

Moving toward the Very Space of Human Beings' Freedom: The Study of Žižekian Act in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

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Abstract: Margaret Atwood has become one of Canada's major writers in recent decades. Her masterpiece *The Handmaid's Tale* explores an alternate reality, which allows Atwood the space to explore issues of humanity while still remaining removed and keeping a broader perspective in relation to the current reality. Notable studies concentrate on a psychological analysis of the novel. This critical focus is important; but it misses the crucial point that the world, portrayed in the novel, is the representative of any real ideological system in which different discourses operate all together. Therefore, the study of characters' behavior with a methodology that covers both psychological and political elements all at once is still essential. In order to fill the mentioned gap, this essay refers to Slavoj Žižek's theories and concentrates on the notion of act for the purpose of study. This research examines the political notion of act on Margaret Atwood's masterpiece *The Handmaid's Tale* in a psychological ground. It is an attempt to understand the ways the protagonist rejects her own ideological fantasy and creates an alternate reality. This study provides concrete examples of how a protagonist, named Offred, has been rejecting her own ideological fantasy as a Handmaid.

Keywords: Act, Ideological Fantasy, Symbolic Order, Offred

INTRODUCTION

A poet, novelist, short story writer, and author of numerous reviews and critical essays, Margaret Eleanor Atwood has become one of Canada's major writers in recent decades. Atwood wrote her sixth novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, while spending time in both West Berlin and Alabama, in the United States, in the mid-1980s. The novel, which was published in 1986, quickly became a best-seller, selling millions of copies worldwide. The novel *The Handmaid's Tale* has won the author the Booker Prize in Britain, the Governor General's Award in Canada, the Arthur C. Clarke Science Fiction Prize, and the *Los Angeles Times* fiction prize in the United States. Because of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood is described as "the most distinguished novelist under fifty currently writing in English" (Howells, 1995, p. 1). The novel is one that explores an alternate reality, which allows Atwood the space to explore issues of humanity while still remaining removed and keeping a broader perspective in relation to the current reality.

Psychoanalytic theory in relation to Atwood's novel is significant because it brings the unconscious aspect of utterance out through the analysis of characters, relations, and situations. Most critics of psychoanalysis are concerned with the theme of the construction of identity and use a psychological approach. Notable studies concentrate on a psychological analysis and deals with the construction and reconstruction of characters' identities and bodies together with the construction and reconstruction of Atwood's texts. They recommend that "constructionism asserts the process of understanding oneself, others, and reality that are depicted in Atwood's work, and corroborates the fact, in connection with system theory, that human beings do not really construct absolutely new things, but transform existing reality" (Müllers, 2000, p. 254-5). This critical focus is important; but

it misses the crucial point that the world, portrayed in the novel, is the representative of any real ideological system in which different discourses operate all together. Therefore, the study of characters' behavior with a methodology that covers both psychological and political elements all at once is still essential. In order to fill the mentioned gap, this essay refers to Slavoj Žižek's dynamic and complex theories. It intends to offer a comprehensive approach that enables the researcher to show how the political factors are parallel the psychological factors.

Born in 1949, Slavoj Žižek is a Slovenian philosopher and cultural critic who participates in various disciplines such as political theory, film theory, and theoretical psychoanalysis. He has a gifted mind, with a surprisingly understanding of contemporary theory. As Matthew Sharpe maintains, Žižek has written books and articles in Serbo- Croatian, Slovenian, French, English, and German. He has written an extraordinary amount of them such as “intellectual engagements with everything from the history of opera, popular culture, and contemporary theory, to modern philosophy, European cinema, and political events” (Sharpe, 2004, p. 2). Žižek's works draw on three main areas of influence, philosophy, politics, and psychoanalysis. In each of these areas, Žižek is influenced by the writings of a single individual, “Georg Hegel in philosophy, Karl Marx in politics, and Jacques Lacan in psychoanalysis” (Myers, 2003, p. 14).

This research examines the notion of political act on Margaret Atwood's masterpiece *The Handmaid's Tale* in an attempt to understand the ways the protagonist rejects her own ideological fantasy and creates an alternate reality. This study provides concrete examples of how a protagonist, named Offred, has been reflecting, revising, criticizing, and rejecting her own ideological fantasy as a Handmaid actively. By investigating how Offred uses her narration to resist Gilead's severe control, this essay shows the ways she gradually rejects the symbolic values in her rebirth or what is called by Žižek as her political act.

ŽIŽEKIAN ACT: THE ONLY WAY OUT

Studying Žižek is a stimulating experience, “one is simultaneously informed, edified, and entertained” (Sciull 296); his courage and willingness to criticize leftist conventions and common sense is attractive even when he is wrong, even when “his political judgment is questionable,” and even when “his taste is bad” (Hart, 2002, p. 556). Žižek’s reworking of political notions introduces the concept of fantasy into the political field. For this end, he concentrates on the prohibition, supervision, and direction of “the ways ideological formations work as economic of enjoyment.” Žižek proposes, “ideological formation is more than a set of different elements constituted as a set by virtue of a certain nodal point” (Glynos, 2001, p. 191-214).

Lacan’s favourite keynote on the matter of fantasy, often quoted by Žižek, is “desire is the desire of the other” (Žižek, 1997, p. 49). In other words, “what sets our desire in motion, thus allowing us to construct those historically mediated fantasies that constitute what we perceive as our self, our unique identity, is always our radical indecision *vis-à-vis* the other’s desire” (Vighi & Feldner, 2007, p. 44). Žižek avers:

One should always bear in mind that the desire ‘realized’ (staged) in fantasy is not the subject’s own, but the other’s desire: fantasy, phantasmic formation, is an answer to the enigma of *Chevuoi?*- ‘You’re saying this, but *what do you really mean by saying it?*’ - which established the subject’s primordial, constitutive position. The original question of desire is not directly ‘What do I want?’, but ‘What do others want from me? What do they see in me? What am I to others?’ (Žižek, 1997, p. 8)

In *Tarrying with the Negative* (1993), Žižek claims that consumerist symbolic order “buys” our support with different rituals such as shopping. Advertisers, also, have today become skillful at selling us products by associating them with images of social and sexual success. Therefore, Consumerism admires a mode of “false enlightenment,” one

that objectifies us as what we might term “enjoying animals” rather than encouraging the autonomous subjectivity enshrined in liberal philosophy (p. 216–19).

To break this plight out, it seems that subjects need a kind of re-birth. The re-birth involves a total rejection of the existing symbolic order and of the symbolic authorization or role assumed for the subject. Žižek avers this re-birth is done only by an act:

The act differs from an active intervention (action) in that it radically transforms its bearer (agent): the act is not simply something I ‘accomplish’-after an act, I’m literally ‘not the same as before’. In this sense, we could say that the subject ‘undergoes’ the act (‘passes through’ it) rather than ‘accomplishes’ it: in it, the subject is annihilated and subsequently reborn (or not), i.e., the act involves a kind of temporary eclipse, *aphanisis*, of the subject. (Žižek, 1992, p. 44)

In other words, the only way out is a radical revolutionary act that rejects or traverses all the founding assumptions of the existing ideological regime with its undergirding political fantasies. In a way, therefore, the act is a kind of attacking at oneself, a form of symbolic suicide.

Applying this notion in Socio-political field, for Žižek politics proper is the political act by which the basic ideology of a political regime is inaugurated. The political act is a total revolution that replaces the old social fantasy with a new social fantasy. This is elaborated in the following:

As for many other contemporary Theorists, for him politics proper in the last instance involves or invokes the arbitrary decision that founds a political community upon a social ideal or form of the highest good, but that also represses into the political unconscious the fundamental social fantasy of that political community (Sharpe & Baucher, 2010, p. 170).

The destruction of the subject’s fantasy in the act is strictly correlative to Hegel’s “night of the world.” For Hegel the mere gesture of subjectivity is “the night of the world,” thus, the act is a return to that gesture, a reinvention from

founding moment of the subject (Myers, 2003, p. 60). Rex Butler (2005) believes that this aspect of act makes the impossibilities achievable, no more than “the actualization of an already existing possibility” (p. 67). As Žižek affirms:

An act does not occur *within* the given horizon of what appears to be ‘possible’ - it redefines the very contours of what is possible (an act accomplishes what, within the given symbolic universe, appears to be ‘impossible’, yet it changes its conditions so that it creates retroactively the conditions of its own possibility). (Žižek, 2000 a, p. 121)

In Žižek’s way, the act, or the negation that opens up the possibility of re-birth is considered as the last result of the West for removing the false enlightenment of Consumerism. For Žižek, postmodern political discourse is set within the horizon of liberal-capitalism. Theorists and politicians may argue about different manifestations of it- such as the development of health service or the problems of taxation- but capitalism itself is never seriously criticized. To resolve the predicaments of the postmodern subject, Žižek invites scholars to reject the “conditions of possibility of postmodernity” in order to change “the horizon in which these predicaments make sense” (Myers, 2003, p. 60). In other words, postmodern subjects should revolt against capital-liberalism. By the very nature of an act, of course, Žižek cannot predict what the symbolic order would look like after a revolution. Žižek is able to only make a judgment for present and his wishes to reject that which is on the stake, capitalism, in the hope that it donates to some extent better situation - a space in which human beings are not paranoid narcissists who have inundated with their “own enjoyment and find pleasure only in servility” (ibid 61).

PROTAGONIST’S ACT: TRAVERSING IDEOLOGICAL FANTASY IN MARGARET ATWOOD’S *THE HANDMAID’S TALE*

The Handmaid’s Tale is concerned with “the necessity for the individual to reject individual retreats” from symbolic order

and to become involved in resistance to authority (Palumbo, 2009, p. 26). What is needed in the symbolic order is a radical and revolutionary act in which the elementary coordinates of the regimes' ideological fantasy are traversed. It is an act that "reaches the utter limit of the primordial forced choice and repeats it in the reverse sense. Such an act presents the only moment when subjects are effectively free" (Žižek, 1992, p. 77). Beneath her apparent passivity, Offred, the narrator, has been reflecting, revising, criticizing, and rejecting her own ideological fantasy as a Handmaid actively. She strives to reject her symbolic identification and explores her power through her practices and reconstruction of her beliefs by narration. In this regard, Offred actively resists the overall ideology of symbolic order by narrating her story, attaching to new Ego-Ideal, and finally escaping from Gilead.

A strategy used by Offred to attack the sovereignty of the Gileadian order is to narrate the story orally. She narrates:

I would like to believe this is a story I'm telling [...] It isn't a story I'm telling.

It's also a story I'm telling, in my head; as I go along, Tell, rather than write, because I have nothing to write with and writing is in any case forbidden. But if it's a story, even in my head.

I must be telling it to someone. You don't tell a story only to yourself. There's always someone else.

Even when there is no one.

A story is like a letter. Dear You, I'll say. Just you, without a name. Attaching a name attaches you to the world of fact, which is riskier, more hazardous: who knows what the chances are out there, of survival, yours? I will say you, you, like an old love song. You can mean more than one.

You can mean thousands. I'm not in any immediate danger, I'll say to you.

I'll pretend you can hear me. (*HT* 123)

Inviting readers to listen to her story, she leads them to a new type of communication; she believes subjects "must explore various ways to communicate with one another cross-culturally if they are to develop political solidarity" (Dodson,

1997, p. 84). “Although forced into complicity by fear during her postings,” the narrator threatens the regime’s political fantasy by telling her tale (Freibert, 1988, p. 285). In other words, through narrating her story, Offred demonstrates her act to break the domination imposed by the symbolic ideology, further, to establish a favorable history. It indicates that her oral story function as history. Thus, it is important that Offred’s story is an oral narrative because, exactly as the definition of act by Žižek, it does not participate in the official discourse of the Gileadean language. Radical act, here, explicitly rejects or traverses all the founding assumptions of the existing ideological regime, with its undergirding political fantasies (Žižek, 1997, p. 39).

Language is a device, which has the potentiality to be used by an individual as a “power against him/her through restriction and suppression” (Bazin, 1991, p. 118). The Handmaids are all cynical subjects whom “synchronized as one” by the big Other, the overcome power of Gilead; but Offred does not feel comfortable with this symbolic mechanisms that is manifested as the color-coded dress, the red robe, and white wimples. By revealing the discomfort in red dress, Offred’s capability in breaking language supports her to reject her current symbolic fantasy. In the second chapter of the novel, the protagonist announces her discomfort as:

If I turn my head so that the white wings framing my face direct my vision towards it, I can see it as I go down the stairs, round, convex, a pier glass, like the eye of a fish, and myself in it like a distorted shadow, a parody of something, some fairy-tale figure in a red cloak, descending towards a moment of carelessness that is the same as danger. (*HT* 9)

It implies her attempt to “turn the traditional meaning of the fairy tales” or the biblical teaching into a paradox, an attempt to use language to reject Gilead’s ideals, and display her unhappiness of the present reality (Stein, 1992, p. 270-3). In Žižekian way, Offred’s dissatisfaction is an evidence to prove that she is not so fully identified with symbolic order’s fantasy, “not all of her being is caught in it;” this is why, for her, “it is easier to acquire a distance towards fantasy, to traverse it” (Žižek, 1999, p. 294). Therefore she can traverse

the fantasy, and accepts “the nonexistence of the big Other” (p. 296).

Offred’s sensitive mind to verbal constraint enables her to recognize that a large amount of biblical phrases and doctrines venerated in Gilead contain a great deal of ambiguities. In order to reject the present ideological fantasy, she uses puns to explain the words she hears with different meanings. She reacts strange when the first time hears about the revolutionary group:

“The grapevine,” she says. She pauses, looks sideways at me, I can sense the blur of white as her wings move.

“There’s a password,” she says.

“A password?” I ask. “What for?”

“So you can tell,” she says. “Who is and who isn’t.”

Although I can’t see what use it is for me to know, I ask,

“What is it then?”

“Mayday,” she says. “I tried it on you once.”

“Mayday,” I repeat. I remember that day. M’aidez. (*HT* 82)

Punning on the words, she interprets the word Mayday, the revolutionary group, as M’aidez, a French offensive statement. She then recalls the real meaning of Mayday, help me. Offred, also, defines “date rape” as a French dessert name:

We studied things like that, then. On the floor of the room there were books, open face down, this way and that, extravagantly.

Now, said Moira. You don’t need to paint your face, it’s only me. What’s your paper on? I just did one on date rape.

Date rape, I said. You’re so trendy. It sounds like some kind of dessert. Date rape. (p. 38)

These short clauses speak Offred’s ability to replace the old social fantasy with a new social fantasy. Some critics like Mario Klarer works on Offred’s narration and searching for different meanings of words. Klarer takes her narration into account as a process that “is not only the key to gaining access to the past but also provides the possibility of anticipating the future, or that which does not yet exist” (Klarer, 1995, p.

134). To be precise, in the language-dominance order of Gilead where words are employed and simplified as wooden signs and biblical scrolls, manipulating language assists Offred to challenge her symbolic fantasy and struggle for another possible fantasy. It is exactly what Žižek believes as “simply the graphic presentation of the relation between signifier and signified” (Žižek, 1995, p. 112). Since “the signified, the meaning, is a function of the big Other” (p. 115) and “the signifier is maintaining its identity through all variations of its signified”, Offred’s punning on the words sets in motion the way of a new “ideological field through the operation of quilting” (p. 111). It puts a new master signifier into the chain of signifiers and traverses Gileadian language.

After traversing the Gileadian language in her act, Offred explores the possibilities for the language of an alternative ideological order in everyday gossip since it can be a channel for the possible symbolic order in future:

The Marthas know things, they talk amongst themselves, passing the unofficial news from house to house. Like me, they listen at doors, no doubt, and see things even with their eyes averted. I’ve heard them at it sometimes, caught whiffs of their private conversations. Stillborn, it was. Or, stabbed with a knitting needle, right in the belly. Jealousy, it must have been, eating her up. Or, tantalizingly. It was toilet cleaner she used. Worked like a charm, though you’d think he’d of tasted it. Must’ve been that drunk; but they found her out all right. (*HT* 11)

Brian Johnson argues “like chatting, gossip about the private lives of social superiors does promote alliance among the gossipers in that it identifies them as belonging to the same social sub-group” (p. 44). This unofficial news (gossips), “passed from house to house,” serves the same function as the women’s lip-read names exchanged “from bed to bed” (*HT* 4). Offred announces “gossip traveling from house to house or bed to bed is an image of alliance, solidarity, and resistance that defines and sustains a distinct social we” (p. 44). Moreover, “the Marthas’ gossip is valuable not simply for the purpose of alliance it serves, but for the way in which it undercuts the

representative figures of the dominant ideology” (Johnson, 1996, p. 44). This destruction of the figures of the dominant ideology will feed, at least, personal act rather than the total rejection of the symbolic order by all subjects. However, we can now add that traversing the ideological fantasies involves understanding that the sublime objects of ideology are not sacred. As Žižek affirms such an act of destruction is, of course, “not without a kind of moral beauty,” but it nonetheless runs contrary to the ethic of present symbolic order; it intends to spare the Other, the confrontation with a established truth that would hurt her by demolishing her Ego-Ideal (Žižek, 1991, p. 41).

One of these gossips was the story of Moira’s escape that “passed among them that night, in the semi-darkness, under their breath, from bed to bed” at the Rachel and Leah Center (*HT* 125). Her disdain for this type of identification in the symbolic order is evident in the fact that she is not only truly happy during the secret meetings with Moira but also she is replacing, unconsciously, Moira as an Ego-Ideal in her fantasy instead of Virgin Mary. Offred fantasizes, the story of Moira’s escape from the Center in this words:

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. We expected her to be dragged in at any minute, as she had been before. We could not imagine what they might do to her this time. It would be very bad, whatever it was. [...] Moira was out there somewhere. She was at large, or dead. What would she do? The thought of what she would do expanded till it filled the room... Moira had power now, she’d been set loose, she’d set herself loose. She was now a loose woman. (p. 124-5)

Offred’s relation with Nick is the result of her identification with new Ego-Ideal; she kisses Nick even though she knows that he could very well be an Eye; when she thinks petty, she put it, “I should have felt evil; by Aunt Lydia’s lights, I was evil. But I didn’t feel evil” (p. 157). The same as Moira, an

intelligent and willful woman, one can say that Offred sees herself as an intelligent and somewhat independent woman who purposefully opposes to the Republic of Gilead. In order “to be a creative non-victim” (Atwood, 1972, p. 38), as one of the demonstrators, for Offred, Moira becomes “externalized as the expectations of the social group to which the individual belongs.” The source of their satisfaction is “the feeling of loyalty to the group.” Offred looks at himself through the eyes of the group, she strives to merit its love and esteem. (Žižek, 1991, p. 64).

The use of religion has such power on the Handmaids that Offred turns to God as a new sublime object of ideology in order to find the strength to overcome this situation. She explains God she is told to pray as:

What we prayed for was emptiness, so we would be worthy to be filled: with grace, with love, with self-denial, semen and babies.

Oh God, King of the universe, thank you for not creating me a man.

Oh God, obliterate me. Make me fruitful. Mortify my flesh, that I may be multiplied. Let me be fulfilled. (*HT* 194)

Offred does not pray the way she is told by the Aunts, rather for the strength to keep on living, she calls her new God:

If I were You I'd be fed up. I'd really be sick of it. I guess that's the difference between us. I feel very unreal, talking to You like this. I feel as if I'm talking to a wall. I wish You'd answer. I feel so alone. All alone by the telephone. Except I can't use the telephone. And if I could, who could I call? Oh God. It's no joke. Oh God oh God. (*HT* 205)

Her new God is not distant to her, but so close, that she even places herself into His place, saying “if I were You,” and sees Him as a friend who should call her not to be alone. Offred does not pray to the avenging God she had been identified with previously, but pray to a new friendly God she herself believe in. Taking into consideration Žižek's emphasis on the effect of signification with respect to the

signifier, in the “floating state” of signifiers, the concept of God as helper “fixes retroactively the meaning of the chain, sews the meaning to the signifiers, halts the sliding of the meanings” (Žižek, 1995, p. 113).

By engaging in this new ritual and identification symbolically with new Ego-Ideal and new sublime object of ideology, Offred has accomplished her act that replaces the old social fantasy with a new social fantasy. Offred’s act develops as she obtains more and more control on her behaviors; it starts manifesting itself in Offred’s observation of her own body. Since she has disciplined her practices, her fantasy toward her own body is changed. She reflects the big difference between “her concept of body as concrete, substantial and multifunctional in the old time, and the void she feels within herself” (Hsieh, 2010, p. 11) after her body becomes obedient:

I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will. There were limits, but my body was nevertheless lithe, single, solid, one with me. Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I’m a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping. It transits, pauses, continues on and passes out of sight, and I see despair coming towards me like famine. To feel that empty, again, again. (HT 74)

It is obvious that Offred does not want to end her life in this way, because she is not the kind of woman who can be or who wants to be regarded as a dignified Handmaid, or martyr. He does not like to be seen as Virgin Mary but likes to be seen like Moira.

According to Brian W. Shaffer, the first time that the protagonist figures the possibility of act is the Latin inscription, “*nolite te bastardes carborundorum,*” means “don’t let the bastards grind you down, which Offred discovers scratched lightly into the floor of her bedroom by her predecessor” (p.150). In fact, her narration helps her in liberating from her ideological fantasy. In this respect, “the

narrator rejects the overall control” on her by creating “her own context,” or her new symbolic order (Husserl, 16). If she had left herself behind, it would have meant that she have not seen herself only as a birth machine, a definition that she is identified with and imposed on her. Towards the end, she resists and does not surrender to the position considered for her; “don’t let the bastards grind you down” (*HT* 197), she advises and so she does. In her “act, far from amounting to a case of impotent aggressivity,” she turns against herself, “rather changes the co-ordinates of the situation in which the subject finds herself” (Žižek, 2000 b, p. 150).

Offred then comes to believe in the existence of an organized resistance on philosophical grounds:

There must be a resistance, a government in exile. Someone must be out there, taking care of things. I believe in the resistance as I believe there can be no light without shadow; or rather, no shadow unless there is also light. There must be a resistance, or where do all the criminals come from, on the television? (*HT* 105)

She reveals the same resisting fantasy when she tries to discover Ofglen’s whereabouts. Offred becomes willing to involve in the rebellious organization at the end of her story. Although Nick’s betrayal was possible, she cooperates with Nick’s instruction and gets onto the Eye’s van. As Žižek puts in plain words, “the hero’s (active subject’s) act, by means of which she disturbs the balance of the socio-ethical totality of *mores*,” is always necessarily experienced by her community as a crime (Žižek, 1999, p. 103). Doing so not only is not she a cynical subject as before but also chooses a more active attitude in creating her ideological fantasy. Offred constructs a new symbolic order as she explains, “this is a reconstruction. All of it is a reconstruction. It’s a reconstruction now, in my head, as I lie flat on my single bed rehearsing what I should or should not have said, what I should or shouldn’t have done, how I should have played it” (*HT* 134).

The novel ends in a traversed symbolic order by Offred and the Handmaid’s fate ultimately unknown, as her final words offers:

The van waits in the driveway; its double doors stand open. The two of them, one on either side now, take me by the elbows to help me in. Whether this is my end or a new beginning I have no way of knowing: I have given myself over into the hands of strangers, because it can't be helped.

And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light.
(*HT* 307)

Departing from the Commander's house and climbs into the van, the female protagonist confronts all the risks and possibilities of her act. She seems to enter consciously into a process of becoming the subject of another symbolic order. Hélène Cixous and Clement (1986) believes "through the same opening that is her danger, she comes out of herself to go to the other, a traveler in unexplored places; she does not refuse, she approaches, not to do away with the space between, but to see it, to experience what she is not, what she is, what she can be" (p. 86). In a way, therefore, Offred's act is exactly, as what Žižek defines, "a way of striking at yourself, a form of Symbolic suicide" (Myers, 2003, p. 60). Offred's act, or the negation that opens up the possibility of re-birth, changes its conditions so that it creates retroactively the conditions of its own possibility (Žižek, 2000 a, p. 222). In this way, "with an act, *strictosensu*, we can therefore never fully foresee its consequences, i.e., the way it will transform the existing symbolic space: the act is a rupture after which nothing remains the same" (Žižek, 1992, p. 45). Therefore, by the very nature of an act, of course, Žižek cannot predict what the symbolic order would look like after an act, or what future is waiting for Offred as she announces "and so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light" (*HT* 307).

CONCLUSION

Explaining ideological symbolic orders is always Atwood's subject in her novels and poetry. An in-depth analysis of her novel *The Handmaid's Tale* offers that it is profoundly

political; her novel represents the subjects' conflict with power and its forms: dictatorship, tyranny, torture, and the reality of violence (Rigney, 1987, p. 104). For Atwood, literature is a political device to show the behavior of subjects in a symbolic order. In other words, Atwood's portrayal of the order referred in *The Handmaid's Tale* includes the investigation of political elements.

Contemplation on political notions introduces fantasy as a psychological implication into the political field. The concept of fantasy does not include what we would describe as daydreams and it is not concerned with the reality principle. It is postulated to be the reservoir of innate, unconscious images and knowledge, which has been built up because of phylogenetic inheritance (Watt, Cockcroft, & Duncan, 2010, p. 74). It was argued "desire is always the desire of the Other" (Žižek, 1997, p. 9). Fantasy plays an important role in symbolic registration and identification. It leads to such subjugation that all people become cynical subjects. The only way out is a radical traversing of the existing ideological regime, or act.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, a dystopian fiction, Margaret Atwood "focuses on society, not on the cosmos, and it has a primarily social-political message, a didactic intent to address the Ideal Reader's moral sense and reason as it applies to the protagonist's - and our own - place in society and in history" (Gottlieb, 2001, p. 15). This fiction is a "device to solve a problem facing writers of dystopian speculative fiction: to prompt readers to change the world" (Murphy, 1990, p. 26). Therefore, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, as an example of dystopian fiction, Margaret Atwood seeks to construct a society as a critique of what is happening now in the world. The results of this thesis indicate that Offred's dissatisfaction is an evidence to prove that she is not so fully identified with symbolic order's fantasy, "not all of her being is caught in it;" this is why, for her, "it is easier to acquire a distance towards fantasy, to traverse it" (Žižek, 1999, p. 294). The novel portrays the act of a brave protagonist who rejects the symbolic values through narrating her oral story, attaching to new Ego-Ideal, and finally escaping from Gilead.

Offred's story is exactly as the definition of act by Žižek; it does not participate in the official discourse of the Gileadean language. Radical act, here, explicitly challenges the founding assumptions of the existing ideological language, with its undergirding political fantasies (Žižek, 1997, p. 39). After rejecting the language of symbolic order, Offred attaches to new Ego-Ideal. In order "to be a creative non-victim" (Atwood, 1972, p. 38), as one of the demonstrators, for Offred, Moira becomes "externalized as the expectations of the social group to which the individual belongs." The source of their satisfaction is "the feeling of loyalty to the group." Offred looks at himself through the eyes of the group, she strives to merit its love and esteem. (Žižek, 1991, p. 64).

She traverses her ideological fantasy and accepts the nonexistence of the big Other. In her act, she traverses Gilead's language by different strategies, redefines God for herself, and joins the underground rebellions. Therefore, beneath her apparent passivity, Offred has been reflecting, revising, criticizing, and rejecting her own ideological fantasy. In this way, Offred manipulates "the graphic presentation of the relation between signifier and signified" (Žižek, 1995, p.112). Her punning on words sets in motion the way of a new ideological field through the operation of quilting. It puts a new master signifier, God, into the chain of signifiers and traverse Gileadian language. Finally, the protagonist chooses to escape from Gilead to an unknown place. Her act, or the negation that opens up the possibility of re-birth, changes its conditions so that it creates retroactively the conditions of its own possibility (Žižek, 2000 a, p. 222). We can never fully predicts the consequences of her act because by the very nature of an act, of course, Žižek cannot predict what the symbolic order would look like after an act, or what future is waiting for Offred as she announces "and so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light" (*HT* 307).

However, it is reasonable to conclude that the social-political message of the novel is Žižek's argument on act, as Karen Stein affirms that the novel "addresses its exaggerated version of present evils to readers who have some power to act and, by this means, hopes to bring about social and political change" (Stein, 1996, p. 59). However, this socio-

political change urges a new worldview to the present order that confesses the “contemporary deadlock” despite the fact that “it accepts responsibility for the hard work of building a new, better order. Whereas some might find his emphasis on no guarantees and the fact that subjective destitution and the violence of the act can involve a choice for the worst,” for Žižek and Atwood “this absence of guarantees is the very space of human beings freedom” (Dean, 2006, p.203).

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