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**Abstract:** Margaret Atwood's postmodern writings seem to be influenced by the literary tradition that defines the imaginary of western culture, myths and tales. It is the aim of this analysis to show and demonstrate how these works from the literary tradition are re-written and re-interpreted in *The Handmaid's Tale* whose dystopian world is consciously deeply rooted in the Judeo-Christian scriptures and unconsciously the folk-tale tradition of *The Arabian Nights* and the Grimm Brothers, concretely in "Snow White".

**Keywords:** *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood, Scheherazade, Bible, fairy-tale, doppelgänger.

**Elena NAVARRO LÓPEZ**

***The Handmaid's Tale: A Twisted Mirror of Fairy-tales in a Dystopian Narration***

#### **0. Introduction**

This paper presents an interpretation of Margaret Atwood's novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, based on the Bible and fairy-tales. This is going to be done through the study of the novel's narrative structure and its characters, which are considered as a re-writing and re-interpretation of the texts mentioned since some of their mythemes are replicated in Atwood's book. This approach to the novel is supported by the fact that Atwood does often make a parodies of influential texts of popular culture (Wilson 12) alongside with other female feminist authors who have similarly revisited the Scriptures or fairy-tales to convey a

new feminist message in works such as Ursula K. Le Guin's *She Unnames Them* (1985) or Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* (1979).

The act of re-writing is a common and useful practice in literature that has happened since the beginning of literature as Genette claims when he states, "any writing is re-writing and literature is always in a second degree" and that "the perpetual transfusion or transtextual perfusion of literature" (9). The act of re-writing is essential to understand stories since "tales have been revised and duplicated through the years" (Zipes 10). The starting point of fairy-tales is orality but with the rise of literacy and the invention of the printing press, they underwent a revolution in which they changed forms and themes (Zipes 10) when they became an inspiration source for new works.

This is relevant to see how those texts from the literary popular tradition are used as a re-writing in *The Handmaid's Tale*, a novel that presents a dystopian setting where the human race is in decay very few babies are coming to the world and those that are born are unhealthy due to sexually transmitted diseases and pollution. To solve this problem, the government of the Republic of Gilead<sup>1</sup> uses the story of Rachel and her slave Bilhah from the *Bible* in which Rachel, who is barren, gives children to her husband thanks to her slave. The book quotes the specific biblical passage: "Give me children, or else I die. Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb? Behold my maid Bilhah. She shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her" (Atwood 138). In the book, women are fundamentally divided in two different categories, Wives and Handmaids. In the book, fertile women who have sinned in their pre-Gilead life become Handmaids, women who are at the service of the Commanders and their Wives to bear the children they were unable to have. Gilead is seen by people as the perfect solution to the infertility and moral problems that country was facing.

However, the utopia that the ruling classes create for themselves configures a dire dystopia for the women enslaved for reproductive purposes, since "for the pursuit of perfection, the perfect place and society, can also lead to rigid if not totalitarian societies" (Hintz and Ostry 11). By showing the world under a different spectrum to the one that readers are used to, fairy-tales and dystopias allows us to reflect about sociocultural dynamics, in this case, the oppression that women suffer. According to Irigaray, women were the "unknown 'infrastructure' of the elaboration of that social life and culture" (174).

In the novel, Handmaids become a visible infrastructure of the future of humankind by their reproductive functions by turning them into invisible women and individuals. This is revealed through the references to biblical texts and fairy-tales, which already form part of the reader's cultural background knowledge and, according to Zipes, are present in the daily life of readers in a conscious and an unconscious way (4). This book contains conscious references to the *Bible* and unconscious ones to *The Arabian Nights* and to the *Grimm's Household Tales*, specifically the stories of "Little Snow White" and "Little Red Riding Hood". Albeit the latter seems to be a most evident reference for critics like Sharon Rose Wilson, this paper is not going to focus on its analysis given Wilson's interpretation of the novel's protagonist, Offred, as an already eaten Red Cap who finally escapes.

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<sup>1</sup> Fictional theocratic regime located in the territory of the United States.

The *Bible* conforms the foundation upon which Atwood formulates *The Handmaid's Tale's* world, the Republic of Gilead, and the system that governs character's lives. Besides, the main character and narrator of *Arabian Nights*, Scheherazade, can be seen as source of inspiration for the narrative structure, which is formed upon the basis of the day and night dichotomy, upon the metanarrative pattern of a story within a story and upon the fact that both are female narrators that are telling their story in order to survive. Finally, it is influenced by the story and characters from "Snow White". The figures replicated are Snow of White, who can be seen in Offred, Handmaid; the Evil Queen, who has many things in common with Serena Joy, Wife, and a sort of Prince Charming, represented by Nick, the guardian that saves the narrator.

### **1. A Religious Fundamentalist Reading**

Among the different references that are contained within *The Handmaid's Tale*, the biblical ones are the most salient and conscious ones. The novel's world is built, according to a Tan's opinion, over "the distortion of the Old Testament Texts, or simply 'biblical fundamentalist'" (96). The fundamentalist reading of the *Bible* consists on the belief that what is described in the sacred book is absolute truth, a premise that is perceived by critics like Marchadour and Neuhaus as dangerous for people who search in the *Bible* the solution to their daily life problems instead of seeing the scriptures as a text that can be interpreted (152-153).

#### **1.1 Creation of the Dystopian Bilha**

The novel's world is ruled by the faithful interpretation of the scriptures in order to suit the purposes of the Government which can be summarized by "*Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth*" (Atwood 138). In order to follow the order given by God to Adam, they decide to rely on a biblical passage described by the book as,

[...] the mouldy old Rachel and Leah stuff we had drummed into us at the Centre. *Give me children, or else I die. Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb? Behold my maid Bilhah. She shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her.* And so on and so forth. (Atwood 138)

From the fragment can be inferred that Wives need to be mothers to be complete, while Handmaids, like the narrator, serve to help the Wife to fulfil said purpose in life. In order to get the Handmaids to endure their task they have been brainwashed to accomplish their duty, as evinced by the narrator's use of the verb "drummed" to describe how they were told to become the Bilhah's of the Wives (138).

In addition to institute the figure of the Handmaid, the fundamentalist reading of Rachel's passage from the Old Testament also constitutes the inspiration for the Ceremony rite. The Ceremony is the institutionalized act of reproduction in Gilead, in which the Commander reads out loud some passages from the *Bible*, primarily *Genesis*, to all the people that live in the house, they pray and the sexual act takes place. This sexual act follows the Scriptures to the letter, since Rachel's words, "And she said, Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by

her." (*King James Bible*, Gen. 30. 3), are taken literally and so the Handmaid places herself between the Wife's knees holding hands and the Commander as can be seen from Offred description:

I lie on my back, fully clothed except for the healthy white cotton underdrawers. [...] Serena Joy is arranged, outspread. Her legs are apart, I lie between them, my head on her stomach, her pubic bone under the base of my skull, her thigh on either side of me. She too is fully clothed, My arms are raised; she holds my hands, each of mine in each of hers. This is supposed to signify that we are one flesh, one being. What it really means is that she is in control, of the process and thus of the product. [...] Below it the Commander is fucking. (Atwood 145-146)

The biblical passage is misinterpreted and twisted by Gilead authorities in the Ceremony since there is no explanation of how these reproduction acts of took place in the Scriptures. Moreover, this posture does not only apply to the sexual act but also to the moment of giving birth in order to show this woman's union, in this case, the words are literally read and not interpreted like in the Ceremony. Nevertheless, Gilead does not take into account the fact that Rachel's petition for having children does not respond to God's command but to the envy that she suffers from her sister who is also married to her husband "And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, Give me children, or else I die" (Gen. 30. 1).

If anything, with this system Gilead's government also seeks to ensure that the women from the ruling class do not envy those women who, despite their sinful lives, are still able to procreate. However, as Tan claims, the "possible influence over their masters was not represented in the biblical text", yet Gilead takes people's belief in the *Bible* as God's word to make them believe that what the Government stays is only God's will, however they take into account only part of the sacred text and interpret it in order to suit their purposes. Therefore, the Scriptures do not provide them with the answer to the real life situation since the relation between Wife and Handmaid is not as peaceful and free of hatred as the relationship between Rachel and her servant would seem. This can be seen in the first meeting between Offred and Serena: "I want to see as little of you as possible, she said. I expect you feel the same way about me [...] I know you aren't stupid [...] As far as I'm concerned, this is like a business transaction. But if I get trouble, I'll give trouble back. You understand?" (Atwood 24). Serena, in her position of power, threatens Offred to make sure that she does not endanger her position by, for instance, influencing her husband. This is an event that is not contemplated in the Scriptures, which are oblivious to the dynamics of the relationship between Bilhah, Jacob and Rachel. Serena threatens Offred again when she states, "I think she is going to hit me, but she doesn't. Just like the other one. A slut. You'll end up the same." (Atwood 442). Serena here does not only insult Offred calling her a slut but threatens her with the allusion to the previous Offred, who was found dead in her room.

Likewise, Offred's thoughts about the first meeting with Serena evince her inferiority as a Handmaid because she narrates that "I didn't answer, as a yes would have been insulting, a no contradictory" (Atwood 24), while in the second meeting she does nothing to

protect herself. Offred is assuming the position of a slave since she does not have the voice to answer, even though the Government does not recognize the existence of slavery since, according to Offred's words, "Nor does rape cover it: nothing is going on here that I haven't signed up for. There wasn't a lot of choice but there was some, and this is what I chose" (Atwood 146). This means that it was her choice to become a Handmaid; the fact that it is her choice means that she cannot be a slave since slavery is not chosen by people since they are treated by objects that can be bought and changed. Despite the fact that the Handmaids seem to have chosen this situation, it has to be considered that they were offered little choice, they could die in the Colonies or they could be as goods that can be changed at any moment by their masters. This can be seen in Serena's threat and primarily in the fact that they do not have a name of their own but their master's name with the preposition of that indicates that they belong to that person (Atwood 469).

### **1.2 Biblical Allusions in Gilead**

The influence of the Scriptures over the novel is also seen in the names that Gilead's government—and thus Atwood—chose for places and institutions, which are quite relevant in the analysis of the *Bible's* influence, namely Gilead, the Rachel and Leah Centre and Jezebel.

Gilead, the name of the Republic in the novel, is the name of the mount where Laban, Rachel's and Leah's father found Jacob, made peace and promised not to harm each other the *Bible* (Gen. 31. 21). Jacob ran away from Laban because he wanted to start a new life without the influence of his father-in-law, who believed in idols and not in the true God. For this reason, it will be plausible to say that the name Gilead in the novel states the new beginning of society without the ill practises of the past in order to follow God's word and save the world through the new babies that are born from the Handmaids.

This is possible thanks to the Rachel and Leah Centre that receives the name from Jacob's wives, who had Handmaids that bare some of their children, in Rachel's case due to her infertility and in Leah's to keep her place as the wife with a greater number of offspring. It is in this centre where women that had committed sinful crimes in the past, like Offred, who married a divorced man; Janine, who aborted; or Moira, who was a lesbian, are detained. The Red Centre is where their indoctrination takes place (Rine 54) and where the Handmaids are taught to serve the Wives, like the first Handmaids, Bilhah and Zilpah, served Rachel and Leah. During their stay in the Centre, the Handmaids are told to be special, and for that the following quotation was used: "Blessed are the meek. She didn't go on to say anything about inheriting the earth" (Atwood 100). This quote shows again how Gilead uses the *Bible* to suit their purposes by not reciting the entire verse "Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth" (Matt. 5. 5). By avoiding the second part of the verse they convey a new message in which they take away the fact that the Handmaids would enjoy God's favour instead of being just the cursed women society wants to portrait.

Finally, Jezebel is the brothel for high class men. In this place work the women who are considered sinful and are "those who couldn't be assimilated" (Atwood 368) by the system because they do not want to bear children but did not want to go to the Colonies, a place where they are sent to work and die due to the bad conditions. These women have to satisfy the sexual desires of the Commanders of Gilead at Jezebel while the Wives remain at

home. In the Scriptures, Jezebel was a wife of the king of Israel, Ahab, a pagan who is described as a sinner who committed fornication, seduced God's servants and believed in false gods and that did not repent from sin (Rev. 2. 20-21).<sup>2</sup>

That Gilead's brothel is named after this famous biblical prostitute presents it as the place where men from Gilead's government abandon the righteous practises that Gilead establishes and allow themselves to be sinful like the servants seduced by Jezebel. In addition to this, Jezebel is not only the brothel that the Commander and Offred visit, but also a part of the novel that includes Moira's story, Offred's friend before the constitution of Gilead and one of Jezebel's prostitutes. In the chapters that compose this section, it can be seen how Offred influences Serena to let her be with Nick under the excuse of procreation, even though she already knows she is pregnant, and the Commander, who lets her be free in his room and who takes her to the Jezebel when that is strictly forbidden. So it can be said that in this section Offred represents the role of Jezebel since she is able to influence other people to do her will, even though it is against the establishment, the same way the biblical character did.

## 2. The Dystopian Tale-telling

Whereas the *Bible* is explicitly present in the book, fairy-tales are so in a less obvious way. Before starting to analyse how fairy-tales are developed in this novel, it is necessary to understand the relationship between the *Bible* and fairy-tales. This relation is clearly explained by Zipes, who says that humans need to incorporate and enhance myths in their daily lives to experiment a genuine religious experience since tales had a clear religious "initiatory" responsibility that was lost with time (1-2). Fairy tales were considered mirrors to contemplate the reflection of past times and the religion of the ancestors of humankind (Carus 186) for this reason, the *Bible* and fairy-tales are considered objects of study to myth criticism.

Nevertheless, there are many differences between a sacred text and a fairy-tale which are relevant for the analysis. The main difference is that whereas the *Bible* is the word of God and cannot be changed, fairy-tales started as oral folk tales that were later written down. The first influence of folk tales on this novel is the reference to oral narration since the narrator's story is recorded in tapes which can suggest the traditional way of transmitting stories likewise a continuation of the classical form of tales collections like the *Arabian Nights*, *The Canterbury Tales* (1381), or in the *Decameron* (1351). Being the *Arabian Nights* and its narrator, Scheherazade, the major influenced that can be traced in Atwood's novel.

### 2.1 The Captive Narrator

The *Arabian Nights* is a collection of Middle East folktales presented by Scheherazade, the narrator and at the same time the protagonist of the frame-story since she is using the tale

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<sup>2</sup> "Notwithstanding I have a few things against thee, because thou sufferest that woman Jezebel, which calleth herself a prophetess, to teach and to seduce my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed unto idols. /And I gave her space to repent of her fornication; and she repented not." (Rev. 2. 20-21)

telling act to delay her death and to change king Shahryar and end his custom of killing his brides after the wedding night because he was once betrayed by his wife. Scheherazade is able to delay her death for one thousand and one nights, after which she is pardoned by the king who finally considers her his wife. As it has been mentioned, in the *Arabian Nights*, Scheherazade's tales are inside other tales that will correspond to the main narration. For instance, in "The Porter and the Three Ladies of Baghdad" there is the event that happens in this story and then the different stories told by the porter, the guests and the ladies. In the novel, it can be seen how Offred mixes stories from her past, such as her relationship with her husband, Luke, or her stay in the Red Centre with what is happening to her in the present.

These two female narrators do not only share their narrative structure but also, according to Stein, just as Scheherazade narrates to save her life, so Offred relates her story, being a "Scheherazade of the future, telling her story to save her life" (269). The fact that she is telling the story means that she continues living, even though, in Offred's case, the very act of narrating implies risking her life, whereas Scheherazade was asked to continue her stories by the Sultan (Stein 270).

Besides this fact, it has to be taken into account that both rely on orality, which links them with the folk tradition that is to be transcribed into written text. In Scheherazade's case, this can be seen in how king Shahryar orders to transcribe the tales after pardoning her life:

King Shahryar summoned chroniclers and copyists and bade them write all that had betided him with his wife, first and last; so they wrote this and named it "The Stories of the Thousand Nights and A Night". The book came to thirty volumes and these the King laid up in his treasury (*Nights* 61; vol. 10)

In Offred's case, her story is a transcription of a collection of thirty tapes, the same number of volumes that Scheherazade's tales had according to the extract of *Arabian Nights*. The Handmaid's stories began with some songs as a camouflage and are ordered afterwards by scholars. The fact that the tapes were camouflaged shows that telling her story as a Handmaid is an act of disobedience, since Gilead banned writing and reading to women to silence them. In addition to this, the fact that they are tapes allows the reader to know that she might be alive after escaping the Commander's house, the same way that the transcription of Scheherazade's story tells the reader that she was able to survive. Nevertheless, for Offred this is not a certainty and her ending could be different since the government of Gilead is not interested on hearing her story and change like Shahryar was moved by Scheherazade's tales. As Stein claims, the narration of Offred's story makes her part both of the victimization and the resistance of the republic of Gilead (269), just as Scheherazade is a possible victim of king Shahryar for being his bride, but at the same time she is part of the resistance because she offers herself as a bride in order to try to stop the women's slaughter.

## **2.2 A Day and Night Narration**

Being female narrator is the most obvious aspect that Offred and Scheherazade's share, besides the fact that both are being repressed by patriarchal power, and that both narrations are established upon the dichotomy between day and night. In Scheherazade's case, it is during the night when she relates her tales and nights are what divide in chapters her stories. Though Offred's narration takes place in the two different moments of the day, the story she narrates in each moment is different. Daytime narrations are formed by chapters 1 to 5<sup>3</sup> and are related either with a particular place or event, in which the Handmaid remembers her life before Gilead and during its early days. The night-time sections formed by a single chapter called "Night" is the only times when Offred can enjoy of some freedom (Ketter 210),<sup>4</sup> as Offred claims: "the night is mine, my own time, to with as I will, as long as I am quiet" (Atwood, 59). Reversely, Scheherazade's free time is the day, a period totally unknown to the reader since the text is constituted only by the tales related to the king.

One last thing that they have in common is that, in addition to tale-telling, the fact that they are able to bear children is what saves them from death. On one hand, Scheherazade's life is pardoned when she reveals to the king Shahryar that she had three children, even though the king assures her that she was pardoned before even seeing them. On the other hand, though Offred is ultimately saved by Mayday,<sup>5</sup> it could be argued that her first salvation comes when she avoids being condemned to the Colonies by joining the Handmaid's program thanks to her fertility. Moreover, when she gives birth to a child for the Commander, a child that is in fact Nick's, is what in the end makes him help her contact Mayday. At the end, as Stein claims in her essay, the triumph of the Scheherazade figure to save herself comes from her sexuality and her narration, and the fact that it is a framed story allows the reader to explore the ambiguities of interpretation (272-273).

### 3. Serena's Mirror: June

The relevance of "Little Snow White" to the text's central action comes from the relationship of the two women, Snow White and the Evil Queen (Gilbert & Gubar 36), which in Atwood's novel is represented by the relationship between Wife and Handmaid. In this case, the Wife can be identified with the Evil Queen as she has the power to cause the death of the Handmaid if necessary,<sup>6</sup> as with Serena's insinuation about the death of the last Offred; while Offred would be the naïve Snow White whose beauty, in the Handmaid's case her fertility, threatens the position of the Queen/Wife.

In addition, it is in the relation between Offred and Serena Joy that the reader can understand better the alienation that women suffer in this dystopian patriarchal world due to the attempt to fix infertility. Both women are victims and prisoners of this system and are very much alike, but instead of helping each other, they see the other as an enemy who can

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<sup>3</sup> The "Jezebel" part of the novel belongs to the day division because it is between two "Night", it is formed by 9 chapters which makes it an exception in length to the other day and night divisions of the book.

<sup>4</sup> There is one exception to this which is a part called "Nap" that is considered part of the night sections for its relation with sleeping and being between two day parts.

<sup>5</sup> Mayday is a secret resistance group inside the Republic of Gilead. They work to overthrow the Republic of Gilead from within.

<sup>6</sup> See page 44 of the present study.



be destroyed by their opponent. This, in fact, constitutes the core dynamic of many doppelgänger stories, in which the ego of the protagonist is threatened by the appearance of his alter ego, leading to a conflict that is solved by death, for instance in *William Wilson* (1839) by E. A. Poe, or in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) by R. L. Stevenson. According to Gilbert and Gubart, the same happens in "Snow White", since the conflict between the Evil Queen and Snow White is one between "woman and woman, self and self" (37).

### 3.1 A Doppelgänger Snow White

As such, to analyse the myth of the doppelgänger might help us understand the relationship between Wife and Handmaid as a mirror of the relationship between the two female characters of "Little Snow White". Serena has no relevance for her husband and the appearance of Offred only makes things more complicated for her to keep her husband's love and attention, since she cannot compete against her in terms of fertility and youth, the same way the Evil Queen feels threatened by Snow White's beauty and youth.

This fear of the doppelgänger can be understood as "an imagined figure, a soul, a shadow, a ghost or a mirror reflection [ . . . ] the psychological power of the double lies in its ambiguity, in the fact that it can stand for contrast or opposition, but likeness as well" (Živkovic 122). In it, the relationship of the Wife-Handmaid is inscribed, because the Handmaid is not only a figure in which the Wife can see the personification her desire of being a fulfilled woman through the Handmaid's fertility but also a threat for that same reason. The Handmaid has what the Wife lacks so she can be seen as a desirable woman by the husband and can take everything that belongs to the Wife.

Serena's fear is very clear since the beginning of their relation, when Serena informs Offred that she wants to see her as little as possible (Atwood 23) because the Handmaid's presence is a symptom of her failure as a woman for being barren. Moreover, when Serena tells Offred that "As for my husband, she said, he's just that. My husband. I want that to be perfectly clear. Till death do us part. It's final" (Atwood 25), she is warning Offred and showing that she is the one in power. At the same time, it is a clue of Serena's insecurities; Offred can give to the Commander what he wants and not her. This threat settles the rivalry between them which "typically develops between the 'original' and his double, which gives rise to complex relations of domination and counter-domination." (Marcus 192), when the ego perceives the threat of the other she starts confronting it.

However, if we pay attention to the characteristics that a Wife can envy from a Handmaid, there is the fact that the latter can be more beautiful and sexually attractive thanks to her youth, but also that her attraction might emanate instead from the appeal of her reproductive capacity despite her physique. In Serena's case this causes her even greater distress since she was considered an impressive woman due to her physical appearance and her voice (Atwood 25), whereas the only characteristics that Offred has are having brown hair and fertile ovaries. This description can relate to the Evil Queen's beauty before the blooming of Snow White. This is also a way to display one of the doppelgänger's characteristics that establishes that "the 'original' is ontologically prior to her double (provided the story states who is who) and tends to use this for claiming priority over his

double" (Marcus 192). This superiority is demonstrated through the physical qualities that made Serena superior to Offred for being Serena de original ego.

Even though Serena seemed to be better according to the stereotypes that rule women's life in this novel, her value is not as high as Offred's since, according to Irigaray "Woman's price is not determined by the 'properties' of her body—although her body constitutes the material support of that price" (Irigaray 177), as a consequence of this, a woman's value is a sum of different qualities. Offred is the one who has greater value for being still fertile, which is the aspect most valued in Gilead, unlike Serena, just as it happens with Snow White, who is better valued than the Queen.

Serena's insecurities are neither new in women's lives nor a new thing in literature as evinced in "Little Snow White". In the tale, the Queen, who is Snow White's step-mother, was obsessed with her beauty for she was the most beautiful woman in the kingdom. However, Snow White was growing up and when she asked her mirror who was the fairest and it answered that it was Snow White, the Queen "was shocked, and turned yellow and green with envy. From that hour, whenever she looked at Snow White, her heart heaved in her breast, she hated the girl so much" (Grimm 48). The Queen could not bear that fact and decided that killing Snow White was the best solution to recover her power position because in the tale's context beauty is the value that a woman needs to have, the same way fertility is the value by which women are measured in Gilead. In both cases, we see how the younger character embodies all things that the older one wants and desires, which is an example of the rivalry between the original and her doppelgänger, or a representation of what is defined as "confrontations, in consciousness, of what the unconscious cannot deny" (Vardoulakis 102) between the ego and the doppelgänger. In the tale's case, this is translated into the loss of youth and beauty in favour of a new individual who is there to take the place of the original in both, an idea that can also be applied to the novel.

Even though doppelgängers are associated with evil, Vardoulakis claims that they can be also presented in a positive way as long as the ego feels threatened by this alter ego (100). Besides, in Snow White there is the idea, according to Gilbert and Gubar, that "Snow White is destined to replace the Queen because the Queen hates her rather than vice versa" (38). This is precisely what happens in the relationship between Serena and Offred, in which Offred was disappointed as she wanted to turn the Wife into a "motherly figure" (Atwood 25), someone who would understand and protect her, but instead of that she receives Serena's hate the same way Snow White is despised in the fairy-tale.

In order to have a doppelgänger, the story does not only require to have a double that impersonates the aspects that its original desires the most, as it happens in this kind of doppelgänger, but also that the ego can see that this other person is a reflection of her desires; in other words, that they share common features. According to Marcus, "the double is never identical to his 'original' in every respect" (191) which is the reason why, even though Serena and Offred cannot seem much alike and thus have a doppelgänger relationship, they do share meaningful characteristics that confirm the opposite. To begin with, both of them are singers, as Serena was a singer in the Songs of Gospel Hour, while Offred used to sing at her mother's request when she was a child and sings religious and love songs during her time at the Commander's house. Moreover, both have stopped singing

at specific periods. Serena ceased her career when she started to give political speeches, until she has to renounce them as well because Gilead requires her to help her husband's career by not having one of her own. Offred stopped singing because it caused her throat ache. Regardless of this fact, Offred as the narrator has a voice while Serena remains in a secondary position like the Evil Queen in "Little Snow-White".

Another thing they have in common is smoking. Serena acquires cigarettes from the black market since she can afford it and has good connections, while Offred envies her since she cannot enjoy that pleasure. The fact that they smoke is quite relevant since it shows that they do not conform entirely to the ideal of femininity that the government of Gilead wants to establish as part of its patriarchal system. Even though they try to forbid smoking on the grounds of health reasons, the men who rule Gilead smoke, drink and have sex with unwomen at Jezebel's because, in their hypocrisy, they feel superior to women. However, this superiority is questioned by the fact that Serena and Offred know how to manipulate the Commander to get what they want, or in Serena's case, she knew, since after Offred's arrival she loses this capacity in favour of the younger woman.

In addition, they are both the property of the same man. If Serena became so when she married, which means that it was her own decision, in Offred's case, this happens as an imposition from the State that left her no alternative. It is in Offred that we can see a greater degree of belonging to the Commander than in the Wife's case, given that she has no name of her own but the name of her owner and that she has it tattooed in braille in her ankle while Serena has it on a ring which she can get rid of if she wished.

In fact, like Offred, Serena does also have a fake name as this "was never her real name, not even then. Her real name was Pam" (Atwood 71). This shows another parallelism between both women and also Serena's desire of being a different woman, an idea that suggests that she is not comfortable with who she is and, consequently, Offred becomes a mirror in which she reflects the desired version of herself.

This is not the only thing that torments Serena since what she desires is to have the husband's attention and affection, a wish that can be seen during the Ceremony in which the rite is shameful for both Wife and Handmaid, since Serena is unable to follow the Gilead standards due to the pain of feeling replaced:

You can get up now,' she says. 'Get up and get out.' She's supposed to have me rest, for ten minutes, with my feet on a pillow to improve the chances. This is meant to be a time of silent meditation for her, but she's not in the mood for that. There is loathing in her voice, as if the touch of my flesh sickens and contaminates her. I untangle myself from her body, stand up; the juice of the Commander runs down my legs. [...] she continues lying on the bed, gazing up at the canopy above her, stiff and straight as an effigy. Which of us is it worse for, her or me? (Atwood 149)

What should be a moment of shame and pain for the Handmaid is lessened by the narrator's focus on Serena, the one who feels humiliated by the fact that her husband has had sex with this other ego, a fact that is mentally devastating for her. The Ceremony is the most relevant example of her failure as a woman for being barren; Serena's position is taken

by Offred in front of her eyes without being able to stop it because it is what society asks her to do. Here the virtue of childbearing that was traditionally linked to the Wife in the institution of marriage is removed from her and given to the Handmaid, resulting in the Wife's loss of power.

This is the reason why there is one moment when they work together as a team in this dystopian setting, instead of being in open war with each other. In this occasion, Offred turns into a useful double, described by Marcus as a kind of doppelgänger where "the 'original' craves for a double or doubles in order to take control of his life" (208). This happens when they become allies to have a baby fathered by Nick and not the by the Commander. The subversion takes place because Serena is a dystopian Evil Queen, this means that the power she possesses in the fairy-tale has been removed by Gilead and so she in the pursuit of the power the figure demands. Besides, the act of offering Nick to Offred in order to get her pregnant could be also seen as the poisonous apple, since adultery is a capital sin in Gilead, this implies that if Offred is discovered she will die and Serena Joy will eliminate the threat that Offred is.

The confrontation between them takes place at the end of the book when Serena discovers that Offred has betrayed her confidence even though she tried to help her with the pregnancy. Being with the Commander is not what annoys Serena but the fact that she did not know it: "'Behind my back,' she says. 'You could have left me something.' [...] I think she is going to hit me, but she doesn't. [...] Just like the other one. A slut. You'll end up the same.'" (Atwood 412). In the extract, there can be seen the idea of repetition, a non-ending situation in which Serena is always the ego who has to eliminate her doppelgänger in order to survive, but the alter ego always reappears.

### **3.2 Nick, a Kind of Prince Charming**

The last element that has to be taken into account in the analysis of Atwood's novel as a re-writing of "Little Snow White" is Nick, who can be seen as a symbol of the poisonous apple of the story as previously stated, or as "the positive representation" of "'the prince'—the daring young man who saves the maiden" (Miner 164). Nick is seen as the prince as a result of the love affair with Offred that follows the typical roles of fairy tales and romances (Miner 164). However, the fundamental reason for this comparison comes from the fact that Offred's salvation is in part thanks to him, but it is not fully as the stereotypes linked to this figure since it requires that the saving of the damsel in distress to be performed entirely by him alone.

Nick and Offred end up together as part of the plan ideated by her and Serena to get her pregnant, which turns him into a passive prince. At the same time, it is true that without the sexual encounters that Offred has with Nick end up in a pregnancy that provides her the security of not failing to get pregnant for the third time and be sent to the Colonies for her failure. By allowing Serena to have a child would have been the perfect way to achieve her goal and thus be free to get rid of the Handmaid, since they only remain in a household until the end of the period of breastfeeding. Nevertheless, Nick becomes an active character by planning Offred's rescue by Mayday, putting an end to Serena's hope of fulfilment and social

approbation. In order to save Offred, Nick puts at risk his life (Minner 161) and persuades the narrator to escape with the two eyes "It's all right. It's Mayday. Go with them" (451).

#### 4. Conclusion

Taking everything that has been said into consideration, it would be plausible to state that *The Handmaid's Tale* takes inspiration from the *Bible* and classical fairy-tales, such as those that have been studied in the present work, *The Arabian Nights* and "Little Snow White". This inspiration can be seen through the novel as a kind of re-writing in which the author uses these texts to convey a new story. The tales are seen as a reflection of the value that patriarchal societies give to women, as it can be seen in Irigaray's essay where it is explained that women are considered commodities instead of people, who have to keep their beauty, youth and fertility unharmed, which is something that is reflected upon the novel from the very beginning with the use of Rachel's biblical story that creates the division of women between Wives and Handmaids.

In addition to the quoting of several of its passages, the *Bible* is clearly seen as an influence that Atwood does not hide, as she articulates Gilead as based upon the fundamentalist interpretation of this religious text. The re-writing of the *Bible* starts with the use of the Old Testament as source for the rules of Gilead and the moral standards that its citizens, especially women, have to follow. Besides, the fundamentalist reading of several passages from *Genesis* creates the institution of the Handmaid and its associated rites, like the Ceremony and the way Handmaid's give birth to the Wife's offspring. The name of the nation itself is taken from the Mount of Testimony where Jacob and Laban promise not to harm each other, a reference that could be related with the beginning of a new society without the ill practises of the past that follows God's command and whose mission is to save the world from the immorality of past times. The Rachel and Leah centre takes its name from Jacob's wives, whose handmaids serve as the model for this figure. The last reference from the *Bible* analysed is Jezebel, the brothel, where powerful men like the Commander do not follow the precepts that they expect women and the lower classes to follow. It is a place where they can get rid of the moral standards that they have imposed to society, which shows the hypocrisy and corruption of the ruling class and its fundamentalist reading of the *Bible*, since the high classes of Gilead consider themselves above the rest of society. The other sources are fairy-tales, whose features like the oral narrator and framed stories relate Atwood's novel with *The Arabian Nights*, which also presents thematic similarities between Offred and Scheherazade since they are both prisoners of male rulers, who are saved by storytelling and by childbearing, and whose stories are transcribed into books. There is also the fact of the day and night division that helps to separate the different chapters in both stories.

The last folk tale that was analysed was "Little Snow White" that features a similar doppelgänger relationship between its protagonist and antagonist than the one between Serena and Offred, which highlights the alienation of women that provokes hatred and rivalry between women in Gilead. This alienation has been caused by the patriarchal order due to the pressure that women have to endure in a world where they are a product for men that needs to compete with other women for the privileged spot at the lap of the owner. This

is exemplified in the novel in the relationship between Serena and Offred in which Serena's value is low due to her age and barrenness and thus easily replaceable by the Handmaid. The latter's mission is to bear children for couples while preserving the institution of marriage that provides security for women when their value decreases like the Evil Queen who is afraid of being replaced by Snow White. This situation of female rivalry is not solved by the figure of the Handmaid, which only makes the situation worse by forcing the Wife to live with the woman that she considers her enemy, suffering the humiliation of witnessing and participating in the extra-marital sexual relationships of her husband. Handmaid and Wife are both the victims of the society that has taken their freedom from them in order to serve men.

As the present work has studied, *The Handmaid's Tale* is a text filled with literary and cultural allusions that replicates and reconfigures several mythemes. These are used to convey a new story that is enriched by these references that are re-written in a dystopian narration that conveys the dangers of religious fundamentalism and the reality of women's subordination to men.

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