

"Basic Victim Positions" and the Women in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

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ABSTRACT

In the light of Atwood's "Basic Victim Positions" as stated in *Survival*, the women in *The Handmaid's Tale* embody a wide spectrum of mental responses in the face of traditionalist oppression. Most interesting of all is the Narrator in her dynamic complexity. While the mental states of the others may be seen to constitute a kind of guidebook of recognizable but undesirable or unrealistic options, her honest, patient and courageous struggle for freedom and dignity, and her ultimate triumph through love and the power of words, redeem her earlier indifference and establish her as a woman who elicits not only compassion but respect.

RÉSUMÉ

A la lumière des "Basic Victim Positions" (états fondamentaux de la victime) tels qu'ils sont énoncés dans le livre *Survival*, on peut constater que les femmes dans *La servante écarlate* représente un large éventail de réaction mentale à l'oppression traditionaliste. Le personnage le plus intéressant est la narratrice en raison de sa complexité dynamique. Tandis que l'état d'esprit des autres peut sembler constituer une sorte de guide d'options reconnaissables, quoiqu'indésirables ou irréalistes, la narratrice, par sa lutte honnête, patiente et courageuse pour la liberté et la dignité ainsi que la victoire finale grâce à l'amour et au pouvoir de mots, rachète son indifférence première et se montre une femme qui commande non seulement la compassion mais aussi le respect.

Through its fictitious perspectives on the immediate and distant future, *The Handmaid's Tale* (*HT*) deals with the perennial issue of politics, the exercise of power in human society. Atwood's own definition gets to the heart of the matter. "By 'political' I mean having to do with power: who's got it, who wants it, how it operates: in a word, who's allowed to do what to whom, who gets what from whom, who gets away with it and how" ("An End to Audience," p. 353). Specifically, the book is about the rigorous subjection of women in a society that, however perverted, is seen by its elite as "a return to traditional values" (*HT*, p. 7), or as the Commander worded it, a return "to Nature's

norm" (*HT*, p. 232) — a view implicitly echoed by Professor Pieixoto in the "Historical Notes" epilogue.¹

As the attitude of Pieixoto echoes that of the Commander, the stereotypical role of the epilogue's Maryann Crescent Moon recalls that of Lydia at the Salvaging, Lydia's platitudinous "I'm sure," "I am certain" and "may I say" (*HT*, p. 286) echoed in Crescent Moon's thrice repeated "I am sure" (*HT*, pp. 311-12). Far from being mere coincidence, the echoes dramatically emphasize what the two women have in common, namely a willingness to collaborate with a male power structure oppressive of women. Since the ostensibly liberal-enlightened distant future of Pieixoto

and Crescent Moon bears an uncanny resemblance to our own time, this collaboration ironically helps confirm Pieixoto's statements that "Gilead was, although undoubtedly patriarchal in form, occasionally matriarchal in content, like some sectors of the social fabric that gave rise to it" (*HT*, p. 320). Simply put, whether the fictional time frame in *The Handmaid's Tale* is present, immediate future, or distant future, the abiding focus of interest is the subordination of women in Western culture and the role women themselves have played in accepting and enforcing this subordination. Deprived of their traditional networks of mutual support in the totalitarian atmosphere of Gilead, women are forced to accept a brutally enforced, yet recognizable approximation of what used to be called the "women's sphere," the notion that their sole proper role is domestic, reproductive, nurturing, morally uplifting.²

We are given to understand that, in Gilead, the modes of coercion are psychological as well as physical, resulting in social conditioning akin to that stemming from female acculturation in traditional patriarchal society:

Maybe none of this is about control. Maybe it isn't really about who can own whom, who can do what to whom and get away with it, even as far as death. Maybe it isn't about who can sit and who has to kneel or stand or lie down, legs spread open. Maybe it's about who can do what to whom and be forgiven for it. Never tell me it amounts to the same thing. (*HT*, pp. 144–45)

In the language of transactional analysis, the Regime seeks to instill in each woman a "Parental Ego State" that accepts her subjugation as part of the natural order of things (Berne, pp. 23–8). In the face of such oppression, each must assume her own static or dynamic mental posture.

In *Survival*, Atwood provides a discussion of four such mental postures, what she calls the "Basic Victim Positions":

- Position One: To deny the fact that you are a victim.
- Position Two: To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim, but to explain this as an act of Fate, the Will of God, the dictates of Biology (in the case of women, for instance),

the necessity decreed by History, or Economics, or the Unconscious, or any other large general powerful idea.

Position Three: To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim but to refuse to accept the assumption that the role is inevitable.

Position Four: To be a creative non-victim. (pp. 34–41)

Having set out and briefly discussed each of the four, Atwood goes on to say that her "verbal diagram ... is intended to be suggestive rather than totally accurate," stressing that "experience is never this linear: you're rarely in any Position in its pure form for very long — and you may have a foot, as it were, in more than one Position at once" (p. 39). The Basic Victim Positions is a convenient framework for a discussion of the women in *The Handmaid's Tale*, especially of the Narrator herself.

The eight most prominently featured women in the book range from the young to the old, from the low to the high, from the innocent to the guilty. Three play a relatively minor role: Janine, the Handmaid whose "Birth Day" is one of the highlights of the book; Cora and Rita, the Marthas in charge of household duties at the Commander's house; and the Narrator's mother, a militant feminist from the earlier time who is forced to clean up toxic wastes in the Gileadean colonies. The other four are more central: Lydia, Aunt and directress at the Rachel and Leah Centre and, later, at the Salvaging and Particution ceremonies; Serena Joy, ex-TV personality and Wife of the Commander; Moira, Handmaid/Jezebel and the Narrator's best friend; and finally, of course, the Narrator herself. They are people who, in keeping with the Regime's policy of divide and conquer, are unequally oppressed, and each responds in her own way.

The first of the major characters, Lydia, is a privileged collaborator with the Regime, and predominantly in Position One. Whether, in the words of Professor Pieixoto, she serves as an Aunt "because of a genuine belief in what [she] called 'traditional values,' or for the benefits [she] might thereby acquire" (*HT*, p. 320), she does manage consistently to deny the fact that she is a victim while continually exhorting the Handmaids to do likewise. Not once, in all her lectures on duty, does she grant that women are equal to men.

"You must cultivate poverty of spirit" (*HT*, p. 74), she tells her charges, in a moment of irony rich in Scriptural echoes.

Her continual preaching and practice of the kind of saws Victorian mothers dispensed to their daughters does take its toll, however. "Love is not the point" (*HT*, p. 232), she proclaims, but breaks into tears at the thought of men and women making love: "Don't think it's easy for me either" (*HT*, p. 65). Lydia is a superb embodiment of the truth of the Narrator's remark that "Ignoring isn't the same as ignorance, you have to work at it" (*HT*, p. 66). Her suppressed rage manifests itself early, in her almost casual cruelty — "For our purposes your feet and your hands are not essential" (*HT*, p. 102) — and, later, in her cool orchestration of ritual murders in the Salvaging and Particicution ceremonies.

In brief, Lydia almost perfectly fits the description Atwood added to her statement of Basic Victim Position One:

This uses up a lot of energy, as you must spend much time explaining away the obvious, suppressing anger, and pretending that certain visible facts do not exist. The position is usually taken by those in a Victim group who are a little better off than the others in that group. They are afraid to recognize they are victims for fear of losing the privileges they possess, and they are forced to account somehow for the disadvantages suffered by the rest of the people in the group by disparaging them. As in: "I made it, therefore it's obvious we aren't victims. The rest are just lazy (or neurotic, or stupid); anyway it's their own fault if they aren't happy, look at all the opportunities available for them!"

If anger is felt by victims in Position One, it is likely to be directed against one's fellow-victims, particularly those who try to talk about their victimization. (*Survival*, p. 36)

So closely does Lydia identify with the Regime that she becomes, in fact, its coercive voice in the mind of the Narrator, who always refers to her as "Aunt Lydia," thereby reminding the reader of the oppressive role traditionally played so often by older female relatives in the social conditioning of young women.

To turn from Lydia to Janine is to turn from one end of the spectrum of dominance to its extreme opposite, yet Janine, in her weakness, so obviously ill-equipped to cope with the pressures exerted upon her,

is, nevertheless, like the aggressive and cruel Lydia — a predominantly Position One victim. Early on, while still in the Rachel and Leah Centre as a Handmaid in training, she quickly seems to internalize the Aunts' preaching that the gang rape she suffered as a teenager was her own fault. She subsequently collaborates with Lydia as an informer on her fellow Handmaids and excels in the moaning and crying "ecstasy of abasement" (*HT*, p. 204). Later, she obviously relishes the triumphant sense of superiority over the other Handmaids that she has been taught to feel because of her pregnancy. Finally, after the death of her baby, she escapes into the insanity that has long been a possibility for her. So far as one can detect, she is never out of Position One, of denial, except perhaps briefly at the beginning.

The Marthas Cora and Rita are representative of their class, leading humdrum lives, yet they present an interesting contrast. Though both seem to have adjusted to and accepted the daily routine of chores in the Commander's house, each has her own mental reaction to it. Cora, who invariably presents a more pleasant face to the Narrator, interacting with her and anticipating her pregnancy with almost childlike enthusiasm, seems on the whole to be well adjusted to her station — in other words, seems most of the time to be in Position One, denying the fact that she is a victim. Whether it is because her duties are not so degrading or onerous, or because she lacks perceptiveness, she has adjusted to her lot without revealing evidence of any consequent mental stress. The case is different with Rita, whose surly hostility towards the Narrator puts Rita in Position Two, acknowledging the fact that she is a victim but attributing her victimization to some vast unchangeable cause and shifting the blame to someone other than those responsible. Rita's resentment towards one actually decreases as one moves up the ladder of power, as she demonstrates by becoming noticeably less cool towards the Narrator after learning that she has obtained, from the Commander's Wife, the privilege of a match and the marginally higher status Rita perceives to accompany it. All three of Atwood's explanatory points concerning Position Two apply to Rita:

1. The explanation displaces the cause from the source of oppression to something else.
2. Because the fake cause is so vast, nebulous and unchangeable, you are permanently excused from

changing it, and also from deciding how much of your situation (e.g., the climate) is unchangeable, how much can be changed, and how much is caused by habit or tradition or your own need to be a victim.

3. Anger, when present — or scorn, since everyone in the category is defined as inferior — is directed against both fellow-victims and oneself. (*Survival*, p. 37)

It is Cora and Rita who, in their domesticity, are most reminiscent of the traditional ideal of the "women's sphere" mentioned earlier. Though Rita's mental conflict is observable, neither woman consciously questions her servitude.

In addition to the Narrator, the only other woman in this house, which is not a home, is the Commander's Wife who, though a long step up the ladder of female power and prestige from the Marthas, has much in common with Rita since, most of the time, like Rita, she occupies Position Two — acknowledging the fact that she is a victim but explaining this to herself as something beyond her control. This internal struggle obviously causes her severe distress, and her name, Serena Joy, is an ironic reminder that her mind is the very opposite of either serene or joyful. Before their first meeting, the Narrator may yearn for Serena's friendship and, even late in the book, see the parallel between Serena's oppression and her own — "I see the two of us, a blue shape, a red shape, in the brief glass eye of the mirror as we descend. Myself, my obverse" (*HT*, p. 271) — a parallel reinforced by the spectacle of the Handmaids and the Wife hanged together at the Salvaging. However, Serena endures her suffering and humiliation, and directs her hostility towards the Narrator rather than towards those who are responsible. Try as she might, Serena, like Lydia, fails to suppress her rage, breaking into tears on the evening of the Ceremony and, near the end of the book, promising revenge on the Narrator when she learns of her surreptitious attendance with the Commander at a forbidden evening event. Despite her extreme of crabbed tension and largely misdirected resentment, however, it would be an oversimplification to see Serena as occupying Position Two only.

In the past, in her days as a TV personality, she has played a hypocritical and self-deceiving role in her attempts to manipulate other women in speeches evoking the "women's sphere": "about the sanctity of

the home, about how women should stay home" (*HT*, p. 55). It is not surprising that this information about Serena is juxtaposed with Lydia's preachments about women's duty of moral responsibility for curbing male lust, for at this stage Serena is, like Lydia, in Position One — assuming superiority over others she can control while mouthing the values of a patriarchal elite and denying her own victim status. Only life under a totalitarianism she herself helped create brings her finally to a Position Two realization of her predicament, as the Narrator observes: "How furious she must be, now that she's been taken at her word" (*HT*, p. 56). It is also true to say that she does not stay locked in Position Two.

Under the increasing pressure of circumstance, she exhibits some evidence of an independent frame of mind and eventually attempts to improve her position, thus lessening her degree of victimization. In other words, she exhibits the insights of Position Three, and a willingness to act that might even be associated with Position Four, though she clearly expects the Narrator to take most of the risks. Her smoking of black market cigarettes at their first meeting, for example, leads the Narrator to see her as "a woman who might bend the rules" (*HT*, p. 24). Much later, in the eyes of the Narrator, Serena's knitting is "evidence of stubbornness, and not altogether despicable" (*HT*, p. 214). Still later, her use of the word *damn* helps signalize her rebellious tendency as she enters into a conspiracy with the Narrator to get a baby behind the Commander's back: "We just won't tell him, will we?" (*HT*, p. 216). Serena's motivation in initiating this plot is undeniably selfish and callous, but it is evidence of her growing estrangement from the Commander as well as a genuine rebellion — that is, a successful Position Three attempt to "distinguish between the *role* of Victim (which probably leads you to seek victimization even when there's no call for it), and the *objective experience* that is making you a victim [sic]" (*Survival*, p. 38). This frame of mind, however, lasts only until she finds evidence that the Narrator is involved in yet other surreptitious activities, this time with the Commander. Her rage at this discovery reveals that she has been blinded by jealousy and has thus come to exhibit the instability inherent in Position Three: "This is a dynamic position, rather than a static one; from it you can move on to Position Four, but if you become locked into your anger and fail to change your situation, you might well find yourself back in Position Two" (*Survival*, p. 38). Serena's flirtation with lucidity

and self-betterment, however short-lived, gives her something in common with the three remaining women of *The Handmaid's Tale*, each of whom, in her own distinctive way, predominantly enjoys the awareness associated with Positions Three and Four: the Narrator's mother, her friend Moira, and the Narrator herself.

The Narrator's mother, never named, and always seen as from a distance, through Moira's remarks and through the Narrator's recollections of actual experience or of films at the Rachel and Leah Centre, is a feminist activist and link between our own time and the near future represented by Gilead. Her knowledge grows out of her experience in the society we know, and her participation in protest marches, pornography burnings and political strategy sessions reveal her as a woman who has clearly earned her way beyond the awareness of Position Three to the creative action of Position Four:

In Position Four, creative activity of all kinds becomes possible. Energy is no longer suppressed (as in Position One) or used up for displacement of the cause, or for passing your victimization along to others (Man kicks Child, Child kicks Dog) as in Position Two; nor is it being used for the dynamic anger of Position Three. And you are able to accept your own experience for what it is, rather than having to distort it to make it correspond with others' versions of it (particularly those of your oppressors). (*Survival*, p. 38)

So intense is her political commitment that it leads to tension between her and her daughter who, as a child, resents the time her mother takes from her to devote to the cause, and who, only under the catastrophe of totalitarianism, comes to understand the urgency of her mother's message. The mother can thus be seen as a representative of the feminists of the eighties and a reminder that these women's daughters cannot ignore or take for granted the gains these women made. The mother's early role as activist and final fate as remover of toxic wastes stamp her as a self-sacrificing and tragic figure, having much in common with the younger but kindred spirit, Moira.

The Narrator's illusion to Moira's college research paper on date rape tells us that Moira, like the Narrator's mother, has worked her way to Position Three in the culture we know, but it is only later, under the tyranny of Gilead, that she moves into the creative resistance of Position Four. Moira becomes part of the

organized resistance, the Underground press and, later, as a Handmaid, rebels without hesitation. Whether calming down the hysterical Janine, escaping from the Rachel and Leah Centre, or alluding to the physical torture she has endured, she never consents to play a victim's role. The central fact about her is that she never suppresses or deceives herself, or blames other victims of oppression, or loses sight of who her real enemies are. In other words, though she is mentally and physically abused by agents of the Regime, her energies are always channeled in the right direction. So unwavering is she in her clarity of insight, contempt for officially sanctioned hypocrisy and almost instinctive courage that she becomes like a beacon in the Narrator's mind, as the embodiment of the subversive values that contrast most sharply with the official line embodied in Lydia. Her courage is so unhesitating as to border on recklessness, however, and leads to the painful and degrading fate that makes her into a warning as well as an inspiration to the Narrator.

For the dynamic anger of Position Three, we must look to the Narrator, the most complex major character in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Lydia and Serena Joy are representative types, each standing for a whole class of women. Moira, though not a representative type, is a static character whose actions, in any given situation, the reader can learn to predict. The Narrator, however, is a fully developed character complete with inconsistencies of thought and feeling and the constant potential for change.

When the book begins, she seems still in shock from what has happened to her, but this early she is at least aware of her oppression, even if not yet ready to resist. Her breaking of the rules by looking a Guardian in the eye is "an event, a small defiance of rule, so small as to be undetectable, but such moments are the rewards I hold out for myself, like the candy I hoarded, as a child, at the back of a drawer. Such moments are possibilities, tiny peepholes" (*HT*, p. 31). She yearns for her former independence — "I think about having such control" (*HT*, p. 34) — and cites Lydia's exhortations with ironic detachment. The desperate exhortation of her predecessor — *NOLITE TE BASTARDES CARBORUNDORUM* — becomes for the Narrator a kind of compass needle indicating her frame of mind. Recalled by her again and again — once even as a prayer, before she learns what the words mean — the statement clearly indicates the basic fact that she is

in Position Three, aware that she is a victim but refusing to accept that role as inevitable.

Her frequently expressed love of the outrageous may seem at worst a petty distraction and at best a futile dissipation of mental energy, but it does serve to delegitimize oppressive forces and thus free her mind for future creative action. She seeks satisfaction in such things as thinking of secretly defying Serena Joy by making love with Nick in her parlour, having a feeling of power over Serena, hearing irreverent remarks about Lydia, feeling rebellious at the thought of wearing the glittering and theatrical costume the Commander gives her, and so on. That this mode of thought is far from heroic she is well aware: "I wish this story were different. I wish it were more civilized, I wish it showed me in a better light, if not happier, then at least more active, less hesitant, less distracted by trivia" (*HT*, p. 279). In her defense, one can say that she does earnestly seek to know the truth and to be honest with herself, which under the circumstances is a solid start.

Constant in her character is an apolitical temperament highly resistant to change: "Habits are hard to break" (*HT*, pp. 34-35). She is a very private person, concerned almost exclusively with herself and those closest to her, such as her child and husband; she fails to help the resistance movement, despite a clear request from her companion Handmaid Ofglen. Atwood's own remarks on the political, made in an interview a few months before the publication of *The Handmaid's Tale*, are relevant here:

"the political to me is a part of life. It's part of everybody's life. What we mean [by political]," she continued, "is how people relate to a power structure and vice versa. And this is really all we mean by it. We may mean also some idea of participating in the structure or changing it. But the first thing we mean is how is this individual in society? How do the forces of society interact with this person?" (Freibert, p. 280)

This story is not primarily about organized political activity as we know it, nor about a *coup d'état*, nor about protracted guerrilla warfare against a government; rather, it is about the everyday experience of one woman suffering oppression. In other words, the plot of the novel "plays to our sense of the familiar" (Davidson, p. 116).

To state the Narrator does not mount a physical resistance to her oppressors is not, however, to deny that she is constantly engaged in a heroic mental struggle. She retains an ideal of conduct revealed in one of her admiring references to Moira, after Moira has been recaptured and forced to become a Jezebel: "I don't want her to be like me. Give in, go along, save her skin. That is what it comes down to. I want gallantry from her, swashbuckling, heroism, single-handed combat. Something I lack" (*HT*, p. 261). The Narrator's actual life is much less glamorous than her ideal. With its waverings and temptations to surrender, it can best be summed up in her final reflection on her predecessor:

Nolite te bastardes carborundorum. Fat lot of good it did her.

Why fight?

That will never do. (*HT*, p. 237)

The pause before the final affirmation does much to indicate the intensity of the conflict, the courage it requires to hang on, and the precariousness of each small victory. Fighting for her sanity and self-respect, she therefore lavishly spends energy that could have been directed into action had she been sooner able to move beyond Position Three. However, the fact remains that, despite her fear, she tenaciously holds to her stated intention to survive — "I intend to last" (*HT*, p. 17) — and, playing a patient game of shrewdly sizing up other characters and constantly waiting for opportunities to present themselves, she moves by fits and starts towards the bold creative action of Position Four. This lifelike progress, two steps forward, one step back, finds her at one time or another occupying every one of the Basic Victim Positions and sometimes more than one at the same time.

The closest she comes to Position One, ironically, is with the Commander during the evening out, for, in her excitement on this occasion, she almost manages to forget or deny her victim status:

The checkpoints are no problem, everything goes as smoothly as the Commander said it would, despite the heavy pounding, the pressure of blood in my head. Chickenshit, Moira would say. (*HT*, p. 244)

What I want is a mirror, to see if my lipstick is all right, whether the feathers are too ridiculous, too

frowzy. In this light I must look lurid. Though it's too late now.

Idiot, says Moira. (*HT*, p. 245)

The intrusions of Moira into the Narrator's thoughts on this occasion are an emphatic reminder of the Narrator's denial. Moira's story of her attempted escape, recapture, and torture — which occupies all of Chapter Thirty-eight — is juxtaposed in contrast with the final event of the evening, in which the Narrator, alone in a hotel room with the Commander, tries unsuccessfully to respond to his advances: "Surely there must be something here for us, other than this futility and pathos.... It's the least [I] can do" (*HT*, p. 267). As she herself admits, it may be her vanity that keeps her from seeing the Commander's pattern of behaviour that evening as Moira sees it, namely, as "[j]ust another crummy power trip" (*HT*, p. 255).

The Narrator's move to the opposite end of the spectrum, Position Four, is, first of all, in her pursuit of the relationship with Nick without the knowledge of either the Commander or Serena Joy. Typical is the deep human need, defiance of oppression and sense of wild freedom the Narrator feels moments prior to her initial serious contact with Nick, which antedates Serena's plot:

I want Luke here so badly. I want to be held and told my name. I want to be valued, in ways that I am not; I want to be more than valuable. I repeat my former name, remind myself of what I once could do, how others saw me.

I want to steal something....

Down past the fisheye on the hall wall, I can see my white shape, of tented body, hair down my back like a mane, my eyes gleaming. I like this. I am doing something on my own. The active tense. Tensed. (*HT*, p. 108)

Though her actions are tinged with guilt when she remembers her husband, and shame when she tells of how thankful she was for Nick's attentions, the fact remains that she unhesitatingly risks her life each time she visits her lover. Despite her well-justified fear, she grasps at love recklessly, hungrily, and ecstatically. Ofglen continues to ask her to help the Underground by spying on the Commander, but she ignores the requests. Her love affair with Nick has become an end in itself

— her way of repudiating her victim status by defying the Regime and achieving intense and precarious fulfillment in a dangerous world: "We make love each time as if we know beyond a shadow of a doubt that there will never be any more, for either of us, with anyone, ever. And then when there is, that too is always a surprise, extra, a gift" (*HT*, p. 253).

In a book of many ironies, one of the biggest is that the Narrator's discovery of the creative non-victim role of Position Four in this instance entails an almost simultaneous embrace of the resignation of Position Two. For her refusal to accept Ofglen's invitation to join the fight against the Regime, even if the Underground can enable her to escape in a crisis, she feels shame in retrospect but also pride, because she wants Nick, not political freedom or escape.

Even now, I can recognize this admission as a kind of boasting. There's pride in it, because it demonstrates how extreme and therefore justified it was, for me. How well worth it. It's like stories of illness and near-death, from which you have recovered; like stories of war. They demonstrate seriousness. (*HT*, p. 283)

So far so good, but in a different mood the explanation takes on quite a different cast:

Some days I was more rational. I did not put it, to myself, in terms of love. I said, I have made a life for myself, here, of a sort. That must have been what the settlers' wives thought, and women who survived wars, if they still had a man. Truly amazing, what people get used to, as long as there are a few compensations. (*HT*, p. 283)

The ironies pile one upon the other, for it is her relationship with Nick that causes him, as a member of the Underground, to give her at least a chance at escape when the fast-approaching crisis finally arrives; nevertheless, during a relatively short period of time, she manages to hold two attitudes that contrast sharply with each other.

It is the Position Two attitude that wins out just before the rescue. Under the repeated hammer blows of the Salvaging with its intimidating hangings, the Participation with its mass hysteria and blood lust, and the suicide of Ofglen with its implied threat of arrest and torture, the Narrator's will to resist, even mentally, crumbles. Nick at this point "seems very far away" (*HT*, p. 298), and she resolves to give him up. Her

surrender is complete: "Everything they taught us at the Red Centre, everything I've resisted, comes flooding in.... They can do what they like with me. I am abject" (HT, p. 298). Serena Joy's discovery of her evening out with the Commander drives the Narrator into an even more complete state of paralysis as her predecessor's defiant slogan, *NOLITE TE BASTARDES CARBORUNDORUM*, becomes a mere echo: "But I feel serene, at peace, pervaded with indifference. Don't let the bastards grind you down. I repeat this to myself but it conveys nothing. You might as well say, Don't let there be air; or Don't be" (HT, p. 303). This scene of the Narrator sitting in an upstairs room after receiving Serena's dire threat is reminiscent of Moira sitting in an upstairs room playing with the Quaker children during her escape attempt. Moira's carefree attitude — "I didn't feel scared by then, in fact I felt quite good" (HT, p. 258) — contrasts sharply with the Narrator's half-hearted listing of options she will never pursue. The two scenes superbly illustrate the difference between Moira's Position Four, in which all energy is efficiently channeled toward a goal, and the Narrator's present, Position Two stance, in which energy is wasted because of an overpowering sense of futility.

The rescue is not the end of the story, however, and her Position Two stance is merely an interlude preliminary to a breakout into the creative, Position Four act of telling her story. Lucy M. Freibert has pointed out how the Narrator comes to realize "that an embodied imagination, not body alone, offers the real potential for freedom" (p. 287). The Narrator's ultimate escape from victimization comes through her creative power of words, a power she has clearly recognized in the Scrabble encounters, for example, and in the Commander's pen: "The pen between my fingers is sensuous, alive almost, I can feel its power, the power of the words it contains" (HT, p. 196). This growing awareness on the part of the Narrator is consistent with Atwood's own philosophy, which she expressed before writing *The Handmaid's Tale*:

A voice is a gift; it should be cherished and used, to utter fully human speech if possible. Powerlessness and silence go together; one of the first efforts made in any totalitarian takeover is to suppress the writers, singers, the journalists, those who are the collective voice. ("Amnesty International," p. 396)

In telling her story, the Narrator at last gets to strike a tangible blow against oppression, and have something

of primary significance in common with Moira as former member of the Underground press. Whether the Narrator survives physically or not is left unclear, but her voice on the tapes leaves no doubt as to her final, triumphant mental stance as creative and powerful non-victim.³

In conclusion, therefore, it can be said that, in the light of Atwood's Basic Victim Positions, the women in *The Handmaid's Tale* embody a wide spectrum of mental responses in the face of traditionalist oppression. Most interesting of all is the Narrator, who manages to range the spectrum with a dynamic complexity approaching that of life itself. While the mental states of the others may be seen to constitute a kind of guidebook of recognizable but undesirable or unrealistic options, her honest, patient and courageous struggle for freedom and dignity, and her ultimate triumph through love and the power of words, redeem her earlier indifference and establish her as a woman who elicits not only compassion but respect.

NOTES

1. Two studies have already appeared on the role of the epilogue in *The Handmaid's Tale*: Davidson and Foley. For a discussion of historical parallelism or mirroring in this novel, see Cowart, pp. 105-19.
2. For a discussion of the "women's sphere" concept, see Bernard, pp. 80-93. Bernard finds the earliest use of the term in Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792).
3. Buss notes that this kind of memoir is "a useful form for those women who most often see identity in terms of their relationships" (p. 82). Freibert says that, in depicting the Narrator's experience, Atwood "tests the viability of French feminist theory" and "eclectically draws on the most useful" of French feminist principles as enunciated in the works of writers like Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, and Monique Wittig (pp. 285, 291).

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Storm Brewing

She stood at the window, watching
clouds stride across the sky
toward the house,
gather,
a big, black fist
above the brown roof.

She wanted it
to pound the glass,
pry up the screens,
get inside,
smash the wedding picture
that held her
white, frozen in a frame —

yes, fistfuls of wind and rain
to roll up the stairs,
gust down the corridor
into the bedroom,
tear back the blankets,
shred the sheets,
capsize the double bed,

rip into the closet
where, clutched in black wire claws,
her blouses flapped their arms,
her pants kicked their legs,

wake the suitcase
from its trance
against the wall,

set it free.

Jill Solnicki
Toronto, Ontario

The Meeting

your eyes glitter over the table,
the floor shifts slightly, now your hands are open
palm upward, laying it out, the lay of the land,
the way it lies. why do I say nothing?
silence is not falsehood, but a truth
of sorts, the truth of itself, of silence.

listen: I do not trust you, do not trust
myself. this is the truth of lies,
which are silver at first, and easy,
polished as spoons. later there are black slugs
on the lettuce, or is it just the light?
better eat carefully anything I give you.

to walk in the room, over the slanting floor
on rotten boards, we who put those here
forgot to note the location of the holes.
the table tilts over the shifting floor,
the words have shadows in them, shadows
swallow them up, the room settles itself

in its new position: are those cracks or webs?
now there is only your voice and the altered structure
of the room, and the way a gesture, a shoulder touched
could be appeal or curse, promise or threat.
glasnost, put it into whatever language
you happen to be speaking at the time.

cards on the table, all jokers, they wink
suggestively at each other, you take a trick.
this lie, this other death, will soon be over.

Janet McCann
College Station, Texas