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Lisa Eder

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Univ.-Prof. Mag. Dr. Alexandra Ganser-Blumenau

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1. Introduction

1.1. Outline

Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* has been the object of great interest for literary scholars as well as a broad general audience since its release in 1985. Over the years, it has been transformed to a film in 1990, radio shows for the BBC in 2000 and the CBC in 2004, two audiobooks, and numerous stage adaptations, among them even an opera¹. It gained recent attention in 2017 due to the release of a TV show of the same name, which is broadcast via the streaming service Hulu and currently on its second season.

The majority of analyses so far has concentrated on placing the text in the dystopian tradition by connecting it with other renowned works of the genre, such as Orwell's *1984* or Huxley's *Brave New World*, as well as examining it through a feminist lens. In addition to the question of genre, the issue whether the main character complies with or resists the dominant totalitarian ruling of the Republic of Gilead has sparked a number of essays and studies by academics. However, even though certain aspects of the novel have been covered by research, none of it has looked at space as a decisive factor for both plot and characters. To this effect, this thesis seeks to answer the following questions:

- How are different fictional spaces constructed?
- Which of these spaces can be appropriated by characters, and for which reasons?
- Which social practices are employed to form a distinct model of space in the respective spaces under analysis, and how does space reflect on characters and their behaviour?

After the introduction, which will provide an overview of the research that has been done so far, the novel will be situated in its historical and cultural context, which will demonstrate that parallels between the fictional narrative and genuine developments in Canada and the United States are deliberately drawn by the author and contribute significantly to the formation of the fictional spaces that are depicted in the novel. Furthermore, the theoretical basis on which this thesis

¹ For a detailed overview of all adaptations, see <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20180425-why-the-handmaids-tale-is-so-relevant-today> (13 August 2018).

operates will be introduced, and, most importantly, the concept of space as the core element of the thesis will be clarified. In addition, the parameters that determined the categorisation of the spaces under analysis will be explicated.

The third chapter investigates the so-called 'public' sphere in *The Handmaid's Tale*. An outline of the Republic of Gilead's unique organisation, its spatial politics, and the marginalisation of women within this space will provide the framework for particular public spaces such as the Red Centre or the secret brothel Jezebel's. These spaces evoke certain behaviours from the characters and entail specific social practices central to the forging of the respective spaces. It will be shown how characters utilise such customs to display their conformity or defy them to signify resistance against Gilead. In addition, specific public events like the Salvaging or the Prayvaganza will be treated as spaces themselves and will be examined in this section.

The focus of the fourth chapter is the 'private' sphere, although I argue that in the fictional world of Offred and her fellow Handmaids, true privacy is hardly anywhere to be found. However, Offred's household provides at least the idea of seclusion. Within it, Offred is subject to the will of her masters and their employees, which constitutes a distinct power hierarchy that is reflected in the entire space of the household. In the Commander's office she engages in forbidden activities, thus converting the space and appropriating it. Her own bedroom, on the other hand, is simultaneously her refuge and her prison. In its bleakness, it provides the fertile soil for her nostalgic contemplation, and thus the gateway to her mental space.

Such abstract space is the subject of the fifth chapter. The space of Offred's innermost thoughts will be analysed regarding its various functions, which extend from the maintenance of hope to vital coping mechanisms concerning the fates of her loved ones. It will be argued that these practices allow for the creation of a space for the autonomous self, which is otherwise impossible under the regime. Furthermore, the function of storytelling as a means of establishing a dialogical self will be explored. On the whole, it will be revealed how the abstract model of mental space provides a possibility for Offred to stay mentally sane, and thus constitutes the most important space in the novel.

1.2. Status quo of research

Research on *The Handmaid's Tale* has mainly focused on the main character's conforming to or resisting the Republic of Gilead. In the following, it will be examined how scholars of various fields have interpreted the novel in this regard in order to set a starting point for the analysis this thesis will undertake.

Shirley Neuman highlights Offred's deliberate ignorance towards the rise of the regime, claiming that this willed insensitivity is synonymous with outright compliance (862). This notion is strongly supported by Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor and Alan Weiss who emphasise that Offred's lack of courage entails a certain degree of political complicity. Those in favour of viewing Offred as conforming to a totalitarian system have found substantial evidence for their argument in the distinction between ignorance and ignoring, described in detail by the protagonist herself: "Ignoring isn't the same as ignorance, you have to work at it" (Atwood, *Handmaid's Tale* 66). Danita Dodson perceives this explanation as a definite confession, acknowledging Offred's guilt in helping to initially create and further sustain the Puritan regime, and unmistakably labels her an indirect accomplice for that reason (82). In contrast to this judgment, Offred is also frequently seen as a typical victim of dystopian power distributions, for example by Erika Gottlieb. By drawing comparisons with protagonists of other dystopian novels, such as Winston Smith in *1984* and Bernard Marx in *Brave New World*, who find themselves in similar situations, they claim that Offred's complicity manifests itself merely in her desire to adapt and survive rather than to intentionally support an oppressive system (Gottlieb 140). In this way, they ostensibly reject Offred's own, albeit oblique, explanation of her actions.

It is interesting to note that these scholars disregard any of the other characters with regard to their degree of complicity or resistance. Further investigation into this issue is therefore strongly necessitated, since protagonists such as the Commander, Moira, or Nick play a vital role in the novel and should not be underestimated in their significance. Moreover, for the purpose of this thesis, the attitudes and behaviours of different characters contribute significantly to the distinctive characteristic of various spaces, and hence denote a focal point in analysing and interpreting these spaces.

Several places in Atwood's novel are connected with different degrees of affiliation with the Republic of Gilead. Raffaella Baccolini shows that the dystopian genre often distinguishes between different locations, clearly marking them as pro- or anti-regime (520). Moreover, Lois Feuer notes that this distinction is primarily based on the degree of displaying domesticity (linked to conformity) or maintaining a sense of hope (linked to resistance). It is interesting to note that analyses of places in *The Handmaid's Tale* always include a mental dimension, since Offred often resorts to her memories or thought plays. For Fiona Tolan, this limited form of escape is her only possibility of emotional survival in an otherwise daunting environment, and subsequently concludes that Offred adds a somewhat rebellious touch to the otherwise clearly regime-conforming household ("Utopias" 21). Stillman and Johnson follow the same pattern of argumentation, covering an abundance of textual references to the novel itself for their assertions, but ultimately arrive at a different conclusion: they assert that Offred's thoughts do not help her escape, but rather distract her from actively resisting the oppressive practices around her. The novel's romance plot provides another setting that is often categorised as Offred's cradle of rebellion. Brooks claims that Offred's affair with Nick in his apartment is the "opposition to the State" (152), thus clearly labelling it as a move of resistance. Notably, Weiss deduces the exact opposite from this relationship and draws on the fact that Offred herself uses her femininity to exercise power over a male individual, Nick, by seducing him. Consequently, she conforms to the regime's standards of deliberately unequal power distributions based on sexuality. In addition, he constitutes that her complacency with Nick makes her even more oblivious to the predominant circumstances around her, and holds her equally responsible for sustaining these conditions (136). Weiss takes one of Atwood's interviews into account here, in which she declared her main character as "an ordinary, more-or-less cowardly woman (rather than a heroine)" (qtd. in Weiss 125) – a statement that definitely supports his allegations.

Regarding language and narration in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the most prominent and most frequently analysed aspect is the issue of storytelling. Karen Stein, Peter Stillman and Anne Johnson most notably refer to the act of narrating in first-person perspective, which is in line with Feuer's arguments. They stress that through the narration of her own accounts and experiences, Offred remains a unique character in a society which strives to eliminate all individuality. The

researchers constitute precisely this act as rebellious against the Republic. Whereas Feuer's claim is that Offred's story is simply a way out of invisibility (91), Stein highlights the outright rebellious nature of her wish to communicate with others ("Scheherazade" 272). Whilst these assumptions may be valid, Weiss classifies them as an unsatisfactory conclusion to assign Offred the status of a rebel: ultimately, he argues, "she does nothing" (136). This demonstrates the apparent discrepancy between the interpretations of Offred's motives: different scholars deduct different intentions of the protagonist in this regard; yet, the defiant nature of narrating an intimate story in a system that prohibits the written word is an assertion that is generally shared by the greater part of scholars. The role of verbal irony and satire in Offred's accounts is discussed by Stephanie Hammer and Ildney Cavalcanti. Although Hammer presents an extensive list of quotations from the primary text to demonstrate that *The Handmaid's Tale* is above all a deeply satirical text, she does not provide a thorough examination of a variety of other sources, and thus fails to convince the reader of her point. Stein, on the other hand, succeeds in developing Hammer's basic argument further, as she fittingly argues that the novel's epigraph is taken from Swift's *A Modest Proposal*, an intrinsically satirical text itself and thus a possible indicator for the ironic nature of Atwood's novel ("Proposal" 58). One should not assume, however, that research has covered all there is to say about the use of irony and satire in the novel – it may be advantageous to take a closer look at the effects those rhetorical devices have on the readers, and how they might influence their perception of the repressive conditions in the novel. In this regard, this thesis will predominantly look at the realm of mental space by drawing on Offred's practice of storytelling as a means of resistance, as it contributes a noticeable share to creating 'her' space.

Although certain aspects concerning complicity with or resistance against the oppressive political and social structures in *The Handmaid's Tale* have been considerably developed and discussed, a proper and all-encompassing research of characters, settings, and narrative features has not been conducted yet. Even more so, this thesis adds a new dimension to the already existing research on this novel by incorporating the abstract model of space, which simultaneously functions as a complex construct resulting out of social interaction and practices, and influences the behaviour and attitudes of characters precisely because of this dynamic nature. The views of literary scholars differ strongly with regard to their interpretations of

textual evidence; a thorough examination of both the primary text and secondary material will expose the connection of fictional social practices with spatial construction and its effects on the novel's protagonists. Thus, re-reading Atwood's novel with the already existing research in mind will demonstrate the relevance of spatial theory for literary analyses.

2. Reality, literature, and theory

2.1. The novel in its context

In order to grasp the connection between spatial theory and Atwood's novel, it is necessary to take into account the social and historical circumstances that preceded the creation of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Their influences on the text are clearly visible and contribute to the particular construction of the fictional spaces in the novel, which emphasises the applicability of Lefebvre's, Massey's, and Foucault's theoretical concepts for a literary analysis.

In the late 1960s and 70s, postcolonialism and feminist perspectives gave rise to both the emergence of a strong Canadian nationalism and the movement of Second Wave Feminism in the USA, which lay much of the groundwork for the emancipation of women in the years and decades to come. Canadians increasingly concerned themselves with their own country, culture, and art. Due to this development, culture – a topic that had not been the subject of much public interest until then – gained importance as a means of carrying political value for Canadians. During that period, the so-called “Canadian Lit boom” encouraged and empowered minority writers, among them women, to make their voices heard (Howells 195). Women were able – and needed – to “renegotiate their positions [...] through [...] creative writing” (195). This time of cultural upheaval was also the time when Margaret Atwood's reputation was established, for example by her receiving her first Governor General's Award in 1966. For her, the will to survive marked the leitmotif in Canadian literature, being “the opposite of desperation and resignation” (Rosenthal 297). I argue that it is also a driving factor in *The Handmaid's Tale*, which will become visible in chapter 5.

With an increased interest in Canadian life, intellectuals also turned to the emerging postmodern and postcolonial theories. According to these models, reality is always only a representation from a particular perspective. Hence, Canadian identity, nation, and narration were now perceived as concepts that were not simply given, but constructed by their cultural context (Rosenthal 302-3). This perception strongly resembles Lefebvre's conceptual reflections of space, which, for him, is also to be seen as formed through social practice and a set of social relations (26).

To acquire a detailed understanding of the novel, it is important to decode its contents with regard to culture and politics. The author was very much aware of political, cultural, and social developments around her, which is clearly reflected in her writing. During her time as a student at Harvard, for example, Atwood developed an interest for her own country and its literary field, mostly through reading anything she could get her hands on in Northrop Frye's library (Staines 14). Simultaneously, she engaged with American Puritanism – a subject that was, in my estimation, doubtlessly an inspiration for *The Handmaid's Tale*. David Staines mentions that while the author addresses global problems such as gender politics or the conflict between humankind and nature, “her focus is distinctively Canadian” (22), as Atwood's occupation with her home country can be seen in the binary opposition of Canada and the USA in *The Handmaid's Tale*: Canada is the implied safe haven compared to the Republic of Gilead (or the USA), the final stop of the secret escape route called ‘Underground Femaleroad’.

The cultural issues explored in *The Handmaid's Tale* include “religious fundamentalism, feminism, consumerism, environmental decline, and rampant technology” (Jadwin 21). Many of these topics entered humankind's consciousness in the 1980s and have been increasingly discussed ever since. In the newly written foreword to the 2017 edition of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood claims that everything that is described in the book has already happened before, in a totalitarian regime, a dictatorship, or a fundamentalist religion: “No imaginary gizmos, no imaginary laws, no imaginary atrocities” (Atwood, *Introduction* x). It is reasonable, therefore, to deduce that all research and readings the author had done before accumulated in the novel. One of these influential factors was the rising fanaticism of monotheistic religions. Atwood visited Afghanistan in 1978 and was intrigued by the social and cultural conditions there, especially concerning women. Her visit was followed by an increasingly hostile diction of Middle Eastern countries towards the ‘West’, which furthered her fear of repressive totalitarian regimes and made her research such systems in the beginning of the 1980s (Jadwin 24). Other incisive developments around the world were the outlawing of birth control and abortion in Romania, and China adopting its one child policy. One can easily detect the parallels between some of these measures and Gilead's practices.

Even more importantly, social practices and society as a whole changed dramatically: by 1984, the year preceding the publication of *The Handmaid's Tale*, North America had become quite conservative in its values. In several other countries, for example in the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth, conservative uprisings took place, and governments openly opposed their predecessors' liberal moves (Jadwin 26). Ronald Reagan's election was strongly influenced by the rise of the so-called "Moral Majority", an evangelical Christian political action committee" (28), which symbolised a paradigm shift in North America's values and morals contrary to the more open and emancipatory climate of previous years. Agitating against homosexuality, ethnic diversity, and female emancipation, the movement encouraged a patriarchal vision of the country. Thus, it was also inherently anti-feminist, as it defied what women and feminists in particular had been fighting for, especially with regard to the self-determined treatment of their own bodies. These women's rights were now perceived as anti-traditional, and as an actual threat to Christian families. Robertson, the founder of the Christian Coalition, even dismissed feminism as a "threat to society" (29), using very radical and drastic diction. Again, parallels to the fictional developments in *The Handmaid's Tale* are evident.

Being an active attendant of North America's political and social situation – and a woman herself – Margaret Atwood was certainly acutely aware of the implications such developments meant for society as a whole. However, although she has frequently advocated women's rights and pressing issues of emancipation, the author has openly refused to commit herself to the explicit term of feminist writing (Pache 125). Instead, she prefers to focus on the role of the woman in society, the relation between social and also patriarchal structures and women, and how these roles are – and need to be – constantly re-negotiated. Instead of aspiring to craft her works as a serious academic critic, Atwood prefers to adopt an ironic stance as she believes this to be a more successful way to reach her readers (126-7). In *The Handmaid's Tale*, this is noticeable in numerous satirical comments by Offred.

In addition to real events and global changes, the author has always been interested in the abstract issue of power distribution, the relation between political and personal matters, and the sometimes blurry lines between those spheres. In her 1971 poetry collection *Power Politics*, the underlying message seems to be that

power and politics surround us all and permeate our daily lives, even though we might think we are sealed off from it. In an interview with Jo Brans, Atwood states that

[p]olitics, for me, is everything that involves who gets to do what to whom... [...] Politics really has to do with how people order their societies, to whom power is ascribed, who is considered to have power. A lot of power is ascription. People have power because we think they have power, and that's all politics is. And politics also has to do with what kind of conversations you have with people, and what you feel free to say to someone, what you don't feel free to say. (qtd. in Somacarrera 44)

This view reflects Michel Foucault's perception of power as an all-pervasive element that is central to human relationships and behaviour, which will be analysed in connection with different characters' practices in *The Handmaid's Tale* in the following chapters.

Margaret Atwood displayed an extraordinary interest in political and social circumstances around her in the years and decades that preceded the publication of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Given that she worked on the novel for several years and put great effort into the research of the different elements that constitute the text (Atwood, *Introduction* x), I argue that the connections to the 'real world' are deliberately made. On the one hand, this simplifies the application of the theoretical conceptions that were chosen for this thesis: while it is essential to bear in mind that Lefebvre's, Massey's, and Foucault's theories on space and power focus on analysing reality and actual scenarios rather than fictional constructs in literature, I nevertheless claim that their hypotheses are equally applicable to the realm of literary fiction, as they clearly resonate in the text. Applying Lefebvre's and Massey's ideas, social practices and social relations create the distinct fictional spaces the characters move in, which in turn affects the protagonists in their behaviour and practices. Hence, the spaces and practices in *The Handmaid's Tale* can be analysed in the same way as real spaces and genuine social practices. On the other hand, Atwood's exaggerations of genuine circumstances add to the perception of the novel as a satirical text: Atwood's transformation of actual developments into a 'what if?'-scenario allows for an abstraction of spatial theory for literary fiction.

2.2. From context to conception: theoretical basis

There are two terms pervading this paper, functioning like a red thread around which the investigation of *The Handmaid's Tale* is constructed: space and power. Following Foucault, I argue that both are inseparable from each other, and their concepts often overlap and intersect. Both concepts have been elaborated on in various fields; hence, the approaches of three scholars were chosen in order to limit the scope of the thesis, and to keep the analysis as concise and comprehensible as possible. Regarding space, Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* forms the foundation on which further arguments are built. In her books *For Space* and *Space, Place and Gender*, cultural geographer Doreen Massey continues some of Lefebvre's ideas and transfers them to the field of gender studies. Her approach provides valuable insights for breaking down gendered space and gendered power relations depicted in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Given their significance for this thesis, both concepts will be explained in detail in an individual sub-chapter (2.3).

Power/Knowledge, the extensive collection of interviews with Michel Foucault, provided the point of origin for examining the theme of power. He claims that "[e]ndeavouring [...] to decipher discourse through the use of spatial, strategic metaphors enables one to grasp precisely the points at which discourses are transformed in, through and on the basis of relations of power" (70). In this way, he clearly connects spatial organisation with distinct methods of power distributions. Power, he argues, is a force that is present everywhere around us and crucially defines the organisation of any given society. It is continuously formed, generated, and sustained as "a more-or-less organised, hierarchical, co-ordinated cluster of relations" (198). In this way, power "needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body" (119). The general public tends to view the concept of power in a rather one-sided way and synonymous with 'law': there must be a sovereign, a ruler so to say, who says no and imposes sanctions, and on the other side there must be people who in turn accept these prohibitions (140). However, in contrast to this common belief of power being a negative instrument that confines people within specific borders of desired behaviour, Foucault argues that in its function it is rather to be seen as a

positive driving force beneficial for humans by creating new knowledge and producing discourse. He calls this the “productivity of power” (119).

Foucault devised six principal hypotheses about power, which are explained in *Power/Knowledge* (142) and should henceforth serve as the frame within which the term is used in this paper:

- (1) Power always co-exists with the social body.
- (2) Power relations should be seen in a greater network of general relations (such as sexuality).
- (3) Power does not only take the form of prohibition and punishment.
- (4) It denotes “general conditions of domination”.
- (5) It serves an economic interest.
- (6) There is always a form of resistance against power.

These six assumptions can be applied to power distributions on larger levels, such as within a state, or in smaller units such as the family or sexual relationships, which also adopt particular relations of domination (188). In chapters 3 and 4, this scheme will be applied to various power structures depicted in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. I will dissect the relations that define the Republic of Gilead’s social and spatial organisation and examine how they are reflected in various locations. Furthermore, the significance of certain relations between groups of characters and individuals will be explored, as it is assumed that by establishing a sense of either togetherness or estrangement they also play a vital role in creating a specific attitude towards the regime.

2.3. From conception to theory: defining space

Diverse kinds of relations form the basis for Foucault’s notion of power as well as for Lefebvre’s and Massey’s concepts of space. Before turning to Henri Lefebvre’s and Doreen Massey’s works, which this thesis will primarily rely on, as well as providing more detailed insights into Foucault’s conceptions of space, a short abstract on the history of space as an instrument for literary analysis will be given.

In the second half of the 20th century, scholars from various fields turned to perceiving space as a fruitful object of analysis. While it was common practice to examine the situation of man within time, for example by investigating social practices, art, or political developments in relation to historical events or circumstances, space evolved to become an alternative category of analysis. In the

1970s, this paradigm shift gained further attention through the rise of Neo-Marxism (Massey, *Politics* 70). Marxist philosophers were interested in the question how space may contribute to constituting society, claiming that “all [...] so-called spatial relations and spatial processes were actually social relations taking a particular geographical form” (70). They declared space a social construct that “is constituted through social relations and material social practices” (70). In the 1980s, this notion was augmented by another argument, which added a reflexive dimension to the matter: in addition to social factors influencing the spatial dimension, it was asserted that also “the social is spatially constructed” (70). The spatial turn, therefore, essentially claims that society is affected by its spatial organisation – a view that was (and is still) both strongly supported and challenged by philosophers, sociologists, and intellectuals in the years and decades to come. However, although ‘space’ is a term that is frequently and widely used by a number of literary scholars, it lacks a clear and common definition. While many of the existing definitions or usages of the term strongly differ, most do share the assumption that space is to be seen in opposition to time (67).

Ernesto Laclau defines spatiality as the “realm of stasis”, where no politics are possible (qtd. in Massey, *Politics* 67). Although for him space is indeed a vital component of the forming of a society, it is only in connection with the temporal dimension that social mechanisms can be fully understood (Laclau 82). In this way, he stresses the mutual influence of society and space, but constitutes space to be an inadequate exclusive source of social analysis. Similarly, Henri Lefebvre calls for including the lived practices and social constructs that play a role in spatiality in analysis (qtd. in Massey, *Politics* 67). Supporting the Marxist view, he states that “the social and the spatial are inseparable and that the spatial form of the social has causal effectivity” (qtd. in 71). However, Lefebvre strongly contradicts Laclau’s perception of space being entirely apolitical by emphasising the explicitly political, ideological, and strategic nature of any space (Lefebvre 31).

According to Lefebvre, “[s]ocial space is a (social) product” (26). In *The Production of Space*, the philosopher argues that humans find themselves in a multitude of different spaces, each formed by their own actions and relations. Via spatial practice, people – or fictional characters, as I argue – assign meaning to spaces and thus appropriate them for themselves. He distinguishes between the

physical, mental, and social dimension within a given space, and claims that these fields are closely connected with each other and need to be considered as a unity. This belief will be followed in the analysis of *The Handmaid's Tale* as well, especially in chapter 5.

Humans assign specific names to specific places, denoting certain functions and evoking certain connotations. A 'marketplace', a 'shop' or a 'bedroom' are universally understood concepts that "correspond to a specific use of that space, and hence to a spatial practice that they express and constitute" (16). This concept is crucial for the subsequent analysis of spaces within Atwood's novel, as it will be shown that many places serve purposes and expect behaviours that deviate radically from the purpose and behavioural patterns they were initially created for. Lefebvre uses the term "spatial code" for this phenomenon and declares that every space constitutes such a code that is read, or decoded, by the people using it (16). Decoding a space implies, however, that people engage in a so-called "process of signification", which means they perceive themselves as subjects within that space and responsible for forming it (17). In *The Handmaid's Tale*, deciphering the spatial code correctly and behaving accordingly is a necessary survival skill for the characters.

"[S]ocial space 'incorporates' social actions" (33). It is an interesting detail that Lefebvre sees the source of such social actions precisely in something that Foucault so vehemently opposes when it comes to the source of power: prohibition. In contrast to this, he pronounces it to be "the ultimate foundation of social space" (35). Granting or denying access to a space is one prevalent characteristic of power over such a space, which will be demonstrated at a later point in this thesis. Furthermore, every space already exists with its implications before any subject enters it, making it a difficult challenge to appropriate – and thus change – the given space. The subject may therefore first perceive a space as an obstacle, "hedged about by Draconian rules prohibiting any attempt at [...] modification" (57). Although Lefebvre's conceptional reflections refer to reality, they are equally applicable to the literary realm: we see such endeavours for example in Offred's struggle and reluctance to truly appropriate her own bedroom in the Commander's house.

Space, Lefebvre claims, represents a network of relationships between people, things, and other spaces. It “subsumes things produced, and encompasses their interrelationships in their coexistence and simultaneity” (73) – people play an active role in its constitution. Spaces are also always influenced by their own history and former appropriations; in Atwood’s novel, this is apparent in the return to Puritan values that had already been in place once, and the continuation of more modern aspects such as technology. All social practices that define a space derive from previous practices and processes, which themselves form a new heterogeneous set of relations (190). In doing so, layers of meaning are added that render a space organic and dynamic. Spaces occupied in this way provide direct testimony of the “relationships upon which social organization is founded” and mirror the hierarchical classification of members of a social group (229). Spaces undergo several different, creative signifying processes which radically change their meaning, depending on the social practices of the present subjects. Therefore, Lefebvre speaks of the “production of space” (16).

Many of Lefebvre’s statements relate closely to Foucault’s theories, especially with regard to knowledge and power. Knowledge (*savoir*) is equally omnipresent within space as it is within power (41), and it is particularly important when it comes to both interpreting and generating spatial codes. Similarly, Foucault determines a reciprocal relationship in his works: exercising power continuously creates knowledge, and knowledge in turn encourages effects of power (*Power* 52). I argue that Lefebvre’s and Foucault’s ideas operate on common ground here, as both acknowledge the interactive dynamics between social subjects and the systems they are involved in.

The process of signifying or connoting space is linked to the respective system of power distribution in place, since all “[a]ctivity in space is restricted by that space; space ‘decides’ what activity may occur, but even this ‘decision’ has limits placed upon it” (Lefebvre 143). For Lefebvre, restrictions, limits, prohibitions – even though Foucault claims they may not be the only stimuli for power – form the basis of space regardless if it is the state or an individual who exercises them (35). More often than not, Lefebvre concludes, this takes the form of violence in the name of a superordinate authority (162) – in the case of Gilead, it is religion and patriarchy that determine both signifier and signified.

Spatial practice thus simultaneously defines: places [...]; actions and signs; the trivialized spaces of everyday life; and [...] spaces made special by symbolic means as desirable or undesirable, benevolent or malevolent, sanctioned or forbidden to particular groups. (288; emphasis in original)

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, these symbolic means are selected and justified by religion, which operates by creating a desire for identification and imitation (236). Gilead, as will be shown at a later point, indeed strongly relies on these two distinctive mechanisms. Lefebvre claims that “[s]ocial spaces interpenetrate one another and/or superimpose themselves upon one another” (86). This statement will be considered again in chapters 3 and 4, where the intrinsic connection of all spaces within *The Handmaid's Tale* will become visible. It is precisely this broad range of examples that vividly illustrate Lefebvre's theories that makes the whole of Atwood's Republic of Gilead such a fascinating space to analyse.

Doreen Massey follows a different approach by exploring cultural and philosophical aspects of space in her books *For Space* and *Space, Place, and Gender*. She establishes her own definition by drawing on the fields of applied geography and global economy. I argue that by putting them in much less abstract terms, she continues Lefebvre's theories and makes them tangible for a broader audience interested in current social developments. Both Lefebvre and Massey share many beliefs about the structure and conception of space.

First of all, Massey calls for three basic propositions about space in *For Space*: we need to recognise it as the “product of interrelations” on all levels; then understand that there exist multiple spaces at the same time; and accept that space is “always under construction” and never a truly finished product (*For Space* 9). This parallels what Lefebvre says about space being the subject of dynamic processes. Most significantly, Massey draws attention to the importance of the interdependency of social relations and space. Individuals and their interrelations are constitutive of the spaces they inhabit, “[b]ut spatiality may also be from the beginning integral to the constitution of those identities themselves, including political subjectivities” (10). The Red Centre or the social dynamics of Salvagings or Prayvaganzas in *The Handmaid's Tale* may be seen as examples of practical application of her claim.

Furthermore, with space being the social dimension and forming the arena of social action, it is also intrinsically connected to the realm of politics (99) – and

thus power. The reason for this, Massey argues, is that every space is inevitably negotiated and “contoured through the playing out of unequal social relations” (153). In this way, Massey’s view clearly conforms to that of Lefebvre.

In *Space, Place, and Gender*, a collection of texts on the topic, the author clarifies her points and develops them even further. Power, meanings, and symbolisms permeate spaces on all scales, necessarily reflecting back on the individuals that move within them (*Place* 3-4). In this way, she claims, space “partly constitutes the observer and the observer it” (3), which echoes Lefebvre’s concept of the interdependence between subjects and spaces. Through its inherently dynamic nature, space also mirrors the ongoing “social geometry of power and signification” (3). With regard to specific places, the author defines them as particular moments that are created within a net of social relations that are woven together over time and include their own pasts and traces of previous social practices (120). For Massey, such social relations do not end at a specific point or place; rather, some stretch out beyond the particular locus that they are ascribed to, resulting in a vast complexity of relations and a multiplicity of spaces (168).

It is clear now that Massey’s and Lefebvre’s claims demonstrate multiple similarities – it should not go unnoticed here that Massey even frequently uses identical terminology to that of Lefebvre. What distinguishes her from the French sociologist, however, is Massey’s interest in gender, and the role it plays in construing spaces. While Lefebvre only marginally comments on the relevance of gender for spatial theory, Massey is positive that all spaces are gendered, and they are so in a vast variety of ways that need to be considered when looking at the structure of a space, and how people experience and inhabit it (164). Moreover, “this gendering of space and place both reflects *and has effects back on* the ways in which gender is constructed and understood in the societies in which we live” (186; emphasis in original). In this way, Massey uses Lefebvre’s theories as a starting point for elaborating on a specific aspect of spatial theory. In Western societies, gendering is typically realised in the binary polarisation of male and female. As a reference point, she repeatedly mentions spaces that are traditionally connotated as male, such as the city (167), or female, such as the household (180). Accompanying this gendered spatial allocation, there is inevitably also a form of control and dominance, which directly links back to the issues of power already

outlined. In addition, Massey notes that traditionally, women and other suppressed groups have been restricted in their mobility and access to specific spaces (150) – a notion that was also recognised by Lefebvre (*Space* 310). This exercise of power has an enormous effect on identity formation processes, as Massey points out, and hence also on the forming of spaces themselves, as they naturally become inherently connoted as being reserved exclusively for males or females (*Place* 179). In this way, the ruling class, for example white males, are able to keep the subordinated group under their control and drastically limit their possibilities of breaking out of this circle. This way of thinking is especially relevant in, and applicable to, radical patriarchal societies such as the Republic of Gilead. In chapter 3, it will be explored how the Sons of Jacob slowly narrowed characters' lives and the spaces they used to inhabit in this way, in order to form a totalitarian regime.

Last but not least, before taking a look at *The Handmaid's Tale* in context and consecutively turning to the in-depth analysis of the novel, Foucault's view on space needs to be addressed. In his essay "Of Other Spaces", he states his interest in those spaces "that have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect" (24). He calls these spaces "heterotopias" and asserts that different types of them exist in each and every society (24). Each heterotopia has a distinct function, and they are all characterised by not only having one obvious meaning, but rather an array of different meanings. For the sake of brevity, I will only focus on two types of heterotopias that are relevant for this thesis. Firstly, there is the heterotopia of deviation, which is a space reserved for those individuals who fail to conform to dominant social norms (25). In Atwood's novel, this is represented most drastically by the Colonies, where disobedient women are sent to work with lethal substances. However, one could also claim that the Red Centre or even Offred's room are such heterotopias of deviation, since they represent locations where characters are sent against their will and because of their previous inappropriate behaviour. The second type of heterotopia is that of rituals or rites of purification, which is not generally accessible to the public, but only with explicit permission and via specific gestures (26). There is an abundance of such heterotopias in *The Handmaid's*

Tale: the Red Centre, the Commander's office, Jezebel's, and other households, just to name a few. These will be more closely analysed in the following chapters.

Space, it can be deduced, is a product of human influence as well as it influences humans. Through social practices, subjects assign meaning and function to space. In turn, these spaces denote social mechanisms, and have a strong transformational potential. According to Foucault, space is not an empty void in which people and things are randomly placed, but formed by a heterogeneous set of relations ("Spaces" 23). Such relations are formed by the interaction of space and subjects – an effect that is tangible both in the real world and the realm of literary fiction. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, several places and locations are depicted that reflect both political and individual intentions, ideologies, and strategies. While some are intrinsically connected with the Republic of Gilead and its morals and values, others signify a strongly regime-critical atmosphere. In the following, the novel will be put into context, which will again illustrate the relevance of Lefebvre's, Massey's, and Foucault's theories. In chapters 3, 4, and 5, selected spaces will be analysed in terms of the level of affiliation to the regime or resistance against it, how they are socially constructed, and how they construct and influence the identities of the protagonists.

2.4. The question of labelling spaces

In this thesis, the spaces under analysis are categorised as 'public' or 'private'. It is essential to remember that in the fictional Republic of Gilead, this binary distinction is a difficult task, given the state's panoptic nature. In general, the spaces that Gilead encompasses are tightly structured into spaces that are reserved for specific protagonists at specific times to perform specific rituals. It is, however, universally acknowledged by the protagonists that these spaces are intrinsically connected by a distinct set of values, morals, and attitudes:

This is the heart of Gilead, where the war cannot intrude except on television. Where the edges are we aren't sure, they vary, according to the attacks and counterattacks, but this is the centre, where nothing moves. The Republic of Gilead, said Aunt Lydia, knows no bounds. Gilead is within you. (Atwood, *HT* 33)

Offred's – or Aunt Lydia's – words exemplify the oscillation of Gilead between a concrete location and an all-pervasive ideological model. They prove that true

privacy in the sense of “being free from the attention of the public” (*Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* 1207) is not possible, or at least not desirable under the Gileadean regime. Therefore, I pursued a distinction based on the primary usage of the respective spaces: the Republic of Gilead as a whole, the Red Centre, Jezebel’s, and events like the Prayvaganza serve a public *function* as they are designed for a greater, anonymous crowd. In contrast, Offred’s household, her room, and Nick’s apartment are specifically intended for a few particular protagonists. The selection of spaces for analysis was therefore based on the relevance of their function and its reflection in characters’ social practices: the spaces in this thesis either have a prominent function in terms of the frequency of mentioning, or in terms of their significant transformative function for characters’ social practices, behaviour, or attitudes. Consequently, I claim that the distinction between public and private may be difficult, but if both intended usage and actual function are taken into consideration, it is indeed a probate way of classifying the chosen spaces.

3. 'Public' space

In this chapter, spaces will be examined that are devoted to and used by large groups of characters, serving a communal function. As a starting point, the Republic of Gilead itself as the framework for all spaces within *The Handmaid's Tale* will be examined, followed by an analysis of the Red Centre and the secret brothel Jezebel's. Additionally, public events such as the Prayvaganza, Salvaging, and Particicution will be treated as spaces as well, since they serve specific functions that are established through specific social practices, and are also restricted to particular places. These spaces were chosen because they are frequently mentioned in the novel, which denotes their high importance for the main protagonists. In addition, many decisive events take place in these spaces, marking their significance for various characters.

At this point, James Scott's concept of behavioural systems within oppressive regimes must be introduced. Within these systems, Scott locates so-called public transcripts, by which he means the "open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate" (2) typified by the display of publicly accepted actions and language. By making sure to deliver a "credible performance, speaking the lines and making the gestures he knows are expected of him" (4), the subject ensures his or her safety. On the other hand, there are hidden transcripts that escape the watchful eyes of those in power, for example "offstage speeches, gestures, and practices that confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears in the public transcript" (4-5). Such hidden transcripts often manifest themselves in small defiant acts. The public transcript for Scott is what Lefebvre calls the spatial code that needs to be deciphered in order to behave appropriately within this space (47-8). I therefore suggest dividing the term into the sub-categories of overt and covert spatial code parallel to Scott's definitions of public and hidden transcripts, to provide a clearer distinction. In order to understand the social relations and practices that define the spaces in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Scott's model will provide valuable support.

3.1. The Republic of Gilead

3.1.1. (Fictional) past and (fictional) present

In the fictional realm of *The Handmaid's Tale*, North America has undergone a dramatic change from a liberal democracy to a totalitarian, oppressive regime. At the beginning of Offred's narrative, this revolution seems to have happened around five years ago. In one of her flashbacks, the narrator recollects that religious fundamentalists overthrew the government and shot the President of the United States of America, "all at once, without anyone knowing beforehand" (Atwood, *HT* 182). The activists, the so-called Sons of Jacob, quickly established a new society based on radical religious beliefs, which calls for a new, firm social organisation. Lefebvre claims that "new social relationships call for a new space" (59) – the Republic of Gilead embodies this new space. In this section, I explain the basis of Gilead's existence and the space it was initially founded on and examine the social organisation of the regime: do the social practices that are required by the government contribute to form Gilead's very own space? I will show that on an individual level, the characters who move within this space both contribute to forging this particular space and are in turn subordinated by what this space ultimately becomes.

Even though it is never explicitly stated in the novel itself, Margaret Atwood mentions in an interview that the centre of Gilead is Cambridge, Massachusetts, and, more specifically, the Harvard University campus: "It's very concrete. The Wall is the wall around Harvard yard. All those little shops and stores mentioned are probably there at this very minute" (qtd. in Tomc 80). In this way, Atwood establishes yet another link to her readers' reality. Harvard, a stronghold of intelligence and innovation, is used as the epicentre of the atrocities depicted in *The Handmaid's Tale*: like many totalitarian systems, such as Nazi Germany, the creation of Gilead had the support of members of the intelligentsia and the ruling upper class. Karen Stein also draws a parallel between these two regimes in her analysis of Offred's descriptions ("Proposal" 67). Besides totalitarian regimes, Margaret Atwood has taken much of her inspiration for *The Handmaid's Tale* from genuine philosophical or religious currents in the world, as already touched upon before. Lefebvre argues that all spaces have a history, and no space is ever truly new or original (164). This background is always present in the specific

characteristics of the current space (110) and naturally influences the living beings within it. Similarly, the Republic of Gilead, though it never really existed, as well as the events leading to its foundation also comprise fragments that parallel American Puritanism, such as the marginalisation of women based on religious beliefs, and Second-Wave Feminism, like the vigorous protests of feminists. The distinctive space it occupies therefore includes remnants of such previous forms of social practices, norms, and values.

3.1.2. Feminism upside-down?

What preceded the Sons of Jacob's rebellion was a period of rigorous female emancipation in the USA. Offred recalls this pre-Gilead era in several flashbacks, revealing that her own mother rigorously participated in the feminist movement that turned against conservative views of women and advocated against sexual violence. She particularly remembers one instance when her mother took her to the park to witness and participate in an organised burning of pornographic magazines and books; "[g]ood riddance to bad rubbish" (Atwood, *HT* 48), the women chanted. In many aspects, Offred's mother and her fellow campaigners are reminiscent of Second-Wave Feminism: both, fictional and real, employed the slogan "Take Back the Night" and planned various events in order to achieve the same goal. Notably, Offred's mother, who is never called by her actual name, together with the feminists in *The Handmaid's Tale*, took an extremely radical position by even condemning her own daughter for typically female behaviour such as doing household chores. She tried to follow her beliefs with great vigour, which evoked resistance among society that often ended in violent attacks against the women (see 189). Stein calls this a "continuum of repression: once people begin to burn books, the door is open for further censorship" ("Scheherazade" 277). Hence, many scholars, among them Feuer (89), are of the opinion that the actions and beliefs of feminists in the novel are partly responsible for the Sons of Jacob's violent uprising and for the oppression that they would have to face in the coming years. In fact, it is argued that Offred's mother "unintentionally supports the essentialism of the fundamentalist right" (89). This can be seen as another evidence for the satirical nature of Atwood's novel. I argue, however, that even though feminism is in a way turned upon its head in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood essentially demonstrates what might happen if seemingly good intentions lead to a disastrous outcome.

Offred's role in the formation of Gilead's society is ambivalent. Initially, before Gilead existed, she ridiculed and rejected her mother's visions and did not take part in the feminist movement. Later, however, she ironically finds herself acknowledging that at least some of their claims were right and have been realised in Gilead, though in a way unintended: "Mother, I think. Wherever you may be. Can you hear me? You wanted a women's culture. Well, now there is one. It isn't what you meant, but it exists" (Atwood, *HT* 137).

At the same time, she recognizes her own guilt in the creation of the totalitarian regime. Before Gilead, Offred could not appreciate her freedom properly, and did nothing to protect it. Instead, she found herself content with her life as a wife and mother, and saw no need in caring to change the status quo for women. Now, she sometimes marvels at the thought of the possibilities she was offered in her memories, the clothes she was able to wear, and the choices she was able to make. This behaviour, called "[w]illed ignorance" by Neuman (862), is repeated throughout the whole novel. Offred does not rebel against her rights being stripped away, her money and job being taken, her life being turned upside down. Offred herself even confesses to this behaviour, as she highlights the difference between ignoring and ignorance (Atwood, *HT* 66). Weiss therefore accuses Offred of being an accomplice in the creation and continuation of the Republic (122). He points out that she ostensibly failed to acknowledge her liberty in the first place, and did nothing to defend it when the time came, either because she did not have enough courage or was not interested in the fate of her country and people (133-4). Her own complicity in the creation of the repressive regime makes her partly responsible for the creation of her own restricted, dismal space.

The drastic difference between mother and daughter in terms of their behaviour towards the status quo of women symbolises what Stillman and Johnson call a "reverse generation gap" (79), because it is usually the younger generation that rebels against inadequate social circumstances. In this way, it can be deduced that Offred's mother and Offred herself employ opposite social practices – open rebellion versus quiet acceptance – during the transformational period that led to the creation of Gilead, and therefore add diverse layers to the space they inhabit.

Even though Offred's mother suffered severe consequences for her revolts by being sent to the Colonies, the fact that women were able to march for their rights and

voice their opinions exemplifies the liberal circumstances in the years preceding the foundation of Gilead. According to Neuman, Atwood's fictional regime is a possible continuation of reality in 1984 (859). When looking back at the liberal times before Gilead, and thus also at the social circumstances in North America at the time the novel was written, she claims that "the world seemed to be getting a little too free for women" (858). Although I oppose the view that freedom for women has – or should have – a limit, Neuman's statement certainly holds true for supporters of male chauvinism and patriarchy, real or fictional. Hence, within the general dissatisfaction among people and a sexually overcharged society, the Sons of Jacob found fertile ground for their ideas, which ties in with Foucault's argument that sexuality and politics form a fruitful basis for prohibitional tactics of those in power ("Discourse" 52).

3.1.3. Domination and submission: male versus female

While female characters in the novel enjoyed the freedom to wear what and behave how they liked, the lives they led were by no means safe. Although Gilead suppresses women on all levels imaginable, making a woman's life a site of constant danger, Offred also reports on the negative sides of the 'time before':

[Y]ou'd remember stories you'd read, in the newspapers, about women who had been found [...] in ditches or forests or refrigerators in abandoned rented rooms, with their clothes on or off, sexually abused or not; at any rate killed. There were places you didn't want to walk, precautions you took that had to do with locks on windows and doors, drawing the curtains, leaving on lights. (Atwood, *HT* 238)

Physical and sexual abuse of women was apparently a frequently committed delinquency; both the government and society itself ostensibly failed to provide a safe environment for women. It is important to remember Lefebvre's assertion that "[n]o space ever vanishes utterly, leaving no trace" (164), which indicates that every space is an accumulation of old and new individual characteristics, spatial codes, and social practices. The same can be applied to the realm of literary fiction: in *The Handmaid's Tale*, previous conditions significantly influenced the creation of a new space, where its traces are still tangible. Indeed, Atwood commented that Gilead was initially supposed to improve the living conditions for women, especially compared to the dangerous prior situation: "Women aren't whistled at on the street, men don't come climbing in the window in the middle of the night. Women are 'protected'. Sardonicly speaking, in totalitarian countries the streets

are much safer for the most part” (Tolan, “Utopias” 22). Similar to Feuer, Tolan also argues that Gilead, to a certain degree, even reached some of feminists’ proposed goals, although this of course comes at the high price of drastically limited freedom (23). In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, this is manifest in the distinction between what Tolan calls negative and positive freedom (24), or, in Aunt Lydia’s words, “[f]reedom to and freedom from” (Atwood, *HT* 34): before Gilead came into being, men were presented with a constant availability of pornographic material and countless possibilities of sexual encounters in brothels or even motorised with so-called Pornycorners or Pornomarts. Arguably, this excess resulted in both physical and mental overload, leading to the total ban of the previously prevalent public transcript of sexuality. In a dialogue between Offred and the Commander, it becomes obvious that the pursuit of happiness in pre-Gilead society manifested itself in the search for a sex partner, as he remarks, “Think of the trouble they had before. [...] Don’t you remember the terrible gap between the ones who could get a man easily and the ones who couldn’t? [...] Think of the human misery” (Atwood, *HT* 231). Hence, the freedom women enjoyed, especially regarding their sexuality, soon compelled them to compete with each other to reach a “liberty they did not desire, and as such was no liberty at all” (Tolan, “Utopias” 27). The freedoms granted to citizens seem to have aided in the emergence of social unrest and dissatisfaction.

Accordingly, Aunt Lydia elaborates on the benefits of Gilead’s system. Tolan defines her so-called ‘freedom to’ as “ungoverned liberal hedonism that results in immoral liberties” (“Utopias” 24) in the pre-Gilead era; an abundance of choice regarding a character’s private life and their sexuality. Aunt Lydia fittingly laments, “We were a society dying [...] of too much choice” (Atwood, *HT* 35). ‘Freedom from’, on the other side, signifies life under Gilead’s authority, and implies not being subjected to the male gaze, or seen as an exploitable sexual object. Yet, this particular kind of freedom, and the thus promised security, comes at a high price for everyone, and ironically, the situation in Gilead for women did not really change for the better.

Even though sexuality seems to have played a vital role in creating dissatisfaction among people, it is worth noting that it continues to be a constitutive factor in the establishment of social hierarchy in Gilead. As Sayyed Moosa Vinia and Tayyebah

Yousefi note, Gilead employs a rigid system of binary gender terms that is based on heteronormativity (169). The sexual act is reserved for reproductive purposes only, and the distribution of sex partners is a matter of social stratification. Sex is institutionalised both politically and socially (Stein, “Scheherazade” 277). Handmaids have three chances for proving their value; if they fail to impregnate at their third assignment, they are discharged and transferred to work as slaves in the Colonies for the rest of their lives. In short, a woman’s social value is reduced to their ability to reproduce and bear healthy children, which is exemplified in the transfer of a Handmaid to another household after the birth of a baby to repeat the process. Fittingly, infertility is a handicap that is also solely assigned to the woman, as Offred explains: “There is no such thing as a sterile man any more, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that’s the law” (Atwood, *HT* 70-71). This legislation ties in with Gilead’s male-controlled ideologies and its marginalisation of women. According to Massey, spaces and their identities are “always formed by the juxtaposition and co-presence there of particular sets of social interrelations, and by the effects which that juxtaposition and co-presence produce” (*Place* 169); in Gilead’s case, these interrelations, its public transcripts, so to say, are inherently defined by masculinity.

Following these principles of patriarchy, it is the men who are assigned a wife after having reached maturity – in this way, men play yet again the active part of the seducer, and women are again reduced to representing the helpless victim, the sexual object (Moosa Vinia and Yousefi 166). Only high-ranking officials are permitted a wife and a Handmaid, signifying and reinforcing their high social status in the Republic. Stillman and Johnson state that “Gilead is devoted to reproduction – white, Christian, misogynist, stratified reproduction” (71). Production and reproduction, according to Lefebvre, are important elements in the construction of space, as they contain and assign “the social relations of reproduction” (32). The Republic of Gilead’s tight regulation of reproduction, therefore, although it is justified as a necessity for the survival of mankind, signifies that its space is tightly controlled and does not allow for any cracks in its foundation. The harsh and merciless punishment of dissidents is evidence for this claim, as well as the firm organisation of the Republic in general. In order to justify and ensure the male authorities’ power over others, “Gilead’s infrastructure requires a highly developed, complex structure of power, system of indoctrination,

and division of labor” (Stillman and Johnson 71) – and labour, in turn, has the general function of dressage and discipline for the people (Foucault, *Power* 161).

The Republic of Gilead is founded on a rigid distribution of power grounded on gender differences, which echoes Foucault’s notion of the relationship between sex and power: “For some, the domain of sex is where the ineluctability of the master is established; for others, it is the source of the most radical of all subversions” (*Power* 138). In this way, space in Gilead is clearly organised in terms of access and permission, based on sexuality and gender. This becomes blatantly visible in the Aunts’ speeches that claim that “men are sex machines” (Atwood, *HT* 153), but women are created differently (55). Thus, Gilead exploits the natural difference between the sexes and uses it to legitimate their own oppressive practices. This results in the man holding “the sanctified reins of power in society, he rules, assigns roles, and decrees after social, religious, and cosmic concepts convenient to his interests and desires” (Malak 12). Space, therefore, is principally organised around patriarchal philosophies, and subjects within space are expected to conform to these practices at all times. Moreover, the social relations and practices that characterised space in pre-Gilead times are distorted and shifted to yield a completely different social structure, even though the basic premises of social relations as such did not change: just as before, there are still two sexes, but their relation to each other and the composition of their social value have changed dramatically.

3.1.4. Woman and womb as public space(s)

In Gilead, women and their bodies are objectified and perceived as the property of men. This is most prominent in the case of Handmaids, who are treated as resources and capital for the Republic in general, and for Commanders and their Wives in particular. Their only, though utterly precious, asset is their ability to bear children, which is, according to my reading of the text, emblematised by the ‘space’ of their wombs. For Lefebvre, every body is “produced and [...] the production of a space” (195) – I argue that in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, this is also applicable to a part of a character’s body. Therefore, the bodies and wombs of Handmaids are treated as public spaces in Gilead.

Offred’s descriptions of Handmaids’ garments is the first evidence of this claim. The prescribed uniform consists of a scarlet red gown that covers the whole body

and a white headgear that prevents the women from both seeing and being seen (see Atwood, *HT* 18). Interestingly, this apparel has the adverse effect on others: the flamboyant dress calls for public attention, and moreover, a possible pregnancy – which determines a Handmaid's value – is easily detectable (see 36). Hence, Handmaids' bodies are opaque and transparent at the same time.

In addition, all Handmaids must obey strict rules regarding the treatment of their bodies, for example daily walks “to keep [the] abdominal muscles in working order” (36) or the mandatory diet to maintain the best possible conditions for conception. The spatial code of a Handmaid's body is defined by outside forces, as the women are not involved in any decision-making process at all. In this way, Gilead's government exercises spatial control over private issues, which is synonymous with social control on identity for Massey (*Place* 179). Clearly, this interference is highly invasive on both a physical and mental level and deprives the women of appropriating a space that should actually be unaffected by any external influences.

Governmental control over the space of the Handmaids' bodies also extends to natural physical mechanisms. Their monthly period is a sign of failure, for they have failed to fulfil Gilead's expectations. To make matters worse, Handmaids only have a limited number of chances to conceive a child before they are deemed unworthy and sent to the Colonies. In this way, body and womb seemingly conspire against their host. Offred's report reveals that because of the permanently imminent deportation, she has internalised Gilead's dogmas, as she begins to hate her body for its monthly deception (see Atwood, *HT* 83). Gilead's power and spatial control slowly creep into the minds of the subjects, driving a wedge between the women and the space of their bodies, which contributes to the alienation of their respective identities.

The public staging of births further supports the categorisation of female bodies and wombs as a public space. Whenever a Handmaid gives birth, all others in the district are collectively taken to the household in question, where a carefully concerted choreography of chanting, breathing, and praying is performed. As shown in the case of Janine/Ofwarren, the personal needs and wishes of the woman in labour are disregarded, and she is not allowed any analgesic medication (see 124). Instead, the Aunts take the reins, acting as supervisors of the event and

enforcing specific social practices (see 133). Moreover, the woman giving birth has to submit herself completely to the wishes of the household's Wife, who claims the baby immediately after it is born. This yet again stresses that the function of the fertile female body in Gilead is that of an inanimate vessel. However, the repercussions of the required social practices do not only affect the Handmaid in labour: Offred explains that this phenomenon extends to many Handmaids witnessing the birth, as many of them experience birth symptoms such as lactating breasts themselves (see 137). This demonstrates the reciprocal function between social practices and spaces; in this case between the enforced choreography and the space of Handmaids' bodies or wombs. On Birth Days, all women are exposed to the public in a highly intimate situation, and the control over their bodies is again exercised by and enforced from the outside.

For the government, fertile women are a national resource which needs to be protected and nourished in the best ways possible. This concern, however, does not apply to the women as individuals or even subjects, as their minds and personalities are irrelevant for their physical purpose of bearing children. The female body serves a communal function in the fictional world of *The Handmaid's Tale*, which is confirmed by Offred, who repeats Gilead's perception of Handmaids: "We are for breeding purposes: [...] We are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (Atwood, *HT* 146). Such abstraction of the female body is also acknowledged by Lefebvre, who determines that it is essentially "transformed into exchange value, [...] into a commodity *per se*" (310; emphasis in original). For Gilead, it is only the space of the woman's body, and more specifically, her womb, which is of value. Hence, and because of the large extent of governmental control thereover, woman and womb indeed conform to my definition of a public space in Gilead. The Republic successfully interposes itself between women and their bodies, making the latter a site of constant inner conflict. Moreover, the power Gilead exercises over women and their wombs renders an appropriation of this space impossible for Handmaids.

3.1.5. Justifying oppression: the gil(ea)ded cage

Beside masculinity, religion is of equally high significance for Gilead's agenda, even though it seems to play a lesser role in social practices. Although Gilead is supposed to be founded on Christian morals, it "miserably lacks spirituality and

benevolence” (Malak 9). Core values of Christianity such as altruism, charity, and compassion have no place whatsoever in Atwood’s dystopia. Indeed, spirituality is merely present in the ritualised chunks of language the Handmaids exchange, and in the recitation of the Bible immediately preceding the monthly Ceremony. In such situations, biblical texts are used to establish political control and to shape a particular reality for Gilead’s inhabitants (Stein, “Proposal” 61). With regard to religious texts, Foucault mentions that they often serve internal procedures of controlling and delimiting discourse, which is precisely what is happening in Gilead. Such texts often consist of “things said once and preserved because it is suspected that behind them there is a secret or a treasure” (Foucault, “Discourse” 56). At a later point, it will be shown that Gilead’s authorities even deform and modify such texts in order to generate a suitable version of the truth for its citizens.

Gilead is “openly misogynistic, in both its theocracy and practice” (Malak 11): instead of a benevolent Christian God, Gilead seems to base its beliefs on a “judgmental father god” (Stein, “Proposal” 62) who exercises his power through sanctions and prohibitions. In the same manner, Foucault observes that “Christianity imposes sanctions on sexuality, [...] it authorises certain forms of it and punishes the rest” (Foucault, *Power* 186). Hence, although spirituality and religion were the founding principles on which the Sons of Jacob built their new regime, they are significantly underrepresented in daily practices and routines, and do not seem to extensively determine the construction of Gilead’s space. Instead, life in Gilead is based on “frugality, conformity, censorship, corruption, fear, and terror”, which makes it an inherently dystopian place (Malak 10). Certainly, the Christian idea of heaven or paradise has little resemblance to such a place.

However, though not overly present in daily practice, religion plays an important role in the creation and maintenance of space. As already mentioned, absolute space, as Lefebvre calls it, is “by definition religious as well as political” and relies on identification and imitation (236). Those two mechanisms are indeed reflected in Gilead’s everyday life: characters execute certain practices in order to identify themselves as a unity and imitate ritualised customs to strengthen their community spirit and to set themselves apart from others. In addition, an intangible higher instance such as God or religion helps to legitimate the

government's cruel and inhumane procedures. The public transcript of Gilead, its rites and routines, is supposed to appear invulnerable in this way.

On the whole, the social organisation of the Republic of Gilead represents a radical, thorough breach to previous conditions. Moosa Vinia and Yousefi argue that Gilead's government owes its – temporary – success to precisely this radicalism (163). Emancipation, sexual autonomy, freedom of speech, or careless social interactions: all traces of such earlier liberties are completely banned, and any failure to conform to the new order is pitilessly punished. Power is maintained through “surveillance, suppression of information, ‘re-education’ centres, and totalitarian violence” (Neuman 857). Feuer therefore calls Gilead a “society-as-prison” (84), which again refers back to Bentham's and Foucault's concept of the Panopticon, which will be elaborated on in chapter 4.

Two elements that are essential to uphold this control are propaganda and the fabrication of Gilead's very own “truth” (Moosa Vinia and Yousefi 166). According to Foucault, truth

is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements. [It] is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it. A ‘régime’ of truth. (*Power* 133)

To bind its people to their values and practices, Gilead forges its own truth and thus establishes a regime based on information and facts that are impossible to verify for ordinary characters. Foucault asserts that both “power of knowledge of the truth and the power to disseminate this knowledge” are two essential forms of control a state has over its people (34). Stripped from the possibility of reading or writing, and with no access to any objective news, people in Gilead have no other choice but to believe what the authorities tell them. Gilead skilfully re-writes history and takes control over all forms of information distribution, for example television news broadcastings. Talking about the “science of space”, Lefebvre indicates that knowledge is an integral part of the forces of production within a state, and often based on an underlying ideology to conceal the political use of information (8-9). The night of the Ceremony, Offred is able to watch such a programme and reveals her doubts about its validity when she says, “[W]ho knows if any of it is true? It could be old clips, it could be faked. But I watch it anyway,

hoping to be able to read beneath it” (Atwood, *HT* 92). This passage is strongly reminiscent of other dystopian novels, such as *1984*, and signifies the absolute control the oppressive regime has over any space it governs. Furthermore, Offred’s wish to derive information from the clips reveals a hidden transcript: instead of conforming to the public transcript of accepting Gilead’s message, she tries to follow her own interest.

Lefebvre states that the basic form of social relations, which construct space, is the “form of exchange” (82), including exchange of information. This is particularly true in *The Handmaid’s Tale* since Gilead bans the written – and to some extent also the spoken – word, except at designated religious ceremonies such as the monthly ritual between Commander, Wife, and Handmaid, when selected parts of the Bible are recited. Offred’s hope to catch a glimpse of the truth – the objective truth, that is – can therefore only be realised through verbal exchanges with other Handmaids, because Gilead’s control over the media “leaves only gossip [...] as an independent source of knowledge” (Stillman and Johnson 72). Gilead’s citizens, and especially Handmaids, are denied access to the realm of truth, to a true and authentic space within their fictional world, so to say. Limiting people’s access is central to maintaining a regime’s power; the Republic of Gilead marks no exception.

Nevertheless, Offred seems to accept Gileadean norms in a large part, because she has internalised much of what she has learned at the Red Centre. More precisely, she deliberately decides to do so: at one point at the Commander’s office, she bravely asks for information about “[w]hatever there is to know. [...] What’s going on” (Atwood, *HT* 198). Only a few days later, however, she gives up this thought and does not pursue it any further (205). Her resorting to willed ignorance has several reasons: on the one hand, Offred needs to conform to the new norms in order to survive; on the other, they provide a safety net for her, as she can lead a seemingly protected and safe life this way. In this way, she approximates to Gilead’s public transcript of outward obedience. Yet, despite her hard work of ignoring her dire situation and accepting the circumstances, she still frequently resorts to old, pre-Gilead standards and values, because she cannot fully accept Gilead and still hopes she will be able to escape or – more importantly – will be

saved by Luke or another hero. It will be shown, however, that her desire for this scenario significantly decreases after she starts an affair with Nick.

3.1.6. Identity formation and (im)mobility

Moosa Vinia and Yousefi observe that Offred is constantly looking for a character to protect her (164), a “motherly figure” or simply “someone that can appease the anxiety, fear and tension” (174). Jill Stauffer calls this “ethical loneliness”: “the experience of being abandoned by humanity compounded by the experience of not being heard” (9). The most effective driving factor for her gradual dehumanisation under the Gileadean regime is undoubtedly the prohibition of language use, which makes it impossible for her to find *her* space in Gilead.

The same applies to the majority of Gilead’s citizens. Forging their own identities is denied to them, especially because the spoken word is highly restricted. A symptomatic example of this practice is the re-naming of Handmaids, who “get their identity from the Commander they serve” (Moosa Vinia and Yousefi 167). Although Offred tries to convince herself that a name does not define a person, she does not fully succeed and contradicts herself: “I tell myself it doesn’t matter, your name is like a telephone number [...]; but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter” (Atwood, *HT* 94). Feuer claims that Offred’s real name is vital to her because it signifies a link to her life before Gilead and to her self-concept as a valuable individual (85). In Gilead, individuality is abandoned for the sake of community, which precludes any development of identity. In the caste of Handmaids, each woman is infinitely interchangeable; a prominent example in the book is the replacement of Offred’s shopping partner Ofglen (see Atwood, *HT* 294-95). Although Offred is shocked by this sudden change, she is not allowed to openly comment on her astonishment, as it is expected of Handmaids to submit themselves to their use as impersonal objects (Stein, “Scheherazade” 271).

In a post-structuralist fashion, Moosa Vinia and Yousefi profess that “Handmaids do not exist in Gilead, for a subject can exist only when it holds a linguistic place” (167). Following this line of argument, it is not only their names which are erased, but also their discourses (Stein, “Scheherazade” 271) – their personalities, identities, and individual backgrounds. Handmaids, deprived of their real names and subjected to their masters, are thus denied a basic existence, as free language production is a vital constituent of identity formation. Just as language may foster

community spirit and unity, it may also provide the basis for rebellious and subversive thoughts (Moosa Vinia and Yousefi 167). Therefore, it can be argued that open resistance against the regime might not even be possible for Offred whatsoever, because her identity is confined within strictly limited borders, or not even existent in the first place.

“[L]anguage and discourse precede the existence of the subject. Thus, the strict restrictions on using the language would cause subjects great troubles in understanding their social place and identity” (Moosa Vinia and Yousefi 168). Handmaids do not have language, they do not have any discourse and consequently, they lack a stable basis for an individual identity. This is also exemplified in their red clothes, which function as a uniform, covering their bodies and even their heads, making it impossible to distinguish one Handmaid from another. Gilead has successfully “silenced women and rendered them invisible” (Stein, “Scheherazade” 270), which results in a classification of characters grounded on sexist and dehumanising patterns (Tolan, “Utopias” 22). In Scott’s terms, silence is an essential aspect of Gilead’s public transcript. Similarly, Cavalcanti notes that the opposition of men and women in dystopian novels is often enacted on the level of language (153): men are proprietors of language, while women are denied free speech under the guise of their own protection or for the good of all. Notably, Offred herself turns to such binary and dehumanising categorisations when she refers to herself as a “prize pig”, or to other Handmaids as “caged rats” (Atwood, *HT* 79), implicitly supporting Feuer’s notion of Gilead being a prison. In these instances, she uses the little language she is still able to use to confirm the stereotypical gender divisions of Gilead. Since I am convinced that free speech is a headstone of both humanity and democracy, I support Moosa Vinia’s and Yousefi’s as well as Cavalcanti’s perceptions about the impossibility of identity formation under such limiting circumstances. It is notable that Gilead’s misogynistic doctrines are present in Offred’s own language; however, I argue that this development is a natural result of the constant pressure and indoctrination Handmaids are subjected to.

Still, as mentioned above, Offred conforms to the practices and behaviours that are expected of her. In one instance, Offred engages in flirtatious actions with young guards by provocatively swaying her hips and indulging in the thoughts of what

might happen if he responded to her teasing and touched her (Atwood, *HT* 32). She is aware that the Guards, too, must long for physical contact, as they are supposed to be chaste until marriage. In this way, she plays on their male instincts and thus, by exercising power via the female body, she willingly reduces herself to her female physique, “which is precisely the identity Gilead requires” (Stillman and Johnson 76): again, a woman is objectified and sexualised, although in my reading of Moosa Vinia and Yousefi, Cavalcanti, and the primary text, I doubt that this categorisation can be referred to as an ‘identity’, and even less so as an identity favoured by Gileadean authorities. Rather, I claim that Offred resorts to patterns of behaviour from the time before the Sons of Jacob took over: a sexually charged society as well as various media resulted in a general intersexual relationship that was primarily based on appearances, sexual availability, and the satisfaction of physical needs – in short, the body.

With reference to Judith Butler and her concept of gender performance, Moosa Vinia and Yousefi justify Offred’s behaviour. They claim that “the subject clings to social norms, despite knowing that these norms cause its subordination” because there is “a strong urge of the subject to attach to its identity” (168). Hence, although the public sphere does not allow for an individual identity, Offred still makes an effort to preserve hers by resorting to her memories (see chapter 5). It is important for every subject to be able to perceive and acknowledge their social status and social self in order to situate itself within a space, and to find its own space (Lefebvre 182). This results in the creation of an “individual and public identity” (Moosa Vinia and Yousefi 182). Because Gilead denies these processes to its citizens, one can conclude that Offred and her fellow Handmaids do not have a space of their own. Being stripped of their individuality, they move between the spaces unseen and unheard, never able to truly claim a space as their own. Identity and individuality simply do not have a *space* in Gilead, not even for its most devout and pious followers, as their individual needs and selves are sacrificed for the greater public good.

At the time of Offred’s accounts, the Republic of Gilead is still in the formation process, which means the characters inhabiting it are still adapting to the new order and oscillate in a “limbo of the past and present” (Moosa Vinia and Yousefi 168). On the one hand, the radical and quick upheaval did not allow for lengthy

periods of gradual adjustment, so many of the old morals and values are still pertinent in the minds of the protagonists. On the other hand, the people of Gilead naturally have to conform to the newly established social order simply in order to survive, as the regime inflicts drastic forms of corporal punishment on any character who does not obey. This results in what Moosa Vinia and Yousefi call an “identity crisis” (168) that has strong effects on the inhabitants of Gilead across all social scales.

It is interesting to note that Gilead’s oppressive rules also fully affect the ruling class. This is exemplified in the character of Serena Joy, who does enjoy certain freedoms such as being able to tend to her own garden, but is still in fact just as limited in her mobility as the Handmaids. When the Handmaids and Wives are summoned to Janine’s/Ofwarren’s house to witness a birth, Offred notes that the Wives are offered comfortable chairs, sweets, and even alcohol (Atwood, *HT* 125). However, they are in reality forced to travel to the event and cannot simply stay at home – thus, they are just as constrained as their red-gowned servants. The same applies to the Commander, who is obliged by his own government to perform the monthly ritual rape of his Handmaid, during which Offred detects that “[t]his is no recreation, even for the Commander. This is serious business. The Commander, too, is doing his duty” (Atwood, *HT* 105). Stein determines that Gilead’s leaders are caught in the same oppressive rituals they impose on lower social classes (“Scheherazade” 272); the space they created through their restrictive practices is therefore mirrored within themselves. According to Lefebvre, class struggle is usually deeply ingrained in the organisation of space (55). The state “weighs down on society [...] in full force; [...] imposing analogous, if not homologous, measures irrespective of political ideology, historical background, or the class origins of those in power” (23). The space that is created by the ruling class and which they named the Republic of Gilead largely requires obedient performances from all characters who move within it; there is no official exception. The space of the state vigorously reflects back on all its citizens. In Lefebvre’s words, “[s]paces are strange: homogeneous, rationalized, and as such constraining” (97).

According to Massey, mobility within a space is essential to establish the identities of the self and the places one moves in: “If it is now recognized that people have multiple identities then the same point can be made in relation to places.

Moreover, such multiple identities can either be a source of richness or a source of conflict” (*Place* 153). I claim that for Handmaids in Gilead, the latter is the case, as the influences of mobility and the resulting role allocation of the sexes on identity formation are clearly visible in the novel: they live in the shadows of their respective households, dependent on the mercy of their Commanders and their Wives. If they leave the house, they are only allowed to do so if they are accompanied by at least one other Handmaid, so they cannot even be regarded as independent beings. This restriction of mobility is also addressed by Amy Kaplan, who, despite focusing about female writers of the 19th century, provides relevant insights into the forces and dynamics that underlie such one-sided limitations. With reference to the expansion of the American nation during this time period, she emphasises the importance of domesticity for establishing the so-called ‘foreign’ in opposition to the home or nation (581). According to her, femininity is symbolised in the private at-homeness and can be seen as the counterforce to the masculine desire for territorial extension and public exhibition of power. Gilead as a nation in the early stages of its formation participates in this binary categorisation of home and foreign space, of domesticity and public expansion, which is, again, coined by binary terms based on gender and sexuality: “If domesticity plays a key role in imagining the nation as home, then women, positioned at the center of the home, play a major role in defining the contours of the nation and its shifting borders with the foreign” (582). In accordance to Kaplan’s claims, it is therefore necessary to establish a firm, immobile core of society in Gilead, which is inherently female, to ensure the success of the greater, expanding nation. Furthermore, clear boundaries between spaces (and rules about who may enter them under which circumstances), social classes, and sexes reinforce the either/or dichotomy. The outcome here is two-fold: on the one hand, solidarity among a specific class is increased; however, this also leads to an even more rigid exclusion of so-called ‘others’ (depending on the space in question, these ‘others’ may be women, Handmaids, or non-Gileadeans). While these clear regulations should facilitate a successful appropriation of a space by its inhabitants, I argue for the contrary: the described dichotomy leaves no space for women, and especially Handmaids, to develop their own identities, which, in turn, is crucial for the social development of a space. While Kaplan emphasises the important role of women for the household, domesticity in Gilead operates under different paradigms: it is not women who

rule over the home; it is not women who shape the nation from within, who contribute their share to forming the nation. Instead, the role allocation in the Republic of Gilead is decided by male authorities. I consider this to be one decisive factor that moulds the struggle of women – and especially Handmaids – to appropriate space.

It is a pivotal element of Gilead's distinctive nature that mobility and access to specific places are highly restricted. For Massey, the ability of women to roam around freely has always marked a risk to patriarchal ideologies (*Place* 11). Quoting Craig Owen, she emphasises the “masculine desire to fix the woman in a stable and stabilizing identity” (qtd. in *Place* 11). In Gilead, this goal seems to be achieved, for all women regardless of their official function are constrained to fixed spaces and routes within the Republic. Even on their daily walks to the grocery shops, the Handmaids must not deviate from the direct route except for small detours that lead them to the Wall, where the hanged enemies of the regime are displayed. Hence, even these ways of moving within Gilead's space are monitored and prescribed, since Handmaids exercise their limited mobility always under the watchful eye of (male) guards. Stillman and Johnson perceive measures like this to be “specifically aimed against women, their individuality, and their identity” (73).

Society in the Republic of Gilead is structured based on the binary concepts of sexuality and gender, with power being distributed via the same aspects. I claim that while all protagonists in the novel try to appropriate the space for themselves in one way or another, this practice is eventually refused to the Handmaids. The public transcript of the space is essentially characterised by enforced silence, immobility, and violence, which thwarts all such attempts. The restriction of language has proven to be the most decisive factor in this mechanism, since the loss of language inevitably leads to the loss of subjectivity (Stein, “Scheherazade” 270). Therefore, an appropriation of space and the consequent formation of an identity is ultimately denied to the majority of Gilead's inhabitants. Furthermore, it was shown how the space that was created by both the government and ordinary citizens reflects on their own social practices and individual behaviours, which echoes Lefebvre's understanding of space being the result of such practices. With regard to the deduction that women in Gilead do not have a (fictional) identity due to the lack of an appropriated space or discourse, I claim that the existence of an

identity of Gilead's (fictional) space as a whole must be questioned. If an identity of the space exists, it can only be one-dimensional in the way that it merely allows for one specific set of social practices and relations. The binary definition and perception of space in Gilead simultaneously reiterates and constitutes the "masculinity and femininity of the sexist society in which we live" (Massey, *Place* 259) and which is also occupied by Gilead's inhabitants. For Massey, it is essential for women to recognise their "necessary locatedness and embedded/embodiedness" in space, and "take responsibility for it" (*Place* 11). I have shown that in the Republic of Gilead this is evidently denied, which is an essential presupposition for all spaces within the physical location of Gilead that will be analysed henceforth: if social practice, such as speaking freely, and the process of identity formation are impossible, an individual appropriation of a space becomes the site of an endless, futile struggle which the subject cannot escape.

3.2. The Red Centre

The Red Centre is one of the most prominent locations in the novel and known by several names, for example Rachel and Leah Centre, reminiscent of the biblical story Gilead's sexual exploitation of women is based on, or Re-education Centre. However, it is most frequently referred to by the name Red Centre, which undoubtedly derives from the red gowns the Handmaids are forced to wear at all times. This place is a recurrent theme in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Even though Offred has 'graduated' from the Centre an unspecified time ago, she thinks of her instruction there on numerous occasions. One reason for that might be that it was the last place she saw her best friend Moira, who mysteriously escaped the Centre and has been missing ever since. I argue that the Red Centre symbolises an archetypical space for Gilead that is shaped by specific social relations and practices. Arguing after Lefebvre, the place therefore also reflects on those who move within it, which will be exemplified by means of certain characters.

3.2.1. Form and function

The importance of the space is established on the very first pages of the novel: the beginning of Offred's narrative is a recollection of the Red Centre and its

composition (see Atwood, *HT* 13). It soon becomes clear that the heart of Gileadean education and indoctrination is in fact located within the walls of an old school, and that the prospective Handmaids use the same furniture as school children did before the Republic was established. Even though the women can be seen as students, too, the drastic modification of the educational content marks a considerable turn of what an educational institution connotes in a modern sense, for example the transfer of general knowledge, or fostering pupils' political and social development. Certainly, as it is the case with Harvard University being the heart of a fundamentalist regime, Atwood made the decision to place the Red Centre within a school intentionally. It was pointed out earlier that every space is a product of previously prevalent social relations and practices. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the most obvious trace of these practices is the edifice itself. According to Lefebvre, the creation of a space calls for the thorough consideration of its form and function: "The architect is supposed to construct a signifying space wherein form is to function as signifier is to signified; the form [...] is supposed to enunciate or proclaim the function" (144). In the case of the Red Centre, there is hardly any connection between the form of the space – a school intended to educate children – and its function – indoctrinating young women by means of violence and brainwashing methods. The only link between form and function is the designated purpose of both to provide an environment of *teaching*. Lefebvre continues by declaring that the relationship between form and function determines the "social 'realities'" of a space (149), which in turn allow for the forming of specific social practices, bonds, and interactions. I claim that it is the apparent discrepancy between the two that renders a successful social appropriation of the Red Centre difficult or even impossible for its inhabitants. Although Lefebvre admits that "a particular institution may have a variety of functions which are different – and sometimes opposed – to its apparent forms and avowed structures" (149), appropriation of a space is a necessary procedure for subjects to claim such a space as their own by modifying it to serve specific needs of their group (165). Gilead has failed to enable such appropriation, which results in a certain confusion within characters. The Red Centre's main purpose is to teach Handmaids the expected practices, values, and rituals under the new government, in other words: to teach them how to decipher Gilead's spatial code. Every subject relies on space to aid in the process of decoding and in the dictation of such norms by signifying

permission and prohibition; “space ‘decides’ what activity may occur [...]. Space lays down the law because it implies a certain order” (143). The Red Centre as a space cannot successfully convey these messages, because it painfully lacks the harmony of form and function. The therefore resulting uncertainty felt by characters is expressed through their various forms of behaviour – open resistance by Moira, silent acceptance by Offred, or a mental collapse by Janine.

3.2.2. Responding to the space: Moira, Offred, and Janine

While Moira has always defied commonly accepted standards in pre-Gilead times, for example by her homosexuality, individual style of clothes, or her blunt and often offensive directness, her character is most clearly described in the passages that show her at the Red Centre. There, her rebellious nature manifests itself in several defiant actions. The effect the indoctrination has on her is not one of obedience and subordination, but gives rise to more agitation and resistance, which distinguishes her strongly from the other Handmaids. It is Moira who initiates the secret meetings with Offred in the toilet stalls, where it is revealed that one of her most valuable assets is her sharp sense of humour, which greatly contributes to her maintaining mental sanity (Stillman and Johnson 79). It is also Moira who tries to break out of the Centre on several occasions. Despite her first attempt of escape being unsuccessful and resulting in severe corporal punishment, she does not cease to hold on to her plan. The space Moira occupies is therefore marked by a constant struggle, the oscillation between conformity, resistance, and violence. According to Lefebvre, “[s]overeignty implies ‘space’, and what is more it implies a space against which violence, whether latent or overt, is directed – a space established and constituted by violence” (280). In this way, Moira’s endeavours to achieve self-determination can be seen as attempts to appropriate the space of the Red Centre in her very own way. In Stillman’s and Johnson’s words, she is both “a powerful woman and a powerful idea” (80).

It is worth noting that the power of this idea – or woman – increases even after she has left the Red Centre. The remaining Handmaids have to rely on whispered gossip, since the Aunts do not provide any information about the topic, thus creating a hidden transcript of disobedient behaviour. Via this hidden transcript, the story of Moira’s brave escape spreads like wildfire among the women:

Moira was our fantasy. We hugged her to us, she was with us in secret, a giggle; she was lava beneath the crust of daily life. In the light of Moira, the Aunts were less fearsome and more absurd. Their power had a flaw to it. They could be shanghaied in toilets. The audacity was what we liked. (Atwood, *HT* 143)

Moira's actions seemingly have an enormous effect on the others. Even though it is absolutely clear to Offred that she could never do anything as risky like her friend, she finds comfort in the possibility of escape and idolises her friend for it. Hence, Moira's attempts of appropriation influence the way the space is perceived by others.

Furthermore, Moira displays a strong sense of leadership when she helps Janine during her mental breakdown. Although her methods seem brutal and heartless at first, as she slaps Janine twice and insults her (see 228), she is the only one of the women who does not merely stand by and watches, but really takes action. Ultimately, her behaviour results in Janine's returning to her chores, and spares the Handmaids from the certain punishment by the Aunts. It can be deduced that Moira's actions affect her fellow trainees significantly. Her constant opposition "encourages Offred that despite their unprecedented and anomalous situation, resistance is possible" (Moosa Vinia and Yousefi 171), and confirms Foucault's declaration that power always entails a form of resistance (*Power* 142). It also shows that an internalisation of Gilead's morals and norms is not the only social practice a woman can engage in.

Given that a political state is the manifestation of various different power relations that predetermine its existence, Foucault points out that revolution against these relations is simply "a different type of codification of the same relations" (122). In this case, Moira's practices change the formerly impenetrable shell of the Republic of Gilead, the Red Centre, and the Aunts, and therefore deform the prevalent power relations. In addition, she adds a layer of hope to the Centre's space through defiant actions, contributing to the formation of a strong hidden transcript that is beneficial to herself and other Handmaids. She is therefore a central character in the conception and interpretation of this space and its practices, and contributes a noticeable share to the social relations that are formed there.

Contrary to Moira, Offred continues to follow her practice of willed ignorance at the Red Centre. Just like before she was sent there, she refrains from any action

that would put her in a worse position – in fact, she refrains from any action at all. Although she engages in small defiant acts such as whispering and meeting Moira in the washrooms, there is no evidence that Offred plays any role at the Red Centre apart from that of an inconspicuous, obedient student. This performance mirrors her previous life, when she silently stood by as her freedom was taken away, and authorities radically restricted women's rights. Offred's behaviour towards Moira also reveals her inherently selfish character. Despite the admiration and envy she feels about her friend's mental strength, she puts her own needs above Moira's when she tries to talk Moira out of her planned escape: "I couldn't stand the thought of her not being here, with me. For me" (Atwood, *HT* 100). Hence, even though Offred cannot be seen as a model example of successful indoctrination at the Red Centre, she still outwardly symbolises the social practices of submission, propaganda, and prohibition that essentially constitute the space of the Centre.

As already touched upon, Janine is a more ambiguous character at the Red Centre, which becomes most obvious in her mental breakdown. Moreover, while she refuses to acknowledge her own guilt in her being gang raped before Aunt Lydia at first, constant pressure and forced bullying from the other women form her into an obedient Handmaid, a good citizen according to Gilead's values. Her change of mind is even rewarded by Aunt Lydia, who entrusts her with the task of spying on her friends. Janine's struggle of being torn between her former life, her moral beliefs, and the attitudes Gilead requires her to have is a prominent example of the identity crisis faced by Gileadeans.

3.2.3. Moulding the space: the Aunts

Some characters in Gilead do not seem as strongly affected by this crisis as others, as they apparently enjoy the power that was given to them by the new government. Weiss claims that this is one of Atwood's central messages: "totalitarian regimes arise because people are too complacent or afraid to resist them, or actually welcome them" (137). The Aunts in the Red Centre, for example, symbolise the epitome of Gileadean values. They are responsible for teaching the future Handmaids everything there is to know about the new rules, laws, and practices. In their effectiveness as public speakers they resemble Christian preachers of the Classical Age, as Moosa Vinia and Yusefi remark (163). Their monologues consist of "platitudes, admonitions, and iterations of codes of behaviour" (Stein,

“Scheherazade” 271) which serve to provide the guidelines for the Handmaids’ later occupation. They are directly responsible for disseminating Gilead’s spatial code. Ironically, however, Tolan notices that many of Aunt Lydia’s utterances strongly resemble the slogans of the former feminist movement (“Utopias” 23): “Women united for a common end! Helping one another in their daily chores as they walk the path of life together” (Atwood, *HT* 171). This can be interpreted as yet another influence on the aforementioned identity crisis, since the Aunts are undoubtedly familiar with feminist diction from the pre-Gilead era. Even more so, their mixing in of such slogans adds to the confusion of identity that is already present within their novices, thus aggravating their efforts of spatial appropriation.

Following the prescribed practices of the Gileadean government, the Aunts forge their own truths for the sake of the government and distort the reality for their purposes, pursuing Foucault’s idea of engaging in a “master/disciple relationship” with their students (Moosa Vinia and Yousefi 164). The importance of knowing the objective truth has already been elaborated on – the Red Centre prominently illustrates the refusal of such knowledge within Gilead. Feuer, for example, detects a delicate detail in one of the Aunts’ mottos. While Gilead’s authorities spread the ‘biblical’ quote, “from each according to her ability; to each according to his needs” (Atwood, *HT* 127), she reveals that it is actually a Marxist slogan which was modified to fit the religious justification of sexual exploitation (Feuer 85). It is simply impossible for Handmaids to unmask this deception, as they are prohibited from reading the Bible or any other text. In this way, Gilead is able to exercise its power largely uncontestedly, enabling the government to select parts of (religious) texts to serve their purposes, just as the Aunts select personal stories of their apprentices to make an example of sinful, abnormal behaviour. They thus “aim to project a reverse-discourse of what was normal under the former government” (Moosa Vinia and Yousefi 165), for example by blaming Janine for being raped, although she was in fact the victim. Distorting texts and quotes and using them as propaganda as well as contorting facts clearly opposes Foucault’s concept of an unbiased power distribution, and therefore aids in the construction of a space that is not designed for Handmaids to appropriate.

Victimisation and its counterpart, the establishment of power, are intriguingly exemplified in the status of the Aunts. Although the Republic of Gilead openly

silences and represses women in countless ways, these women assist in those practices and thus take part in their own oppression. While it may be true that they enjoy certain freedoms such as access to coffee and limited arbitrament, their compliance with the regime results in the manifestation of more and more deteriorated conditions for women, including themselves. The practice of involving members of oppressed classes in the oppression of said class is, however, a phenomenon that is not unique to the fictional Republic of Gilead. Foucault points out that in the 19th century, factories frequently housed specially trained female overseers in factories with a female workforce, in order to ensure discipline (*Power* 157). The underlying reasoning was that in order to maintain discipline, military forces alone are not sufficient. Rather, it is “necessary to have at the same time this new distribution of power known as discipline, with its structures and hierarchies, its inspections, exercises and methods of training and conditioning” (Foucault, *Power* 158). The same principle can be applied in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. As Professor Pieixoto states in the ‘Historical Notes’ section at the end of the novel, “the best and most cost-effective way to control women for reproductive and other purposes was through women themselves” (Atwood, *HT* 320). Moreover, instead of functioning as caring, maternal figures supporting the younger women in this difficult transitional phase even within strict limits, they are no less fearsome and brutal than Gilead’s military force. Disguised in a “spirit of camaraderie” (Somacarrera 53), they ruthlessly enforce the state’s ideology. Witnessing the suffering of the women around them, the Aunts nevertheless assume “male values at the expense of their feminine instincts” (Malak 12). This practice, however, is not limited to the Aunts alone. Weiss notes that “[d]ystopian regimes are [...] kept in place by the acquiescence of a complacent citizenry that accepts and may even enjoy its comforting oppression” (128). In many of Atwood’s novels, women are subjected to male abuse, and they simultaneously aggravate the circumstances as they start to see themselves and other women through men’s eyes, thereby reinforcing the prevailing conditions. Offred herself is guilty of such practice, as she determines her personal value through her body and reduces other women to their physical features, for example when she points out Aunt Lydia’s long, rodent-like teeth (Atwood, *HT* 65). The spatial code of Gilead, therefore, encroaches upon its inhabitants. In an analysis of Gilead’s distinctive power distribution, Dominick Grace mentions that “female complicity in the oppression of women is an

important element in the maintenance of the state” (51), which is confirmed in the Aunts’ role in *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

Given their overwhelming power over the women at the Red Centre, the Aunts are the most important constitutive factor in the composition of its space. They take an active role by dictating appropriate and prohibited behaviour and disseminating so-called truths, and are thus indeed the only group that manages to at least partly appropriate the space of the Centre for themselves and their purposes.

In summary, the Red Centre represents an accumulation of various social practices it comprises and evokes, which results in the formation of a multifaceted space. Each character adds their unique layer to the space of the Red Centre, allowing for an abundance of possible interpretations. On the one hand, the Aunts symbolise the practices intended by the government, its public transcripts, which are then internalised by the majority of the Handmaids and create a distinctive net of social relations. On the other hand, Moira’s rebellious behaviour undermines these relations and inserts her own attempts of appropriation, which result in an even more diversified space. Furthermore, the apparent discrepancy between the Red Centre’s form and function render an appropriation by all characters impossible.

3.3. Jezebel’s

The spaces that have been analysed so far have been closely connected with an affirmative atmosphere towards the regime. This space marks a turning point, since Jezebel’s, the secret brothel, is radically different to all other places within the Republic of Gilead. Malak claims that the period before Gilead and the Republic itself can be seen as two extremes on a spectrum (12). This is most explicit at Jezebel’s, which is designed to mimic the freedoms and joys of former times. At first glance, it defies Gilead’s morals, values, and behavioural standards, making it an especially rich space to analyse. Its name derives from a character in the Jewish Bible: Jezebel, the Princess of Tyre, who refused to worship the only accepted God Yahwe and engaged in deceitful activities against prophets. She was eventually slaughtered in a gruesome way, with her killers claiming that peace was impossible while the “whoredoms [...] and sorceries” of hers continued (Coogan 150). Jezebel’s story sets the tone for the events and actions at the brothel. While

the women at Jezebel's are permitted small liberties such as drugs or alcohol, they are in fact trapped in the place and face only two alternatives: participating in the (enforced) "whoredoms" or being killed.

Relating to Scott's classification of public and hidden transcripts, I claim that Jezebel's takes a unique position: the social practices it evokes are both a hidden transcript of the Republic of Gilead and create a public transcript for the characters that move within it. Moreover, in accordance to Lefebvre's perception, I argue that the existence of this particular space is a necessary result of the repressive nature of Gilead itself. To verify this claim, selected characters' behaviour within the space will be analysed to clarify the extraordinary social relations that are prevalent there.

3.3.1. Extensions of the past

Offred is taken to Jezebel's only once, and it is an incisive event during her time at the Commander's household. The preparations for the trip are reminiscent of a carnival: Offred is required to dress up for the event, but the offered costume seems absurd and ridiculously revealing to her. The make-up she is supposed to put on looks exaggerated and strange to her; an effect she also observes on the other women that work at Jezebel's: "I've realized how unaccustomed I've become to seeing [make-up], on women, because their eyes look too big to me, too dark and shimmering, their mouths too red, too wet, [...] too clownish" (Atwood, *HT* 247). Although the social practice of wearing make-up – and it is indeed a *social* practice, since make-up is intended to enhance a person's visual appearance, which can only be perceived by other subjects – has been strictly banned in Gilead, it is a *sine qua non* at Jezebel's. The same can be said about the clothes worn by the prostitutes: exposed skin, colourful fabrics, and even fetish-related elements function as signs of affiliation and membership. More than once, the Commander appeals to Offred to behave as if she belonged there in order not to give herself away.

Jezebel's is characterised by a peculiar history. Immediately after their arrival, Offred notes that she is in fact quite familiar with the place: the brothel is located within the walls of a former hotel, which Offred and her husband Luke frequently visited during the time when she used to be his mistress. For Lefebvre, no place is truly unique, and every space is an assemblage of the particular structures of the

previous spaces it featured (164). In this light, it is not surprising that a hotel which was used for secret sexual encounters before the Republic of Gilead came into being is now a brothel which serves the exact same purpose. Massey produces the same argument as Lefebvre, claiming that each place is “the focus of a distinct *mixture* of wider and more local social relations” (*Place* 156; emphasis in original). The mixture that is present at Jezebel’s consists of elements of Gilead’s doctrines, as the oppression of women is still maintained at the brothel, and the laissez-faire lifestyle of the period before Gilead, which is represented in the particular dress code and behavioural patterns of both sexes.

Furthermore, it is an ironic paradox that Offred returns to the hotel that symbolised her position as Luke’s secret mistress. Given that Gilead prohibits any contact between Commanders and Handmaids and reduces sexual encounters to a highly ritualised procedure once a month, the fact that the Commander takes Offred to this secret place in order to have sex with her unmasks her position yet again as that of a mistress. Hammer calls attention to this interesting parallel in Offred’s relationships: her position in Gilead at first with the Commander and then later with Nick “as part of a sexual triangle replicates her previous position as Luke’s mistress” (41). Therefore, Jezebel’s space can also be interpreted as a representation of Offred’s social position. Nevertheless, or maybe precisely because of this dilemma, it is difficult for her to appropriate this place: Offred cannot relax or enjoy the atmosphere, even though the Commander treats her in a friendly and almost courteous way. After all, Jezebel’s is still a prison within a prison for her.

For Foucault, the brothel is an extreme form of a heterotopia (“Spaces” 27). Jezebel’s, given its peculiar nature, can be categorised as a heterotopia of rituals and rites. Because Jezebel’s is a secret club only reserved for high-ranking Commanders and their trading partners, access to it is highly restricted, which is a key feature of such heterotopias (26). Its primary function is to “create a space of illusion”, a space that both stands in contrast to and compliments real space (26). Jezebel’s works like a distorted image in a Venetian mirror that allows a glimpse at a parallel universe and is thus a clear example of a heterotopia in Foucault’s terms.

3.3.1. Disillusion in disguise

Through specific dress codes and patterns of behaviour, for example drinking alcohol, the brothel simultaneously establishes a sense of community among the characters and disobeys Gilead's rules and regulations. The space of Jezebel's is thus primarily defined by a strong sense of cheerful non-conformity and a defiant attitude towards the established system, resembling secret underground parties. However, "the club's initial gaiety begins to disintegrate" (Tolan, "Utopias" 28): while at first sight, Offred marvels at the colourful costumes, she slowly begins to doubt the cheerfulness of the attendant crowd and recognises the empty gazes of the women. According to my reading of the text, the allusions to social practices in pre-Gilead times, for example overly lax morals and open disrespect for women's bodies, thus also reveal the absurdity of an exuberantly sexualised culture. This is made explicit in the mainly negative feelings that are evoked in Offred by the carnivalesque costumes, sequined dresses, and transparent garments (Atwood, *HT* 247). On the one hand, this might signify that she has already adapted to Gileadean norms – its spatial code – to a certain extent; on the other, it could again emphasise the impossibility of successful spatial appropriation for all protagonists.

Offred's Commander, however, seems to take utter pleasure in Jezebel's. Entering the scene, he whispers, "It's like walking into the past" (247), and Offred cannot help but notice the joy in his voice. For him, there is no reason to criticise the customary promiscuity, as he is free to enter and leave this place as he wishes. His role as a high-ranking member of the hegemonic class both allows for liberties like free access to Jezebel's and impairs his judgment: when Offred enquires about the legality of the place, his justification of its existence simultaneously echoes Gilead's chauvinist and sexist diction: "you can't cheat Nature, [...] Nature demands variety. It stands to reason, it's part of the procreational strategy. It's Nature's plan" (249). At this point, it becomes clear that Offred cannot expect any aid from her Commander when it comes to escaping Gilead, and her only chance to ease her dull daily life are the nightly Scrabble games and talks with her master, as long as it pleases him. Besides his language, it is also the Commander's behaviour at Jezebel's that reiterates the customs outside the brothel's walls. Observing his movements and gestures as well as those of the other men, Offred notes that

he is showing off. He is showing me off, to them, and they understand that, [...] they keep their hands to themselves, but they review my breasts, my legs, as if there's no reason why they shouldn't. But also he is showing off to me. He is demonstrating, to me, his mastery of the world. (248)

The Commander and all men at Jezebel's exercise power over the women, just as it is the case in the Republic of Gilead in general. Their mastery at Jezebel's, however, manifests itself in sexuality rather than psychological pressure and violent reinforcement of rules. Moosa Vinia and Yousefi derive that "if in Gilead, procreational ability marked womanhood, in Jezebel, the sexed body defines femininity" (169). For Lefebvre, the body is the primary instrument with which space is perceived and produced (162). In this way, enforcing rules by means of sexual abuse of women's bodies proves to be a valuable strategy for the authorities at Jezebel's. Furthermore, Lefebvre claims that absolute space – within which he also includes religious spaces such as Gilead as a whole – "assumes meanings addressed not to the intellect but to the body, [...] conveyed by threats, by sanctions, by a continual putting-to-the-test of the emotions. This space is 'lived' rather than conceived" (235-6). Jezebel's, therefore, proves to be an exceptional example of a space whose existence and power is directed towards the body, binding characters to it by means of sexual exploitation. At the same time, its access is reserved for the hegemonic class, creating a discourse that is defined by specific social rules of clear hierarchy, which stabilises and reinforces its power (Foucault, *Discourse* 61).

As Offred's observation of her Commander's actions has shown, men at Jezebel's speak for women, they parade them as if they were their properties, and they take advantage of their miserable situation. Women are treated like consumer goods, wrapped in an appealing packaging and ready to use at all times. For Tolan, this is a sign that "[t]he symbols of consumerism [...] have become confused with symbols of liberty; 'freedom of choice' has become a consumerist slogan" ("Utopias" 28). The space of Jezebel's thus represents a distorted, carnivalesque image of the space of the pre-Gilead era; it is an "excessively hedonistic alternative world of consumption" ("Utopias" 28). The fact that this world is also implicitly criticised by Offred clearly symbolises its complex oscillation between past and present.

Apart from the Commander's possessive behaviour, Offred's reunion with Moira is another source of disappointment for her. Stillman and Johnson (79) as well as

Weiss (137) declare Moira as Offred's alter ego, whose unprecedented rebellion ignited a spark of hope that has helped her through her time at the Red Centre and the Commander's household. While I agree that Moira has always taken a more active role than Offred, seeing her old friend at Jezebel's reveals that her development is nothing like Offred has expected: despite her hopes that Moira proves to be the rebellious hero she imagined her to be, Moira cannot fulfil these expectations. Instead, Moira seems resigned; her voice displays "indifference, a lack of volition" (Atwood, *HT* 261). I argue that Moira's destiny is proof for Malak's argument that positive characters "usually prove miserably ineffectual when contending with ruthless overwhelming powers" (11), and that escape or active fighting are impossible within the regime (Stillman and Johnson 80). The space of Gilead has seemingly dispirited Moira and forced its will upon her.

A careful reading of the text, however, reveals that Moira is yet again the stronger of the two women at Jezebel's, although her plans to break out of Gilead ultimately failed and her resistance turned out to be ineffective: after telling the story of how she escaped the Red Centre, Moira tries to comfort a crying Offred by humorously assuring her that Jezebel's is certainly not the worst place she could be in: "Anyway, look at it this way; it's not so bad, there's lots of women around. Butch paradise, you might call it" (Atwood, *HT* 261). Even in the face of sexual abuse, imprisonment, and forced sterilisation, Moira deliberately decides to put her own need for consolation last. Therefore, it can be argued that Moira's mind has not been broken; rather, her actions are evidence for an attempt of appropriation. With regard to Lefebvre, Moira's understatement of her circumstances is not to be interpreted as a sign of total conformity with or acceptance of the system, as "[r]epressive space wreaks repression and terror even though it may be strewn with ostensible signs of the contrary (of contentment, amusement or delight)" (144). Hence, it can be said that Moira has maintained her rebellious character, but ceased to engage in any concrete action. In the end, Moira is still imprisoned, "defeated but still defiant. Gilead is not within her" (Stillman and Johnson 80).

Despite her visit of Jezebel's being a small distraction of her daily routines and the fact that she was able to confirm that Moira is alive and – more or less – well, Offred returns disillusioned and sorrowful. Her best friend might enjoy more freedom of choice and speech at Jezebel's than herself, but her actions are just as

restricted as those of Handmaids or any other woman in Gilead (Moosa Vinia and Yousefi 169). When speculating about Moira's future after this meeting, the differences in the stories Offred tells, the corrections and alterations she makes, reveal that she tries to deny Moira's daunting fate. Moira ending up at Jezebel's discloses the futility of resistance for Offred, and she must realise that she is "alone in her journey of survival" (172).

In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre contemplates about the "silence of the 'users' of [oppressive] space", and enquires about the reasons why people so often "allow themselves to be manipulated in ways so damaging to their spaces and their daily life without embarking on massive revolts" (51). According to my thinking and with regard to a fictional environment, the existence of a space like Jezebel's is the answer to these questions. Form and function of Jezebel's have a more obvious connection than it is the case with the Red Centre – the previous and the current usage of the space correspond to each other. For the ruling class, the brothel is an outlet for their desires that are otherwise strictly prohibited in Gilead, and the fact that power is exercised by means of the body provides fertile ground for a successful perpetuation of the space. Furthermore, the women 'working' at Jezebel's are silenced and made compliant by making them aware of their horrible alternatives. In this way, Jezebel's shows many parallels to the Republic of Gilead itself, where similar practices are employed to oppress the Handmaids. The men's behaviour towards each other and towards the women they abuse is evidence for this claim. Therefore, Jezebel's can be seen as a reinforcement of government laws on another level, with a slightly different focus but an almost identical goal and outcome. Jezebel's nevertheless forges its very own space, too: the distinct layering of power structures mirroring those sanctioned by the Republic as well as the permission of otherwise outlawed visual appearances and activities of the attendants result in an extraordinary net of social relations, which reflects back on the protagonists and influences their behaviours.

3.4. Special events in Gilead

There are several occasions in *The Handmaid's Tale* that share certain characteristics: they are organised by the government of Gilead, their attendance is

mandatory, and they require specific social performances and practices. Therefore, these events will be treated as spaces themselves, or rather as *a* space, since they are formed out of the same prerequisites, signify the same set of social relations, and demand the same behaviour from their attendants. The events under analysis are the Prayvaganza, the Salvaging, and the Particution. The space of public events in Gilead is structured by means of permitted and prohibited social practices. Moreover, the relations of public and hidden transcripts contribute to forming a diverse array of social performances.

3.4.1. Prayvaganza

The first public event that is described in the novel is the so-called Prayvaganza. It is officially intended for mass marriages of young girls to eligible young soldiers, or for witnessing members of other religions renouncing their faith. The Prayvaganzas take place at the very heart of Gilead, at the great court of Harvard University, which underpins its high value for the government. The space is rigidly partitioned: while the Wives and daughters are permitted to sit on comfortable chairs in the back of the courtyard, the Handmaids are positioned right in front of them:

Here there are no chairs. Our area is cordoned off with a silky twisted scarlet rope [...]. The rope segregates us, marks us off, keeps the others from contamination by us [...]; so into it we go, arranging ourselves in rows, which we know very well how to do, kneeling then on the cement floor. (Atwood, *HT* 226)

This practice stands in contrast to Handmaids' first priority of being invisible to others. In Aunt Lydia's words, "[m]odesty is invisibility [...]. To be seen – to be *seen* – is to be [...] penetrated. What you must be, girls, is impenetrable" (38-9; emphasis in original). At public events like Prayvaganzas, however, Handmaids stand out because of their scarlet dresses and their white headgear, and they are well aware that they are the centre of the Wives' attention while they take their assigned seats (see 226). The spatial division between the women as well as their colour-coded clothes show that despite Aunt Lydia's hope for a strong community of women across the social spectrum, Gilead emphasises the heterogeneity of women. Gilead failing to achieve their objective of solidarity and camaraderie ties in with Lefebvre's conception that a space is rarely ever completely homogeneous; it "simply has homogeneity as its goal [...]. And, indeed, it renders homogeneous.

But in itself it is multiform” (287). It can therefore be deduced that the government’s ideology contradicts its actions, making the spaces it occupies incomparably more difficult to appropriate for individuals.

In Scott’s terms, the public transcript of Prayvaganzas consists of unconditional obedience. All women, especially Handmaids, are supposed to remain quiet during the prayers and ceremonies, and their movements are meticulously monitored and controlled by armed Guards. Their voices are, again, completely silenced. However, the hidden transcript of the space reveals that the compulsory submission is not fully realised. Handmaids use gatherings like the Prayvaganza to exchange information, to enquire about lost friends or relatives, and to spread gossip among each other. Elisabeth Hansot highlights the Handmaids’ expertise in utilising those events. For her, “[t]hese hidden sites of resistance are furtive and opportunistic; interlaced with the required enactment of the public transcript, they are a barely audible counter to it” (187). Offred’s description of the information exchange indeed attests to this expertise: the whispering of the women resembles a constant hum, which makes it impossible to distinguish one single voice among them (see Atwood, *HT* 226). In this way, the hidden transcript of the Prayvaganza is the barely audible exchange of information. This practice establishes a certain sense of community among the Handmaids and contributes to the formation of a social practice that is unwanted by the government, but desperately needed by the women who suffer under it.

With reference to spatial codes in Lefebvre’s sense, the ‘overt’ spatial code is represented by the participation of all women at the ceremony; their attendance, their prayers, and their adherence to the rules that are both explicit and implicit at the event. The ‘covert’ spatial code is the disobedient practice of exchanging information and disobeying the imperative silence. The fact that Handmaids try to officially observe the prescribed norms and simultaneously work together to utilise the space for themselves signifies their appropriation of the space – through social practices, they engage in a signifying process and assign meaning to it. Consequentially, it can be reasoned that public events like the Prayvaganza are the only space/s in public which Handmaids can appropriate in Gilead.

3.4.2. Salvaging and Particution

The Salvaging renders a similar picture. Again, it is a segregated event based on gender, and again, the modes of behaviour that are permitted are strictly limited by governmentally prescribed guidelines. However, Salvagings differ from Prayvaganzas in one decisive element: they are designed to display organised violence and murder, and involve the attendants in aggressive practices. For Lefebvre, this is a typical sign of oppressive absolute spaces, because “in the case of power, signifier and signified coincide in the shape of violence – and hence death. Whether this violence is enacted in the name of God, Prince, [...] or Patrimony is a strictly secondary issue” (162). Indeed, the crimes against Gilead’s faith that the culprits committed are of minor importance at the event. This is exemplified by the fact that the crimes are not even specified before the penalty is imposed, although Aunt Lydia claims this to be the result of imitative crimes that followed previous announcements (Atwood, *HT* 287). The Republic pretends to exercise fair punishment for crimes against women from within the Handmaids’ own ranks, being aware that such accusations evoke greatest resentment and anger among the partakers. This feeling of community is only strengthened by Aunt Lydia, who accentuates the inclusive pronoun ‘we’ in her welcoming speech: “I’m sure we are all aware of the unfortunate circumstances that bring us all here together on this beautiful morning, when I am certain we would all rather be doing something else, at least I speak for myself, but duty is a hard taskmaster” (286). In this way, unity among the women is created, which is a necessary precondition for the gruesome actions that are to follow. In Lefebvre’s words, the Salvaging can be described as a space “where violence is cloaked in rationality and a rationality of unification is used to justify violence” (282).

Although Offred participates in the hidden transcript of illegal exchange of information among the Handmaids again, she cannot help but be drawn in by the public transcript of ordered mass hysteria resulting out of the following Particution. The Handmaids are expected to participate in the slaughtering of a man accused of raping two Handmaids, one of them pregnant. Offred, despite knowing that the government uses lies and fake stories to justify their actions, feels appalled by the allegations: “despite myself I feel my hands clench. It is too much, this violation. The baby too, after what we go through. It’s true, there is a

bloodlust; I want to tear, gouge, rend” (Atwood, *HT* 290-291). Weiss notes that “Offred feels the authorized emotions she is expected to” (134) and accuses her of fully partaking in the prescribed violence (133). However, Offred’s anger and bloodlust completely vanish after she witnesses Ofglen manically kicking the man, and she is shocked by the brutality her friend exercises. Hence, I argue that she is not the obedient, violent murder Gilead wants her to be, but a victim of her own emotional overpowering, which she eventually manages to get under control. In my view, she has not fully internalised Gilead’s overt spatial code. Weiss’s cynical comment that “[a]pparently, she has found something that rouse her to anger at last – but only when she is supposed to, and against a State-sanctioned target. One can only wonder how different her fate might have been had she aimed her rage at her oppressors” (134) does, however, seem to carry a grain of truth.

Special events in Gilead, like Prayvaganzas or Salvagings, are created to establish a sense of community among the attendants, to bind them to the values and practices the Republic expects from them, and to justify their violent actions by concealing them as rationality. This public transcript of the events results in what Lefebvre calls an absolute space with a specific spatial code (48). On the other hand, the unity that is desired by the government also leads to unity among Handmaids, who manage to appropriate the space by developing hidden transcripts that undermine the Republic’s intentions.

Public space in Gilead is shaped and structured by means of social practices, individual behaviours, and power distributions. The Republic of Gilead symbolises a multiform space that is impossible to fully appropriate for any one social group, while the Red Centre and Jezebel’s can be seen as the two ends of a spectrum regarding their destined function in connection with their form. The space of public events is where Handmaids’ attempts at appropriation are most successful through specific social practices.

4. 'Private' space

Although the following spaces are labelled 'private', it must be repeated that in the fictional Republic of Gilead, no space is truly private. The *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* provides several definitions for the word 'private', among them "belonging to or for the use of a particular person or group; not for public use" and "where you are not likely to be disturbed; quiet" (1207). Given the constant surveillance and penetration by governmental authorities, privacy in this sense is beyond reach for all characters in *The Handmaid's Tale*. However, many spaces in the novel are at least supposed to be reserved for private use in the sense of the first definition given above, and will hence be treated as private spaces.

4.1. Offred's household

At the time the events Offred describes take place, she has been with her third household for a few weeks. Although she is used to the basic division of labour, responsibilities, and power from her previous assignments, she nevertheless has to adapt quickly to her new home and her new 'family'. The structure of Offred's household is hierarchical and rigid, with a strict partitioning regarding the dominion of specific rooms and places: the staff, Rita and Cora, occupies the kitchen; the Wife, Serena Joy, is in control of the garden, the living room and the master bedroom; and the unnamed Commander dominates his private office. According to Lefebvre, urban space is "replete with places which are holy or damned, devoted to the male principle or the female" (231), which is noticeably reflected in the household. For Offred, the house's Handmaid, a single plain room is reserved, although it will become obvious that it is merely a room for an exchangeable servant. Stillman and Johnson observe that "[t]he structure of the household isolates Handmaids" (74): a Handmaid leads a boring life that mostly consists of extensive periods of waiting in her room; she is a burden to the Marthas who are obliged to cook and clean for them, and a thorn in the flesh of the Wife who perceives a Handmaid's presence as a permanent reminder of her own shortcomings as a woman and spouse. In this way, I argue that even though Offred is a member of the household, she lives within a space that is intrinsically hostile towards her. In this context, it is impossible for her to appropriate this space, since she has no possibility of assigning value or meaning to it. For Lefebvre, "[f]amilial

space [...] is the guarantor of meaning as well as of social (spatial) practice” (232), but being shunned by Serena Joy and Rita, who have power over the majority of the space, Offred is no more than a silent, unwanted guest in the house; and even more so, she is replaceable. Despite these desperate conditions, however, her room provides the framework for the only space that is truly hers, which will be analysed in chapter 5.

4.1.1. Gendered home

In general, the strict partitioning of the Republic of Gilead is manifested in the smaller realm of the household. For Massey, “the need for the security of boundaries, the requirement for such a defensive and counter-positional definition of identity, is culturally masculine” (*Place* 7) and thus a clear projection of Gilead’s patriarchal structure. However, although the act of drawing borders is a masculine idea, the household is in itself characterised by a strong presence of femininity, which is apparent in the limited space reserved for the Commander. While women are deprived of their rights in public, it seems that they are at least partly able to exercise dominion over the private space. Returning to Kaplan’s conceptions of domesticity, “the home as a bounded and rigidly ordered interior space is opposed to the boundless and undifferentiated space of an infinitely expanding nation” (583), which reflects the historical confinement of women to the domestic realm, as Lefebvre notes:

All historical societies have diminished the importance of women and restricted the influence of the female principle. [...] The female realm was in the household: [...] Women’s social status was restricted just as their symbolic and practical status was. (247-8)

Massey agrees with this view and highlights that women have always led “more local lives” than men (*Place* 9), and that the space of the home is frequently associated with a motherly figure (10). The reiteration of this archaic principle in Gilead results in a stabilisation of oppressive gender roles and complicates any attempt of women to break out of their ascribed roles. Appropriation of the domestic space, therefore, is performed *by* men *for* women – following Lefebvre’s ideas, this practice is doomed to failure as it ignores the relevant subjects in the matter.

Lefebvre claims that “housing is the guarantee of reproductivity, be it biological, social or political” (232). While the first part of this statement is certainly compatible with Gilead’s perception of a household, the social dimension is neglected in Offred’s home, as Handmaids are not allowed to fraternise with other women. Given the peculiar nature of the triangular relationship between Serena Joy, the Commander, and Offred, however, I argue that fraternisation does not seem a feasible option whatsoever. Furthermore, political reproductivity is not intended as well, as in Gilead, politics is prescribed and dictated through the Bible, which does not allow for any opposition. Lefebvre’s scheme of a household space can therefore not be fulfilled in Gilead.

4.1.2. Panoptic home

Another factor contributing to the dense and cold atmosphere of the household which exacerbates successful appropriation procedures is the constant threat of surveillance. On the positive and economical aspects of surveillance, Foucault declares that

[t]here is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorising to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against, himself. (*Power* 155)

More than once, Offred voices her fear of being observed by any member of her home. In this way, the household resembles Jeremy Bentham’s idea of a Panopticon, an institution that employs a “new mode of obtaining power of mind over mind” (39) by tricking inmates of a prison into thinking they are constantly being monitored. This would result in a self-regulation of behaviour among inmates, since “the persons to be inspected should always feel themselves as if under inspection, at least as standing a great chance of being so” (44). Foucault, who engaged intensively with the concept of the Panopticon, identifies that the state has to operate on a fine line to ensure the continuity of the structures and behavioural patterns it demands: “If you are too violent, you risk provoking revolts. Again, if you intervene in too discontinuous a manner, you risk allowing politically costly phenomena of resistance and disobedience to develop in the interstices” (*Power* 155). The possibility of surveillance must hence be continuously upheld in people’s minds. Everyone in Gilead could potentially be a spy, a member of the so-called Eyes, and over the course of the novel Offred

suspects several protagonists of this demeanour, among them her later affair Nick. This symbolises the general shift of Gilead's power from an individual to a global level, as "[p]ower is no longer substantially identified with an individual who possesses or exercises it by right of birth; it becomes a machinery that no one owns" (156). The space of Gilead and its spatial codes, therefore, are extended to the household.

4.1.3. Safe home

Despite Offred's fear of being spied on, her domestic life and daily routines are in fact protected from any harm, apart from the monthly Ceremony and provided that she behaves according to the public transcript of the space. It is true that Offred openly cherishes the protection she is given under Gileadean authorities, which becomes obvious in several passages where she contemplates about not being able to walk the streets on her own at night in pre-Gilead times. Even though she often makes negative and ridiculing remarks about the absurdities and cruelty in Gilead, "[i]t is important to recognize how much Offred [...] accepts Gilead's protective embrace" (Weiss 133). Again, this might be due to her awareness of the possible alternatives: cleaning toxic waste in the Colonies, being subjected to physical violence by her mistress, or even being publicly executed at one of the Salvagings for disobedient behaviour.

In any case, it is a difficult if not impossible task for all characters to appropriate the space of the household for themselves. In the following, the analysis of selected spaces within the wider space of the household will provide evidences for this argument.

4.2. Serena Joy's space

Serena Joy, the Wife of Offred's Commander, is portrayed as a cold, elderly woman who energetically engaged in promoting Puritan values before the Sons of Jacob took over, but now finds herself caged within the very environment she contributed to craft, as Offred remarks: "She doesn't make speeches anymore. She has become speechless. She stays in her home, but it doesn't seem to agree with her. How furious she must be, now that she's been taken at her word" (Atwood, *HT* 56). Serena Joy actively participated in the creation of her own prison by

demanding stricter rules and less freedom especially for her own sex; the space that was thus created and which she now inhabits, *her* space, now weighs down on her relentlessly.

Despite the patriarchal order everyone has to obey in the Republic, however, Serena Joy is eager to maintain her claim of being the implicit master of the household: she commands the servants and is able to grant or deny special freedoms to Offred, for example giving her a cigarette (see 216). The fact that she is able to override certain policies marks her powerful position. Nevertheless, the extent of her power has its boundaries, too. Her space is limited; she is for example not allowed to enter the Commander's room. Furthermore, her decision-making powers are only taken seriously when the Commander does not interfere – ultimately, being the patriarch of the household, it is his word that counts.

Serena Joy's very own space is at the same time her most precious possession: her garden. She is often found tending it, cutting grass or grooming the colourful array of flowers. A "Tennyson garden", Offred calls it (161), which corresponds to Serena Joy's personality: she desires natural beauty and growth while at the same time exercising total control over it. In the garden, no other protagonist is allowed access without the explicit permission of the lady of the house. This designates the garden as Serena Joy's private space and enables her to project her own personality onto it. By designing and managing the garden after her own wishes, she can assign meaning to it – in one word, appropriate it.

The situation is different within the walls of the house itself. The sitting room, for example, is the first room Offred sees when she arrives at her new assignment, and it is also the room she must enter once a month for the ritual beginning of the dreaded Ceremony. Offred describes the room in great detail and recognises Serena Joy's touch in the choice and arrangement of furniture and decorations: "The tastes of Serena Joy are a strange blend: hard lust for quality, soft sentimental cravings" (90). Moreover, there is a clear code of conduct, or spatial code, for the sitting room. It is Serena Joy's territory; even the Commander is supposed to obey certain rules there (see 97). All members of the household have to behave in a certain way in this room; their positions, language, and practices are strictly prescribed. Lefebvre emphasises the importance of such gestures, as they "embody ideology and bind it to practice. Through gestures, ideology escapes from

pure abstraction and performs actions” (215). Masculine dominance, however, is not completely eliminated in this space, as the Commander does not have to fear any consequences if he does not adhere to Serena Joy’s wishes. This clearly undermines her power in the house and expose her attempts to appropriate the room by means of furniture and decorative elements as futile.

The core part of the Ceremony, the ritual rape of the Handmaid, takes place in the master bedroom of the house, another part of Serena Joy’s space. Within this room, Gilead’s power is most tangible, since all participants of the ritual must exercise the prescribed procedures, even though there is no authority to supervise them. Skipping the Ceremony is not an option because of the panoptic nature of the household; the Republic is thus simultaneously present and absent in the bedroom. Although Offred is supposed to stay after the Ceremony is over to increase the chances of impregnation, Serena Joy ushers her out as soon as the deed is done (Atwood, *HT* 106). Her behaviour of contradicting Gilead’s laws to minimise her own pain that results from watching a stranger having sexual intercourse with her husband shows that she deliberately flouts certain obligatory practices to create a hidden transcript for herself. Nevertheless, the intrusion of the Handmaid and the adulterous actions of the Commander she has to silently endure seriously impede her authority in the household, and especially in her own private bedroom.

Sandra Tomc identifies a number of blank spaces throughout the novel, which symbolise sites of escape (75). One of these spaces is the empty white canopy above the bed, on which Offred focuses her attention during the Ceremony. The bare surface allows her thoughts to drift away from the scene and to resort to her mental space. Tomc notes that the “moments of crisis and horror in this novel are organized around threats to the internal and bodily membranes surrounding the uncharted space of the self” (76) – the Ceremony can certainly be characterised as such a moment of crisis for Offred. Finding her autonomous self both unwanted and curtailed in her own home, her control over her own body and its physical borders is taken away from her, too. Foucault’s argument that “power relations can materially penetrate the body in depth” (*Power* 186) is clearly visible here. Therefore, the monthly Ceremony “is the most obvious manifestation of threat” for Tomc (76). It can be argued, however, that this threat is directed against all

participants of the ritual: although the Commander is the uncontested head of the family, in this context he is as subjected to rules imposed from the outside as his Wife and Handmaid. His body, too, is under the control of others. Serena Joy must endure the intrusion of strangers at her house and in the most intimate moments of her married life, whose presence is cloaked as protective and supportive measurements. The power of Gilead is thus embodied in the space of Serena Joy's bedroom; its required spatial practices impede the appropriation of the space even by those who are seemingly in power. Such power, after Foucault, is perceptible as a "multiplicity of relations of force immanent in the domain in which they are inscribed" (*Power* 187), just as the Republic of Gilead is inscribed in the most private actions between husband and wife (and Handmaid).

Power is "generating itself at each moment, at each point, and in every relation between one point and another" (187). The household is a space of physical and psychological dominance over Offred and, in fact, all other protagonists who are unable to escape its dense network of power relations and control. Furthermore, even though the spaces described, the bedroom, living room, and garden, can be regarded as Serena Joy's territory, the Wife is only able to completely appropriate the latter.

4.3. The Commander's office

The Commander's office is the only space within the household that is reserved solely for the patriarch, and where no one else is permitted access. I argue that the Commander's office signifies a space within the household that is drastically different from its surrounding space. Within it, he exercises his individual laws and control over Offred, who at the same time uses the room as a space of refuge. In this way, the office can be considered as a safe space for both, although Offred must engage in certain social practices to uphold this claim. The social relations formed in this room symbolise a defiant attitude towards the Republic of Gilead, which influences the protagonists' behaviour: whereas during her first visit, Offred is scared, shy, and quiet, she becomes much more open and comfortable over the time, and even asks for small favours. Similarly, the Commander seems cautious about his desires at first, only demanding a coy goodnight kiss from his Handmaid, while at a later point he crosses the last boundary by taking her to Jezebel's to have

sex with him. The space of the Commander's office, therefore, has a transformative nature and abides to its very own laws, creating a provocative and resistive environment.

4.3.1. A taste of the forbidden

Within the four walls of his office, the Commander is spared from his dissatisfied Wife, his intrusive servants, his work, and even from Gilead itself, which is demonstrated by the accumulation of forbidden objects like books, games, or magazines that are openly displayed. The fact that the Commander does not even try to hide these things in a closet or a safe demonstrates his power over this space and over his family, including the staff. Being a powerful official in the Republic, he appears to feel untouchable by spies, and he trusts in the power of his position when he excludes all members of the household from entering his room. When Offred is invited for their first meeting, she is stunned by what she sees as she crosses the threshold:

What is on the other side is normal life. I should say: what is on the other side looks like normal life. There is a desk, of course, with a Computalk on it, and a black leather chair behind it. [...] But all around the walls there are bookcases. They're filled with books. Books and books and books, right out in plain view, no locks, no boxes. No wonder we can't come in here. It's an oasis of the forbidden. (Atwood, *HT* 147)

This first impression sets the tone for the activities that are to follow and that define the space of the office. Moosa Vinia and Yousefi note that “[t]he art of living is closely related to one's idea of the truth, and his/her perception of the quality of being” (164). In the case of the Commander, it can be assumed that he still holds on to pre-Gileadean values and cherishes particular amenities from his past. Only later, in dialogues with Offred, it will become clear that the Commander himself believes in Gilead's course of action and supports its patriarchal and oppressive views. Similar to Jezebel's, the Commander's office signifies a heterotopia of rituals and rites, although the exact shaping of the heterotopia is quite different. Whereas Jezebel's is designed and used as a more or less public space, although access is limited, the office is reserved for one single protagonist only. Offred is a clear exception of this rule; she receives an explicit invitation which enables her to enter the room. In this way, the invitation corresponds to Foucault's description of a “certain permission”, and the prescribed knock at the door before Offred is called

inside corresponds to “certain gestures”, which form the two prerequisites for creating a heterotopia of rituals (“Spaces” 26).

Although the unexpected invitation to the office, which of course she could never really decline, puts Offred under a lot of pressure, the first few moments immediately put her at ease. The environment seems familiar to her, a reminiscence of former times, and the Commander’s reaction to her appearance also soothes her: “His smile is not sinister or predatory. It’s merely a smile, a formal kind of smile, friendly, but a little distant, as if I’m a kitten in a window” (148). The atmosphere in the office is filled with nostalgia, a yearning for a “place that is longed for and romanticized” (Massey, *Place* 10). In Offred’s case, this place is her pre-Gilead life with all its conveniences, of which she is suddenly and painfully reminded when she enters the office. In this way, her rebellious thoughts are ignited again through remembrance, even though they only emerge after she has left the office and returned to her room. When the Commander asks her to kiss him at the end of the first evening, all she can seem to think of is ways how to kill him the next time she is summoned – but it turns out this is only a reconstruction she added for her audience to present herself in a different light (see Atwood, *HT* 149-50). Nevertheless, the murderous thoughts are present in Offred’s mind, which demonstrates the transformational potential the space of the office has on the main protagonist.

4.3.2. A taste of humaneness

From the very first mentioning of the invitation to his office, it is clear to Offred that her presence there could possibly be her death sentence. The possibility to gain something from it, however, makes her curious and lets her mind wander to possible reasons for and outcomes of this secret encounter:

There’s no doubt about who holds the real power. But there must be something he wants, from me. To want is to have a weakness. It’s this weakness, whatever it is, that entices me. It’s like a small crack in a wall, before now impenetrable. If I press my eye to it, this weakness of his, I may be able to see my way clear. (146)

It is this weakness of the Commander that contributes to the formation of this very special relationship between them. Although the contact between a Commander and his Handmaid is highly restricted to the Ceremony, he knowingly crosses this border by seeking to build a personal relationship. Reasons for this are manifold:

while the structure of both the public space of Gilead and the private space of the household isolates women, it also confines men to specific places and practices. In this way, the Commander uses Offred as a welcome disruption from his daily oppression. On the other hand, he openly admits that he wants the meetings to be beneficial for Offred as well: when she asks him about the Handmaid before her, he admits that she committed suicide because she could not endure her situation any longer. For her, the 'new' Offred, he says, he envisions a different fate, which is why he wants to entertain and distract her (197). The deal between them, therefore, is reciprocal: Offred is supposed to provide entertainment for the Commander and to create a more personal relationship in a society "purged of diversity and individuality, based on sexism, racism, and elitism, in which private relationships between friends and lovers become [...] subversive acts" (Feuer 84). In turn, the Commander provides Offred with glimpses of her past, grants her special conveniences like hand lotion or the possibility to read, and gives her the opportunity to establish a more or less unconstrained discourse for herself. However, Malak states that in his attempts to make Offred's life bearable for her, the Commander "appears more pathetic than sinister, baffled than manipulative, almost, at times, a Fool" (12), as he should be aware of the fact that Offred does not come to his room entirely voluntarily, and her behaviour is still driven by the underlying fear of being unable to fulfil his desires and consequently being deported or executed. Moreover, the space is tainted by the Commander's views on women's designated place in society, which is exemplified in the conversations between him and his Handmaid. He is convinced that Gilead's structure and its rules mark an improvement for its inhabitants, as he firmly believes that women can now "fulfil their biological destinies in peace. With full support and encouragement" (Atwood, *HT* 231). Statements like this show that although the Commander might display goodwill towards Offred and her situation, he is deeply entrenched in the Republic's propaganda, and therefore not to be underestimated.

Despite the Commander's patronising and condescending views about women in general, what defines the relationship between him and Offred are various forms of exchange. They exchange words mostly unobstructed by governmental prescriptions, basic information about each other, goods (magazines or lotion), and services (kisses, flirtatious remarks). Lefebvre emphasises the importance of

exchange for the development of social relations, and thus also for the creation of a space that can be appropriated by its users (82). The Commander's office consequently constitutes a focal point for Offred's social relations, and even though it is not *her* space but his, she can appropriate the space to a certain extent. The gradual crossing of boundaries is evidence for this claim: when she is first offered a magazine to read, she is initially reluctant to take it, knowing that Gilead's authorities employ harsh corporal punishment for such a misdemeanour. However, the Commander's encouragement strikes a chord with her:

It's not permitted, I said. In here, it is, he said quietly. I saw the point. Having broken the main taboo, why should I hesitate over another one, something minor? Or another, or another; who could tell where it might stop? Behind this particular door, taboo dissolved. (Atwood, *HT* 149)

The Commander is willing to keep himself and Offred entertained at all costs, regardless of the price they would have to pay if it were discovered – arguably, however, the price for Offred would be incomparably higher. The space of the Commander's office nevertheless serves as an important source for exerting even a limited form of freedom to maintain her autonomous self, thus facilitating spatial appropriation.

4.3.3. A taste of freedom

Offred's attempts to appropriate the space of the office predominantly operate via the realm of language. Throughout the novel, Offred proves that she is a true lover of words and language, as she often engages in word plays and contemplates about the etymology or meaning of certain words. The Commander's wish to play Scrabble, as ridiculous as it first seems to her, hence proves to be a much-appreciated relief. The importance of language to establish a sense of individuality and identity has already been analysed, but for Offred, the deprivation of language in written and spoken form has an even more devastating effect. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that she indulges in the regular Scrabble games with her Commander and savours every single letter she spells:

Larynx, I spell. *Valance*. *Quince*. *Zygote*. I hold the glossy counters with their smooth edges, finger the letters. The feeling is voluptuous. This is freedom, an eyeblink of it. *Limp*, I spell. *Gorge*. What a luxury. The counters are like candies, made of peppermint, cool like that. [...] I would like to put them into my mouth. They would taste also of lime. The letter C. *Crisp*, slightly acid on the tongue, delicious. (149; emphasis in original)

Apart from the open enjoyment Offred feels about the Scrabble matches, there is another underlying implication of the game. As the use of words like “voluptuous”, “taste” or “tongue” in the above quote has already suggested, the play with language is also erotically charged. Feuer notes that “Offred’s clandestine game of Scrabble with her Commander evokes the sensuality of now-forbidden textures and language” (86). As with everything that is forbidden, the prohibition itself makes the object in question even more desirable. Offred and the Commander are not allowed to touch, to speak, or to have sex outside of the Ceremony – it might be the knowledge that Offred is a forbidden fruit that add to the games’ sensuality and the Commander’s excitement about the meetings. Moreover, the fact that Offred is theoretically able to give herself over to or withhold her body from the Commander gives her a certain sense of power over him.

For the first time since Gilead came into being, Offred actually feels in a position of power. The office provides a safe zone for her, and she is well aware of the Commander’s weakness of wanting her company and admiration, even though he is not at all dependent on her – after all, she could be replaced within a matter of hours. But it is not only the Commander Offred’s power extends to. Serena Joy is completely oblivious to her husband’s and Handmaid’s nightly activities. Offred’s secret visits with her Commander give her a feeling of power over her mistress, because she defies both the government’s and Serena Joy’s rules under her own roof (Moosa Vinia and Yousefi 171). After a few meetings have gone by, Offred notices that her own attitude towards Serena Joy has changed: while she felt nothing but hate for her when she first came to the household, there is now a hint of guilt for being “an intruder, in a territory that ought to have been hers” (Atwood, *HT* 170). Claiming both the Commander’s sexuality and his social entertainment for herself, Offred wonders what might be left for Serena Joy – but at the same time she outspokenly enjoys her superior position (see 171). Her contentment signifies that she assigns valuable meaning to the space of the Commander’s office – a definite sign of a successful attempt of appropriation, and of the transformational potential of the space as a whole.

Besides offering entertainment and distraction, the office is also a space for the exchange or transfer of knowledge, which is crucial for the establishment of power. Both Lefebvre (41) and Foucault (*Power* 119) agree to the notion that subjects

desire knowledge of the truth to create a space for themselves. For Offred, it is crucial to discover the meaning behind the Latin inscription in her closet, “Nolite te bastardes carborundorum” (Atwood, *HT* 195). Being illiterate in Latin, she senses the opportunity to gain this knowledge through her Commander. In a moment of courage, she asks him for the translation (197). The Commander, unaware of the delicate origin of Offred’s question, teasingly claims that the saying is only a joke and not to be taken seriously. For Offred, however, it is quite the opposite: in chapter 5, it will be demonstrated that the will to survive and not to let the bastards grind her down is of paramount importance and hence so much more than a joke to the Handmaid. At any rate, however, this situation reiterates Gilead’s particular system of power distribution: the silenced woman, deprived of any opportunity to maintain her identity, must rely on a male authority to gain knowledge and, consequently, power.

The public transcript of the space of the Commander’s office is simultaneously a hidden transcript within the larger realm of Gilead. Hence, the space provides a site of escape for Offred, as she is able to engage with one of her most intense passions that is otherwise forbidden under the threat of violent consequences. Furthermore, the fact that she is allowed to use language, play with it, and fully indulge in such a game enables her to assign valuable meaning to the space. Despite her still being subjected to submissive behaviour towards her master, Offred learns to avail herself of the situation, and gradually becomes more relaxed, as she remarks after a few visits: “little of that formality remains between us. I no longer sit stiff-necked, straight-backed, feet regimented side by side on the floor, eyes at the salute. Instead my body’s lax, cosy even. [...] As for the Commander, he’s casual to a fault” (193). It can be argued that Offred is able to retain a small part of her identity through the games, the conversations, and the readings she does in the office. Keeping in mind that reading, writing, and language itself are paramount to her, I argue that Offred is able to partially appropriate the space of the Commander’s office due to the social practices she engages in. However, it must be noted that her presence in the office is, after all, enforced, which is why a full and all-encompassing appropriation of the space is still denied to her. As for the Commander, the space of his office is clearly wholly appropriated by him. He is able to enjoy complete freedom by displaying his collections of forbidden items, he does not have to watch his language or behaviour, and all his needs are fulfilled

there because he is the ultimate holder of power. As a result, the Commander's office can be described as a space where characters are able to meet certain needs and to engage in a signifying process. The consequently developing social relations contribute to the formation of a space that is beneficial for both characters, and that resonates in their behaviour in the sense that they can retain parts of their individuality in an environment that otherwise does not allow for such processes.

4.4. Nick's apartment

The chauffeur's apartment is located on the same premises, but in a small house detached from the main building. The space of Nick's apartment also symbolically stands for the affair between him and Offred and for the shift in Offred's attitude towards her situation. This space is constructed by the social relations between two characters, and its construction is made explicit through a highly transformative effect it has on the first-person narrator.

4.4.1. Loaded with sexuality

Unremarkable in his visual appearance and behaviour, Nick has been serving the Commander and his family for a long time. Because of his inconspicuousness and the way he sometimes looks at her, Offred initially suspects him of being a secret spy. They usually encounter each other when she leaves the house for her shopping trips or in the living room during the first part of the monthly Ceremony and are forbidden to speak to or even look at each other, not to mention any physical contact. Nevertheless, their first intimate contact happens within the household, when Nick delivers the Commander's first invitation to his office to Offred while she is strolling through the living room at night. Although Offred and Nick are a forbidden match in any respect, there is immediately a strong sexual tension between the two. She is drawn to the man and his touch, and justifies her desire by claiming that "[i]t's lack of love we die from. [...] Can I be blamed for wanting a real body, to put my arms around? Without it I too am disembodied" (Atwood, *HT* 113). This quote exemplifies Offred's strong longing for physical affection which will eventually prevail over her resistive attitude. Nick touches and even swiftly kisses Offred, but then vanishes without a further word, which raises both Offred's fear and interest. This initial excitement is transferred to the next physical contact and sets the tone for the atmosphere of the space of Nick's apartment.

The next encounter happens at the apartment and is arranged by Serena Joy, who bribes Offred into having sex with Nick to increase her chances of becoming pregnant. By offering her information about her lost daughter, she provides an irresistible incentive for Offred to accept this offer, although she is again not really in a position to decline. The first visit at Nick's apartment is thus enforced by an outsider. Therefore, Moosa Vinia and Yousefi argue that the rebellious act of continuing the 'appointments' in secrecy were in fact initiated by Offred's subordination to Serena Joy, and do not result out of her own determination to act independently (172). In the first version that Offred tells of this visit, there is no verbal exchange between the two. The hectic descriptions of their movements as well as the rapid recital of details are reminiscent of a stream of consciousness, and denote the sensuality and excitement of the situation:

He's undoing my dress, a man made of darkness, I can't see his face, and I can hardly breathe, hardly stand, and I'm not standing. His mouth is on me, his hands, I can't wait and he's moving, already, love, it's been so long, I'm alive in my skin, again, arms around him, falling and water softly everywhere, never-ending. I knew it might only be once. (Atwood, *HT* 273)

The second version of this part of Offred's story is different. It is told more slowly, more emotionally, and Offred more openly acknowledges the enjoyment of Nick's touch: "There wasn't any thunder though, I added that in. To cover up the sounds, which I am ashamed of making" (275). Her choice of words discloses the great significance she attributes to being touched and treated tenderly. Even though none of the versions Offred offers turns out to be true, the nature of both of her reconstructions reveals a lot about her innermost feelings, and already hints at the personal developments she will subsequently undergo.

Many scholars have severely criticised the romance plot in *The Handmaid's Tale*, which is exemplified by the "rescue of the helpless female victim by the mysteriously dark, silent lover" (Stein, "Proposal" 63). In this way, it is argued that the affair between the two protagonists reiterates the platitudinous scheme of the masculine hero saving the damsel in distress. Stillman and Johnson, for example, note that Offred is eager to reduce herself yet again to her body, which is "hardly the expression of an authentic, natural, or liberated self" (76), but rather a confirmation of Gilead's prejudicial attitudes towards women and a consolidation of her minor position within the regime. "Offred eschews a political interpretation

of her life and identity for a romantic (and traditionally feminine) one” (83). In even more drastic terms, Weiss accuses Offred of being “guilty of complacency, complicity, and selfish concern for her own private needs and desires” (138). In my view, while there is certainly no doubt as to Offred being driven by the need for human contact and affection, it is a hasty and overly radical conclusion to reduce her actions and behaviour to a clichéd and stereotypical romance plot. Rather, the emotional depth and narrative emphasis that are placed on the space of the apartment prove the complexity of the relationship between the two protagonists as well as of the space itself.

4.4.2. Loaded with resistance

Quite contrary to Weiss’s allegations, it must be noted that the consecutive visits at Nick’s apartment are in fact a conscious decision by Offred herself. She is willing to actively put herself in mortal danger if she gets caught, because she

longs for some human connection. She wants to be recognised, loved and listened to. This relationship helps her retrieve her identity and she feels empowered as not only she is transgressing the state ideology on sexuality, but she is also making a choice. (Moosa Vinia and Yousefi 172)

In this way, Offred’s desire to be loved and valued triumphs over her fears. In *Power/Knowledge*, Foucault seems to support such an interpretation, as he perceives love to be a distinct form of power, or rather a system engendered in power (202). Love, therefore, is a means of exercising power over other individuals for Offred. Malak emphasises that “[h]er double-crossing the Commander and his wife, her choice to hazard a sexual affair with Nick, [...] all point to the shift from being a helpless victim to being a sly, subversive survivor” (13), thus attributing entirely different motifs and characteristics to Offred than the aforementioned scholars. For Hansot, Nick’s apartment is simultaneously the space Offred is “most fully able to inhabit” and “(paradoxically for one who calls herself a coward) literally and figuratively the most dangerous one of all” (191). Its ambivalent nature certainly hinders an unobstructed appropriation of the space, but does not prevent it completely. I argue that Offred can in fact appropriate the space of Nick’s apartment, because she uses it to fulfil her most intimate needs and desires, while at the same time exercising power over those against which she otherwise has no means of resistance. Through Offred’s affair with Nick, her restricted self is able to resist (Feuer 86).

Nick's apartment is a space where power relations are renegotiated, and where Offred can retain important parts of her identity. This is exemplified by her revelation of her real name to him, which used to be a closely guarded secret. Stein remarks that by "[r]evealing her name, she reveals herself to him, and becomes vulnerable" ("Scheherazade" 272). The space of the apartment and the social practices that take place within it contribute a noticeable share to the retention of Offred's individuality and her autonomous self. It therefore comes as no surprise that her affair with Nick "marks a relapse into willed ignorance" (Neuman 864), a practice that has helped her stay mentally – and physically – sane in Gilead for a long period of time. Weiss identifies her development as a "means of escape, even escapism" (123) rather than acts of rebellion. While he admits that her having an affair is indeed a subversive act, "it does not involve or lead to any real challenge to the State. Indeed, it may have the opposite effect, reinforcing a character's fatalism" (135). While Offred acts very cautiously at first, aware of every step and look and gesture, she becomes increasingly lax and thoughtless. When Ofglen asks her to spy on her Commander for the sake of Mayday, she admits to herself that she has no intention of escaping anymore, but has resigned herself to her new place: "I do not feel regret about this. I feel relief" (Atwood, *HT* 283).

Chinmoy Banjeree has identified the double motif as one of the key characteristics in *The Handmaid's Tale*, which is made most explicit in Offred's two distinct voices: the one of the helpless bird caught in a cage, and the defiant rebel who resists the system (166). This doubling abruptly dissolves when Offred finds comfort in Nick, the masculine hero whom she "trusts to feminine instinct and surrenders herself to him completely" (Tomc 78), which entails the numbing of both her self and her defiant thoughts. This time, deploying willed ignorance ultimately results in her failure to maintain the high level of awareness regarding her environment. Although the affair radically changes her attitude towards resisting Gilead, she has eventually ceased to pay attention (Neuman 864).

Offred's ultimate fate, whether it is interpreted as salvation or demise, indeed depends on Nick. Weiss observes that "for the sake of her own romantic desires she is 'beyond caring' about getting caught" (135-6), but her thoughts in view of the black van approaching testify to her belated regrets about her inertia: "I've been wasting my time. I should have taken things into my own hands while I had the

chance. [...] But it's too late to think about that now" (Atwood, *HT* 305). Despite Nick's insistent claim to trust him, Neuman remarks that there is no true evidence for perceiving Nick as the knight in shining armour or Offred's saviour, as his actions may be motivated by nothing else than self-protection (864). Offred's fate remains uncertain in the end.

Nick's apartment serves as a central site of escape for Offred. The space enables her to redefine her position within Gilead and allows her to realise some of her most longed for desires. Furthermore, the social practices she and Nick engage in, among them the exchange of intimate information, contribute to transforming Offred's general behaviour and attitudes considerably. In this way, she is in fact able to appropriate the space even if her deliberate ignorance might have played a role in her (possible) ruin.

4.5. Offred's room

Every Handmaid in Gilead who is assigned to a specific household is accommodated in a room of her own. Although Handmaids are permitted to live with their Commanders' families, they are not part of it – each one is indefinitely exchangeable, which is symbolised by the anonymous furnishings in their rooms that do not allow for any individualisation. The Handmaid's room represents a space that is supposed to be her own, but painfully fails to achieve this aim because of its particular function and the social practices that take place in it, or rather, that do *not* take place there. Despite her initial reluctance to embrace the room as her own, Offred's personal development leads to a change in attitude, which is reflected in her attempts to accept and appropriate the room. Furthermore, the space of Offred's room provides the vital link between the public transcript of the household and the hidden transcript of her mental space.

4.5.1. Blank space

Although the novel does not provide insights into other Handmaids' private chambers, in Offred's case, the room is scarcely furnished: a chair, a table, a lamp, a bed. None of these items truly belong to her, nor do they bear the stamp of her personality. The curtains in front of the window are plain white, just like the linen on her single bed, and Offred even wonders whether the framed picture is the same

for every Handmaid (17). Offred's room is, in a word, bare. Despite its emptiness, however, it reveals the intrusion of the government: the window can only partly open and is completely shatterproof, there is no glass in the picture frame, and the place where a chandelier used to hang is now naked. All these minor details serve one purpose: a Handmaid should not be provided with any aid to commit suicide. Tomc, whose concept of the recurring motif of the blank space has already been mentioned, draws special attention to the blank space on the ceiling, where the chandelier used to be. She claims that this blank space "offers the ultimate escape of self-annihilation" (76) in a novel in which self-protection is a red thread throughout the story. Offred immediately draws the same conclusions when she first inspects the room: "It isn't running away they're afraid of. We wouldn't get far. It's those other escapes, the ones you can open in yourself, given a cutting edge" (Atwood, *HT* 17-8). In addition to the 'protective' measurements in the room, its door cannot be locked or even properly closed (see 18). This ensures that any authority or member of the household staff has unobstructed access to Offred's private space at all times, which contributes to the panoptic atmosphere of the space. Offred is subjected to external control and surveillance, even within the space that is supposedly reserved for her private use. For Lefebvre, it is clear that every living creature "lives *in* [their personal] space, and it is a component part of it [...]. Within its space, the living being receives information" (178; emphasis in original). Owning no personal items and being forbidden to add any shade of individuality, Offred can by no means be a component part of her own space. She is consequently unable to appropriate the physical space of her room for her purposes.

Offred constantly struggles in her efforts to maintain her identity, which becomes obvious in her reluctance to label the room she spends most of her time in as hers (see Atwood, *HT* 18). Initially, she strongly rejects this designation "because it has no key for her to assure her privacy and exclude others and because it is at best a transitory way station for her" (Stillman and Johnson 73). Indeed, it seems only natural that in such a hostile and dangerous environment, where autonomous control over both body and mind are evidently denied, Offred refuses to associate any part of it with herself. After some time, however, there is a noticeable change in word choice: coming home from one of her shopping trips, she catches the Commander standing at the door to the room. In the wake of fear of being spied

on, she calls it “my room” – even to her own surprise (Atwood, *HT* 59). One possible interpretation might be that at this point, the room is already associated with Offred’s memories of her previous life and family, and with the nourishing realm of her mental space. Therefore, an intruder in the room she daydreams in is synonymous with a serious violation of privacy for her, even though the room as a material place itself means nothing to her. Hence, I argue that Offred’s room provides the most important site of escape for her, despite the fact that the source of escape is entirely disconnected from the actual physical location, which only provides the visible framework for her descent into nostalgia and remembrance.

Handmaids spend a significant amount of time in solitude. Apart from their daily walks to the shops and the occasional Prayvaganza or Birth Day, Offred is mostly forced to stay in her room, because the other members of the household either do not want to see her (Serena Joy and Rita) or are not allowed to (Nick and the Commander). As Neuman puts it, “Offred’s life of daily waiting and shopping, of timorous strategizing and sudden bursts of daring, forms an intensified and darkened version of a woman’s customary existence” (865). The character of Serena Joy exemplifies that the female realm in Gilead is the household – a natural consequence of being deprived of all other options. In an interview with the CBC on this phenomenon, Margaret Atwood herself commented that “[i]f women are not allowed to have money or jobs, there’s no place they can be except in the home” (Atwood, *Old Human Themes* 15:21). For the Handmaids, this ‘place they can be’ is not even the household as a whole, but merely a small room within this space, which they are not allowed to personalise and thus claim for themselves.

4.5.2. Inspirational space

Apart from daydreams and her mental escapes, Offred’s only occupation during her lengthy periods of waiting is the slow and careful scrutiny of the room and its features:

I explored this room, not hastily, then, like a hotel room, wasting it. I didn’t want to do it all at once, I wanted to make it last. I divided the room into sections, in my head; I allowed myself one section a day. This one section I would examine with the greatest minuteness. (Atwood, *HT* 61)

It is during one of these inspections that Offred discovers the hidden scripture in Latin on the inside wall of her cupboard. She immediately deduces that it must have been carved by the Handmaid that lived in this room before her. From this

point, the thought of her predecessor frequently occupies her mind. Offred feels at the same time connected to and alienated from this unnamed woman: while she wonders who she might have been, she has the subconscious feeling that something terrible has happened to her. This assumption is first confirmed by Cora, one of the servants, who is shocked when she finds Offred lying on the floor at one point, undoubtedly reminded of the last time she saw the previous Handmaid. The Commander then reveals the truth – her predecessor could not bear her dire situation anymore and committed suicide in the room now occupied by Offred. The Latin message is the only remnant that is left from this stranger, creating a sort of invisible bond between Offred and the other woman. Pondering about its meaning, Offred takes pleasure in the thought that there was someone here before her, sharing the same fate and suffering under the same characters, even though the previous Handmaid could not withstand the pressure in the end. For Offred, however, the story of the other Handmaid functions as an encouragement to stay alive and alert, especially after the Commander reveals what the scripture means. She intends to last, she says at the beginning of the novel (17), and the anonymous message strengthens her will to survive even more. In this way, the space of her room functions as a connection between the present and the past. Though it is impossible for Offred to appropriate it due to the various impediments from other household members and Gileadean authorities, it nevertheless provides important incentives for her motivation not to let the bastards grind her down.

4.5.3. Heterotopic space

Offred's room signifies what Foucault calls a heterotopia of deviation. Because of her adulterous actions before the Republic came into place, she does not have the right to become a Wife. Her ability to bear children saves her from being shipped to the Colonies right away, but also condemns her to an existence as a Handmaid. This existence is encompassed by the four walls of her room, since she spends the majority of her time there. Because Offred did not choose to become a Handmaid herself, and because her position as such is in fact a punishment for her immoral behaviour as Luke's mistress, her room can be characterised as such a heterotopia of deviation, which is reserved for people who do not conform to the expected standards and norms (Foucault, "Spaces" 25). Heterotopias in general are defined

by the function they have in relation to its surrounding spaces (26), which is precisely determined depending on the respective social environment (25). In the case of Offred's room, it is the isolating function of confining a stranger, and the symbolic function of signifying replaceability and anonymity. Furthermore, for Offred herself, the room works as a gateway to her mental space. Especially at night, she can focus on her thoughts in peace, which always happens within the walls of her room. The categorisation of the room as a heterotopia of deviation is yet further evidence for the diversity of the household as well as for the difficulty Offred ostensibly has when it comes to appropriating the material space itself.

Over the course of the novel, Offred apparently situates herself within the "false and splintered community of the Commander's household" (Stillman and Johnson 73), undoubtedly because she tries to arrange with her situation. Furthermore, the secret meetings with her Commander make her feel more relaxed and valued, which also results in her being more willing to assimilate. She increasingly uses inclusive pronouns like 'we' or 'ours' when speaking about the members of her household, and Stillman and Johnson note that "[e]ventually, even her skin becomes 'ours,' as the Commander watches her putting on the skin moisturizer" in his office (73). Even though these processes can be seen as an attempt to appropriate the space of her home, this does not mean that Offred surrenders and becomes completely indifferent to her situation, at least not until the point when she engages in the affair with Nick. It has already been remarked that Offred is a very attentive member of Gilead's society. Every gesture, every word, and every look she encounters are revisited during her solitary time in her room. She is aware of the expectations and demands that are placed upon her by the government and her 'family'. Her days and nights are filled with contemplations and plays with her imagination. Despite her social intelligence and general awareness, however, "Offred has no modes of resistance against Gilead, at least none that threaten Gilead in any way" (Stillman and Johnson 75). Weiss argues the converse: for him, it is precisely Offred's high level of alertness towards her surroundings that could make her a useful member of Mayday, the underground resistance organisation. Although many scholars claim that Offred could not possibly do anything against the totalitarian state, Weiss disagrees and claims that dystopian heroes can always do something, and that even the smallest action might contribute to changing the situation for the better (137). Instead, Offred decides to remain silent and

immobile, and chooses to stay in her comfort zone which is her room. Apart from her affair with Nick, she might have realised her little potential to become a brave heroine like Moira.

The space of Offred's room, as a heterotopia in Foucault's sense, serves the important function of opening the realm of Offred's mental space. Although Offred cannot appropriate the space itself due to its anonymous and unchangeable nature, it nevertheless symbolises an important site for maintaining her autonomous self by providing the passage to the space that is truly hers: her mind.

5. Abstract space

Offred's mental sphere is her ultimate place of refuge and escape, and is radically different to the physical locations in the novel. The creation of it is at the same time the social practice that constructs and defines it: in her solitary confinement, Offred lets her mind wander and seeks shelter in memories, nostalgia, and imaginary scenarios. Offred's mental space is indeed the only space she can fully appropriate for herself, as there is nobody else to affect or compromise her most private thoughts. Furthermore, the important function of storytelling as a means of resistance will be analysed, as it opens up a dialogical space. Offred's mental space constructs a hidden transcript within Gilead in Scott's sense, as it requires practices that are prohibited by the (overt) spatial code of the Republic (5). Nevertheless, Offred manages to open up this space and take advantage of it. Similarly, storytelling functions both as a means of resistance against the prevalent dire conditions and as a way to maintain Offred's identity even across spatial and temporal limits. Hence, such abstract spaces constitute the most important spaces for Offred's survival.

5.1. Mental space

The term 'mental space' denotes the Handmaid's private thoughts, her play with imaginary scenarios, and the mental construction of her self. Deprived of an autonomous and self-determined life with ample possibilities of social practice to negotiate her position within Gilead, Offred is denied the construction of a fully developed personality under the Gileadean regime. Therefore, she shifts her focus away from her own situation towards her lost friends and family.

Offred is absolutely determined to survive under Gilead's regime, but her survival "depends on her belief in a position outside of culture" (Tolan, *Feminism* 144). To maintain her willpower and in an effort to keep the Republic at a distance, she detaches from reality by turning to her memories whenever possible. Lefebvre perceives this to be a typical tactic by oppressed subjects: "Dominated by overpowering forces, including a variety of brutal techniques and an extreme emphasis on visualization, the body fragments, abdicates responsibility for itself – in a word, disappropriates itself" (166). This practice of disappropriation is clearly

visible during the core part of the Ceremony that is described in the novel, where Offred's descriptions resemble those of an omniscient third-person narrator rather than a recollection of an event she witnesses and participates in herself (see Atwood, *HT* 105). Moreover, it is reasonable to believe that she is very much aware of her practice being a strategy of evasion or escape, as she directly comments on it during the core part of the Ceremony: "One detaches oneself. One describes" (106). Offred rigorously separates her mind from her body for reasons of self-protection: her body is out of her own reach in Gilead; it is controlled from outside forces and subjected to the needs and demands of authorities and strangers. According to Lefebvre, the so-called "spatial body" comprises an accumulation of the influences of the space surrounding it; its "material character derives from space" (195). In this way, it is quite a rational decision for Offred to try to eliminate her body and its unwanted physical sensations from her consciousness as thoroughly as possible.

5.1.1. Functions of the heterotopia

Offred's mind, in contrast to her body and environment, is unspoiled by any outside source; she is in absolute control in her mental realm. Hence, this space can be seen as a heterotopia of rituals in Foucault's terms, as it is intended for Offred's private 'use' and therefore characterised by a strictly restricted access. In addition, several preconditions must be fulfilled before Offred may enter this space (solitude, immediate physical or mental threat). Moreover, it is a heterotopia as it serves specific functions for Offred, its user. One of these functions is the formation and development of different selves by the protagonist herself. It has been emphasised repeatedly that in Gilead, "loss of identity is an ever-present threat" (Feuer 84), which highlights the importance of even fragmented identity formation processes for Offred. The psychological concept of the creation of a dialogical self, which is essentially "the self created through the community" and an important aspect of a well-rounded character (Tolan, "Utopias" 28), cannot be applied in Offred's situation; rather, she has no choice but to generate what could be called a 'monological self' by establishing her own personality in her mind. Arguably, this is not a smooth and linear process, but characterised by the existence of parallel strands that sometimes even contradict each other: "In her stories, she chooses more roles for herself (lover, author, speaking self) than Gilead

offers her” (Stein, “Scheherazade” 275). It is worth noting that even though Offred tells her story voluntarily, she is at times reluctant to continue, or to speak about delicate passages. This might be the result of shame for her behaviour, for example her abovementioned moaning in sexual pleasure with Nick, or of the desire to present herself in a more favourable light to her anonymous audience. Offred’s ambiguous use of language determines that her behaviour can be interpreted in a number of ways (269), but it is clear that her memories “allow her to recall a sense of self” (Stillman and Johnson 73), which is crucial for her survival.

The second function of the heterotopia of Offred’s mental space is a soothing one, as the memories of her loved ones enable her to grieve and mourn for them. Although the novel does not provide specific details about the fate of most of Offred’s family, there are indeed clues as to what happened to them. Offred’s mother seems to have been deported to the Colonies, which will ultimately be her death sentence. Offred’s daughter is accommodated with and was probably also adopted by an alien family. Although on the picture she looks alive and well, Offred naturally envisions a life in freedom and peace for her own blood. Moira, her best friend, ends up as a drug-addicted enforced prostitute; it remains unclear whether her situation ever changes for the better. Regarding Luke, Offred’s husband, there is no information whatsoever. The reconstruction of their escape, however, hints to him being shot by Gilead’s army. According to Sigmund Freud, the loss of loved ones and the melancholia that it entails take place in the narcissistic realm (Bergmann 5) and is therefore a highly intimate process necessary for the individual to cope with the loss. Tolan remarks that “Offred survives confinement by envisioning a utopian other place to which she might escape” (“Utopias” 21) – this utopian place is her life before the Sons of Jacob took over, which is characterised by its ordinariness: family life, daily chores, working an ordinary job, and earning money did not seem exceptional benefits to Offred before, but are now the source of her longings and desires. At the Red Centre, the definition of ‘ordinary’ shifted significantly. In Aunt Lydia’s words, “[o]rdinary [...] is what you are used to. This may not seem ordinary to you now, but after a time it will” (Atwood, *HT* 43). Ordinariness, it can be inferred, is only an abstract concept, depending on the space one inhabits as well as the social practices that are deemed as normal. Offred herself provides evidence for this assessment when she states that “[c]ontext is all” (154). Despite her eagerness to keep her memories alive,

Offred's efforts diminish slowly but steadily, especially towards the end of the novel, when she has found a certain degree of satisfaction in her affair: "I try to conjure, to raise my own spirits [...]. I need to remember what they look like. [...] Stay with me, I want to say. But they won't" (203). By extensively contemplating the fate of her beloved friends and family, Offred is able to take small steps towards closure, as "Luke and her daughter slip into the past tense" (Stillman and Johnson 73).

5.1.2. Survival as social practice

At the same time, however, Offred is determined to envision a future for herself and those she loves in which they are alive and reunited. Given that her speculations are the result of limited knowledge (Stein, "Scheherazade" 275), they are necessarily open-ended. She does not know about Luke's fate, or her daughter's, or Moira's, so she envisions their whereabouts and hypothesises about their circumstances. Naturally, she also clings to her hope for a positive ending of their stories, for example when she tells herself that Luke might have escaped (Atwood, *HT* 115). In this way, her mental space provides an important third function: maintaining her inner resistance against Gilead and its practices. Tolan states that "Offred's survival depends on her belief in a reality external to her culture, a permanent embodiment of immutable values that cannot be eradicated by a cultural consensus" ("Utopias" 30). Indeed, her thoughts revolve around an imagined organisation, for at this point she does not know yet that Mayday really exists: "I believe in the resistance as I believe there can be no light without shadow" (Atwood, *HT* 115). Offred openly admits that she thinks of herself as cowardly, especially in comparison to Moira (261). Hence, her only hopes lie on other individuals or an organised underground network. Her mental space provides fertile ground for her imaginary escape with Mayday, for Moira's rebellious breakout from Jezebel's, for Luke's safe existence in exile. Therefore, her obedient actions in the real world are sometimes concealed as being actually defiant, as if she is trying to pass the time until Luke – or someone else – inevitably returns to her rescue: "I wait. I compose myself. My self is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech. What I must present is a made thing, not something born" (76). In her determination to euphemise her own passivity, Offred's self-denial becomes obvious, as "[n]o amount of verbal construction,

deconstruction, and reconstruction seems able to help Offred understand, communicate, or resist” (Stillman and Johnson 75).

At the very end of the novel, Offred learns of Ofglen’s suicide in the wake of being caught by the Eyes. One last time, she resorts to her mental space and evaluates different actions she could take in a flash before her eyes: setting the house on fire, committing suicide, running away to Nick’s apartment (Atwood, *HT* 304). Only this time her mental space cannot provide any relief to her situation: “I consider these things idly. Each one of them seems the same size as all the others. Not one seems preferable. Fatigue is here, in my body, in my legs and eyes. That is what gets you in the end” (304). Her play with words, her love of language, her precious site of escape – in the end, none of them can provide the ultimate salvation from her uncertain fate.

The primary function of Offred’s mental space is the creation of distance to her oppressive reality. By focusing on those she cares about, Offred is able to escape the Republic of Gilead to a certain extent. However, the highly contradictory nature of her stories about the others’ destinies is evidence for her struggle to acquaint herself with the uncertainty and ignorance about their fates, and to situate herself within that picture.

5.2. Opening spaces through storytelling

In addition to Offred’s imaginations revolving around her friends and family, the act of storytelling itself is a prominent sign of defiance. Moosa Vinia and Yousefi claim that the rigid structure of Gilead leaves no possibility of resistance other than storytelling itself (168). Offred’s tape recordings, therefore, fulfil two basic functions: while they help her to find her voice in an environment that otherwise completely silences her, they also bear witness to daily life and practices under the regime, which serves as a source of information for later investigations by Professor Pieixoto. Through storytelling, Offred retains a part of her individuality and simultaneously opens up a dialogical space for herself and her imaginary audience.

5.2.1. Storytelling as social action

Stein argues that Offred's "use of narrative opens a space for her within the cramped quarters of Gilead", and that it is precisely the forbidden act of storytelling that characterises Offred's resistance and that constructs her self ("Scheherazade" 270). Telling her story in hindsight, she reconstructs, rearranges, and reformulates her story, and even compares herself to certain words (Atwood, *HT* 113), which again emphasises her awareness of the power of the (spoken) word. I argue that what Stein refers to is an attempt to create an abstract space which is aloof from all bodily and psychological threats Gilead poses. While it is worth discussing whether Offred can clearly be labelled a rebel, the fact that she tells her story – a *woman's* story, that is – is indeed an act of disobedience against Gilead's morals. A look into the past reveals that women have often been silenced in history; they have more often been passive objects than the active subjects of their own stories (269). Similarly, feminist dystopias often deal with women's loss of language and the therefore resulting implications for their position within a suppressive regime. By creating a narrative of her own, Offred manages to break the cycle of enforced silence and submission, while at the same time using it to comfort herself during her lengthy periods of social and ethical loneliness. Therefore, the space Offred opens via storytelling is inherently characterised by a defiant attitude.

Although the revelation of her innermost thoughts and rebellious plans puts Offred in a dangerous position, the "therapeutic aspect of storytelling [...] helps her to adapt more easily and smoothly" (Moosa Vinia and Yousefi 168), especially because Offred sometimes addresses her tale to a mysterious 'you'. This unspecified vis-à-vis serves as a patient listener to whom she can confess and with whom she shares her burdens. This social practice can also be seen as an attempt to establish a dialogical self; the anonymous listener is Offred's silent company in the abstract space she has created for herself. Hence, for Stein "[t]he act of storytelling itself [...] is a gesture of hope, of love, of reaching for connection" ("Scheherazade" 278), for which she does not have any other recipient before engaging in an affair with Nick. "Through telling her story, Offred survives by making herself real, speaking her way out of invisibility into her humanity" (Feuer 91), which is, in Lefebvre's and Foucault's points of view, only possible through the

presence of social relations with other subjects. Moreover, Wagner-Lawlor highlights the importance of wit and irony that pervade the narration. She stresses that Offred's skilful use of irony demonstrates her intellectuality and proves that she is more clearly the agent of her own resistance than many other scholars believe (85). The act of storytelling itself is therefore an invaluable part of Offred's efforts to stay alive.

5.2.2. Storytelling as social interaction

Offred's narrative is evidence of her braveness and creates the illusion of a genuine testimony by directing her narrative at an actual audience. Nevertheless, Stein raises the question whether storytelling is enough, and whether it is possible for women to "gain power through language alone" ("Scheherazade" 276). I argue, however, that these questions are misleading: the relevance of storytelling lies in its comforting function for the protagonist herself. Offred has no interest in gaining power or changing the situation for *all* women – she is merely desperate to stay alive and to alleviate her *own* destiny.

Offred's word plays reveal her skilful mastery of language, which can be transferred to her whole narrative. The fact that the story is told in hindsight, therefore, immediately raises doubts about the accountability and reliability of the narrator. Stein claims that the reconstructive nature of the narration positions it rather within the realm of fiction than within that of a diary ("Scheherazade" 274). Moreover, Offred tends to show herself in a better light, either to raise sympathy among her audience, or because of her own guilt for her (in)activities. Therefore, doubts about her being completely honest and reliable are definitely justified. In my reading of the text, however,

This is also noticed by Professor Pieixoto, who challenges Offred's credibility at the fictional academic conference which is transcribed in the 'Historical Notes' section at the end of the novel. Although he remains sceptical about her accountability, he admits that his team used a significant portion of Offred's narrative to draw conclusions about some of Gilead's authorities, their practices, and structure. Offred herself comments on the possibility of inaccuracy when she says,

When I get out of here, if I'm ever able to set this down, in any form [...] it will be a reconstruction then too [...]. It's impossible to say a thing exactly the way it was, because what you say can never be exact, you always have to

leave something out, there are too many parts, sides, crosscurrents, nuances, [...]. (Atwood, *HT* 144)

It can therefore be interpreted that in her recollections, Offred herself does not alter the truth arbitrarily, but may be a victim of faulty remembrance. In this way, leaving aside the question of reliability, Offred's storytelling serves a second purpose: giving testimony of life in the Republic of Gilead, uncensored by the authorities and therefore an invaluable resource of information for later historicists. In this way, she opens up a dialogical space for herself and her listeners.

Although the question whether Offred's narrative can be treated as an entirely uncorrupted, genuine account of her experiences cannot be sufficiently answered, the act of storytelling serves several functions for the Handmaid herself and for her later audience. On the one hand, telling her story can be seen as a rebellious act against the regime, which signifies the attempt of the protagonist to retain her individual voice. On the other, she proves to be selfless and thoughtful to a certain degree, as she openly wishes to be an informant for future generations. In general, Offred's narration establishes an abstract space characterised by both a self-serving and interactive component.

The abstract spaces that were analysed in this chapter – Offred's mental space and the dialogical space that is opened via the social practice of storytelling – distinguish radically from the physical places in Gilead. These spaces are in fact the only ones Offred can fully appropriate, as they are subjected to her own control. In its peculiarity, such abstract space serves a number of purposes, for example maintaining hope and defiance, or relieving her physical and mental imprisonment in Gilead. All in all, Offred's escapes to her mental space help her to endure her destiny, although eventually, it was demonstrated that this escapism does not provide an ultimate solution for her.

6. Conclusion

In this concluding chapter, I aim to provide a summary of the analyses and findings of this thesis and in this way present answers to the research questions posed in the introduction.

The research that was outlined in the theoretical section has shown that the different spaces one moves in strongly influence one's behavioural patterns and attitudes. Connecting Lefebvre's and Massey's conceptual reflections on this issue with the fictional spaces in Atwood's novel has demonstrated the importance of space as a tool for literary analysis, since the social practices and relations that are present in all social activities result in a reciprocal relationship that is tangible in both non-fictional and fictional environments: on the one hand, they are created and crafted by the individuals – or characters – themselves; on the other hand, they influence their respective behaviours and practices. The spatial analysis of *The Handmaid's Tale* has illustrated that the theoretical concepts can be usefully applied to the realm of literary fiction, as the novel has proven to encompass an abundance of spaces that are characterised by this reciprocity. In this way, it was shown how the creation of certain spaces has a constitutive effect on all fictional subjects who move within them, confirming the validity of Lefebvre's and Massey's theories for fictional spaces. Furthermore, Foucault's notions about power, its formation, and its distribution clearly resonate in the novel and have yielded important insights into the nature and composition of the Republic of Gilead as well as the particular spaces within its framework. Most prominently, this was represented in the space of Offred's household. Foucault's perceptions proved to be a rich source of interpretation for the behaviours and attitudes of the protagonists, which enabled a richer examination of the relevance of social practices for the creation of space.

The so-called 'public' sphere, which was analysed by means of the Red Centre, Jezebel's, and various special events, is characterised by a specific spatial code or public transcript that denies its participants the possibility of appropriation. Due to the highly regulated nature of these spaces and the fact that language as a crucial tool for identity formation is strictly limited, the maintenance of an autonomous self is made impossible, which is why most characters are subjected to an identity crisis. This condition can only rarely be mitigated by Handmaids

through the creation of a hidden transcript of whispering during public events. Although spaces like Jezebel's aim at creating an alternative environment far away from the tight corset of Gilead's morals, the social practices that are expected and performed there still reinforce the regime's power. In general, although certain characters like Moira attempt to resist the oppressive practices in Gilead, their actions eventually remain futile.

'Private' space was illustrated by Offred's household and the behaviours of the protagonists who inhabit it. It was shown that no space within the household is truly private due to the panoptic nature of the space as a whole. While Serena Joy and the Commander are able to appropriate certain spaces for themselves through specific social practices, this process is evidently denied to Offred. Her room, the space that is officially designed for her, can therefore also merely function as a gateway to the abstract realm of her thoughts. It is only through her relationship with Nick and the therefore resulting social practices that Offred finds comfort in the space of his apartment, which is one of the few spaces she can at least partly appropriate. The drastic change in her mind-set is proof for the transformative nature of this space, as the Handmaid's deliberate ignorance forges her space and renders all openly rebellious actions impossible. Even more so, Offred's practice of willed ignorance might even be interpreted as determining her downfall at the end.

Offred's mental space is the only space she can completely and successfully appropriate, because it is unobstructed by any outside influence. The preservation of her private thoughts and imaginations signifies the inherently defiant nature of this space. This metaphorical space serves the important functions of maintaining her individuality and coping with profound loss, which contribute to the perpetuation of Offred's individual identity. Such mechanisms are a crucial precondition for the establishment of an autonomous self. Moreover, Offred's narration itself was treated as a social – and thus spatial – practice that signifies a resistant atmosphere and that supports the main character in her struggle to find her place in Gilead's oppressive environment by fostering the creation of a dialogical self. Hence, I argue that such abstract space is the most important space in the novel.

In conclusion, this thesis has provided valuable insights into Margaret Atwood's popular novel by illuminating the so-far neglected aspect of space. Most

importantly, I would like to emphasise the significance of the concept of space in Lefebvre's and Massey's terms for analysing literary fiction, as it was shown that the different spaces in a novel indeed play a highly influential role for both its protagonists and the possible interpretations of their actions. Through spatial theory, it is possible to gain more detailed insights into the complex structure of novels as a whole, and the relationships between characters in particular. Certainly, the great public interest in the current TV show based on *The Handmaid's Tale* will spark further analyses of the text, for which this thesis might offer valuable considerations.

7. References

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8. Appendix

8.1. German abstract

Diese Diplomarbeit beschäftigt sich mit Margaret Atwoods Roman *The Handmaid's Tale* (dt. *Der Report der Magd*) in Verbindung mit Henri Lefebvres und Doreen Masseys theoretischen Überlegungen betreffend das abstrakte Konzept des Raumes, sowie Michel Foucaults Entwürfen von Macht und deren Verteilung. In diesem Sinne werden die verschiedenen Räume, die im Roman beschrieben werden, nach ihrer öffentlichen oder privaten Funktion unterteilt und auf verschiedene Gesichtspunkte hin untersucht: Wie werden bestimmte fiktionale Räume konstruiert? Welche dieser Räume können sich die Protagonisten zu eigen machen? Welche sozialen Praktiken tragen zur Entstehung und Aufrechterhaltung dieser Räume bei, und wie reflektiert der Raum auf die Charaktere und ihr Verhalten? Nach einer eingehenden Auseinandersetzung mit den theoretischen Grundlagen werden die öffentlichen (die Republik Gilead im Allgemeinen, das Red Centre und das Bordell Jezebel's) sowie privaten Schauplätze (Offreds Haushalt, ihr Zimmer und Nicks Apartment) dahingehend untersucht. Darüber hinaus wird der abstrakte Raum von Offreds Gedanken als der wichtigste Raum im Roman untersucht, da sie sich diesen Ort als einzigen vollständig zu eigen machen kann. Die Arbeit veranschaulicht, dass die Protagonisten signifikant dazu beitragen, ihre eigenen Lebensräume zu kreieren, und im Umkehrschluss von den dadurch entstehenden Umständen nachhaltig in ihrem Verhalten und in ihren Einstellungen beeinflusst werden. Auf diese Weise wird die Wichtigkeit des Raumkonzeptes für die Analyse literarischer Werke hervorgehoben.

8.2. English abstract

This thesis is concerned with Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* in connection with Henri Lefebvre's and Doreen Massey's conceptual reflections regarding the abstract concept of space, as well as Michel Foucault's theories on power and its distribution. The various spaces depicted in the novel will therefore be categorised after their public or private function and analysed with regard to several aspects: how are different fictional spaces constructed? Which of these spaces can be appropriated by characters, and for which reasons? Which social practices are employed to form a distinct model of space in the respective spaces

under analysis, and how does space reflect on characters and their behaviour? After an in-depth examination of the theoretical basis, the public (the Republic of Gilead in general, the Red Centre, and Jezebel's) as well as private spaces (Offred's household, her room, and Nick's apartment) will be analysed. Furthermore, Offred's mental space will be examined as the most important space in the novel, as it is the only space she can fully and truly appropriate. This thesis exemplifies that the protagonists contribute significantly to the formation of their own living spaces, and are in turn substantially influenced by the resulting social circumstances. In this way, the importance of the concept of space as a tool for literary analysis is highlighted.