers and she uses that knowledge to push Elaine to do more. This shift in power becomes evident, not only to Elaine, but especially to Cordelia. She enforces her power, convincing Elaine to keep their secret then, not through hate, but through coercion of friendship. Atwood writes, "She puts an arm around me, gives me a little squeeze, a squeeze of complicity, of instruction. Everything will be all right as long as I sit still, say nothing, reveal nothing. I will be saved then, I will be acceptable once more. I smile, tremulous with relief, with gratitude" (128). The tentativeness of this female relationship stayed with Elaine for the rest of her life.

Elaine's returning to her hometown of Toronto for her art retrospective forces her to confront these memories of her childhood. Elaine has resisted remembering specific parts of her life in order to protect herself. She feels a negative connotation surrounding certain times, remembering basic facts, such as that she was friends at one time with Carol, Cordelia, and Grace, yet she seems to have forgotten all of the bad things that have happened to her during that time: "There's something to do with them, something like a sentence in tiny dry print on a page, flattened out, like the dates of ancient battles. Their names are like names in a footnote, or names written in spidery brown ink in the fronts of Bibles" (221). Even though their relationship had greatly impacted her life, had changed the way in which she viewed herself, and had left a permanent mark in how she would forever view women, Elaine has emptied her mind of their significance in her life, writing them off as a footnote. The reasoning
for this is probably her fear of reverting to her childhood role. However, as expressed by Ahern, "the symbolic meaning of this crisis is one of the lost keys to self-understanding that haunt the older Elaine who feels compelled to fill in the missing pieces of her past" (15). Elaine thinks, "I'm not afraid of seeing Cordelia, I'm afraid of being Cordelia. Because in some way we changed places, and I've forgotten when" (CE 227). Therefore, Elaine has blocked specific memories in the hopes that she will not revert to her former role, the one that Cordelia now assumes.

It is ironic that while her symbolic death, her burial in the hole, was the cause of her becoming zombie-like through her loss of identity, her real near-death experience in the freezing water is what causes rebirth in Elaine. However, it is also what causes her fragmentation of self as she and Cordelia seem to change places. Because she is no longer oppressed by the girls, Elaine now has access to language and she begins to use it as a form of self-assertion. She becomes well known for her "mean mouth," which she uses to frighten her teenaged friend, Cordelia, though in dissimilar ways from those which Cordelia had used to frighten Elaine in their childhood. Having numerous opportunities to do so, Elaine and Cordelia never talk about the realities of what had happened during their childhood. When Cordelia alludes to certain scenarios, Elaine is afraid, unable to cope: "It's as if I've heard other people talking about me, saying bad things about me, behind my back. There's the same flush of shame, of guilt and terror, and of cold disgust with myself. But I don't know where these feelings have come from, what I've done [ . . . ] In my head
there’s a square of darkness, and of purple flowers” (CE 278). The negative connotation to these feelings forces Elaine to veer from her blocked memories.

In addition to resisting remembrance, she eventually begins to avoid Cordelia altogether. Because of the occasional allusions to their shared past, Elaine finds it is easier to cut Cordelia out of her life than to try to work through her psychological scars. However, cutting Cordelia physically out of her life is not the same as cutting Cordelia psychologically or emotionally from her life. As de Jong states, “instead, Cordelia becomes a very powerful and defining absence” (100), indicated when Elaine hears Cordelia’s voice urge her to commit suicide (CE 373). Elaine carries Cordelia with her internally until the end. They are essentially twins, bound to one another. We note that Cordelia realizes this much earlier, as Elaine is disturbed by their high school visit, thinking Cordelia “has expected something from me, some connection to her old life, or to herself” (CE 284). It wasn’t until she returned to Toronto that Elaine understands her need to talk with Cordelia:

There are things I need to ask her. Not what happened, back then in the time I lost, because now I know that. I need to ask her why. If she remembers [...] She will have her own version. I am not the center of her story, because she herself is that. But I could give her something you can never have, except from another person: what you look like from outside. A reflection. This is the part of herself I could give back to her. We are like the twins in old fables, each of whom has been give half a key. (CE 450)
Not only does younger Elaine distance herself from Cordelia, but from other women in general, especially those with whom Elaine might form a connection as she does not want to leave herself vulnerable. One such person is Susie, with whom Elaine could easily ally herself because they both shared Josef. In addition, Susie’s “mistake” of becoming pregnant by Josef could easily have been Elaine’s fate, as she later ponders in retrospect, having become pregnant herself by Jon. However, Elaine opts to steel herself against Susie, thinking she somehow deserved what she got, in Mrs. Smeath-like fashion, as Elaine hears “a small, mean voice, ancient and smug, that comes from somewhere deep inside my head: It serves her right” (CE 341). As Molly Hite states in her article, “Optics and Autobiography in Margaret Atwood’s Cat’s Eye,” when Elaine becomes pregnant, herself, “the judgment echoes that of Mrs. Smeath on the torture her daughter and the other girls inflicted on Elaine and anticipates the judgment Elaine visits on herself by painting Mrs. Smeath shortly after she learns that she, too, is pregnant” (193). Elaine states that, “whatever has happened to me is my own fault, the fault of what is wrong with me. Mrs. Smeath knows what it is. She isn’t telling” (CE 358). Therefore, Elaine still believes in her need for self-improvement, is still internalizing the policing power of the girls, and is still looking internally for some invisible fault that only other women may see. It is because of this belief that Elaine is unwilling to form relationships with others, to empathize with others, and to allow others true access to her self. Her leaving Cordelia helpless in the mental asylum, rather than helping her, reflects this. Elaine resents Cordelia for her weakness; she is afraid because she, too, was weak like
Cordelia at one time. It was easier for Elaine to turn her back on Cordelia than to extend her empathy and support, because then she might have to face the truth of their twin or mirror-like relationship.

When she returns to Toronto, however, Cordelia is the person for whom she is waiting because Elaine acknowledges her need to work through her past. Elaine was able to become self-assertive through language, yet she was unable to overcome her past through language. However, this makes sense because, as Ingersoll states, Elaine’s “past is very much seen through the cat’s eye marble into which Elaine looked at eight and saw her future as an artist” (19). Therefore, Elaine’s method for working through her past is accomplished through her artwork.

The cat’s eye marble, which many, such as Judith McCombs and Coral Howells, view as a symbol of Elaine’s artistic vision, has been a controversial topic. In her work, “Contrary Rememberings: the Creating Self and Feminism in Cat’s Eye,” Judith McCombs stresses the necessity of the cat’s eye imaginary visionary in order for Elaine to establish her sense of self. In her article, “Cat’s Eye: Elaine Risley’s Retrospective Art,” Coral Howells states that the cat’s eye can be seen as an artistic symbol from the beginning (210-12).

Alternatively, Sharon Wilson argues that when “Atwood’s personae and characters look through glass eyes without feeling, they are internally separated” (303). Wilson sees the cat’s eye as negative, a blockage to the formation of the whole self. After Elaine sees her “life entire” (CE 398) in the cat’s eye marble at her mother’s home, she is symbolically able to remove the glass from her eye (Wilson
311). From that moment, she regains feeling and is only then able to review her past with an empathetic eye, feeling a sense of shame and fear in the objects of her painting, especially those of Mrs. Smeath (405) and Cordelia (419), her mirror image (de Jong 105).

A variation from each of these, Ingersoll shows the image of the cat’s eye as central, because it represents a world into which Elaine has been allowed access; however he views this world as one of a distorted vision. Ingersoll sees the cat’s eye as a type of truth—one to which we do not attempt to gain access—rather something we look to in order to create our own text of that truth. This is reflective of Plato’s discussion on how art is a representation of truth. Only those with access, artists like Elaine, have the ability to represent truth through their artwork.

Unconsciously, Elaine has been attempting to use her artwork to work through her past, to represent truth. Through these paintings, a different mode of communication—one in which she is adept—she is able to repeat scenarios and to express her feelings towards Cordelia, Carol, Grace, and especially Mrs. Smeath. Through the many paintings of Mrs. Smeath, she is able to display her contempt for her religious hypocrisy. Painting after painting of Mrs. Smeath echoes Elaine’s hatred of the woman who allowed for her “punishment.” Through this form of repeating, Elaine expresses her pain, her rage, and her frustration at her inability to please those such as Mrs. Smeath, who exemplify society, who deem her unfit, no matter how hard she attempts to conform to society’s rules. Mrs. Smeath’s deeming the girls’ meting out of punishment as appropriate, necessary, and just, is an example
of how Elaine was condemned for her differences, rather than extended empathy or accepted for her "uncivilized" ways.

Throughout Elaine's life, then, she has been repeating in order to work through her past. Through her other paintings we can see this. In "Cat's Eye," only half a face is visible, "from the middle of the nose up: just the upper half of the nose, the eyes looking outward" (CE 446); yet the mirror behind the half-face reflects three small figures walking forward, "their faces shadowed, against a field of snow" (CE 446). The three figures obviously represent Carol, Cordelia, and Grace, the mirror symbolizing their impact on Elaine, how as a result of their relationship, her sense of self split, and she and Cordelia inevitably "reversed roles." The field of snow represents what David Cowart deems in "Bridge and Mirror: Replicating Selves in Cat's Eye" as Elaine's "symbolic death and resurrection" (126). The girls' leaving Elaine to die after she falls through the ice was the catalyst for this reversal of roles. Elaine's half-face reveals her inability to become a whole self. From this point on, she is inextricably linked with Cordelia.

It is this link which makes the ending of the novel somewhat problematic because, like Elaine, we do not know what became of Cordelia, nor do we achieve a true sense of closure in this area. However, Elaine has been able to resolve her issues with Mrs. Smeath through her artwork. As she makes the final tour of her paintings in the retrospective, she realizes much about Mrs. Smeath:

I used to think these were self-righteous eyes, piggy and smug inside their wire frames; and they are. But they are also defeated eyes,
uncertain and melancholy, heavy with unloved duty. The eyes of someone for whom God was a sadistic old man; the eyes of a small town threadbare decency. Mrs. Smeath was a transplant to the city, from somewhere a lot smaller. A displaced person; as I was

(CE 443).

Elaine realizes through looking at these paintings that she “went for vengeance” (CE 443) against Mrs. Smeath, and as an adult, she knows that “an eye for an eye leads only to more blindness” (CE 443). She forgot about Christian charity and because of this, she finds herself no better than Mrs. Smeath. Elaine finally comes to connect with Mrs. Smeath at her retrospective, reflecting her growth of selfhood. As Carol Osborne states in her article, “Constructing the Self through Memory: Cat’s Eye as a Novel of Female Development,” “Atwood shows that growth for individuals and for societies comes when people are able to empathize and connect with those who differ from them while also embracing themselves” (112).

As for Cordelia, Elaine was unable to resolve what had happened between the two of them through language. She is disappointed, feeling a need for such an exchange; to see Cordelia face-to-face. She wanted to connect with Cordelia in some fashion, as well, in order to connect with herself. Elaine thinks, “I’ve been prepared for almost anything; except absence, except silence” (CE 452). As Ingersoll states, though, “Cordelia, however, does not need to appear: Elaine has already exorcized much of the guilt, hatred, and anger generated in her relationships with Mrs. Smeath and Cordelia though her art, conveniently brought together so that the artist, like her
Elaine’s return to the bridge, to the place where she almost died, and her ability to see childhood Cordelia as she really was, or possibly, how she now sees her with more adult-like clarity, allows Elaine to let go. She says:

I know she’s looking at me, the lopsided mouth smiling a little, the face closed and defiant. There is the same shame, the sick feeling in my body, the same knowledge of my own wrongness, awkwardness, weakness; the same wish to be loved; the same loneliness; the same fear. But these are not my own emotions any more. They are Cordelia’s; as they always were. I am the older one now, I’m the stronger. If she stays here any longer she will freeze to death; she will be left behind, in the wrong time. It’s almost too late. I reach out my arms to her, bend down, hands open to show I have no weapon. It’s all right, I say to her. You can go home now. (CE 459).

Elaine has found a sense of closure through her return to the bridge. By acting out the scenario as the Mother figure, she is able to reconnect with Cordelia, to empathize with her, and to send her home. In doing so, she is able to obtain a more whole sense of self by the end of the novel. She is not entirely complete, however, as the other half of the key is missing. Elaine says, “This is what I miss, Cordelia: not something that’s gone, but something that will never happen. Two old women giggling over their tea” (CE 462). Therefore, Elaine has reconciled her past, but not necessarily her future. She desires to have a similarly close relationship with Cordelia without
the pain of the power structure in which they were trapped. Through repetition, supposition, and reconstruction, Elaine has been able to work through her blocked memories and come to a more thorough understanding of her past, a process which Osborne says reflects how “Atwood, like many of her contemporaries, stresses the importance of memory in the maturation process” (112). Elaine has obtained the knowledge Freud stated necessary for one to have power over the self and by the end of the novel, she has come to understand the basis behind the power that structured who she is today. While attempts may have been made to obstruct her in obtaining mastery by obliterating her ability to articulate through language, Elaine was able to find another outlet—her art—to do so. Through her retrospective, Elaine is able to connect and empathize with both Cordelia and Mrs. Smeath. She frees herself from them as well, now able to feel a sense of self, and finally, a sense of coming into her own.
Margaret Atwood presents a dystopian view of the world in her futuristic novel, *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1986). Through this narrative, Atwood examines the issues of political, social, and sexual discourse, illustrating how oppression is enforced through institutionalized control over language and knowledge. Because of its depiction of a society in which women are deprived of power and subjectivity, *The Handmaid’s Tale* has been the subject for numerous postmodern feminist analyses. Many view Offred as an exemplary Atwood protagonist—one who overcomes such deprivations of power and subjectivity to become self-empowered or liberated through her taped narrative. Offred does apparently become self-empowered through the act of recording these tapes, through the act of reconstructing and retelling her story, which serves as a type of catharsis as described by Sigmund Freud in his work “Remembering, Repeating and Working Through.” However, if one considers Peter Brooks’s theory in *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*, that the end of a novel provides meaning, then the “Historical Notes” epilogue makes this liberation theory somewhat problematic, especially when considering power and discourse in relation to Offred’s purpose for her narrative.

Peter Brooks states that in narrative, “everything is transformed by the structuring presence of the end to come, and narrative in fact proceeds ‘in the reverse’ [. . .] in terms of the meaning it would acquire only at the end” (22). *The Handmaid’s Tale* requires such a retrospective reading since, as Earl Ingersoll points out in his article, “Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale: Echoes of Orwell,*” “nowhere in the narrative ‘proper,’ that is, before the ‘Historical Notes,’ do we have any confirmation of how Offred’s story
as 'text' exists" (66). While Brooks states that only through the ending do we find
meaning in the text, the meaning of this narrative changes with the fact that it is only
through the professors' compilation of Offred's tapes, in the order they deem proper, that
it exists in textual form in the future.

While we do learn how this text exists, there are numerous questions left
unanswered, before and after the epilogue. In the article “The Calculus of Love and
Nightmare: “The Handmaid's Tale” and the Dystopian Tradition,” Lois Feuer states that
through this particular Atwood novel, “we can see that the descent is darker and the
rebirth more tentative than in her other novels, in part because of the open-endedness of
the ending” (90). All we know at the novel's conclusion is that Offred escaped from
Gilead, but we have no idea of the conditions into which she escaped. This ambiguity is
essential to the story as Atwood creates both similarities and distinctions among the
conditions under which women lived prior to the Gilead regime, during the regime, and
through the epilogue, after the regime.

One aspect of the epilogue's significance is connected to the idea that in the
Republic, handmaids like Offred, were denied a voice, and though it is many years later,
Offred is still denied her own voice within her own narrative. David Hogsette also
comments on the epilogue in his article, “Margaret Atwood's Rhetorical Epilogue in The
Handmaid's Tale: The Reader's Role in Empowering Offred's Speech Act,” stating that
while feminist readings certainly discern the patriarchal structure of the post-Gilead
society, in addition to Professor Pieixoto's chauvinistic interpretation of Offred's
narrative, what they fail to do is consider the political ramifications of the professors'
compilation of her text (265). Like Hogsette, we must also question the liberating effect
and power of Offred's speaking out, whether Offred truly does break free of her oppressed state, whether she really expresses her own subjectivity because we are never truly sure if it is her voice or whether Professor Pieixoto has allowed her to speak through the confines of his own textual authority (265). Unfortunately, we have only Professors Pieixoto and Wade to look to for answers. Professors Pieixoto and Wade are representative of what is supposed to be a "more enlightened age," yet their chauvinistic interpretative skills seem to align with the Republic of Gilead. The reader is then forced to question their compilation because of their apparent alignment. Therefore, Offred and the intended meaning of her narrative account is trapped as its meaning is radically changed through the dominating force of the time—that of the professors in the future. The epilogue then connects the professors' textualizing Offred's taped narrative to power and discourse. Offred is trapped by discourse—discourse of the future.

Offred's taped reconstruction demonstrates individual power within discourse, reflecting Freud's work, "Remembering, Repeating and Working Through," as Peter Brooks says. Offred's need to articulate her story, rather than simply remember it, shows how "repetition includes the need to reproduce and to work through as a type of remembering, and thus a way of reorganizing a story whose connective links have been obscured and lost" (98, 139). The act of her taping her narrative after she had escaped from Gilead, creates the ability for others, as well as Offred, to rewind and replay her story numerous times. This act allows Offred to reconstruct the story from memory after she had lived through the experience, to document that experience, and to feel a sense of self-affirmation. This recounting also exemplifies what Freud deems is a person's "compulsion to repeat," in order to either work through a problematic past event or gain
mastery over it (98). By retelling her story, Offred is able to work through her past marginalization in the Republic.

In addition to Offred’s attempting to gain mastery over her past in Gilead through recording her narrative, one must also consider her documentation as an act of revolt against the Republic. Aligned with Offred’s probable reasoning for taping her narrative is Foucault’s work on the subversion of repression in *Volume I of The History of Sexuality: an Introduction*. He states that while we consciously defy established power, knowing we are being subversive, we also look away from the present and appeal to the future, believing we are contributing to the revolt, the promised freedom for a different age (*THOS* 7). While Offred does not know if anyone will ever hear her tapes, she certainly attempts to evoke a listener through using the Cartesian *cogito*: “I believe you into being. Because I’m telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are” (*THT* 267-8). However, if Offred’s hope in creating these tapes was not only for self-expression through language, but also to revolt for future generations’ freedom, then the epilogue convolutes such desire through the examples of Professors Pieixoto and Wade. The problem with their transcription and decision-making in terms of Offred’s narrative is, as Hilda Staels states in her article, “*Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale: Resistance Through Narrating,*” that they are concerned with deciphering the tale precisely ‘in the clearer light of our own day’ (*THT* 311), applying their own definition, reflecting their discourse, which closely resembles the supremacy of ‘the defining sunlight’ (*THT* 110) of the Republic of Gilead (465).

The Republic of Gilead, too, traps Offred by its closed interpretation of the Old Testament of the Bible, which forms the basis of the Republic’s power, serving as a
guide for their reaction to abortion and sterilization practices of the preceding society. Through this foundation, the Gileadeans create a patriarchal totalitarian society where women are subservient to men, restricted to domesticity, denied the opportunity to read and write, and reclassified in terms of their childbearing abilities.

While Gilead bases its laws upon the Old Testament, those within the Republic employ only certain passages deliberately, limiting interpretive meaning only to that which advances their own ideology. For instance, the Republic uses Genesis 30:1-3 to substantiate their solution to reproductive decline, hence justifying their forcing the handmaids to copulate with the commanders. The foundation comes from the story of Jacob and Rachel; because Rachel could not conceive, she sent Jacob to her maid, Bilhah, as a surrogate mother, in order to have children. While Rachel certainly may have been sterile, the Republic institutionalizes this edict for all women in their society. The significance is that through Gilead discourse, only women may be infertile and that affirmation for women now comes solely from the ability to conceive. In fact, her identity is reshaped by this focus on her body: “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 [. . .] 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” (THT 73-4). Prior to the Republic of Gilead, Offred felt that she had control over her body, that it was a part of her, but because of Gilead’s discourse, she now feels that her body has more of a focus—more of an identity—than she does, as a person. Moreover, because handmaids no longer speak or identify themselves with their past given names—now obtaining the possessive name of their temporarily assigned
commanders—they no longer have an identity that separates one handmaid from another. Thus, a woman’s sense of selfhood now depends exclusively on her ability to conceive, since all other rights have been denied her, and because she now lacks a name with which to maintain a separate identity.

While a handmaid’s self-affirmation is tentative because of the Republic’s closed interpretation of Biblical verses, it is not only her identity that is at stake, but also her life. Gileadeans’ interpretation of Jacob’s saying to Rachel, “Am I in God’s stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb?” forces the stigma of sterility solely upon women. In the event that a handmaid does not conceive, she is looked at as barren. If she does conceive, she is considered fruitful. There is no gray area. Ironically, however, a man cannot be deemed sterile—the term “sterile” being outlawed—even though, in truth, the novel suggests that many men are infertile; yet the handmaids are blamed and pay for this sterility with their lives. Rachel’s having children else she dies is an emotional plea, rather than a literal statement in the Bible. However, in the Republic, if a handmaid is unable to produce after a third placement, she is sent to the colonies where she will most assuredly die from the toxic wastes. Gilead’s interpretation of Rachel’s statement is quite literal, rather than figurative, and closed to other interpretations. The Republic has decidedly interpreted and redefined specific passages in order to achieve their intended outcomes.

In addition to interpreting specific passages at will, some phrases are taken out of context, leaving only what is necessary in aiding their cause, thus deleting any words detrimental to the Republic’s power. This is reflected through the man-read Beatitudes, which mirror the wishes of the Republic to the handmaids: “Blessed be the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed be the meek,"
(THT 89), yet when the male voice gets to “Blessed be the silent,” Offred thinks, “I knew
they made that up, I knew it was wrong, and they left things out, too, but there was no
way of checking” (THT 89). Because it was illegal for women to read and write, they
had no access to the textual Bible to be sure. Through the discourse of this daily prayer,
the Republic was affirming those who were silent, affirming those who did not speak up,
those within the gaps of power. They institutionalized the handmaids’ inability to
articulate through language, taking away their power to read, power to speak, and their
power to revolt.

Michel Foucault discusses the workings of such institutionalized power in
*Power/Knowledge*, stating that “If [ . . . ] power is strong this is because, as we are
beginning to realize, it produces effects at the level of desire—and also at the level of
knowledge. Far from preventing knowledge, power produces it” (59). While this may
seem problematic in terms of the handmaids whose knowledge is limited, it is not the
amount of knowledge, rather the specific type of knowledge that is produced by power
upon which we must focus and explore because power and knowledge dominate
discourse, and that domination affects all individuals in society, changing how they view
the present and the past, thereby changing who they are today.

Through discourse, institutionalized power reconstructs meaning for individuals.
Toril Moi discusses this idea in *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* when
she states, “we all use the same language but we have different interests [ . . . ] political
and power-related interests which intersect in the sign. The meaning of the sign is
thrown open” (158). As Foucault notes in *The History of Sexuality*, different people
speak from different points of view, in order to obtain different results (27); hence the
Republic interprets meaning in one way, to strengthen its position, and institutionalizes
that specific interpretation for all members of society. Adding to this, Moi says that
“though it is true to say that the dominant power group at any given time will dominate
the intertextual production of meaning, this is not to suggest that the opposition has been
reduced to total silence. The power struggle intersects in the sign” (158). Those like
Offred, then, provide hope for the future because they oppose discourse by mentally
repeating their former names, scenarios, and people from the past during their private
times, attempting to keep their past identity alive. While individuals, such as Offred,
remember previous meanings, the Republic is attempting to eradicate those former
meanings in their language because such interpretations undermine their regime.
However, even though there are subversives, like Offred, within the Republic, more
importantly, they are followed by the next generation who never knew those prior
meanings and personal freedoms, such as reading, writing, calculating mathematics, and
having personal choice; hence, they will never attach any meaning other than that which
is allowed in the institutionalized discourse.

Through her narrative, Offred has been attempting to combat discourse which
dominates her every thought—discourse currently institutionalized by the Gilead regime,
but also discourse from many years prior to her being—in order to create a portrayal that
resembles the truth, or as closely to the truth as she can reconstruct from her memory. In
Offred’s narrative, she attempts to create something new to reveal the truth of her
situation; however, she realizes she cannot get past the multiple forms of discourse. This
is indicated especially in her conversation with Nick at their arranged rendezvous by
Serena Joy, of which Offred thinks as “an assignment,” alluding to a spy movie. Offred says of their encounter:

> We’re quoting from late movies, from the time before. And the movies then were from a time before that: this sort of talk dates back to an era well before our own. Not even my mother talked like that, not when I knew her. Possibly nobody ever talked like that in real life, it was all a fabrication from the beginning. Still it’s amazing how easily it comes back to mind [. . . ] I can see now what it’s for, what it was always for: to keep the core of yourself out of reach, enclosed, protected. (THT 262)

Because these movies demonstrate discourse on how love is supposed to be, Offred uses this discourse in her narration. However, she comments that she knows what this discourse is for—it separates one from truth, from reality, and from risk or vulnerability, which are necessary traits for real exchange.

Offred’s reconstructions are her attempts at creating something truthful, yet after she has reconstructed several versions of the Nick and Offred love story, she replies, “It didn’t happen that way either. I’m not sure how it happened, not exactly. All I can hope for is a reconstruction: the way love feels is always only approximate” (THT 263).

Offred is reiterating through this statement that all she can hope for is a reconstruction since all notions of love have already been touched by other forms of discourse. Unfortunately, she cannot make her narrative original without it having already been tainted by the preconceived. She is unable to get back to the real because she has already been defined by other forms of discourse.
In a review of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Madonna C. Miner concludes from Offred’s reconstructions that her representation of romance shows how the novel wants to believe in “love.” However, this interpretation fails to consider other representations in the novel, taking a minimalist view. Miner fails to consider filmed documentaries, religious discourse such as prayer, and even the academic symposium as discourse. Miner smartly connects Atwood’s encouraging us to “read the future in light of the past, and the past in light of the future,” yet fails to envision the much larger implications in this novel. While Miner does make an excellent point on how neither Offred nor Nick can individuate within these “traditional grammars,” but that both must play the role assigned to them by discourse, she fails to see that this discourse goes far beyond mere romance or love. Offred is unable to escape from how any situation was formerly represented through discourse. Hence Atwood is commenting on how we are unable to escape from discourse.

Even as inescapable as past discourse is for Offred, so too, is her present life in Gilead and the discourse which dominates those in society. When the handmaids are being “brainwashed” at the Re-education center, they must chant in unison that Janine’s being gang raped and having an abortion at fourteen was “her fault,” whereupon she cries hysterically in shame in front of the others. Offred’s statement that “for a moment, even though we knew what was being done to her, we despised her” (*THT* 72), clearly reflects their assimilation into the Gileadean Regime. While they did what they were forced to do, humiliate Janine and make an example of her, they were not forced to feel a sense of satisfaction through their actions.

Offred’s realization that she is unable to escape from discourse is another
possible reason why she must, metaphorically speaking, return to Gilead through her taped narrative. As Marta Caminero-Santangelo states in her article, “Moving Beyond ‘The Blank White Spaces’: Atwood’s Gilead, Postmodernism, and Strategic Resistance,” “to live outside discourse (as much as possible) might be to remain outside of the dominant ideology, but it also removes one from the platform where resistance can be waged [ . . . ] The ‘war,’ such as it is, must be waged within stories, within discourse” (25). Therefore, even though Offred escaped from the Republic and with that, from the Republic’s discourse and ideology, she needed to return to Gilead to effectively revolt within that discourse. Hence, her taped narrative reflects that return.

While Offred does metaphorically “return” to Gilead through her taped narrative, her voice is unfortunately, written into text by Professors Pieixoto and Wade. It is as Caminero-Santangelo states, that “the problematic posed by The Handmaid’s Tale is that reported speech can always be appropriated and subsumed by another discourse, as Offred’s is by the discourse of academia” (34). The “Historical Notes” epilogue reveals that Offred has not achieved her goal since Professors Pieixoto and Wade reshaped her taped narrative in a way that reflects their own ideology, rather than hers, on how they estimated she meant to communicate. Offred is once again trapped by discourse—that of the prevailing future. Even though Offred ultimately escapes from her marginalized female role of the handmaid in the patriarchal society of Gilead, we find that in the “enlightened” future, once again she is marginalized, only this time by the professors in her future.

What we glean from the professors’ compilation of Offred’s narrative is a distinct similarity between the two societies—that of Gilead and that of the future.
Hilde Staels comments on the professors' work, saying "the joint paper of the scientists, 'Problems of Authentication in Reference to The Handmaid's Tale' indicates that they are in search of closed interpretations," (464), much like the Republic of Gilead, which also dealt in closed interpretations. The professors' main quest appears to concentrate on labeling each of the people in Offred's narrative, to place them historically, much as the Republic labeled those in their society—from the commanders, to the handmaids, to the "unwomen." In addition, both the professors and those in Gilead use history as a vehicle to demonstrate their society's definitive progress. What such a comparison indicates through the professors' scholarly fascination with their idea of an historical find, rather than their realizing the social implications expressed by Offred, is the possibility for a repeat formation of a regime such as Gilead.

Earl Ingersoll enlightens us on the significance of this possibility in his article, "The Engendering of Narrative in Doris Lessing's Shikasta and Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale," stating that readers might expect that with the erasure of a regime such as Gilead, there would be an influx of freedoms from such repressed aspects of both Offred's society and ours (45). Professor Maryann Crescent Moon's chairing the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies, would indicate such freedom (THT 299). However, as the reader soon finds, this is not the case. Instead, this society appears to be full of self-deception about its "age of enlightenment"—self-deception that the reader should recognize in our own society. Atwood, Ingersoll states, "seems to be clearly stressing here that history does not follow a linear progression nor may time necessarily be equated with 'progress.' If anything, she seems to suggest that it loops around, and
only fools can be confident that their achievements of freedom can last without eternal vigilance” (46).

Conversely, in her review of *The Handmaid’s Tale* in the *Times Supplement*, Lorna Sage described the novel with Atwood praising the present, in order for readers to have the proper perspective of dystopia. Most critics, including Ingersoll, would disagree with this inference because Atwood is clearly showing the imperfections in each society: that of the past, of Gilead, and of the future. Of course, one should see the differences, but more importantly, the connections that Atwood makes between our present society, the Republic of Gilead, and the very distant future because these connections point us to Atwood’s cautioning. In Amin Malak’s work “The Handmaid’s Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,” he comments on Sage’s review, stating that Atwood is like Orwell, “who in *1984* extrapolated specific ominous events and tendencies in twentieth-century politics, she tries to caution against right-wing fundamentalism, rigid dogmas, and misogynous theosophies that may be currently gaining a deceptive popularity” (10). As Ingersoll stated previously, Atwood is cautioning her readers about one’s need for vigilance, because without it, we allow for regimes such as Gilead to form, to exist, and to rise to power.

Atwood’s message is demonstrated through Offred’s mother, who tells Offred that “you young people don’t appreciate things […] don’t know what we had to go through, just to get you where you are” (*THT* 121). What especially illuminates this need for eternal vigilance is Offred’s unwillingness to continue her mother’s fight as she thinks, “She expected too much from me, I felt. She expected me to vindicate her life for her, and the choices she’d made. I didn’t want to live my life on her terms. I didn’t want
to be the model offspring, the incarnation of her ideas. We used to fight about that. I am
not your justification for existence, I said to her once" (*THT* 122). However, because
women of Offred's generation ignored their surroundings, and instead simply enjoyed the
fruits of their predecessors' labors, rather than continue the quest for equality and
freedom, they contributed to the Gilead regime's ability not only to form, but especially,
to obtain power. Atwood's alluding to Nazi Germany shows the connection that Gayle
Greene makes in her review of *The Handmaid's Tale*, "Choice of Evils," that of the
Germans ignoring the Nazi movement and Offred ignoring Gilead's movement. Both
types of ignoring paved the way for fascism.

Atwood connects the women's movement of Offred's mother's time to
that of the "woman's movement" in the Republic of Gilead. Aunt Lydia's saying
there will be in the future "women united for a common end" (*THT* 162), is
important as it not only links the current regime to the past, but also to the future. This
future unification of women was something that Offred's mother had fought for, as
exemplified when she and Offred went to a demonstration burning books and magazines
that offend women through the portrayal of women as an object of desire (*THT* 38). The
Republic of Gilead solved the problems against which women, such as Offred's mother,
had demonstrated. They outlawed pornography and changed society through their
laws—laws which were created to protect women. In each case, women had the same
goals, but the interpretation of those goals was what differed. There were completely
different power structures surrounding women of these two very different societies.
Hence, what Atwood is ultimately commenting on is the power of interpretation,
connecting interpretation to power and discourse. Not only is it how institutionalized
power interprets, which shapes the discourse of that interpretation, but it is also the acting
upon that interpretation through discourse, which changes meaning for individuals.

Aunt Lydia’s showing a documentary on one of Offred’s mother’s Take Back the
Night rallies reflects such a change in meaning. Offred’s mother never intended her
action of revolt to be reshaped into the form in which it is utilized. Yet, Offred’s mother
is forever trapped in an “unwoman” documentary, used as a counterexample for the
handmaids, even though her goals, in theory, mirrored that of the Republic’s. The
Republic created a woman’s culture—a culture Offred’s mother had rallied for—but
because of the power of the Republic, the meaning reflected back to society, altered
dramatically. Offred muses over this alteration, reflecting, “Mother, I think. Wherever you
may be. Can you hear me? You wanted a woman’s culture. Well, now there is one. It
isn’t what you meant, but it exists” (THT 127).

This documentary also serves another purpose: for the Republic to revisit the past
for their own devices. Even though individual discussion of one’s past is outlawed—that
of the time prior to the Republic of Gilead—Aunt Lydia shows documentaries of the past,
exemplifying the past Gileadeans want their handmaids to remember. Her showing
pornographic movies, women being raped, and women being beaten or killed,
demonstrates the sexual degradation and violence found in the past with too much
freedom and not enough religion (THT 118). Through such examples, she believes she is
illustrating the advantages of their current regime, demonstrating progress made.

Atwood is clearly making a connection among all societies—past and present—
indicating their production of ideology through discourse. As Caminero-Santangelo
notes, Offred’s comparison of these films to the geographical films of her past are both
used to advance ideology—particularly "an ideology that objectified and marginalized the 'uncivilized' to show the superiority of the 'civilized'" (32). One must then connect this production of ideology through discourse from the past to the Gilead regime and also to the future, as the professors, too, document the past and use it to indicate their superiority. This is indicated through the symposium—yet another type of discourse used to produce ideology—when Professor Pieixoto not only scoffs at past society's ideas of an education, but also at their political and social practices. It is ironic that Professor Pieixoto is able to see the deficiencies of past societies without making connections to his own. In taking a retrospective look at the pre-Gilead period, Professor Pieixoto states that "As we know from the study of history, no new system can impose itself upon a previous one without incorporating many of the elements to be found in the latter [...] and Gilead was no exception to this rule" (305). While he can acknowledge this, he fails to connect this idea to his own society. He understands the "racist policies" of Gilead, but fails to see the sexist policies which link Gilead to his future society.

It is Professor Pieixoto's failure to see his own societal flaws that prevents him from reading Offred's tapes objectively. Because of this failure, Offred's attempts at liberation and political activism are placed in jeopardy. Atwood uses irony, through Offred's tapes, to indicate that history is a story—one that may be appropriated and subsumed by those in the future, just as Offred's narrative has been misinterpreted entirely due to closed minds. Atwood is clearly cautioning us on our viewing ourselves as more civilized and superior than those of the past through connecting those in the past (our present), to those in Gilead, and those in the future, forcing her readers to also make such connections and to question ourselves.
Through Professor Pieixoto's example, Atwood's readers should not only read her text retrospectively, but with the correct frame of mind. In her article, "Names, Faces, and Signatures in Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* and *The Handmaid's Tale*," Jessie Givner suggests that the open-endedness of *The Handmaid's Tale* portrays a process of 'infinite regression,' but more importantly, perhaps, that this text mirrors Derrida's arguments relating to texts, such as this one which acknowledge the reader's role in both hearing and producing the writing, thus introducing itself as a text which "awaits its own form" (73). Therefore, the reader's role is integral. If we look at things as black and white, we align ourselves with those such as Professor Pieixoto, considering Offred's narrative "soi-disant" because it "bears no title" (300). However, labels and names have been proven irrelevant, not only as indicated in the Republic of Gilead, but also through Pieixoto's attempts to pinpoint names and dates in history, rather than to empathize with Offred and the condition from which she escaped. However, if we listen to Offred's narrative with empathy and understanding, then her heroism is validated. Therefore, how Offred's text is read indicates her ultimate liberation.

Through this link between interpretation and liberation, Atwood is implicating us, the readers. She is calling attention to the text, creating an analogy between history, fiction, and interpretation. Atwood's position on how many interpret history is portrayed through Offred's description of her watching an historical documentary, that "it was only a story. I thought someone had made it up. I suppose all children think that, about any history before their own. If it's only a story, it becomes less frightening" (*THT* 144). If then, we, the readers, think of our history as a story,
instead of reality, we become like Professor Pieixoto, blind to our own flaws, and susceptible to repeating history.

Not only should we look to our past in relation to our present, but also we should look at our past and our present in relation to our future. If we think of *The Handmaid's Tale* only as an entertaining story, failing to consider the ramifications of "what if?" then we have failed to hear Atwood's message. When asked about the meaning of *The Handmaid's Tale* at a lecture in Syracuse, New York, in April of 2003, a part of Atwood's response was that it explored what people are willing to exchange for stability. That exchange is integral to understanding Atwood's message exemplified through comparisons of societies in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Ultimately, *The Handmaid's Tale* is not just a story, but a critique of what we are willing to exchange, to ignore, to allow, for what we believe will be our safety and stability. If we, like Professor Pieixoto, ignore political tendencies surrounding us, arrogantly looking at the past and the stories the ghosts of the past have to tell us, we exchange our freedom, our identities, our lives, for that illusion of stability and safety. Thus, like Offred, we could lose what we now have, even though our society is not perfect. We also lose the opportunity to learn from our history and to change as a result of that awareness. Offred's narrative begs her listeners to read her experience with understanding and empathy for her ultimate liberation. Offred's listeners hold the power to liberate her. Atwood also cautions her readers of *The Handmaid's Tale* to have a likewise open-minded interpretation. This request, however, is not for Atwood's liberation, nor our own, but for the future freedom of generations to come.
Conclusion

This work has explored the development of the protagonists within specific power relationships found in the narratives of *Alias Grace*, *Cat's Eye*, and *The Handmaid's Tale*. In order to assess the individual's development within the confines of society, one must also consider the open-endedness of these narratives because as Peter Brooks states, the ending provides meaning (93). By merging Sigmund Freud's notions of repeating to obtain knowledge or mastery with Michel Foucault's exploration of power and how it shapes an individual, one may more clearly analyze the protagonists of Atwood's novels, but more importantly, our own roles as Atwood sees them, in society. By considering power in relation to the development of the protagonists in the novel, we might understand Atwood's commentary found within each of the novels.

In *Alias Grace*, society's truth changed; hence, Grace's identity was transformed. Instead of Grace being deemed a celebrated murderess, now she would be deemed one wrongfully imprisoned. Changes in power transformed society's truth; hence Grace, the individual, was transformed because of that truth. Atwood's message that not only history, but individual identity may be rewritten is reflected here. Atwood's leaving the end of the narrative open forces the reader to consider such things, because in the novel, we have the power to decide what is the truth, and therefore, to form Grace's identity. Therefore, we, as readers, should recognize that no matter how individualistic we may think we are, power dictates our truth of history, our truth of society, and our truth of our own identities.
In Cat’s Eye, Elaine’s developing an identity through her artwork and by connecting and empathizing with Cordelia and Mrs. Smeath reflects Atwood’s commentary on necessities for growth in both individuals and societies. Elaine’s art represents an individual’s need to have an outlet for self-expression. As a child, Elaine had no avenue for self-expression, losing her ability to articulate through language. As a teenager, Elaine’s “mean mouth,” may have indicated her potential for mastery of the oral language, yet her using these skills almost solely to verbally assault others shows her need for maturation. Elaine’s honed verbal skills are of no use when attempting to communicate with her mother, Suzie, or even Cordelia, for that matter, when the subject matter of conversation calls for empathy or compassion. As Elaine matures into a young woman, however, she finds another avenue; her artwork to do so. Through her retrospective, Elaine sees the outpouring of emotion to work out her hate, anxiety, fear, and love in her paintings. In addition, Atwood portrays how openness and empathy are essential for growth and connection with others in society. Elaine learns this truth at the end of the novel, because without such understanding her growth would remain stunted, much like Cordelia’s and Mrs. Smeath’s. Through the open ending of the narrative, we view Elaine as one who has let go of her vengeance, finally come into her own, and wishes to reconnect with Cordelia, on a new level. Clearly, Atwood is commenting on society and how we, too, need to be open and empathetic for true connection, working through our past history to become empathetic, like Elaine, in order to connect with one another on a new level.
The Handmaid's Tale represents a collection of Atwood's commentary, possessing the messages later found in Alias Grace and in Cat's Eye, in addition to what could be the most important message of all: that while society does have power over individuals, individuals, too, have power in affecting the fate of our society with awareness, understanding, and activism. Through Professor Pieixoto, we envisage how an arrogant, rather than empathetic, retrospective of history allows societies to fail to see their own shortcomings in comparison to the past. Such arrogance allows for history to repeat itself, which is evident when comparing the future with the Republic of Gilead. The Professors' compilation of Offred's text represents their overwriting history and the reshaping of identity—Offred's identity. Like Elaine in Cat's Eye, Offred found an outlet for self-expression, her taped narrative, which could allow for her self-empowerment through language, as well as an attempt at political activism.

Atwood cautions us against closed interpretation through the examples of Professors Pieixoto and Wade, showing us why it is necessary to have an open mind—one able to see a number of possibilities. Ultimately, by leaving the end of the narrative open, the power of interpretation is left open to the reader. Atwood is demonstrating the need for the reader, like individuals in society, to be aware, to be engaged, to be active, and to be open-minded. Without such awareness, the reader, like Offred and like individuals in society, could be caught unawares, and be captured by forces of closed interpretations. Is this just a story about a fictional character in a futuristic society or is this commentary on our own society? If it is just a tale, then
we fail to understand Atwood's message: what are we doing right now in the hope that something like this never happens? Are we like Offred was—content with how things are, ignorant of how things may become? Or through the reading of this novel, will we open our eyes to see the vast possibilities, growing with Offred, to see that one must be aware, must be engaged, must be active, and especially, open minded in our interpretations?

Combining Freud's notions of repeating to obtain knowledge or mastery with Foucault's exploration of power and how it shapes an individual, and applying those ideas to Atwood's literature allow us, yes, to more clearly analyze Elaine, Grace, and Offred, but more importantly, to envision our own subjective growth within the structures of our society. Margaret Atwood's literature invokes the reader, not only allowing for or suggesting we be empowered through our interaction with her novels, but demanding it. The power relationships explored in these novels show those not only formed within the inner circles of the text itself, demonstrating the individual in relation to society, but also those formed on the outside—between the author and the reader of the text, where real individuals exist within societies. Atwood's work hinges upon the interaction between the author and the reader since she desires for her readers to understand her commentary woven within the pages of her narratives; moreover, she wants her readers to do something with that knowledge. In The Handmaid's Tale, Atwood/Offred says, "You don't tell a story only to yourself. There's always someone else [ . . . ] A story is like a letter. Dear You, I'll say. Just you, without a name. Attaching a name attaches you to the world of fact, which is
riskier, more hazardous: who knows what the chances are out there, of survival, yours?" (40). Atwood implores us to listen to her narratives, demands we listen to her commentary, because we, as readers are “out there” in the “hazardous world of fact.” If we hear Atwood’s calling in her “stories,” listen to her commentary, and act on that message in society, we could improve our own chances of survival. However, if we close our minds, failing to hear Atwood’s commentary in her “stories,” then we align ourselves with those akin to the Republic of Gilead and Professors Pieixoto and Wade, because without open minds, empathy, and activism, we not only fail to validate and liberate Atwood, the writer, but more importantly, we have failed ourselves.
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