‘In Burning Red’ –

Red as the Color of Female Shame in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

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Abstract

This paper explores the color symbolism employed in Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. It argues that the color red is used to mark the female protagonists—the handmaids—as shameful, sinful outcasts, and compares and contrasts them to the other color-coded women (mainly, the ‘blue’ wives) in the novel, shedding light on how this color-coding reflects connotations of red that tie it to the female body and female sexuality. This is achieved by playing on the ever-so-prominent social and cultural construction of women being trapped in a caste system, in which they are either ‘sacred mothers,’ ‘sinful sexual objects,’ or no ‘real women’ at all. The essay furthermore demonstrates that *The Handmaid's Tale*, which depicts a Christian fundamentalist regime, employs (post-)biblical imagery to support the association of lust and sin with the color red. Finally, the article outlines that *The Handmaid's Tale* unearths the hypocrisy inherent in female denunciation by showing how the color red is used in the story to highlight the discrepancies that define a society in which women are reduced to their bodies and their functions as sexual beings.

Keywords

Caste System; Christian Fundamentalism; Color-Coding; Dystopian Fiction; Female Body; Margaret Atwood; Sexuality.

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Introduction

"[…] [W]hen we're trying to move on," Taylor Swift writes in the prologue to her 2012 hit album Red, in which she deals with overwhelming heartbreak and lost love, "the moments we always go back to aren't the mundane ones. […] They are […] moments of newfound hope, extreme joy, intense passion, wishful thinking, and in some cases, the unthinkable letdown. And in my mind, every one of these memories looks the same to me. I see all of these moments in bright, burning, red."[1]

For ages, red has been one of the most heavily connoted colors across cultures, standing both for concepts and (intense) emotions. It is associated with heat (think, for example, of the red markers on a faucet to symbolize hot water), affection, and love (most prominently symbolized through a red heart icon), but also with lust, sin, and shame, particularly in connection to the female body.

The latter holds true for the 1985 novel *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood. This dystopian story takes readers to the future in the American Republic of Gilead, where everything is organized in strict adherence to the Bible by a powerful fraction of Christian fundamentalists, calling themselves the 'Sons of Jacob.' Women are no longer individuals with their own rights, but they are put in a strict caste system according to their functions. Within this caste system, they are marked by colors: Young, fertile women are turned into handmaids, dressed in red robes, and forced to become 'breeding machines' for powerful Commanders, whose barren wives are dressed in blue. Employed in these households are also so-called Marthas, who wear green and work as servants. The trainers of the handmaids are referred to as Aunts, depicted in brown attire. In this book, the colors assigned to the different 'fractions' of women take on highly symbolic meanings, and it is particularly the color red that marks its bearers as sinful, shameful outcasts.[2]

This essay will show how color symbolism operates in *The Handmaid's Tale*. It will analyze the use of the color red in association with the shunned handmaids and their social exclusion. Furthermore, it will discuss the emotional values and connotations that come with the color red, and how they are applicable to Atwood's text.[3] The aim of the paper is to demonstrate that the color red operates as the color of exclusion and shame in *The Handmaid's Tale*, and to show that this effect is achieved by employing the red color imagery in scenes in which the handmaids are clearly separated and excluded from the rest of the society. By examining the various connotations that come with the color red, it will be shown that *The Handmaid's Tale* picks up those associations that have to do with shame, sin, and the female body. Even though the denounced and excluded characters consist of an entire group, the following analysis will mainly focus on Offred, the female

protagonist, who, due to her affiliation as a handmaid, can stand for this entire group when examining how the color red marks its members as 'the Others.' This paper will also outline that the color red as a signifier of shame is used in a highly contradictory manner in the novel, and that it can thus be read as a symbol for the dystopian world Atwood depicts, which is full of hypocrisy and discrepancy.

All Is Red in Love and War — The Symbolic Meanings of Red

Colors are largely symbolic—they stand for certain concepts and emotions, which have been established by conventions and traditions over time. As Simona Petru states, "[s]ymbols strongly influence our feelings, just as colour does. So colours have the potential to be very powerful symbols" (203). It is important to note, though, that the connotations of colors are not necessarily identical in all cultures and across time. While Ancient Egypt associated red with the protection of the dead, it was the color that symbolized power in Rome. In China, on the other hand, it stands for luck and longevity, while the Bible renders red as the color associated with sin[4], and post-biblical, cultural constructs stemming from the Middle Ages onwards have added the well-known imagery of a blazing red 'hell,' the 'home' of the Devil. Also, wars, as well as political radicalism, can be expressed through red by drawing on images of blood and violence (Allan 631; Greenfield 1-2; Parikh 65-66). It is thus fair to say that "traditional meanings attached to colors vary from time to time and from place to place" (Parikh 66). What can be stated for sure, however, is that the associations that colors trigger in us have the power to influence our feelings, perceptions, and overall mood (Ott and Mack 138).

Red is not only one of the most heavily connoted colors in history but—linguistically speaking—also one of the oldest. Petru (203, 206) states that, after black and white, red was the third term defined by language to denote a color.[5] The author has found that as early as in the Upper Paleolithic, there might have been a symbolic relationship between the color red and the female body. She further suggests that the color probably stood for transformation, as in the transformation that the body of a woman goes through during pregnancy. This would undoubtedly apply to *The Handmaid's Tale*, in which the primary duty of the red-clothed women is to become pregnant and bear children for the elite families of Gilead.

Nowadays, red is mostly known as the traditional color of love, best exemplified by the various red images of hearts. Danger, violence, courage, as well as lust, passion, and desire are only a few other connotations that come with this color. Interestingly, red has long been worn by rulers and thus became associated with power, high status, and dominance, all of which are stereotypically masculine characteristics. In the nineteenth and twentieth

century, the age of conservative Victorianism, however, red slowly started to be put on one level with vulgarity (Greenfield 2-4, 217-18, 260; Jonauskaite et al. 1-2; Roland 13). Scarlet became a signifier of sexual sin, as "red's association with male power had waned" and "its age-old identification with passion and [female] sexuality came to the fore" (Greenfield 217). By the beginning of the twentieth century, "the red dress became a fixture" in works of fiction, "a sure sign that a woman was an adulteress, an adventuress, or a prostitute, or headed in some way for a sexual fall. [...] Bold and bad, the fictional woman in red often ended up shunned, abandoned, or dead" (Greenfield 254-55). It can thus be said that red is a color that triggers both positive and negative associations; in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the latter prevail. It is the handmaids' sexuality that makes them 'lustful' and 'dangerous,' and, as a consequence, turns them into outcasts (Cerrato 4-5).

The color red is also commonly linked with images of blood—"life-blood, the blood of the slain, or menstrual blood" (Allan 626)—all of which find their expressions in *The Handmaid's Tale*, but, as their sole purpose is to bear children, particularly the association of red with menstrual blood (and thus, fertility) is what fosters the denunciation and exclusion of these women in Atwood's dystopia (Thompson 32). In Offred's words, "everything except the wings around my face is red: the colour of blood, which defines us" (Atwood 14). The connection between red and systemic denunciation becomes even clearer when taking into account that the handmaids are solely limited to and acknowledged because of their reproductive organs, which, in turn, makes them property of the state (Rubenstein 116-17). The Gileadean regime thus takes all kinds of individuality from the fertile women, making them dependent on their wombs and wishing for the absence of menstrual blood:

> Each month I watch for blood, fearfully, for when it comes it means failure. I have failed once again to fulfil the expectations of others, which have become my own. 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, and glows red within its translucent wrapping. (Atwood 79-80)

Not Just Black and White — Color-Coding and Marking Women According to Their Functions in *The Handmaid's Tale*

To fully grasp the importance of the color red in Atwood's novel, it is imperative to put it in relation to other prominent colors and their meanings in *The Handmaid's Tale*. In the Republic of Gilead, everyone is color-coded, and these colors all stand for certain functions and qualities. This caste system is particularly evident (and confining) with regard to the female characters, who

are clothed according to their professions and the duties they assume within the regime.[6]

The colors are so prevalent that Atwood makes Offred refer to her 'group' as "bundles of red cloth" (Atwood 133), showing how they are fully deprived of their individuality. They are solely defined by their clothes and what they stand for. Similarly, Offred's shopping partner, Ofglen, is described by the protagonist as "[a] shape, red with white wings around the face, a shape like mine, a nondescript woman in red carrying a basket" (Atwood 24). The woman as a person is "nondescript," and all that makes her who she is are her red-colored clothes. When Rita, a servant in the house in which Offred 'works' as a handmaid, frowns at her, Offred contemplates that "the frown isn't personal: it's the red dress she disapproves of, and what it stands for. She thinks I may be catching, like a disease or any form of bad luck" (Atwood 15-16). These examples illustrate that the women in *The Handmaid's Tale* are merely defined by their functions and the colors that represent them, rather than any personality traits that would make them individual human beings (Roland 6).

Even the protagonist's name—Offred—has "red" in it. She is part *of* the *red* group of women. While, within the story, it is a reference to the character's loss of identity and marks her as the possession of Commander Fred (the handmaid "of-Fred"), David Ketterer interprets the name as a potentially "rebellious[7] reference to her red habit" (210). Offred, then, remarks that "[s]ome people call them [their dresses] *habits*, a good word for them. Habits are hard to break" (Atwood 30). Just like the handmaids are thoroughly defined by their red clothes, and cannot separate their identities from them, they cannot escape the negative connotations of red projected upon them and the resulting social exclusion. In fact, the color red even appears in the scene that marks Offred's 'demise' into a powerless handmaid, subject to the oppressive Republic of Gilead. In a flashback, she recalls going to a store to buy cigarettes, shortly before the Sons of Jacob fully took over. Since women were suddenly forbidden to administrate their own money, Offred finds her card being invalid: "It's not valid.," the cashier keeps repeating to Offred, "[s]ee that red light? Means it's not valid" (Atwood 181). The red light signalizes both the end of her access to money, as well as the end of her personal freedom, and the beginning of her existence as a handmaid and outcast (Roland 27).

The Aunts are the ones who accompany the handmaids on their 'rites of passage' from individuals to sexual slaves by training and instructing them in their duties. They are defined by the color brown and thus wear a color that is mostly associated with strength and seriousness, which are traits commonly allotted to masculinity (Cerrato 20). This, too, is fitting for their purpose within the story, as they take on instructor-like, almost military roles. Furthermore, this group consists of either sterile women or women past the childbearing age.

Since "dying vegetation goes brown" (Allan 630), these Aunts display their lack of fertility through their color-coded clothes.

The household servants, also called Marthas, wear dresses of "dull green" (Atwood 15). As defined by Herman Cerrato (9-10), green can stand for adaptability, flexibility, and nurture—all of which would be expected of servants –, but it is also associated with envy, which is fitting for the Marthas readers encounter in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Offred overhears the Marthas gossiping about the handmaids and their childbearing function, stating that "they're doing it for us all, said Cora, or so they say. If I hadn't of got my tubes tied, it could have been me, say I was ten years younger. It's not that bad. It's not what you'd call hard work" (Atwood 16). This passage suggests that the Martha Cora is jealous of Offred and her position, and thus, it resonates with the association of the color green with jealousy.

Blue, the color of the wives, has increased in popularity ever since the nineteenth century (Greenfield 256). Cerrato, who examined colors with regard to their meanings and associations in a business context, states that this color is very efficiently used when promoting products that are related to cleanliness, such as cleaning liquids or water purification filters (11-13). He also argues that it is a color often associated with piety and coolness, as well as with conservatism, loyalty, faith, and heaven. Furthermore, recalling the famous saying that someone is of 'blue blood,' blue is also a symbol of aristocracy (Allan 633; Parikh 66). All these associations are applicable to the Commanders' blue-clothed wives in *The Handmaid's Tale*. They are loyal to the oppressive system of Gilead and to their husbands, and they believe in the Christian fundamentalist regime. Towards the handmaids, they appear distant ('cool') and superior. Offred describes the eye color of Serena Joy, the wife of Commander Fred, as "the flat hostile blue of a midsummer sky in bright sunlight, a blue that shuts you out" (Atwood 21), evoking a sense of coldness, as well as delineating how Serena is above Offred in the hierarchical system of Gilead. While a hell-imagery of danger, passion, and sin is used for the red handmaids, the wives are 'pure,' and recall notions of heaven (the 'place' reserved for non-sinful people). This is due to their lack of engagement in sexual activities and their inability to give birth to children. Blue is also the color in which the Madonna is dressed in most of her paintings, which underlines the link between this color and the idea of purity and virtuousness (Allan 633).

This juxtaposition of the 'pure' wives and 'dirty' handmaids is a manifestation of the so-called Madonna-Whore-Dichotomy,[8] which "denotes polarized perceptions of women […] as either 'good,' chaste […] Madonnas or as 'bad,' promiscuous, and seductive whores," and

> can be traced from the ancient Greeks […] through later Western literature […], art […], as well as contemporary films […] and television series […]. Still prevalent in the West […], this dichotomy also occurs in non-Western cultures—in Latin and South America […] and in the Middle East and East Asia […]—where female chastity is integral to family honor. (Bareket et al. 519)

This omnipresent categorization of women into two distinct 'sections' demonstrates how *The Handmaid's Tale* comments on contemporary realities and extrapolates them. In the novel, one 'group' is virtuous and sexless, personified by Gilead's blue wives, while the other is sexy and sinful, exemplified by the red handmaids. Even though the handmaids are needed in order to bear children instead of the infertile wives, and it is thus not male stereotyping that makes the latter 'sexless,' the clear distinction between them still functions as a symbol for and representation of opposing attitudes towards women as either chaste and suitable for motherhood, or sexually active and thus objectified and reduced to their bodies, which — in *The Handmaid's Tale* — are literal "interchangeable instruments" (Bareket et al. 521) for men.

Cerrato (4, 11) outlines that the color red has been proven to stimulate the appetite, which, in the case of the handmaids, can be transferred to the sexual appetite they evoke in men. Blue, on the other hand, is an appetite suppressant. Similarly, the wives are only supposed to be the mothers of the children born by the handmaids, but not the ones who are 'contaminated' by engaging in sexual activities or by evoking sexual appetite in their husbands.

The distinction between different 'kinds' of women is negotiated in *The Handmaid's Tale* through the colors the women wear, and what these colors stand for. It also goes hand in hand with the hierarchically superior group shunning those below them. This is most fittingly described by Offred during an event where both wives and handmaids are present:

> A number of Wives are already seated, in their best embroidered blue. We can feel their eyes on us as we walk in our red dresses two by two across to the side opposite them. We are being looked at, assessed, whispered about […]. Our area is cordoned off with a silky twisted scarlet rope […]. This rope segregates us, marks us off, keeps the others from contamination by us, makes for us a corral or pen […]. (Atwood 221-22)

Harlots, Tulips. and Hypocrites — Red as a 'Shame-Signifier' in *The Handmaid's Tale*

If the blue wives are modeled after the sacred Madonna image, and the red handmaids stand for temptation and sin, it is needless to say that these color-coded women are marked by drawing on references from the Bible. That the society of Gilead is organized in strict adherence to the Holy Scripture is illustrated most strikingly with regard to the function of the handmaids: In a monthly 'Ceremony,' they are forced to lie down between the legs of the barren wives as the Commanders penetrate them so they can bear children for them. This Ceremony is based on a passage in the Book of Genesis, in which Rachel presents Jacob with her maid, Bilhah, who, in her place, conceives Jacob's children and gives birth to them on Rachel's knees.

In the Republic of Gilead, the verses from the Bible are taken literally. As is the case with this ceremony being a literal 'enactment' of the story of Rachel and Jacob, the negative connotations of red that appear in the Bible are equally present in Gilead. The place where the handmaids are trained for their new positions is named "The Rachel and Leah Centre" (after the biblical personae); however, Offred refers to it as "Red Centre [...] because there was so much red" (Atwood 103). In this "Red Centre," the women are little by little deprived of their individuality and turned into sexual slaves, who, while being needed for securing Gilead's offspring, are turned into an ostracized, shamed, and shunned group of society. The most striking reference to (post-)biblical imagery connecting red with shame and sin can be found in the scene at Jezebel's,[9] a brothel in which Offred spots a woman "who's in red spangles with a long pointed tail attached, and silver horns; a devil outfit" (Atwood 247). That the woman in red wears a "devil outfit" unequivocally refers to culturally established images of Satan and hell, often depicted with blazing red flames and symbolic of moral misconduct (Greenfield 22). These sinful, red women work in an institution that, in itself, is associated with the color red. The locations of brothels are often subsumed under the term "red light milieu," and tend to employ red lights "as beacons for their trade" (Allan 632). The infamous Whore of Babylon, which, in Revelation 17, is described as sitting "upon a scarlet coloured beast, full of names of blasphemy," and referred to as "the mother of harlots and abominations of the earth [...] drunken with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus" (qtd. in Allan 632) makes the transfer of the biblical equation of red with shame and sin to the 'fallen women' in Atwood's text even clearer.

Even though the red handmaids are never officially labeled prostitutes, they are also associated with seduction and sexual misconduct reminiscent of biblical imagery of sin and hell, which adds to their perception as a shunned group of Gileadean society. After Offred has met two young Guardians, she contemplates:

> [...] I know they're watching, these two men who aren't yet permitted to touch women. They touch with their eyes instead and I move my hips a little, feeling the full red skirt sway around me. It's like [...] teasing a dog with a bone held out of reach, and I'm ashamed of myself for doing it [...]. Then I find I'm not ashamed after all. I enjoy the power; power of a dog bone, passive but there. I hope they get hard at the sight of us and have to rub themselves against the painted barriers, surreptitiously. (Atwood 28)

In this passage, Atwood delineates Offred's consciousness of her own sexuality, and how she believes to be perceived by her surroundings because of her red attire. She feels her "red skirt sway[ing] around her," which is directly linked to her small act of seduction when she "moves" her "hips a little." Also, she is torn

between feeling ashamed, as it would correspond to the indoctrination by the society of Gilead, and not feeling ashamed at all, but instead enjoying her small 'rebellion' against the code of conduct she usually has to adhere to (Roland 11).

Apart from direct references to sexual activities and seduction in combination with the color red, Atwood also employs a seemingly 'innocent' red symbol for the handmaids, namely the tulips Offred sees in Serena Joy's garden. These flowers symbolize the handmaids as an entire group, as well as their menstrual cycle, and the pressure to become pregnant that is being exerted on them, demonstrating that the handmaids are both 'necessities' for the state, and shameful, unwanted outcasts at the same time (Roland 17-23; Rubenstein 116). When Offred first sees the red tulips, she remarks that they are "opening their cups, spilling out colour" (Atwood 18). The handmaids, too, are supposed to 'open their legs' to receive the semen, and, in further consequence, the children of the Commanders, just as flowers must be pollinated by bees. Offred also states that the tulips are "spilling out colour," which is symbolic for the menstrual blood that the handmaids 'spill out.' The protagonist is anxiously waiting to become pregnant at this point in the book, and every month, when her own red substance 'spills out,' she knows she has failed again, and is one step closer to being punished. Fittingly summarized by Karla M. Roland, "the indicator whether or not she [Offred] will be saved is a monthly appearance of red" (17).

At a later point in time in the novel, Offred comments on the flowers again, stating that "[t]he tulips along the border are redder than ever, opening [...]; thrusting themselves up, to what end? They are, after all, empty" (Atwood 51). Again, this description can be transferred to still-not-pregnant Offred's situation, whose womb might be ready to conceive a child ("thrusting up") but is still "empty." When Offred's 'tenure' as a handmaid for Fred and Serena is slowly drawing to a close, her condition is again exemplified via the tulips, about which she remarks that they "have had their moment and are done, shedding their petals one by one, like teeth" (Atwood 157).

That the red tulips serve as a symbol for the fertile handmaids becomes even clearer when Offred comments on the relation between flowers and the barren Serena Joy: "She's [Serena Joy] in one of her best dresses, sky-blue with embroidery in white along the edges of the veil: flowers and fretwork. Even at her age she still feels the urge to wreathe herself in flowers. No use for you [...], you can't use them any more, you're withered. They're the genital organs of plants" (Atwood 87). Also, the flowers in the garden are something for the wives to "order and maintain care for" (Atwood 18), just as they would care for the offspring the handmaids produce. In another scene, Serena is shown violently cutting off the seed pots of the red tulips, symbolizing the tension between her and Offred, and the urge to control the woman who engages in sexual activities with her husband (Roland 21; Rubenstein 120-21).

Atwood further establishes the connection between the red flowers and the red handmaids when Offred informs readers that "[t]he tulips are red, a darker crimson towards the stem, as if they have been cut and are beginning to heal there" (Atwood 18). Just like the tulips, which appear mutilated ("cut") and are now supposed to "heal," the handmaids, too, have been stripped of their former lives and identities, and the society of Gilead tries to instruct women that they now can 'heal' from the burdens of their former lives and 'enjoy' their 'privileged' "position[s] of honor" (Atwood 19). While Aunt Lydia, the instructress whose words Offred remembers throughout the book, refers to America before Gilead as "a society dying [...] of too much choice" (Atwood 31), the handmaids, now, like the red tulips, are apparently 'free' and 'ready to bloom:' "Now we walk along the same street, in red pairs, and no man shouts obscenities at us, speaks to us, touches us. No one whistles. There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from" (Atwood 30).

This pseudo-freedom is allotted to them through their color-coded clothes, and also exemplifies the hypocrisy and discrepancy within Gilead, again drawing on red color symbolism. "The white wings," which the handmaids have to wear along with their red robes, "are prescribed issue; they are to keep us from seeing, but also from being seen" (Atwood 14). As white commonly stands for purity and innocence, these wings are supposed to keep the handmaids from 'contamination' by other men's looks. They are solely their respective Commanders' possessions and must be 'invisible' to anyone else. This is particularly contradictory since the rest of their attire is red, and red is a very visible color that easily draws attention. However, it is also the traditional color of stop signs. Like the red traffic light signalizes that one has to stop their vehicle, the red robes of the handmaids are a warning sign to the citizens of Gilead that these women are 'property,' and must not be touched by anyone except their 'owners.' The dichotomy between the white purity-wings and the red attention-drawing robes can thus be read as a symbol of the hypocrisy inherent in Gileadean society (Allan 631; Cerrato 4-5, 14; Thompson 32).

Another example of the link between Gilead's hypocrisy concerning 'shameful' women and the color red is when Offred remembers people who once fabricated seductive clothes for women, now "down on their knees, repenting in public, conical paper hats like dunce hats on their hats, SHAME printed on them in red" (Atwood 238). Not only could the connection between red and shame not be made any clearer (and bear meticulous resemblance to the public marking of the protagonist in *The Scarlet Letter*), but also, it is exactly such seductive clothes that the Commander gives to Offred when they

go to Jezebel's. Furthermore, he allows her to wear red lipstick on their 'date,' another signifier of female sensuality. This signalizes that the social exclusion of the handmaids is fully subject to the will of the Commanders—which does not always necessarily correspond to Gileadean 'ideals' according to which the handmaids should only be 'vessels' used for childbearing. Furthermore, it is evident that their association with the color red is a tightrope act as they can only be desirable when they are also sinful. Also, it is their desirability and sinfulness which define them and turn them into social outcasts.

Conclusion

This essay has shown that there is a direct link between the color red and the subject of female denunciation and shame in Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. Even though this color has acquired various connotations in different cultures across different points in time, the ties to menstruation and female sexuality, as well as the negative associations of red with shame, lust, and sin that slowly came to the fore in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth century, have been persistent and find their unequivocal expression in this dystopian story.

Since the fictional Republic of Gilead is a "puritanical state" (Rubenstein 119), organized by Christian fundamentalists and based on strict adherence to the Bible, it is only logical that the biblical imagery of hell, Satan, and the Whore of Babylon, which is evoked by the color red, is allotted to the handmaids, who, in contrast to the masculine, post-menopausal Aunts, the sterile household servants, and the sexless, 'pure' wives, are 'contaminated' through their sexual activities. Even though they are forced to perform these activities and rendered necessities by the oppressive Gileadean system, they are still confined to being 'sinful,' 'dirty,' and 'shameful' women, who are shunned by the rest of society.

I have also demonstrated that this 'caste-system-thinking,' which is so prominent in Gilead, and through which women are pigeonholed according to their 'functions,' is a phenomenon that also exists in 'real' societies—in the form of the sexist and confining Madonna-Whore-Dichotomy. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, this 'dystopian' ideology is simply being extrapolated and exaggerated to the utmost extremes (Rubenstein 119-20). The use of different colors, along with the concepts and emotions associated with them, render this particularly salient to readers. By using red for the outcast, denounced women, Atwood draws on already existing powerful connotations that come with this color and heightens the long-lasting association between female shame and red. In Offred's desperate position, she remarks that she "would like to be without shame," she "would like to be shameless" (Atwood 271). However, due to her inseparable ties to the color red and everything it stands for, this shamelessness is withheld from her throughout *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Notes

[1] Connecting emotions to colors is further explored by the artist in the album's titular song: "Losing him was blue, like I'd never known, missing him was dark grey, all alone, forgetting him was like trying to know somebody you never met, but loving him was red. [...] moving on from him is impossible when I still see it all in my head, in burning red" (Swift 00:00:37-00:02:27).

[2] With regard to other works of fiction in which characters fall victim to ostracism, it is noteworthy that red seems to be reserved for female outcasts and their sexuality. The most famous example for this is probably Hester Prynne from the 1850 novel *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne. The protagonist is denounced as an adulteress, and thus has to wear the scarlet letter 'A' on her breast. Similarly, *Thirteen Reasons Why* (2007) by Jay Asher revolves around a young woman who is being harassed and ostracized based on rumors about her sexual life. The title of the book is often stylized as *Th1rteen R3easons Why*, whereby the color red is used for the "1" and the "3." In contrast to that, texts that tackle the denunciation and exclusion of male characters tend to associate them with the color black. In "The Lynching of Jube Benson" (1904) by Paul Laurence Dunbar, for example, the titular character is being falsely accused and killed because of his black skin color. The short story "The Little Man in Black" (1807) by Washington Irving equally links its socially outcast protagonist to the color black.

[3] It is important to note that denunciation and exclusion in *The Handmaid's Tale* differs from texts such as *The Scarlet Letter*, *Thirteen Reasons Why*, "The Little Man in Black," and "The Lynching of Jube Benson" in the sense that not an individual character is being excluded, but an entire societal group, in this case, the fertile, sexually enslaved handmaids.

[4] Even though a primary significance of red in the Bible is the red of blood (animal blood, Christ's blood), it is also established as the color of sin in the Old Testament, as it says in Isaiah 1:18: "Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet [a dark shade of red], they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool."

[5] Petru explains that white and black "are the first in the evolution of basic colour terms," and "express what colour really is—our perception of light (white) or the absence of light (black)." Red, then, "is the first 'real' colour with a defined wavelength. It is the third term that emerges in language after white and black. In languages with only a few terms for colours, the term red includes many hues, which means that it includes all reds, oranges, mist yellows, browns, pinks and purples" (203).

[6] The Commanders, the powerful men of Gilead, are mentioned in combination with the color black throughout the novel, which is equally telling of their position, as this color stands for power, authority, prestige, and control (Cerrato 15-16).

[7] Indeed, red can also symbolize rebellion, which would be equally applicable to *The Handmaid's Tale*, since it is mainly those red-clothed women who are rising up against the oppressive system of Gilead (Cerrato 5).

[8] Originally, the Madonna-Whore-Complex was a term coined by Sigmund Freud to denote a psychological pathology that "inhibited men's ability to view the 'tender' and 'sensual' dimensions of women's sexuality as united, rather than opposing" (Bareket et al. 519-20). This means that endorsement of this dichotomy would hinder men from feeling love and desire for the same woman

Notes

at the same time. By now, however, the Madonna-Whore-Dichotomy is largely viewed "as a social ideology rather than individual pathology," unveiling "how culture and social structure shape men's beliefs about women," and helping to "maintain male dominance" (Bareket et al. 520-21). Focus is nowadays placed on "the sexist, hierarchy-enhancing motives behind this dichotomized perception" (Bareket et al. 527), which clearly find their expressions in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

[9] The name of the brothel is also not coincidental but actually refers to a biblical persona famous for her sins and misconduct (Roland 10).

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Biography

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