

Psychoanalysis and Linguistics: A Lacanian Study of Margaret Atwood's Select Novels: The Handmaid's Tale

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Abstract:

This study employs Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic framework, integrated with linguistic theory, to analyse Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (THT), exploring the intersections of psychoanalysis and linguistics in elucidating themes of power, identity, and resistance. Drawing on Lacan's assertion that the unconscious operates like a language, structured by signifiers and mechanisms such as metaphor and metonymy, the paper examines how Offred's fragmented narrative reflects the linguistic embedding of the unconscious, subverting Gilead's oppressive symbolic order. The analysis delves into key Lacanian concepts: the mirror stage, illustrating identity fragmentation under Gilead's gaze; the symbolic order, revealing language as a tool of domination and resistance; and desire and lack, highlighting how unfulfilled yearnings fuel agency. Symbolism in THT, from red uniforms to biblical euphemisms, is unpacked as a nexus of unconscious desires and ideological control, with Offred's linguistic play—puns like "Mayday" as "M'aidez"—exposing the regime's fissures. Subjectivity emerges as a dynamic battleground, where Offred's monologues reclaim selfhood against dehumanization. The study also engages Slavoj Žižek's notions of fantasy and anamorphosis to underscore how narrative distortions challenge ideological fantasies. By bridging Freudian insights with Saussurean structuralism, the analysis reveals how Atwood critiques totalitarian linguistics while affirming language's liberatory potential. The paper extends its relevance to contemporary issues, such as surveillance and gendered power dynamics, suggesting Lacanian tools for decoding modern discourses. This interdisciplinary approach not only enriches understanding of THT but also advocates for psychoanalytic linguistics as a vital lens for dystopian literature, illuminating the psyche's resilience amid linguistic tyranny.

Key words: Unconscious, Symbolism, Subjectivity, The Handmaid's Tale, and Language.

Introduction:

Psychoanalysis, as a foundational psychological paradigm developed by Sigmund Freud in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, delves into the exploration of the unconscious mind, which Freud argued profoundly shapes human cognition, subjectivity, emotions, and behaviours.

Central tenets of this approach include the repression of memories, the interplay among the id, ego, and superego, and the formative impact of early life experiences. Therapeutic techniques, such as free association, dream analysis, and transference interpretation, aim to uncover and resolve unconscious conflicts, fostering greater self-insight and emotional healing. In contrast, linguistics represents the systematic study of language, examining its structure, meaning, and usage. This discipline scrutinizes components like phonetics (the sounds of speech), morphology (word formation), syntax (sentence structure), semantics (meaning conveyance), and pragmatics (contextual application). Linguistics also probes language evolution, acquisition, variation, and its intersections with culture, society, and cognition, seeking to uncover the principles governing language as a core element of human communication (Auchincloss, 2015).

The convergence of psychoanalysis and linguistics arises from their shared interest in decoding human behaviour and expression, particularly via language. Both fields investigate how linguistic forms mediate thought, affect, subjectivity, and identity, albeit from distinct yet complementary perspectives. Freud viewed language as a conduit for unconscious impulses, conflicts, and repressed memories, with methods like free association and dream interpretation relying on decoding linguistic symbols and metaphors to access hidden psychic content. For Freudian analysts, language serves as both an entry point to the unconscious and a tool for understanding mental processes. Linguistics, meanwhile, dissects language's architecture, functions, and deployment, analysing its division into sounds, words, structures, and meanings, alongside its cognitive and historical dimensions. The structuralist tradition in linguistics, spearheaded by Ferdinand de Saussure, introduced key ideas such as the arbitrary link between signifier and signified, and the distinction between *langue* (the abstract system) and *parole* (actual speech instances), ideas that influenced psychoanalysis profoundly.

This intersection deepened through Jacques Lacan, who reinterpreted Freud using Saussurean linguistics. Lacan asserted that the unconscious operates like a language, structured by signifiers and mechanisms such as metaphor and metonymy (Lacan, 2006, p. 428). He argued that language not only reflects reality but constructs subjectivity, making linguistic scrutiny vital for psychic exploration. This fusion extends to philosophical, cultural, and critical theory, where both disciplines emphasize symbols and meaning in human life, though differing in methods and goals. Psychoanalysis uses language to probe the unconscious, while linguistics provides tools to analyze meaning production and transmission. Together, they offer integrated insights into communication, thought, and selfhood (Mistry, et al, 2024).

Freud's and Carl Jung's legacies have permeated twentieth-century discourse, embedding terms like "unconscious," "ego," "subjectivity," "thought," and "archetypes" into everyday language. Their

hermeneutic approaches to myths and narratives have influenced folklore and mythology studies, yet pose challenges due to limited interdisciplinary training among scholars (Thurmond, 2012). Lacan extended Freud by linguistically decoding cultural artifacts like myths, though critics like Ian Parker argue that such decoding inevitably recodes phenomena, reproducing psychoanalytic theory (Parker, 2002). Julia Kristeva blended Lacanian ideas with semiotics, challenging linguistic norms through intertextual works, though her density can alienate readers (Smith, 1996).

Post-Freudians like Lacan and Kristeva navigate complexities akin to Freud's, acknowledging historical contexts while crediting Freud's hermeneutic innovations (Doty, 2000, 160-174). E.R. Dodds applied post-Freudian psychology to Greek antiquity, highlighting cultural denials of irrationality (Dodds, 1951). Postwar empirical shifts marginalized psychoanalysis in linguistics, yet it retains value in elucidating language development, acquisition, and processing, including parapraxes and mechanisms like displacement and condensation (Von Vorgelegt, et al, 2017). Freud portrayed consciousness and unconscious as linguistically structured, with consciousness arising through verbalization (Storey, 2009).

Freud's Interpretation of Dreams influenced hermeneutics and semiotics, viewing dream transformation from latent to manifest content as linguistic shifts, employing condensation (metaphor) and displacement (metonymy) (Freud, 1900, p. 311). Roman Jakobson built on this, noting metaphor-metonymy tensions in symbolism and aphasia (Jakobson & Halle, 1956, 80–81). This study argues these mechanisms underpin language and thought, rejecting modular models for dynamic, psychologically contextual processes. Freud linked unconscious thinking to verbal residues for consciousness (Freud, 1911, pp. 233–234), aligning with Saussure's sign while extending to consciousness development. Vygotsky viewed thought as completed in words, paralleling Freud's continuum (Wilson & Weinstein, 1992, p. 26).

Freud formalized unconscious ideas from philosophers like Leibniz and Kant (Smith, 1999). Post-Freudians like Klein, Meltzer, and Bion diverged, with Klein emphasizing internal object interplay and Bion viewing unconscious as experiential repository (Grotstein, 2007). Embodied cognition theories support emotions as body-mind bridges (Barsalou, 1999; Pecher & Zwaan, 2005). Contemporary linguistics frames grammar variably, from Chomsky's rules to pragmatic intents, yet often overlooks symbols' emotional roles (Sapir, 1929; Thomas, 1969).

Cicero saw rhetoric as generating emotional impetus (Cicero, 1948, 2.42:179), prefiguring Lacan's view of rhetorician as analyst precursor (Lacan, 1993, p. 219). Lacan aligned symbolic with signifier and imaginary with signified (Lacan, 2014, p. 14). Phenomenology posits rational subjects, contrasting psychoanalytic irrational residues (Lacan, 1998, 20). Lacan's unconscious-as-language

integrates dreams, slips, and jokes as linguistic (Lacan, 1999), extending psychoanalysis culturally. He refined Jakobson's categories with Freud's dream-work (Lacan, 1999, pp. 490–526).

Margaret Atwood's novels, known for narrative complexity and themes of identity, power, and language, suit Lacanian analysis. Works like *The Handmaid's Tale* (THT) explore psychic depths via Lacan's mirror stage, symbolic order, and real (Tolan, 2009). In THT, language dualistically dominates and resists in dystopia (Atwood, 1996). Atwood's fragmented dialogues and symbols enact psychoanalytic principles (Vijya et al., 2023). In *Cat's Eye*, memory disrupts selfhood (Atwood, 1990). Atwood's oeuvre invites psychoanalytic-phenomenological lenses (Mycak, 1998), focusing on characterization via Oedipal and unconscious concepts (Govrin et al., 2022).

Feminist and Marxist readings dominate Atwood studies, yet psychoanalytic gaps persist (Davey, 165). Lacan's triad illuminates Atwood's themes: mirror stage in fragmented selves, symbolic in oppressive norms, phallogocentrism in power (Atwood, 2009). Gaze mediates selfhood in resistance (Macpherson, 2010). Applying Lacan to THT unpacks power, identity, and desire via real, symbolic, and imaginary (Joodaki, 2015). This study employs Lacan to analyze THT, bridging psychoanalysis and linguistics in Atwood's narrative.

Unconscious is Embedded Like a Language:

Jacques Lacan's seminal assertion that the unconscious is structured like a language represents a pivotal reconfiguration of Freudian psychoanalysis through linguistic theory, drawing heavily on Saussurean structuralism. This paradigm posits that unconscious processes operate via networks of signifiers, governed by rhetorical devices such as metaphor and metonymy, thereby rendering the psyche akin to a semiotic system. In this framework, language does not merely express unconscious content but fundamentally constitutes it, shaping subjectivity and desire. Applied to Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (THT), this concept illuminates how the protagonist Offred's unconscious manifests through linguistic fragments, repressed memories, and narrative disruptions, reflecting Gilead's oppressive symbolic order while enabling subtle resistance.

Freud initially conceptualized the unconscious as a repository of repressed desires and conflicts, accessible through linguistic slips, dreams, and associations. Lacan extends this by integrating Saussure's distinction between signifier (the form) and signified (the concept), arguing that the unconscious emerges from the slippage between them. The unconscious, for Lacan, is not a chaotic void but a structured domain where signifiers chain together, producing meaning through displacement (metonymy) and condensation (metaphor), mirroring Freud's dream-work mechanisms (Lacan, 2006, p. 428). This linguistic embedding implies that subjectivity arises from immersion in the symbolic order, where language precedes and determines the subject. The barred subject (\$)

signifies this split, caught between the real (unsymbolizable trauma) and the imaginary (illusory wholeness).

In THT, Offred's narrative exemplifies the unconscious as linguistically embedded. Her fragmented, nonlinear storytelling—replete with puns, recollections, and silences—functions as a textual unconscious, where repressed desires surface through linguistic play. For instance, Offred's punning on "Mayday" as "M'aidez" (help me) disrupts Gilead's ideological discourse, revealing an unconscious plea for liberation beneath surface compliance (Atwood, 1985, 82). This aligns with Lacan's view of parapraxes as signifiers of unconscious truth, where language betrays the subject's division. Gilead's regime, embodying the big Other, enforces a rigid symbolic order through biblical euphemisms and renaming, suppressing individual unconscious expressions. Offred's internal monologues, however, reclaim language, weaving unconscious threads that challenge this order.

Lacan's influence draws from Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*, where dreams translate latent content into manifest via linguistic transformations (Freud, 1900, p. 311). Jakobson later linked this to metaphor (similarity) and metonymy (contiguity), observing their roles in aphasia and symbolic processes (Jakobson & Halle, 1956, 80–81). In THT, condensation appears in Offred's compressed memories, where a single image—like her daughter's face—encapsulates lost wholeness, evoking unconscious loss. Displacement shifts focus, as in her sarcastic reflections during the Ceremony, redirecting trauma into narrative irony. These mechanisms underscore how the unconscious, embedded linguistically, facilitates thought and resistance.

Freud noted unconscious processes diverge from conscious reflection, evolving through verbal linkages (Freud, 1911, pp. 233–234). Saussure's sign parallels this, but Lacan emphasizes the signifier's primacy, chaining subjects in desire's circuit. Vygotsky's idea that thought completes in words mirrors this continuum, with language bridging unconscious to conscious (Wilson & Weinstein, 1992, p. 26). In THT, Offred's storytelling completes her unconscious desires, articulating repressed agency against Gilead's repression.

Post-Freudians like Klein reconceptualized the unconscious as dynamic internal communications, while Bion viewed it as a creative expanse generating emotional images (Grotstein, 2007). Embodied cognition reinforces this, grounding abstract concepts in sensorimotor experiences (Barsalou, 1999; Pecher & Zwaan, 2005). Linguistics often reduces symbols to conventions, overlooking affective charges (Sapir, 1929). Lacan counters this by aligning rhetoric with analysis, where affect embodies signifiers (Lacan, 1993, p. 219; Lacan, 2014, p. 14).

In Atwood's narrative, the unconscious embeds linguistically in Offred's resistance. Her red uniform symbolizes fertility and sin, a signifier chaining her to Gilead's order, yet her unconscious subverts it

through descriptive parody: a "distorted shadow" in a fairy-tale cloak (Atwood, 1985, 9). This linguistic reworking traverses' fantasy, rejecting the big Other (Žižek, 1999, p. 294). Offred's puns, like "date rape" as dessert, satirize discourse, exposing unconscious ambiguities (Atwood, 1985, 38). Žižek, extending Lacan, argues fantasy masks symbolic inconsistencies, organizing reality through intersubjective desires (Žižek, 1997 b, p. 8). In THT, Gilead's fantasy conceals lack via linguistic control, but Offred's unconscious narrative reveals the real's antagonism. Anamorphosis illustrates this: viewing Gilead obliquely through Offred's voice exposes its futility, like Holbein's skull staining worldly achievements (Žižek, 2006, p. 26).

The unconscious's linguistic embedding in THT bridges psychoanalysis and linguistics, showing language as both oppressor and liberator. Offred's traversal—redefining God, joining rebellions—creates new signifiers, retroactively enabling possibility (Žižek, 2000 a, p. 222). Her escape into "darkness within; or else the light" symbolizes unconscious rebirth through linguistic act (Atwood, 1985). This analysis reaffirms Lacan's paradigm: the unconscious, structured linguistically, underpins subjectivity in Atwood's dystopia, offering pathways for resistance amid repression.

Symbolism:

Symbolism in Lacanian psychoanalysis functions as a critical nexus where linguistic signifiers intersect with unconscious desires, manifesting through metaphors, metonymies, and objects that veil or reveal psychic structures. Lacan, reworking Freud, posits symbols as elements in the symbolic order, where meaning arises from differential relations rather than inherent essence. In Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (THT), symbolism permeates the narrative, embodying Gilead's oppressive regime while enabling Offred's subversive interpretations. Key symbols—like the red uniform, mirrors, and linguistic artifacts—illustrate Lacan's concepts, highlighting how symbols construct identity, power, and resistance.

Freud viewed symbols as condensations of unconscious material, particularly in dreams, where images represent repressed wishes (Freud, 1900, p. 311). Lacan linguistically refines this, aligning symbolism with the signifier chain, where symbols operate via metaphor (substitution) and metonymy (contiguity) (Lacan, 1999, pp. 490–526). Symbols thus mask lack, sustaining the big Other's illusion. In THT, the red uniform symbolizes fertility and subjugation, a signifier chaining Handmaids to patriarchal law. Offred describes it as a "red cloak," parodying fairy tales, symbolizing danger and distortion (Atwood, 1985, 9). This metonymic shift exposes symbolic fissures.

Mirrors in THT evoke Lacan's mirror stage, where the subject misrecognizes wholeness in an image, initiating alienation (Lacan, 2006). Offred's reflections fragment her self: a "two-legged womb" under gaze (Atwood, 1985). At Jezebel's, the mirror reveals a garish costume, symbolizing imaginary

illusion shattered by real trauma. Symbols like eyes (surveillance) embody the gaze, constituting subjectivity via the Other (Lacan, 1998, 20).

Biblical symbols in Gilead—euphemisms like "Ceremony"—mask violence, aligning with Lacan's symbolic as law (Name-of-the-Father). Offred's puns subvert them, symbolizing unconscious resistance (Atwood, 1985, 82). Jakobson's metaphor-metonymy tension appears in Offred's condensed memories (metaphor) and displaced narratives (metonymy) (Jakobson & Halle, 1956, 80–81).

Žižek views symbols as fantasy elements concealing symbolic inconsistency (Žižek, 1997 b, p. 279). Gilead's symbols domesticate jouissance, but Offred's reinterpretations traverse fantasy. Anamorphosis in THT: Offred's oblique view stains regime symbols with futility (Žižek, 2006, p. 26). Kristeva's semiotics blend symbols with affect, subverting norms (Smith, 1996). In THT, symbolic silences and fragments weave intertextual resistance. Embodied symbols, like the body as womb, ground cognition (Barsalou, 1999). Cicero's rhetorical symbols generate perturbation (Cicero, 1948, 2.42:179), prefiguring Lacan's affect as corporisation (Lacan, 2014, p. 14). Offred's symbolic reworkings reclaim agency.

In sum, symbolism in THT, through Lacanian lens, reveals linguistic embedding of unconscious, bridging repression and resistance.

Subjectivity and Resistance:

In the realm of Lacanian theory, the concept of the subject is inherently divided, emerging from the intricate dance between the imaginary realm of perceived unity, the symbolic framework of societal norms and language, and the real as an elusive, disruptive force beyond representation. This fragmented subjectivity is not a static entity but a fluid process, constantly negotiated through encounters with the Other—the external authority that shapes desires and identities. Within Margaret Atwood's dystopian narrative, *The Handmaid's Tale* (THT), the protagonist Offred embodies this Lacanian subject, her sense of self eroded by Gilead's authoritarian regime yet persistently asserting itself through acts of quiet defiance and introspection. This section delves into how subjectivity fuels resistance, illustrating Offred's journey as a testament to the psyche's resilience against totalizing power structures.

Lacan's model portrays the subject as barred (\$), a product of the mirror stage where the infant's illusory wholeness gives way to alienation upon entering the symbolic order. Here, language and law impose structure, but at the cost of a fundamental split, leaving the subject in perpetual pursuit of unattainable completeness. In THT, Gilead exemplifies this symbolic dominance, systematically dismantling individual subjectivities by assigning roles based on utility—Handmaids as reproductive

vessels, stripped of names and histories. Offred's designation as "Of Fred" reduces her to an appendage of patriarchal authority, mirroring Lacan's Name-of-the-Father as the enforcer of order and repression. Yet, this imposition is never absolute; Lacan insists that subjectivity thrives in the interstices, where the real intrudes to unsettle coherence (Lacan, 1998, p. 20). Offred's internal reflections capture this tension, her mind a battleground where imposed identity clashes with remnants of her former self.

Resistance, in this context, arises from the subject's refusal to be fully interpolated by the symbolic. Offred's narrative technique—nonlinear, confessional, and laced with irony—serves as a primary mode of subversion. By addressing an imagined audience, she reconstructs her subjectivity outside Gilead's sanctioned discourses, transforming silence into a weapon. This aligns with Lacan's view of speech as a pathway to *jouissance*, that excessive pleasure-pain which escapes symbolic constraints. For instance, during the ritualized Ceremony, Offred's mental commentary infuses sarcasm and detachment, distancing herself from her body's objectification and reclaiming psychic space. Such moments echo Žižek's notion of traversing the fantasy, where the subject confronts the big Other's nonexistence, rejecting ideological illusions (Žižek, 1999, p. 294). Offred's discomfort with her red attire, described as a distorting lens that turns her into a "fairy-tale figure" descending into peril, symbolizes this traversal, parodying Gilead's mythic narratives to expose their artifice (Atwood, 1985, p. 9).

Collective dimensions further amplify resistance. Whispers among Handmaids, like exchanges with Ofglen, forge solidarity, puncturing isolation tactics and hinting at the Mayday network as a real force undermining symbolic stability. Lacan would interpret these as encounters with the real—raw, unsymbolizable elements that disrupt the regime's seamless ideology. Offred's illicit liaison with Nick, fraught with risk yet charged with authentic connection, embodies this disruption, offering glimpses of unmediated desire that defy prescribed roles. These acts, though precarious, affirm subjectivity's dynamism, as Offred oscillates between compliance and rebellion, her psyche refusing erasure.

The novel's framing device, the Historical Notes, complicates this narrative of resistance. Presented as a future symposium, it reconstructs Offred's tapes through academic lens, introducing another symbolic layer that objectifies her voice. Professor Pieixoto's detached analysis, prioritizing historical objectivity over empathy, mirrors how power reappropriates subversion. Yet, the tapes' survival underscores resistance's longevity; Offred's subjectivity endures, a trace defying temporal bounds. This resonates with Lacan's emphasis on the subject's perpetual flux, shaped by language yet capable of manipulating it for agency (Shaffer, 2000, p. 152).

Atwood's portrayal draws on broader psychoanalytic traditions, echoing Freud's unconscious as a site of conflict where repressed elements seek expression. Post-Freudians like Bion expand this to a creative unconscious, generating meaning amid chaos (Grotstein, 2007). In THT, Offred's memories—vivid flashes of her daughter or pre-Gilead freedoms—function as such creative irruptions, fueling resistance by reconnecting her to lost wholeness. This psychic labor aligns with Vygotsky's interplay of thought and word, where language completes inner processes (Wilson & Weinstein, 1992, p. 26).

Critically, this Lacanian reading intersects with feminist interpretations, highlighting how gendered subjectivities navigate phallogocentric orders. Atwood's work critiques materialism and imperialism, but psychoanalysis adds depth to interpersonal dynamics, revealing resistance as both individual and intersubjective (Tandon & Chandra, 2009, p. 18). Offred's bond with Moira, an "externalized expectation" of non-victimhood, exemplifies ego-ideal attachment, fostering loyalty that propels defiance (Atwood, 1972, p. 38).

The ambiguous conclusion—Offred stepping into uncertainty—encapsulates subjectivity's open-endedness. Whether toward salvation or doom, it retroactively validates her acts, creating conditions for rebirth (Žižek, 2000a, p. 222). In essence, THT posits resistance as subjectivity's lifeblood, a linguistic and psychic struggle against annihilation, offering hope in dystopia's shadows.

Desire and Lack:

Central to Lacanian psychoanalysis is the interplay of desire and lack, where the subject's quest for fulfillment stems from an originary void introduced by symbolic integration. This lack, born of separation from imaginary plenitude, propels desire as an endless chain, always oriented toward the Other and mediated by elusive objects (*objet petit a*). In Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (THT), Gilead's dystopia amplifies this dynamic, institutionalizing lack through fertility crises and repressive laws, while Offred's personal yearnings expose desire's subversive potential. This exploration reveals how lack undergirds power, yet desire's persistence fosters pathways to autonomy. Lacan theorizes lack as castration's aftermath, the price for entering language, evacuating primal enjoyment (*jouissance*) and leaving a residue that desire seeks to reclaim (Žižek, 1997b, p. 279). Desire, thus, is not one's own but the Other's, a response to "Che vuoi?"—what does the other want? (Žižek, 1991, p. 49). In THT, societal lack manifests in environmental infertility, rationalizing Handmaids' enslavement as vessels for elite reproduction. Offred's body becomes the site of this collective anxiety, her fertility commodified to fill the regime's void. The Ceremony ritualizes this, transforming intimacy into mechanical duty, suppressing individual desire to serve state imperatives.

Offred's desires, conversely, revolve around lost connections—her child, Luke, autonomy—rooted in imaginary ideals of wholeness. These longings highlight lack's torment, as memories evoke what Gilead represses, perpetuating unfulfillment. Lacan views desire as metonymic deferral, sliding along signifiers without closure; Offred's fantasies of escape or reunion exemplify this, always thwarted by surveillance. Her sarcasm during rituals deflects trauma, channeling desire into mental rebellion, aligning with jouissance's bittersweet excess (O'Dwyer, 2014).

The objet petit a, that partial object promising completion, appears in Offred's attachments. Nick represents this—his gaze offers recognition beyond objectification, their encounters yielding momentary transcendence. Yet, risk underscores lack's inescapability; pleasure intertwines with peril, reflecting jouissance's dual nature. Memories of her daughter, a visceral wound, confront the real—unsymbolizable loss disrupting symbolic facades (Wyatt, 1998).

Gilead manipulates desire, redirecting it toward reproduction under the Name-of-the-Father, embodied by Commanders. Offred's Scrabble games with her Commander simulate intimacy, a false objet petit a reinforcing subjugation. These dynamic exposes ideology's fantasy, masking inconsistencies (Morel, 2011, p. 34). Žižek argues fantasy organizes selfhood against traumatic lack; in THT, Gilead's biblical rhetoric sustains this illusion, but Offred's narrative pierces it, revealing the big Other's hollowness.

Resistance emerges from desire's irrepressibility. Offred's storytelling addresses an imagined Other, reclaiming desire through language. Puns like "date rape" as dessert satirize discourse, redirecting desire toward critique (Atwood, 1985, p. 38). Mayday symbolizes collective desire for change, a real intrusion challenging symbolic completeness.

Freudian roots inform this: unconscious desires seek expression via slips, paralleling Lacan's linguistic unconscious (Freud, 1911, pp. 233–234). Embodied theories link desire to sensorimotor roots, grounding Offred's physical rebellions (Barsalou, 1999). The Historical Notes extend this, academics' detachment highlighting desire's mediation—Offred's voice persists as a trace, inspiring future desires. THT thus portrays desire and lack as engines of human endurance, transforming void into vital force against tyranny.

The Symbolic Order and the Language of Power:

Lacan's symbolic order constitutes the web of language, norms, and institutions governing social reality, enforced by the paternal metaphor that regulates desire and identity. In *The Handmaid's Tale* (THT), Gilead weaponizes this order through linguistic mandates, hierarchies, and rituals, illustrating power's inscription on subjects. Yet, its incompleteness allows for linguistic

countermeasures, as Offred's subversions demonstrate. This analysis examines how language sustains authority while harboring potentials for dismantling it.

The symbolic, per Lacan, structures subjectivity via signifiers, with the Name-of-the-Father imposing law and absence (Lacan, 1993, p. 219). Gilead amplifies this as a theocratic machine, renaming women to signify ownership—"Of Fred"—and deploying euphemisms to sanitize brutality. "Handmaid" and "Ceremony" construct a reality veiling rape and enslavement, aligning with signifier precedence over signified. Uniforms and prohibitions on reading reinforce this, inscribing power bodily and limiting symbolic access.

Power flows through language's regulatory function, rituals like Salvagings enforcing compliance via fear. Lacan sees this as the symbolic's attempt at totality, yet riddled with gaps where the real emerges. Offred exploits these, her monologues repurposing language for self-assertion, creating counter-narratives that question Gilead's ideology (Howell, 1993, p. 328).

Subversion involves manipulating signifiers—Offred's humour and recollections disrupt monolithic speech, engaging the imaginary for illusory agency. Whispers and Mayday represent real fissures, covert networks eroding authority from within. The Commander's illicit interactions reveal symbolic hypocrisy, his desire for connection exposing lack.

Žižek views ideology as regulating visible/invisible, with language framing reality (Žižek, 1995b, p. 1). Gilead's rhetoric sustains fantasy, but Offred's traversal—redefining terms—quilts new meanings. Anamorphosis applies: her oblique perspective stains the regime's grandeur (Žižek, 2006, p. 26).

Freud's mechanisms—displacement, condensation—underpin this, language bridging unconscious to power (Freud, 1900, p. 311). Saussure's influence highlights arbitrary signs, which Atwood critiques through biblical distortions.

The Notes introduce meta-symbolic critique, academics' framework objectifying Offred yet affirming her linguistic legacy. THT thus exposes language as power's medium and Achilles' heel, enabling resistance through symbolic reconfiguration.

Formation of Identity:

Lacan's theory of identity formation begins with the mirror stage, an infantile misrecognition of wholeness that inaugurates ego alienation, deepened by symbolic immersion. In *The Handmaid's Tale* (THT), Offred's identity evolves under Gilead's distorting reflections, fragmented by gaze and norms, yet reconstituted through memory and defiance. This section probes how identity coalesces amid oppression, highlighting Lacanian stages in Atwood's critique. The mirror stage yields illusory unity, masking fragmentation; entry into symbolic introduces lack, identity mediated by Others (Lacan, 2006). Gilead disrupts this, imposing identities via roles—Offred as womb, her uniform a

mirror reflecting subjugation, not self. White wings limit vision, symbolizing curtailed subjectivity; red evokes sin and fertility, enforcing alienation.

Offred's monologues reconcile this, memories evoking imaginary past wholeness—mother, partner—contrasting present dissolution. These intrusions of the real—traumatic losses—fracture imposed identity, fostering resistance. The gaze, Lacan's mechanism of objectification, permeates Gilead: Eyes' surveillance internalizes control, shaping behavior. Commander's look promises recognition but reinforces lack; at Jezebel's, literal mirror exposes distortion (Brandstedt, 1990).

Identity's fluidity appears in Offred-Nick encounters, momentary wholeness defying symbolic. Lacan ties identity to desire's circuit, rooted in lack; Offred's longings for freedom fuel reconstruction.

Žižek's fantasy frame's identity against antagonism; Offred traverses Gilead's, her narrative piecing self amid chaos (Žižek, 1997b, p. 8). Freudian unconscious informs: verbal residues link impressions to consciousness (Freud, 1911, pp. 233–234).

Feminist angles enrich: Atwood's mother-daughter motifs reflect phallic lack, yearning for validation thwarted by patriarchy (Atwood, 2009). Historical Notes complicate, Offred's identity mediated yet resilient. THT depicts identity as processual battle, Lacanian insights revealing formation's vulnerabilities and strengths in adversity.

Psychoanalysis and Linguistics:

The interplay between psychoanalysis and linguistics represents a fertile intellectual terrain, where the exploration of the human psyche converges with the systematic study of language. Psychoanalysis, originating from Sigmund Freud's pioneering work in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, focuses on the unconscious mind's influence on thoughts, emotions, and behaviours. It employs techniques like free association and dreams analysis to uncover repressed conflicts, emphasizing structures such as the id, ego, and superego. Linguistics, conversely, scientifically dissects language's components—phonetics, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics—while examining its acquisition, evolution, and socio-cultural roles. Their intersection lies in the shared pursuit of understanding how language shapes and reveals human experience, offering complementary lenses on cognition and communication (Auchincloss, 2015).

Freud regarded language as a vital conduit to the unconscious, where verbal expressions, slips, and symbols betray hidden drives. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, he described dream formation as a linguistic transformation from latent to manifest content, utilizing mechanisms like condensation (compressing meanings) and displacement (shifting emphases), akin to metaphor and metonymy (Freud, 1900, p. 311). These processes highlight language's role in mediating unconscious material, turning abstract impulses into interpretable forms. Freud further argued that consciousness emerges

through verbalization, with mental activity spanning a continuum from unconscious to preconscious levels, mirroring language's fluid processing (Storey, 2009). Parapraxes, or speech errors, exemplify this, revealing repressed thoughts through linguistic glitches, thus linking psychoanalytic mechanisms to everyday language use (Von Vorgelegt et al., 2017).

Linguistics provides the structural backbone for these insights, particularly through Ferdinand de Saussure's structuralism. Saussure distinguished between the signifier (sound-image) and signified (concept), emphasizing their arbitrary relation, and between *langue* (the systemic code) and *parole* (individual utterances). This framework resonated with psychoanalysis, influencing thinkers like Roman Jakobson, who expanded on Freud by analysing metaphor and metonymy in symbolic processes, including aphasia, where substitutions reflect unconscious associations (Jakobson & Halle, 1956, pp. 80–81). Such analyses demonstrate how linguistic principles underpin psychic operations, rejecting modular language models for dynamic, contextually embedded processes intertwined with psychological development.

Jacques Lacan revolutionized this confluence by declaring that "the unconscious is structured like a language," reframing Freud through Saussurean and Jakobsonian lenses. For Lacan, the psyche operates via signifier chains, governed by metaphor (condensation) and metonymy (displacement), constructing subjectivity within the symbolic order (Lacan, 2006, p. 428). Language not only represents but constitutes reality, with the subject emerging as split—barred (\$) by entry into this order, forever alienated from unmediated wholeness. Dreams, slips, and jokes become linguistic phenomena, royal roads to the unconscious (Lacan, 1999). Lacan's innovation lies in viewing affect as "corporisation," the embodiment of signifiers, echoing ancient rhetoric's emotional impetus (Lacan, 2014, p. 14; Cicero, 1948, 2.42:179). This linguistic turn propelled psychoanalysis into cultural critique, analysing how symbols mediate power, desire, and identity.

Julia Kristeva further enriched this dialogue by integrating Lacanian psychoanalysis with semiotics, subverting norms through intertextual, allusion-heavy works that challenge linguistic conventions (Smith, 1996). Her approach highlights the semiotic (pre-linguistic drives) irrupting into the symbolic, adding affective depth to structural analysis. Similarly, post-Freudians like Melanie Klein and Wilfred Bion reconceptualized the unconscious as a creative, relational expanse, aligning with embodied cognition theories where concepts root in sensorimotor experiences (Grotstein, 2007; Barsalou, 1999; Pecher & Zwaan, 2005). These developments counter linguistics' occasional reduction of symbols to arbitrary units, insisting on their emotional and psychic resonance (Sapir, 1929; Thomas, 1969).

In literary contexts, these fusion yields profound insights, as seen in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (THT). Atwood's narrative employs language dualistically—as a tool of domination in Gilead's regime and a vehicle for resistance through Offred's fragmented storytelling (Atwood, 1996). Lacan's framework illuminates how signifiers enforce the symbolic order, with euphemisms like "Ceremony" masking violence, while Offred's puns and recollections disrupt this, revealing unconscious truths (Vijya et al., 2023). For instance, her reinterpretation of "Mayday" as "M'aidez" exemplifies parapraxis as resistance, traversing ideological fantasy (Atwood, 1985, p. 82; Žižek, 1999, p. 294).

Slavoj Žižek, drawing on Lacan, introduces anamorphosis to this intersection, where oblique perspectives expose ideological distortions, much like Holbein's skull in *The Ambassadors* stains apparent reality (Žižek, 2006, p. 26). In THT, Offred's narrative provides such a skewed view, unveiling Gilead's symbolic inconsistencies—fantasies masking lack through linguistic control. Fantasy, for Žižek, frames reality intersubjectively, regulating visible and invisible, with desire as the Other's (Žižek, 1997b, p. 8; Žižek, 1991, p. 49). Atwood critiques this in Gilead's hierarchical language, where women's roles are scripted, yet Offred's act of narration quilts new signifiers, retroactively enabling alternative possibilities (Žižek, 2000a, p. 222).

Historical shifts underscore this synergy's evolution. Postwar empiricism marginalized psychoanalysis in American linguistics, favouring quantitative methods, yet it retains relevance in elucidating language's phonetic, morphological, syntactic, and semantic development via mechanisms like over-determination and repression (Von Vorgelegt et al., 2017). Freud's hermeneutics, applied to myths by scholars like E.R. Dodds, bridged irrational forces with linguistic interpretation, influencing cultural studies (Dodds, 1951). Contemporary views, informed by phenomenology, contrast rational subjects with psychoanalytic irrational residues, emphasizing language's role in splitting the self (Lacan, 1998, p. 20).

Applying this to Atwood's work, psychoanalysis and linguistics converge in analysing identity formation and power dynamics. In THT, the mirror stage manifests in Offred's fractured self-perception, mediated by Gilead's gaze, while linguistic subversion—redefining God or joining rebellions—asserts subjectivity (Joodaki, 2015). This dual lens fills gaps in feminist and postcolonial readings, offering philosophical depth to characterization (Mycak, 1998; Govrin et al., 2022). Atwood's novels, replete with symbolic imagery and silences, enact Lacanian principles, demonstrating language's capacity to construct, obscure, and reveal the psyche (Macpherson, 2010). Ultimately, this integration transcends disciplines, providing synergistic tools for probing human complexity. Psychoanalysis infuses linguistics with psychic depth, while linguistics grounds

psychoanalysis in structural rigor. In dystopian fiction like THT, it exposes how totalitarian regimes linguistically engineer reality, yet unconscious resistances—embedded in language—foster hope. As Atwood weaves psychological and linguistic forces, this confluence affirms their mutual illumination of the human condition, urging continued scholarly exploration (Tolan, 2009).

Conclusion:

This Lacanian study of *The Handmaid's Tale* illuminates psychoanalysis-linguistics intersections, revealing how unconscious structures, symbolism, subjectivity, desire, symbolic order, identity formation, and disciplinary fusion underpin Atwood's critique. In synthesizing the Lacanian framework applied to Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, this study underscores the profound utility of psychoanalytic linguistics in dissecting dystopian narratives. By foregrounding the unconscious as a linguistic edifice, Lacan's paradigm reveals how Atwood crafts a world where signifiers not only dominate but also fracture under the weight of repressed human agency. This approach illuminates the novel's enduring resonance, particularly in an era marked by resurgent debates on autonomy, surveillance, and ideological control. Rather than merely echoing Freudian repression or Saussurean binaries, Lacan's integration offers a dynamic lens for understanding how language forges psychic realities, a theme Atwood exploits to critique totalitarian encroachments on the self.

The novel's portrayal of Gilead as a linguistic tyranny exemplifies Lacan's notion that the symbolic order, while ostensibly totalizing, harbors inherent lacks that invite subversion. Offred's narrative emerges not as passive recounting but as a performative act of signifier manipulation, where everyday words become sites of *jouissance*—those fleeting excesses that puncture authoritarian discourse. This resistance, rooted in the real's irruptions, challenges readers to reconsider language's dual role: as a chain binding subjects to power and as a tool for unravelling it. In contemporary terms, such insights gain urgency amid global shifts toward digital oversight and populist rhetoric, where algorithms and slogans mirror Gilead's scripted rituals. For instance, the rise of data-driven surveillance in societies post-2020 echoes the novel's gaze economy, where visibility enforces conformity, aligning with Lacan's emphasis on the Other's structuring gaze.

Extending beyond the text, this Lacanian reading invites broader implications for feminist literary criticism. Atwood's work, often parsed through gender lenses, benefits from psychoanalysis's attention to desire's circuits, revealing how patriarchal structures exploit lack to perpetuate subjugation. Yet, Offred's cunning linguistic detours—reappropriating biblical fragments or inventing private lexicons—highlight agency within constraint, a motif resonant with third-wave feminism's focus on intersectional resilience. This perspective counters deterministic views of oppression,

suggesting that subjectivity, though barred, thrives in the gaps of discourse. In educational contexts, incorporating Lacanian tools could enrich curricula on dystopian fiction, encouraging students to analyse how novels like *The Handmaid's Tale* prefigure real-world erosions of rights, such as those debated in reproductive policy forums.

Moreover, the study's emphasis on identity formation through imaginary misrecognitions speaks to Atwood's broader oeuvre, where characters grapple with specular illusions amid societal mirrors. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the uniform's reflective symbolism distorts self-perception, much like modern social media's curated selves foster alienation. Lacan's mirror stage thus provides a framework for critiquing digital-era identities, where filters and profiles enact perpetual deferral of wholeness. This connection bridges literary analysis with cultural studies, positing Atwood's narrative as a prophetic commentary on hyper-mediated existences. By weaving linguistics into psychoanalysis, the novel exposes how power linguistically inscribes bodies, a process evident in today's polarized discourses on gender and authority.

Looking forward, this Lacanian lens opens avenues for comparative research. For example, juxtaposing *The Handmaid's Tale* with works like Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* could explore how racialized subjectivities intersect with linguistic unconscious in speculative fiction. Alternatively, examining adaptations—such as the Hulu series—through Lacan's real might reveal how visual media amplifies traumatic unsymbolizables, extending the novel's critique to screen cultures. Such extensions could also incorporate emerging fields like ecocriticism, where environmental collapse in Atwood's Gilead parallels Lacan's real as an unassimilable externality disrupting symbolic harmony. The relevance of this study intensifies in light of recent socio-political developments. As of 2025, analogies between Gilead and initiatives like Project 2025—outlining conservative overhauls of governance—underscore Atwood's prescience. These parallels, often highlighted in public discourse, align with Lacanian views on ideology as fantasy sustaining the big Other. Project 2025's emphasis on family structures and institutional reforms evokes Gilead's reproductive mandates, where language veils coercive intents. A Lacanian analysis thus equips critics to decode such rhetorics, revealing underlying lacks—economic anxieties, demographic fears—that propel regressive policies. In this vein, Atwood's novel serves as a cautionary semiotic map, urging vigilance against linguistic manipulations that erode democratic subjectivities.

Furthermore, the fusion of psychoanalysis and linguistics proposed here challenges disciplinary silos. Traditional linguistics, focused on formal structures, gains depth from Lacan's psychic dimensions, while psychoanalysis benefits from linguistic rigor in unpacking signifiers. This synergy could inform therapeutic practices, where narrative therapy draws on Lacanian techniques to help clients traverse

personal fantasies. In literary therapy contexts, reading Atwood through this prism might aid in processing collective traumas, such as those from pandemics or political upheavals, by highlighting language's healing potential.

Ultimately, Atwood's masterpiece, viewed Lacanianly, affirms literature's power to interrogate the human condition. It posits that amid symbolic dominations, the unconscious—linguistically woven—harbors seeds of transformation. Offred's tale, a mosaic of silenced voices reclaiming utterance, inspires a re-evaluation of our own discursive entanglements. As societies navigate accelerating changes—from AI-driven communications to geopolitical tensions—Lacan's insights, channeled through Atwood, remind us that true liberation lies in mastering the signifiers that bind us. This study, therefore, not only elucidates a singular novel but advocates for a revitalized critical praxis, one that harnesses psychoanalytic linguistics to foster empathetic, resistant readings in an uncertain world.

In closing, the enduring appeal of *The Handmaid's Tale* lies in its linguistic alchemy, transforming dread into defiance. Lacan's framework amplifies this, offering tools to dismantle oppressive narratives while envisioning alternatives. As Atwood herself reflects on futures beyond her dystopia, so too does this analysis propel scholarship toward innovative horizons, where language and psyche converge to illuminate paths forward.

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