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Voices of Defiance: Resistance to authoritarianism in The Handmaid's Tale and On Tyranny

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VOICES OF DEFIANCE
Resistance to authoritarianism in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *On Tyranny*

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MA Literature: English Track Thesis

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Acknowledgements

When I started my masters, I was thrilled to choose my own classes, as opposed to having to follow mandatory classes within a specific discipline, as was the case for my bachelor's studies in English Language and Culture. Building on my love for the United States, a love that I have had from a young age, I decided to take a class on American identities during my first semester, followed by a class on migration to the United States in my second semester that broadened my knowledge on the socio-cultural and political climate of the United States. In completing a master's in English literature, I decided to combine my love for literature with my love for the United States.

Deciding on a topic proved to be tough, since there were so many texts, frameworks and studies to choose from. However, in deciding, my attention was drawn to the US elections of 2024. This compelled me to take a closer look at the 2024 election and the election of 2016, both won by Donald Trump. The polarizing and dividing nature of his election campaign clashed with everything I had learned from my two classes about the American identity and the role migration had played in this. One work of literature that seemed impossible to leave out of the discussion, for me, was the 1985 dystopian novel by Margaret Atwood: *The Handmaid's Tale*. The subject-matter and narrative of the novel seemed to me still (or dare I say *especially*) relevant, even though the novel turns 40 years old in 2025. The second work this thesis focuses on was advised by Dr. Sara Polak, my thesis advisor: *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* by historian Timothy Snyder, a work I had not read or heard of before I started writing my thesis.

My experience in writing this thesis has been tough, but I have written it with the hope of encouraging every person that reads it to follow their curiosity when writing, discussing or, as myself, researching a topic that they are interested in. Like me, I hope you learn more of that which you are interested in, as well as of the joy in researching itself. I wish to thank my

thesis supervisor, Dr. Sara Polak for her encouragement and astute feedback along the way. I want to give special thanks to family friend Dr. Danielle Kraaijvanger, for her enduring support, advice and encouragement throughout my thesis process. Lastly, I wish to thank my parents for their love and support as I could not have completed writing without their confidence in me.

Abstract

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is one of the most popular novels of the dystopian genre. Even though the novel was first published in 1985, its significance and popularity have increased since the 2016 U.S. elections. The novel highlights acts of resistance against a patriarchal authoritarian regime. The novel has become so popular that it now serves as a symbol of resistance in the contemporary cultural context. Another important text that serves as a tool for resistance is Timothy Snyder's *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*. The text, which explains to its readers how to resist modern authoritarianism through the 'history repeats itself' lens, carries a similar message to Atwood's novel, albeit in a different format. The impact that both works have on contemporary culture, as well as the legacy of symbolism (*The Handmaid's Tale*), highlights the ongoing significance of the written word. In this thesis, I argue that both works inspire their audiences to actively resist the rise in authoritarianism in a post-2016 era in the US and specify how the works achieve this.

Keywords: Margaret Atwood: *The Handmaid's Tale* – Timothy Snyder: *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* – resistance – authoritarianism

Introduction

"Make America Great Again". The political slogan that helped Donald Trump secure the presidential elections in 2016 and 2024 focused predominantly on putting America first again. He is not the first president of the United States to have referred a nostalgic America, a nationalist utopia where the American citizen felt safe and secure economically and socially. The 1920 presidential campaign slogan of Warren G. Harding "America First", Ronald Reagan's 1980 "Let's Make America Great Again", or John McCain's 2008 slogan "Country First" all echoed a similar focus on the return to a country that "flourish[ed] and respected again all over the world […], the envy of every nation" (Trump). However, some scholars believe that the foundational principle of the U.S. democracy has been dissolved by the actions of the Trump administration. Dr. Chemerinsky of the University of California, Berkely, calls Trump's actions "illegal acts [that] create a constitutional crisis", Kate Shaw, law professor at the University of Pennsylvania adds that many of the "new administration's executive orders […] are in clear violation of laws" (*The New York Times*). Some examples of these 'illegal' actions by the Trump administration are the freezing of federal spending, revoking the birthright citizenship, threatening to and deporting people to El Salvador, or the build of the detaining center Alligator Alcatraz in Florida. These actions have made dystopian novels about a repressive regime newly relevant in the U.S. One of these dystopian novels is *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood, first published in 1985. The novel is narrated by a young woman living in the totalitarian regime of Gilead. In this regime, women have been categorized into different social groups that serve their patriarchal leaders (Commanders). The narrator of the novel, Offred, has been categorized as a Handmaid, a fertile woman in a world where many have become infertile due to environmental and economic crises. She serves in a household run by one of the patriarchal leaders of the new regime, Commander Fred and his wife Serena Joy, for whom she must bear a child by the Commander in order to increase the

nation's population. The novel gives a visionary fictional outlook on a potential dark turn taken by the U.S. government. Atwood's depictions were a response to actual political situations that took place in the world at the time of writing. As she had stated herself, many times' "[the rise of an authoritarian regime] was a possibility" and so "a return to a theoretical form of government was a fictional possibility before the Berlin Wall came down, during the Cold War […] Then, the Iron Curtain came down […] The book kept reminding people that 'it can't happen here' is never true anywhere" (Foran).

Once more, actions taken by the current U.S. government closely resemble some of Atwood's depictions of the Gilead regime. During both the 2016 and 2024 U.S. presidential elections, a noticeable rise in sales of dystopian novels, such as George Orwell's *1984* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, has been observed. Atwood's publisher noticed a "200 percent increase in sales" during the 2016 U.S. elections and a "10th position on Amazon's Best Seller in Books list" (Liptak "Sales of Margaret Atwood's Handmaid's Tale have soared since Trump's win"). Again, during the 2024 U.S. elections, a surge in sales was observed, with an increase of almost 7%, and the book reached number 2 on the Amazon bestseller list in November 2024.

In addition to dystopian novels, analytical literature has also been published and sold in abundance, such as Timothy Snyder's *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons of the Twentieth Century* (2017). Coming in at number one as nonfiction paperback on the New York Times bestseller list at the time of its publication, the 126-page book "urge[s] that American democracy is under threat" (Gonzalez). In it, Snyder "illustrates how Trump's ascendancy is on a slippery slope toward tyranny", but never does the author "indicate that [Trump] is a fascist" (Rasouli 87). Instead, Snyder uses historical events that led to the rise of authoritarian regimes in the twentieth century and proposes lessons for his readers as a means to recognize and prevent this movement from happening now. It is significant that works like Snyder's *On*

Tyranny and Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* have regained popularity. American democracy appears to be in danger. Works like these might serve as cautionary tales, or even examples of 'what not to do' – most notably in reference to Atwood's work. Can these texts serve as allegories for the current political climate in the United States? How do both works offer insights into resistance or activist movements on the current political discourse and the possible erosion of democratic norms? Examining the two literary works will give more insight not only into the American citizens' fear of the possible future of their country but also into the real-life political and social climate within the United States during and after the two important presidential elections of 2016 and 2024. Analyzing the symbolism of resisting authoritarian leadership and protesting for women's rights in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, as well as easy-to-follow steps to take within a democratic society against the type of tyrannical leadership, as Snyder tells his audience, can help us understand and undermine authoritarianism and tyranny.

Apart from the record sales of both books, the cultural impact of Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, in particular, has been significant. Additionally, Timothy Snyder, a historian, appears to be playing an authoritative role in his education on contemporary political changes through an historical lens, having been invited to numerous TED talks and interviews since the publication of his 2017 book. His book *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* describes lessons on current threats to U.S. democracy and juxtaposes these to European totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century, such as Soviet Communism and the German Nazi government of the 1930s and '40s. There are two key questions that arise in analyzing these works, namely: 1). How these works seem to respond to the changes that have occurred over the past few years in the United States' political and social climate? and 2). How these texts impact the contemporary climate?

This thesis will provide multiple analyses, firstly through close readings of *The Handmaid's Tale*, both within the time it was written, and in the post-2016 U.S. election era, and of *On Tyranny* at the time of its publication in 2017, as well as reviewing its impact during Trump's second presidency in 2025. I will conduct a comparative textual analysis, and a critical-genre analysis will be conducted to read *The Handmaid's Tale* in relation to *On Tyranny* to examine how Atwood's characters use the same resistance techniques that Snyder advises. Both works will then be situated within a qualitative, discourse-oriented multidisciplinary approach that draws on insights from media studies, digital culture and cultural criticism in order to examine the works' functionality as cultural texts across television, digital media and public life. This thesis will be a hybrid analysis of the texts and their applications in popular contemporary media.

For this thesis, it is important to highlight the central theme of both *The Handmaid's Tale* and *On Tyranny: Twenty lessons of the Twentieth century*, namely 'resistance'. To answer the question of how both works can be viewed as active responses of resistance in a post-2016 era, the definition of 'resistance' must be examined within the correct context. I will build on existing theories to propose the proper framework for the definition of 'resistance' so that it will be relevant to my analysis.

Firstly, I will define the central concept of 'resistance' in my own words and discuss the relevance of other definitions of 'resistance' within the context of this thesis. I will draw on other academics' definitions and examine how their research might be relevant to my own. Furthermore, I will focus on how 'resistance' is portrayed within literature, specifically in dystopian literature, as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is a part of this genre. Additionally, I will examine the use and portrayal of 'resistance' in real life. This examination will provide insight into the possible juxtaposition of 'resistance' portrayal in literature and in real life. Lastly, I will focus on the terms 'totalitarian state' and 'authoritarianism'. These

terms are significant to the two works this thesis analyzes, and therefore, a distinction in clear definitions of the terms is necessary.

Resistance

Resistance has to do with power relations. In the case of *The Handmaid's Tale* and *On Tyranny*, there is a state of governance that holds power over its subjects (citizens). In turn, these oppressed subjects may retaliate to stop their oppression, which is what is called resistance. I base this easy definition mainly on theories proposed by Foucault, in which "[r]esistance is [that which] eludes power, and power targets resistance as its adversary", according to Sharpe et al. (458). I agree with Foucault in my analysis of *The Handmaid's Tale*, where the power of the totalitarian state of Gilead is seen as the enemy by its civilians, who try to resist this power. When viewing Timothy Snyder's *On Tyranny*, I agree with Foucault's theories again, in the sense that the struggle that comes from people's resistance to power [of an authoritarian state] reflects on historical and contemporary situations. Chapters 1 and 2 of this thesis will further explain these theories.

Resistance Literature

According to Barbara Harlow, "'resistance literature,' is writing within a specific historical context, a context which may be most immediately situated within the contemporary national liberation struggles and resistance movements" (4). I concur with this definition of the genre because it upholds my hypothesized viewpoint of both Atwood's novel and Snyder's work (even though Snyder's book is not a work of literature) in the sense that both works put forth a movement of resistance while drawing on historical contexts.

Similarly, Colin Clark argues that dystopian novels like *The Handmaid's Tale* reveal or make explicit, phenomena within a culture that are implicit or hidden, starting that

"Sartre's contention that a writer can call for political change through literature by describing a (political) issue so that we are moved to act on it" (52). Additionally, Clark claims that "language could remain opaque unless it is seen in a particular sociohistorical context" (52). Within the genre of resistance literature, the events described in a certain text are placed inside a political, social, or historical context to call for action. I will theorize in chapter 1 of this thesis that Margaret Atwood's dystopian descriptions of the Gilead regime are relevant within the political, social, and historical context, and I will argue that the text is still relevant in the sense that, 40 years after its publication, the book is again a call to action.

Dystopian Genre

Closing in on the link between resistance literature and the dystopian genre, Tom Moylan describes in his *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia* that "the engaged utopianism of the 1970s and against fashionable temptation to despair in the early 1980s" when Atwood wrote *The Handmaid's Tale*, was a time when "several […] writers turned to dystopian strategies as a way to come to terms with changing, and enclosing, 'social reality'" (186). Even though I agree with this argument, I believe that this description of the use of dystopian strategy in writing is insufficient. I believe that this description leaves a gap between the author and their intended audience's preferred response and calls into question whether authors write a narrative in the dystopian genre as an outlet for their own thoughts, or if they want their audience to engage with the text actively. I will examine this gap more thoroughly in the first and the discussion chapters of this thesis.

Resistance in Real Life

As I will argue in this thesis, both *The Handmaid's Tale* and *On Tyranny* call for an active response of resistance against authoritarianism in a post-2016 era, specifically in the United

States. As this thesis will focus on how these works do this, I find it important to make the distinction between fiction (*The Handmaid's Tale*), or the written word *(On Tyranny*) and real life. This distinction is necessary because why would these two works have real-life consequences on the possible actions of readers? It is relevant to note that Timothy Snyder wrote *On Tyranny* with the purpose of getting an active response from his readers. The book is written in the form of a handbook of sorts. However, in the case of *The Handmaid's Tale*, the distinction between fiction and real life seems to be present. Even though Margaret Atwood has spoken out during the publication in 1985 and throughout her career that she built the world of Gilead on existing authoritarian governments, entangled with global political and social changes in the 1970s and 1980s, the novel was not conceived as a call to action initially. Atwood merely explored themes of authoritarianism, religious extremism, and gender inequality within the dystopian genre. The novel's narrative of resistance has begun to resonate with readers over time due to increasing political and social changes in real life that echoed the novel's narrative, as will be explored further in this thesis.

Authoritarianism vs. Totalitarianism

Lastly, the terms authoritarianism and totalitarianism are used as interchangeably in this thesis. I do realize that there is a distinction between the two terms. However, in order for me to answer my research question(s) to argue my hypothesis, there is little relevance to specify between the two terms. I will look at theorized definitions and specify my view on these, as I do find relevance in naming them when reviewing literature. According to Amy Atchison and Shauna Shames the distinction between a totalitarian state and an authoritarian state is that, in the former, "the state controls every aspect of society […] that seeks to superimpose [an] ideology on society" (33). In contrast, the latter is not "really into imposing an ideology on the people" (Atchison, Shames 33). As I mentioned, this distinction (although true) is not

relevant in my examination of the two works, mainly since Atwood's fictional Gilead regime is categorized as a theology. This refers to an authoritarian state that is ruled by religious principles. However, I find that the Gilead regime does superimpose ideals onto its people and therefore cannot be classified only as 'authoritarian'. Furthermore, Xavier Márquez argues that terms like 'dictatorship' and 'authoritarianism' are used interchangeably in political landscapes to oppose 'democracy' as they are "deviations from forms of government based on popular legimation" (3). Additionally, the term 'tyranny' is described by him as personalized and refers only to an individual ruler. Other forms of government that contrast with democracy are ruled by more than one person, in his definition. I agree with the fact that 'tyranny' as a term derives from (a single, evil) 'tyrant', and as this thesis will examine in chapter 2, this is precisely the type of government that Timothy Snyder warns his readers of. However, Snyder bases his ideas on historical regimes with various formations and governance practices.

Therefore, the terms mentioned above will be used interchangeably in this thesis, as I find that the relevance of distinctions in definition is minimal, especially since the focus of this thesis is on the relation between the two works and the responses of their audiences. Based on the existing literature, I argue that there is a gap in the relation between literature on resistance or portraying resistance, and their audience's response in real life. The terms that are significant within the political landscape and relevant to the act of resistance have been and continue to be defined. However, there is little academic review of how and why audiences resonate with and act on these texts. This thesis aims to see whether this gap exists, and if so, to find an answer that will hopefully inspire others further to examine the relevance of possible readers' action.

This thesis will largely draw on existing theories that suggest their relevance to my analysis of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Timothy Snyder's *On Tyranny:*

Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century. Since these existing theories largely support the key concepts that I have put forth, I will build upon these theories through my hybrid analysis within several theoretical frameworks. These frameworks will not only guide me in my analysis of the texts themselves, but also in comparison to each other, and within socio-historical and contemporary cultural contexts. By opposing these analyses to the social and political climate of the United States in a post-2016 election era, the aim of this thesis will be to show that these works are active responses of resistance against a rise in authoritarianism and tyranny in the proposed era.

Narrative as rhetoric

One of the theoretical frameworks used for my analysis of Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is the framework of narrative. Specifically, I will draw on the existing theory of narrative as rhetoric, as proposed by James Phelan. Phelan offers the definition of narrative as "somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose or purposes that something happened" (219). He theorizes that following a rhetoric approach, "readerly experiences" can be offered to audiences of a text (Phelan 219). Additionally, Phelan puts emphasis on the "sources of those experiences in the author's construction of the text" (219). I will theorize that narration in *The Handmaid's Tale* is relevant in its impact on readers in relation to acts of resistance by its characters, both when the book was first published as well as now, 40 years later, in chapter 1.

Feminism Theory

Another important theoretical framework for *The Handmaid's Tale* is feminism theory. This framework is concerned with emphasizing and examining patriarchal structures in society, while also advocating for social, political, and economic equality for women. I will argue the

importance of feminism theory within Margaret Atwood's imagined Gilead society and the active role resistance plays in the life of main protagonist Offred. However, it is important to note that 'feminism' as a term cannot easily be defined, as it encompasses various approaches. I will mainly emphasize that the characters in Atwood's novel fall into the category of socialist feminists. Classifying the characters in this way agrees with Bell Hooks in her definition of 'feminism' in her book *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* as "a struggle to end sexist oppression" (26). I will examine the significance of feminism theory further in chapter 1.

New Historicism

For Snyder's *On Tyranny*, the framework of New Historicism is important. This framework analyses texts within their respective historical contexts, in which the examination of ideologies and power structures are often included. I argue that Snyder, in contrasting the historical context and the contemporary political environment of the US, emphasizes the use of this framework. I concur with the definition of Louis A. Montrose in *The New Historicism* (1989), in which he argues that texts within this framework are "restituat[ed] not only in relationship to other genres and modes of discourse but also in relationship to contemporaneous social institutions and non-discursive patterns" (17). Especially the latter relationship mentioned by Montrose is, in my opinion, what Snyder emphasizes in his work. Moreover, Margaret Atwood uses historical events in a similar matter. As chapter 1 will further examine, the fictional Gilead regime was based on real-life dictatorships and events of the mid-1900s. Lastly, within this framework, both works are not only "socially produced" but also "socially productive", as is significant for New Historicism (Veester 23). The examination of this thesis will show that the analyzed works draw on existing theories and key concepts from the above-mentioned frameworks.

Two subjects that have been of interest in writing this thesis are the polarization and dividedness of American voters in the post-2016 U.S. election era. However, as I am not a student of politics, my interest was mainly with the socio-cultural context of the potential outcome of this election. While analyzing this, I found that several dystopian novels had climbed the sales ladders in this period; novels that had been written decades before (such as George Orwell's *1984*). One title that caught my eye was Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, not just because of its subject-matter on women's rights within a dystopian narrative, but also because I had read the novel in my first year of my bachelor's studies and had thoroughly enjoyed it. The surge in its sales, I found, had happened again during the 2024 US elections. To me, there seemed to be a pattern, or at the very least, a striking coincidence. As I started analyzing several best-seller lists, I found another title of a book that had gained popularity: Timothy Snyder's *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*. The resemblance between the two works, even though they do not belong to the same genre, nor is Snyder's book classified as literature, was uncanny. Both works familiarize with the broader themes of tyranny and authoritarianism, albeit in different ways. Their rises in popularity within this same era (an era in which the United States seems to have changed socio-culturally and politically) is what prompted me to want to analyze them for this thesis. As I started my investigation, it became clear to me that there was yet another similarity to be found: both works seem to be active responses of resistance against the (potential) rise of authoritarianism. Therefore, I wanted to focus my research on how these (different) responses of resistance are formulated, both within the works themselves, as well as within the post-2016 election era of the United States.

The aim of this research is to describe the conditions and limitations of the works' active responses of resistance, and to establish a relationship between these works and the (potential) success of their call to action with their contemporary readers in the post-2016

election era. The main methods that I used for my research were content analysis of both texts, through which I analyzed both the meaning of the texts within the respective (literary) frameworks of resistance, feminist theory, dystopian (both feminist theory and dystopian are only applicable for Atwood's novel) and socio-historical and socio-cultural studies. Furthermore, a discourse analysis study was conducted with a sociopolitical approach to establish the meaning and communication of these texts in relation to the social context of a post-2016 election environment of the United States. Additionally, for Snyder's *On Tyranny*, a critical discourse analysis of the text was conducted to view the text as a form of social practice.

I conducted these analyses through existing and studied frameworks that suggest relevance to my research and assertion to provide validity and reliability to my claim. In drawing on existing theories to support my claim, there was the potential for assumption and bias to affect my findings. By building on existing theories, both contemporary and older that range through various studies, I have tried to reduce observer bias on my part, furthermore I have provided opposing theories in the concluding chapter.

Ultimately, through the analysis of this thesis, the main research question will be answered: How can the works by Margaret Atwood and Timothy Snyder be viewed as active responses of resistance to the American political and cultural environment in the post-2016 US election era.

Chapter 1. *The Handmaid's Tale*: a defiant dystopian novel

Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel *The Handmaid's Tale* adheres to the genre of a dystopian novel. Based on contextual clues and suggestions from the author herself, the novel's plot takes place in the near future, with the general assumption being that it is set in the late 20th or early 21st century. The United States has been overthrown by a coup, after which the new Republic of Gilead was established. The catalyst for these events was a series of crises and the public's frustration with the (former) government not being able to respond adequately to these crises. One of the crises that led to the founding of the Republic of Gilead, was the decline in birthrates which resulted from reproductive problems caused by environmental pollution. The new regime justifies its control over society through this ecological crisis, with Gilead enforcing strict reproductive rules on women. High-ranking male officers (Commanders) are the new rulers of the republic. They are married to 'trophy wives' who do little more than sit around their house all day, knitting or gardening.

Furthermore, the Gilead household consists of one or two women to help run it, by cooking and cleaning (Marthas), and a Handmaid, who serves as the household's surrogate womb. These Handmaids, who are the few remaining fertile women in Gilead, have a strict regime to follow in order for them to reproduce, for some as part of a punishment for their past sins (such as divorce). Part of this regime is the Ceremony, a ritual in which the Handmaid must participate with their Commander once a month, which reduces them to little more than a walking womb. People opposing the regime are either killed or sent to labor camps (the colonies) in which they must clean up toxic waste. Among these are the Unwomen, who are unable to integrate socially into the class division of women in Gilead. Most of these women are classified as such because they range from being unmarried, divorced, lesbians, protestors, or other types of female dissidents. The narration of the novel is

told through Handmaid Offred (her patriarchally imposed name, meaning 'belonging to her commander, Fred'), who reflects on her present and past as she retells her personal story. The novel was first published in 1985, a time when reproductive politics were a pressing topic in the U.S following the second wave of feminism and the post-liberation era. Part of these reproductive politics was a "widespread rise of the pro-life movement and the start of an administrative backlash against feminism across North America with the election of Ronald Reagan in the United States in 1980" (Latimer 32-33). The "New Right's reproductive rhetoric […] was largely reactionary" […]" with "its overall aim [..] to refigure and reshape the 'maternal drives and desires' of women in a post-liberation era", according to Latimer (33). The New-Right's rhetoric aimed to restore the traditional (white) American family ideal, in which the man provides for his family, and the woman stays home and takes care of the children. However, in the post-liberation era, which refers to the period after civil rights and women's liberation victories of the 1960s and early 1970s (which included the Equal Pay Act of 1963 and Roe v. Wade in 1973), many women joined the workforce and combined their home life with earning a wage of their own. There had been an increase of women's labor force participation of about 13% between the 1970s and the early 1990s, with the most notable growth in professional and white-collar jobs. Nevertheless, this caused more than a shift in traditional male-female roles in society. According to Zillah Eisenstein, American feminism has liberal roots. Eistenstein argues that the "ideology of liberal individualism" is "the construction of feminist theory" (*The Radical Future of Feminism* 5). Bell Hooks agrees that "[d]efinitions" of feminism "are usually liberal in origin and focus on the individual woman's right to freedom and self-determination" (25).

Because modern American feminism finds its roots in liberalism, today the two ideologies are often seen as intertwined as both share similar ideals, such as individual autonomy, freedom of choice, and equality. In essence, the "basic liberal premise" is a

combination of "two key values: freedom and equality" according to Clare Chambers (652). Socialist feminists assert that there is no inequality between genders of the same class and urges to eliminate female oppression while challenging patriarchy and sexism. When examining Zillah Eisenstein's argument, it is important to note that both the New Right's rhetoric and neoconservatism (on which ideas the New Right movement built their rhetoric) shared the idea of a right for freedom for Americans, but not in the way that both the ideals claimed that the liberalism movement approached the term. As Eisenstein argues; equality, followers of neoconservatism and the New Right believed, should be "[equality] of opportunity", not "[equality] of outcomes of conditions" ("The Sexual Politics of the New Right" 574). The latter, as followers of neoconservatism claimed, was how liberalists and especially women viewed it. Both neoconservatism and the New Right believed that liberalism and feminism had corrupted the view on freedom and equality. For the New Right movement, this view conflicted with traditional family values on which American society was built. "[B]ecause [these ideologies] threaten[ed] to transform patriarchy," the New Right's Act, therefore, attacked both (Eisenstein, "The Sexual Politics of the New Right" 569). Within the New Right rhetoric, echoes of liberalism are found; however, these echoes are also challenged. The New Right rhetoric stated that the welfare state of the 1980s, with its high taxes and inflation, had forced women to go into the workforce, not by freedom of choice – which, in turn, challenged their views of the traditional patriarchal family ideal. According to Eisenstein, "the hierarchal male-dominated sexual system" proposed by the New Right "uphold[s] the economic class structure," and thus any opposing beliefs of liberalists or feminists were to be attacked within their rhetoric (Eisenstein, "The Sexual Politics of the New Right" 578).

Moreover, the New Right rhetoric went beyond a view of America's economic system but ultimately started here. If gender equality is promoted within the workforce, it could

ultimately impact to the home life as well. The consequences of this, the New Right rhetoric claimed, could lead to women forgetting their role as caregivers and homemakers or eliminate their need or want to have children altogether. As a result, women's rights were questioned and even halted on a federal level in the 1980s. The New Right movement was no longer just rhetoric but had also mobilized the support of conservative voters in political spheres. One example of New Right legislation was the 1981 Family Protection Act (FPA). Through this bill, the US government withdrew federal funding for services providing abortion or contraception. Instead, the bill provided funding for educational books that promoted traditional male-female roles and patriarchal models (*Congress.Gov*). Another example was the impact of the New Right rhetoric during the 1980s presidential elections, where one of the Republican focal points was an "opposition to abortion and the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) which *identified* the New Right and its distinctive ideology", according to Rosalind Pollock Petchesky (207). The impact of the New Right movement on antiabortion and antifeminism in both politics and social life were palpable. Most significantly, the political shifts in the 1980s as a cause of gender inequality, such as the one that was caused by the New Right, mostly rest on who holds power. According to Chambers, power "is […] both the cause and the effect of gender hierarchy" (654). Atwood signifies the importance of power in gender hierarchy by ridiculing and exaggerating gender inequality.

One way in which Atwood does this is by dividing women into several groups based on their fertility chances. In setting her novel in a patriarchal Republic that regroups women and reduces them to wives, housemaids, or fertile handmaids, Atwood questions the post-liberation era of North America that viewed women as such in its "focus on 'family values'" (Latimer 33). In line with the New Right's rhetoric, Margaret Atwood categorizes the women in her novel into distinct groups (wives, Marthas, and Handmaids) that uphold the qualities women should possess: wives, being submissive to their husbands as the patriarchal figures of

the household, Marthas, in taking on housework tasks such as cooking and cleaning, and Handmaids as fertile 'walking wombs' to bear children to the wives' husbands who cannot bear children themselves. All women are part of the same household, run by a patriarchal figure whom they serve within their respective tasks. Ironically enough, this division of labor is presented as a form of "greater freedom" by Aunt Lydia in the novel, as she questions: "Why expect one woman to carry out all the functions necessary to the serene running of a household? It isn't reasonable or humane" (*The Handmaid's Tale* 167-168). Aunt Lydia is a part of the group of women (referred to as Aunts) that police and train the Handmaids at the Red Center, a place where Handmaids-to-be prepare for their upcoming roles in society. With this admission by Aunt Lydia, Atwood ridicules the notion that women must stay home and manage a household, is policed by the government. Additionally, the idea that these household jobs should be divided between more than one woman in order for them to eventually gain more freedom goes directly against New Right rhetoric yet adheres to their vision of a woman's place in society.

Margaret Atwood used the 1980s American battle over women's rights, as well as Romanian politician Ceaușescu's dictatorship, during which he passed laws for women to have four children; the "*Handmaid's Tale* background material" – as Atwood explained this herself in an interview in 2019 (*Penguin Random House*). She states that "[She] didn't make it up. This [magazine and newspaper clippings] is the proof – everything in these boxes" (*Penguin Random House*). In another interview from 2018, she claims that "[she] made a rule for [her]self" [she] would not include anything that human beings had not already done in some other place or time, or for which the technology did not already exist" (*Lit Hub*). However, she stresses in several interviews that "she was afraid people would think it [*The Handmaid's Tale*] was merely paranoid," instead, she wrote the novel as a work to answer some pivotal questions: "[w]hat if you wanted to take over the U.S. today? What flag could

you wave successfully? *The Handmaid's Tale* is one answer to these 'What ifs?' And it goes from there" (*Penguin Random House*). Additionally, Atwood has said herself: "Nations never build apparently radical forms of government on foundations that aren't there already" (Atwood, *Lit Hub*). In writing the dystopian novel, Atwood responded to the changes that had occurred in the United States at the time of its publication that could possibly create a political shift.

However, it is not just the author that gives an active response of resistance against these changes. In following one Handmaid's tale of present and past, the novel itself also emphasizes an active response in the form of resistance against the Republic of Gilead, and at the same time, warns its readers of the – not always visible – changes that could potentially lead to drastic political or societal changes in the future. The novel "presents an almost completely powerless first-person narrator who tells and retells her own story, apparently only to herself, as she lies in bed at night" (Roy 207). However, at the end of the novel, the reader discovers that the narrator, Offred, has recorded her story of past and present on tapes that she stored, hoping they would be found in the future – as a final act of resistance against the totalitarian Republic of Gilead. As a Handmaid in the Republic of Gilead, Offred has "no access to the written word", according to Wendy Roy (207). Offred references this ban on the written word for women throughout the novel. The reader finds out that, apart from the Commanders, women are not allowed to read or write. Store names have been replaced with signs: a "golden lily' for the Handmaid's dress store or "three eggs, a bee, a cow" for a store resembling a supermarket (*The Handmaid's Tale* 31). Whenever Offred finds a remnant of the written word, she views it as a form of resistance. It brings her joy to find a pillow with the word "FAITH" embroidered on it or a Latin message scratched into the cupboard: "Nolite te bastardes carborundorum," because it is taboo (*The Handmaid's Tale* 63, 58).

Moreover, because of the denied access to reading and writing, Offred's inner dialogue serves as a powerful act of resistance, even if no person is listening. By retelling her past, a life before the Republic of Gilead, and giving insight into her life as a Handmaid under this regime, she defies the Republic. Offred is not allowed to think critically, let alone put her thoughts into words, but she does. This defiance, expressed through words, is an active response to her oppression. "Whether through her [Offred] decision to tell the story, her creative manipulation of words, or her ownership over her own identity and name, the narrator of *The Handmaid's Tale* finds numerous ways to resist Gilead", claims Elena Morgan in her analysis of the novel (*Fresh Writing*). Offred poetically takes the reader along her journey in order to remember her identity through the retelling of her past, as well as resisting her life as a Handmaid in the present. The most obvious form of resistance, therefore, lies in Offred's storytelling. She escapes her reality by telling herself stories of the past. By recalling the people and places of a time when she was not oppressed and still had ownership over her life, she juxtaposes her present with her past and oppression with freedom. Her reminding herself of these times, her telling her story, is seen by her as routine, perhaps as a means not to forget her past. Actively stating to herself that in her own time, she can escape her present serves as a form of resistance against what she is not allowed to: "The night is mine, my own time, to do with as I will, as long as I am quiet […] Where should I go?" (Atwood 43).

A more explicit example of Offred breaking the rules in an act of resistance that also has to do with language is when she finds out her old friend Moira has been transferred to the Red Center, an educational center for all fertile women, where they get instructed by women referred to as Aunts on how to become Handmaids. Primarily, this center serves as a camp where the women's individual selves are stripped away. Offred defies the regime several days into her confinement when she and Moira decide to secretly speak to one another – keeping their old friendship and individualities alive in a time when both are prohibited:

> I couldn't talk to her for several days; we only looked, small glances, like sips. Friendships were suspicious, we knew it, we avoided each other during the mealtime lineups in the cafeteria and in the halls between classes.
>
> But on the fourth day she was beside me during the walk, two by two around the football field.
>
> We weren't given the white wings until we graduated, we had only the veils, so we could talk, as long as we did it quietly and didn't turn to look at one another (Atwood 77).

They meet up several times in one of the old bathroom stalls and speak of their shared past and current fears, as well as thoughts and predictions of the future.

Another example of oppression in Gilead, and a means of defying it, is the use of clothing. In her present, Offred describes how the different sets of women (Commanders' wives, Martha's and Handmaids) wear government-issued uniforms, clothing that erases their identity. A uniform holds no place for variables; it suggests that a person wearing one conforms to what the clothing represents. The Martha's dress is "dull green" and "much like [Offred's] without the white wings and the veil […] with a bib apron over it" (*The Handmaid's Tale* 15). The Marthas do not need to stand out; their uniform does not need to be aesthetically pleasing; it needs to show that Marthas are a part of the household, cooking and cleaning. However, just as with the Handmaid's outfit, the Marthas should not show skin. The Handmaid's uniform, an "ankle-length" skirt, "full, gathered to a flat yoke that extends over the breasts" with "full" sleeves. Paired with "red shoes, flat-heeled to save the spine," paired with "red gloves" and "white wings" a "prescribed issue […] to keep [Handmaids] from seeing, but also from being seen" (*The Handmaid's Tale* 14).

Even the Commanders' wives, who stand at the top of the Gilead hierarchy, wear a veil, albeit prettier, "embroidery in white along the edges", for instance (*The Handmaid's Tale* 87). For all three types of women, the modesty of the dresses and the veils adhere to "the general idea [of the nineteenth century] that women should wear clothes for their health and comfort rather than beauty standards," as proposed by Johnson (9). The colors of the outfits also have little to do with beauty standards. The Handmaids' costumes showcase their fertility through the color red, while the light, pastel-colored dresses of the Wives reference their role as pure and obedient stay-at-home women. However, Offred defies the clothing standards by depicting the vast differences in clothing use during the pre-Gilead era. In talking about women, she explains that "[t]hey wore blouses with buttons down the front that suggested the possibility of *undone*" (*The Handmaid's Tale* 31). Not only does Offred refer to the unbuttoning of women's clothing – something that is not possible in all three types of uniforms for women in the Gilead era, but she mentions that "[women] seemed to be able to choose" (*The Handmaid's Tale* 31). A choice of clothing, as opposed to an issued uniform, gives women an opportunity to express their personality. The uniform is meant to "control women into behaving and acting in an indoctrinated way" (Johnson 10). Self-expression of identity, therefore, is stripped away for women of all classes in Gilead. In returning to her past, Offred demonstrates that clothing played a significant role in terms women's self-expression. Moira, pre-Gilead, who "wore" "one dangly earring [and] the gold fingernail […] to be eccentric", as one distinct example (*The Handmaid's Tale* 43). The issuing of a uniform helps with the speed and effectiveness of women adapting to their new roles in the Gilead society, as their sense of self can be easily forgotten without the means of expression. Atwood's choice to include these descriptive and specific accounts of clothing for the women in a pre- and post-Gilead, is in line with her response to the New Right movement and their

views of women and especially women's place in society, as clothing in *The Handmaid's Tale* reflects on the division of the women based on their place within the household.

In choosing a first-person narrator who confides her memories in a personal story to an imagined audience, the reader is shown a particular perspective of Atwood's imagined dystopian world. Not only does the reader follow Offred's story within the context of the novel, but this type of "sociological imagination helps people 'to use information and to develop reason in order to achieve lucid summations of what is going on in the world and of what may be happening within themselves," as readers may view the plot within their own reality (Seeger 49). Offred's choice of words when addressing her audience, for instance, by mentioning her retelling of her stories to a "Dear You", remains ambiguous throughout the novel because, as Offred states, "*You* can mean more than one. *You* can mean thousands" (*The Handmaid's Tale* 45-46). It can be argued that Offred never intended to have an actual audience listening to her since she quietly visits her past while alone or lying in her bed at night, but the ambiguity in her delivery offers an insight into the mind of a desperate woman trying to navigate her new reality; "[she] must be telling it to someone", after all, "[y]ou don't tell a story only to yourself. There is always someone else" (*The Handmaid's Tale* 45). As is explained in the "Historical Notes" chapter of the novel, Professor James Pieixoto mentions that Offred told her story through "approximately thirty tape cassettes" and transcribed into a "manuscript" after these were found (*The Handmaid's Tale* 307, 309). Atwood's choice for Offred's story to have originally belonged to oral tradition fits within the narrative of the governing state of Gilead, where reading and writing are forbidden for handmaids. The implicit suggestion is that, because of restrictions on reading and writing for handmaids, Offred used cassette tapes because she had no access to pen and paper.

On the other hand, it might have been in line with her narration, which relies heavily on memory, and can be told and retold more easily through speech than by having to rewrite a

memory as it changes over time. Whichever the reasoning or interpretation on the origins of this choice by readers, the impact of using oral tradition reaches further, since "[texts such as *The Handmaid's Tale*] are compelling because they emphasize the power of the spoken word to resist both authorized accounts of personal stories and official records of historical events" (Roy 202). To further elaborate, "artworks as essentially social objects that acquire meaning through the behavio[u]r of individuals toward them," where Offred's story, both within the novel as spoken word, as well as the plot, must be interpreted and understood by their respective audiences within the correct social context (Gingell, Roy 89). Helen Gregory further elaborates that "scholars like Barthes, Becker, and Griswold argue [instead] that artistic production and consumption cannot be understood as isolated components" (Gingell, Roy 89). When reading the novel in 2025, the social context of Offred's story may extend beyond the dystopian world of Gilead. Contemporary readers may feel like Offred is speaking to them and they may see similarities with what has been happening in the U.S. in a post-2016 election era. This argument then could indicate the sudden surge in the novel's sales in both 2016 and 2024.

Moreover, it is precisely because of this argument that the novel must be understood not as an isolated component, but within the current social and political context, that we can understand the regained popularity of Margaret Atwood's novel during the United States' 2016 and 2024 presidential elections. During the 2016 election, Donald Trump attacked Hillary Clinton's character, which sparked accusation of sexual violence on Trump's part, as well as an increase in the gap between social gender roles – which only sparked upset and fear among voters for both parties. Important for the regained popularity of Atwood's novel is its subject matter on women's rights within the context of abortion rights. With Donald Trump running for president, his antiabortion stance had been visible from the start of his election. In a 2016 interview, Trump mentioned that he felt "'there has to be some form of punishment'

for women who have abortions", which "caus[ed] a huge media firestorm" (Crockett). Trump's chosen running mate, Mike Pence, an avid antiabortion advocate; or Betsy DeVos, his secretary of education, who made the comparison between the choice of abortion and the choice of enslaving people – showing the overall stance on women's right of choice to the American voter. Another example was his 2017 decision to take back Obama's "Fair Pay and Safe Workplaces order" that "ensure[d] that companies with federal contracts compl[ied] with 14 labor and civil rights laws," which "included two rules that impacted women workers: paycheck transparency and a ban on forced arbitration clause for sexual harassment, sexual assault or discrimination claims" (O'Hara). These examples are very much in line with the operations of the dystopian world of Gilead, as Atwood herself stated in a 2022 article: "I considered [the story I told in the *Handmaid's Tale*] too far-fetched" but "[t]heoretic dictatorships [like Gilead] do not lie only in the distant past; There are a number of them on the planet today. What is to prevent the United States from becoming one?" (*The Atlantic*). Atwood had modeled the Gilead regime as a theocracy, where law based on religion dictates the lives of Gilead's citizens, including manipulation of language and control over women's bodies. This emphasis on religious law was based, in part, on 17th century Puritan New England, where suppression and social control were significant. Additionally, as mentioned above, Atwood drew on the influence of fears of declining birthrates and the desire to return to traditional gender roles during Ronald Reagan's administration. She also drew on examples from twentieth-century dictatorships, such as Ceausescu's reign in Romania, where women were forced to have children, as well as how Chinese citizens were not allowed to have children. These are examples of regimes that exercised control over reproduction politics, in a similar manner as the Gilead regime does. Drawing on real-life societies and observations is significant for the dystopian genre. However, an argument could be made that authors of the

dystopian theme use their work as outlet for their own fears, not to evoke an emotion or response from their audience.

As is evident, sales surged for Atwood's novel, which hit the above-mentioned points on a fear of authoritarianism on the head with Offred's story. During the 2024 elections, many voters feared for the beginning of a Gilead-type administration. The explanation on the current administration by Morabia that it [the current administration] "could behave in a fascist manner," where "the far-right ideology, the militarization of the police, the violent suppression of opposition, the massive deportation, the beliefs in White supremacy, and the strongman and authoritarian demeanor" echoes some – if not all – of Gilead's ideals (757-758). These fears, again, shot Atwood's novel to the top of many best-seller lists. Even though many dystopian novels (such as YA novels like *Divergent* and *The Hunger Games*) have always peaked reader's interest, the timing of a newfound interest in Atwood's 1985 novel, "seems to signal both a widespread uncertainty and the genre's ability to observe and criticize power relations" (Isomaa et al, x).

After all, "the literary conventions of the dystopia […] illustrate the relationship between the inner life of the individual and the greater whole of social-historical reality". (Seeger 50). Though the difference between dystopian works such as *Divergent* and *The Hunger Games* and Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* lies in the similarities drawn between the fictional world and the real one. It is true that most dystopian works rely on historical events and present a world based on its readers' fears of an imperfect world.

However, the fictional worlds as described by Atwood and for instance, George Orwell, draws on historical events that seem to be repeating now. This repetition of historical events in a post-2016 U.S. election era connects with readers of *The Handmaid's Tale* as the novel draws on these same historical events in creating its dystopian regime. Ultimately, it is this connection that helped with the novel's regained popularity, although Offred's story of

resistance offers a deeper layer of connection between twenty-first century readers. Many of them, too, wish to resist the rise of totalitarianism in the U.S.

Chapter 2. *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*: a handbook on resistance

One week after Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 presidential election, Yale historian Timothy Snyder posted a message on Facebook titled "Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century". With this message, Snyder combined historical facts on fascism, Nazism, and communism to sketch various lessons that would help Americans look through a lens of history to change their present situation potentially. Online followers shared the post over 17,000 times. Snyder then translated the post into several languages, and various news articles used it as inspiration, before Snyder decided to present his lessons in a book in 2017 (which rose to several best-seller lists as well). Like Atwood, Snyder decided to create a 'call to action' through examining historical events. He used the upcoming fascism of Nazi Germany, communist Czechoslovakia and oligarchy Russia as examples from the twentieth century and turned these into lessons "adapted to the circumstances of today" to not only "examine history to understand the […] forces of tyranny" but also "to consider the proper responses to it" (*On Tyranny* 13). The twenty lessons provided by Snyder are easy to comprehend – i.e., lesson one being "Do not obey in advance" – and supported by an interpretation of the lesson, as well as historical context from the twentieth century. For lesson one, Snyder uses the obedience of German and Austrian citizens during the annexation of Austria by Nazi Germany in March 1938, to show how easily tyranny can creep in and what its implications could be. In reviewing the past through these lessons, Snyder shows his readers how history can be a tool of instruction in actively resisting recurring events of today.

On Tyranny can be placed within several overlapping frameworks, mainly historical and political frameworks. Snyder uses specific historical events that fit within his area of expertise as a historian of Eastern Europe and totalitarian regimes, principally Soviet Communism and Nazi Germany. In using events from the twentieth century, Snyder uses both

applied history and historicism in order to frame a practical guide for resistance, as well as explaining tyranny and authoritarianism within the contemporary democratic structure, through a historical lens. When viewing Snyder's *On Tyranny* within the framework of applied history, Snyder arguably looks at a "moral relation to the past, essentially the idea that the past can guide [his readers'] behaviour in the present" (Kaal, van Lottum137). However, according to Dutch historian Herman Paul, it is a "curious assumption […] that something can only be learned if the subject (the learner) and the object (what he or she draws a lesson from) are situated in the same circumstances", since "not similarities, but differences between past and present allow us to learn something 'now' from 'then'" (127). Herman Paul's assumption equivocates the question of whether there are similarities between Nazi Germany and Soviet communism of the twentieth century and the possible contemporary threat to tyranny as Snyder claims.

In addition, Herman Paul warns of a danger that arises "when historians are keen to see their own beliefs confirmed in the past", something that Snyder's critics accuse him of doing when he vocalizes his view of the current political state of the United States (128). Paul continues that "historical conversation presupposes an epistemic relation with the past, aimed at knowledge and understanding" – something that Snyder does (130). However, Snyder leaves no room for an understanding or interpretation of the past for his readers. *On Tyranny* instructs its readers what this interpretation is, and the interpretation of the similarities with the present. Putting words in his readers' mouths, so to speak, eliminates an objective stance on the present events brought forth by Snyder in his book. However, as an academic historian, in providing the broader public with his interpretation of the past, Snyder invites his readers to participate in a critical conversation of the historical influences of the present.

Snyder also draws on a political framework, intertwining Republicanism and Liberal Democratic Theory. Republicanism and Liberal Democratic Theory have a shared foundation

of being concerned with preserving free societies. First, both frameworks must be defined to understand how Snyder uses them. Starting with Republicanism, the etymology of the word is derived from ‘republic’ or ‘republican’. Its definitions lie far and wide, but it mainly goes back to a form of government with republican principles. The *Dictionaire de l’Académie* (1694 edition) defines these principles as a “[s]tate governed by several”. This definition is in line with the Latin description of res publica; which can further be explained through Cicero’s definition of it: “[t]he republic is the thing of the people; but a people is not just any gathering of persons assembled no matter how; it is the gathering of a multitude of individuals who have become associated by virtue of an agreement on law and a community of interests” in his *De republica* (Keller). In addition. Keller adds that [t]the term *republican* […] had the meaning of ‘rebel’ […] someone who opposed the present regime”. Snyder’s use of this framework is visible through the rejection by the one-party state of the voice of the people in that state. The absence of civic engagement can lead to tyranny, Snyder claims. Within a tyranny, there is not just oppressive rule, but a loss of shared civic responsibility. Therefore, in order to have the republican state survive, Snyder’s answer is a participation by its citizens – “Lesson one: Do not obey in advance, lesson 2: Defend institutions” and “lesson 18: Be calm when the unthinkable arrives” all ask for an active participation of citizens in order for democracy to survive (*On Tyranny* 17, 22, 103).

From a liberal democratic viewpoint, Snyder first and foremost draws on John’s Locke’s analysis of liberal democracy. Essential to Locke’s interpretation is “the question of people right and people power” where emphasis is placed “on civil and political rights of the citizenry” where “in principle, if not practice […] representatives must be answerable to their constituents” (Itodo 104). Snyder’s lessons “Believe in truth”, “take responsibility for the face of the world” and “establish a private life” all emphasize liberal-democratic fears of the erosion of individual autonomy as a result of surveillance and propaganda by a totalitarian

state (*On Tyranny* 32, 65, 87). Within this viewpoint, Snyder claims that tyranny can weaken institutions' means to protect individual rights, which are central to a contemporary (liberal) democracy. Snyder combines Republicanism, which views freedom as non-denominative, with a liberal democracy view of freedom as achievable without interference, stating that both viewpoints are demanded since freedom is fragile. Snyder calls for collective action and shares a unified warning from American citizens.

Seeing that Snyder is a democrat, it could be argued that *On Tyranny* could be classified as political criticism, especially since Snyder highlights political themes through history and juxtaposes these against a post-2016 election United States. In his call to resistance, Snyder, through his lessons, focuses on the individual to make a difference, which is in line with the Republicanism framework in which the individual citizen is a rebel, as Keller puts it. Seymour's analysis of resistance is harmonious with Keller's argument. According to Seymour, resistance does not solely "focus […] on structures of political economy and dominant cultural discourses" but should also keep in mind "how relationships of power are experienced, transmitted, and changed by individuals in their everyday practices" in order for resistance to work (305). All of Snyder's twenty lessons aim at change to take place on an individual, everyday level. The significance of following these small steps and making small changes could potentially grow if more people do the same. After all, "social structures cannot be changed easily or immediately in the foreseeable future", according to Angela Wigger (Barrow 149). However, this is not to say that Snyder's call to action offers a full rejection of tyranny, nor that the changes will have a significant impact. Cleverly though, Snyder supports the theories of his lessons with historical facts from the twentieth century and warns his readers of a potential repetition of events. This is a powerful structure, because it demands readers to think critically, which in turn helps readers believe Snyder's proposition put forth in his lessons.

Since Snyder is an academic historian, he adds gravitas to his assertions that the political environment is similar to those of the twentieth century. Therefore, his warnings are heeded more easily by his audience than if he were not a historian. In speaking with Amanda Lang in April of 2025, Snyder explained that "[t]he way that the twenty lessons are constructed [is that they] are meant not just to be prescriptive, but also to describe an arc […] so one can debate how far along we are" on the road to tyranny in the United States (06:14-06:25, *WONK*). This is not to say that the book does not contain Snyder's personal opinion – it is just not framed as such. The book, therefore, could more easily be interpreted as a "manifesto, […] a passionate call to action" (Holter). A reason for writing down his instructions in *On Tyranny* (which is also featured as a specific lesson in the book) is not to obey. Snyder argues that "democracy depends on an individual's sense of ideals and an individual's ability to define for themselves what is normal", again adhering to the Republicanism framework (Wright). In viewing his book in this way, readers can view the lessons as a guideline for their definition of the term 'democracy'. Importantly, Snyder explains that when he wrote his book in late 2016, he "did not start from the assumption that American democracy is secure" (Wright). Looking through the lenses of his frameworks again, it can be argued that an endangered democracy gives way for other forms of government, such as authoritarianism, to come in its place. This is exactly Snyder's belief. Through the historical analyses that accompany his lessons, Snyder tries to explain how, in the past, one-party states overthrew fragile democracies.

In order to explain the premise of Snyder's book, we must first go back to the birth of the United States, and its democracy. As Snyder explains in the prologue of *On Tyranny,* "the Founding Fathers sought to avoid the evil that they […] called *tyranny*", by "establishing a system of checks and balances" and "law" upon which they "found[ed] a democratic republic" (10). In this republic, according to the Declaration of Independence:

> [A]ll men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. – That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, - That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness (45-46).

There are three significant points to unpack here: (1) the system of checks and balances, (2) the Right of self-determination, and (3) the fact that a government exists for its people, and not vice versa. Starting with the system of checks and balances, three main branches make up the US government: the legislative branch (Congress, consisting of the House of Representatives chosen by US citizens and the Senate, containing two Senators from each state, also elected and appointed), the executive branch (the President, elected by the citizens) and the judicial branch (consisting of one Supreme court and inferior courts established by Congress). This division assures that no group or person will have too much power. The "ability […] to respond to the actions of the other branches" by each branch is effectively the system of checks and balances (*US Government*).

The right of self-determination gives people "the right to determine their own political status and to be free of alien domination" and is therefore closely related to the third main point (Hannum). Because people have the right of self-determination, their chosen government exists solely for them, as it acts on their behalf. Once a government loses sight of these three main points, it opens the possibility to go from a democracy to a tyranny, as

Snyder argues. The model of democracy as set by the Founding Fathers, is constructed from these main points. As is already stated in the preamble, the Constitution of the United States is made by and for "*We the People*" (1). The articles of the Constitution, which are divided into the three main branches, show precisely how the main points as shown above are supposed to come together in a joined union government for the people. However, as can be made apparent from Trump's first, and especially now during his second, presidency, the divide between the three branches has been blurred. Trump controls the legislative branch in the sense that he controls the House and the Senate. The Supreme Court's decision in Trump v. United States in July of 2024, in Trump's favor, shows a turn "'into virtually uncheckable power'" for Trump in the executive branch, according to scholar Peter Shane (Blumenthal).

Lastly, Trump, during his first presidential term, has appointed many judges (226 federal judges, including 3 Supreme Court judges) who endorse his political agenda. This apparent complete control of Trump over all three branches of government are eerily similar to 1933 Germany, hence the reason for Timothy Snyder to model his lessons to that specific time in history. As Adolf Hitler came to power in January 1933, he was the head of a constitutional government. In February of the same year, the Reichstag building burned down – something that Hitler used as an excuse to pass his enabling act that gave him dictatorial authority. He began arresting political opponents, created a secret police force, shut down newspapers, and started building a concentration camp. By 1934, he had power of the military forces and had arranged himself as a full-fletched dictator. Looking at the Trump administration in 2025, apart from being in control of all three branches of government, Trump has already dealt with a constitutional crisis; deporting people overseas and having started a global trade war. This crisis will give him (much like Hitler) the 'excuse' to use the emergency powers of the presidency to make decisions that in other scenarios would be considered illegal and not under his authority. Moreover, he has already created a secret

police force. I.C.E. can arrest, detain and deport people without any political or legal recourse, which essentially makes I.C.E. the equivalent of the Geheime Staats Polizei of 1933 Germany.

Furthermore, Trump has ordered the expansion of Guantanamo Bay, similar to Hitler having built Dachau concentration camp, as well as sending US citizens to El Salvadorian prisons. Finally, as an American president is chief Commander of military forces, Trump has complete control. Seeing as the United States has been a democracy for over 200 years, the only hope is for rational people to resist what is happening in order to stop its discourse. With this intention in mind, Snyder invites his readers to look critically at the comparisons he draws in *On Tyranny*, in order to understand, as well as resist. His lessons accompanying the historical comparisons and context, are tools offered to complete the resistance.

With Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* being a work of fiction, and *On Tyranny* being more of an instructional 'read-the-warning-signs' pamphlet, the two works seem to have little in common (apart from the overarching theme of totalitarianism). However, as is mentioned above, Snyder calls upon the individual citizen to heed his warning signs to make an impact. Atwood's protagonist, Offred, does exactly that in the totalitarian state of Gilead. The question then arises: how many of Snyder's lessons are followed by Offred or the other characters in Atwood's novel? In an attempt to combine the two literary works, an analysis of Snyder's *[On Tyranny:] Twenty Lessons* through Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is necessary. In conducting this comparative textual analysis of both texts, the examination will show how Atwood's dystopia embodies Snyder's lessons. In addition, the critical-genre approach within this analysis of Atwood's dystopian text examines how her novel mirrors real authoritarian threats as Snyder's *On Tyranny* describes them.

Starting with Snyder's first lesson; "Do not obey in advance", it could be argued from the offset that Atwood's protagonist fails to follow. The fact that Offred narrates her story

while living under the Gilead dictatorship could indicate that she, along with others, had not headed the warning signaled by Snyder in *On Tyranny*. However, readers learn through Offred's narration of her present and past that she most definitely reflects on potential warning signs she missed:

> Is that how we lived then? But we lived as usual […] We lived as usual, by ignoring. Ignoring isn't the same as ignorance, you have to work at it. Nothing changes instantaneously: in a gradually heating bathtub you'd be boiled to death before you know it. There were stories in the newspapers […] [The stories in the newspapers] were like dreams to us […] We were the people who were not in the papers (62).

By stating that changes made by the Gilead government initially did not impact her life directly, Offred not only acknowledges that these changes took place, but that she went along with them. She did obey, until it was too late – as Snyder puts it: "anticipatory obedience means adapting instinctively, without reflecting, to a new situation" (20). As Offred contemplates the moment everything changed, it becomes clear that much of her obedience stemmed from fear and not understanding the ripple effect that small changes that preceded this moment held; "I guess that's how they were able to do it" […] Keep calm, they said on television. Everything is under control. […] There wasn't even any rioting in the streets" (*The Handmaid's Tale* 178-79). The only character in Atwood's novel that seemingly understood the implications the coup could have on their future, was Moira: "Here it comes […] You wait, she said. They've been building up to this" (179). However, Moira too, did not follow lesson one. Her warning came too late. Nevertheless, as opposed to Offred, Moira is one of the few, if not the only character in Atwood's novel that refuses to obey to the new rules set by the Gilead government.

Snyder's second lesson, "defend institutions", is one not necessarily followed by

Offred, but we do see a glimpse of Snyder's interpretation of the lesson in Atwood's novel. As Snyder notes, institutions are not always changed or destroyed, "[s]ometimes institutions are deprived of vitality and function, turned into a simulacrum of what they once were" (*On Tyranny* 24). When Offred visits the doctor, she notes that the tests are "the same as before, except […] now it's obligatory" (Atwood 65). Remnants of the old days can be found in the examination room: "a folding screen" with "snakes and the sword […] bits of broken symbolism left over from the time before" painted on them (Atwood 65). However, the doctor examining her is not allowed to look upon her – a white screen masks handmaids' faces from view with every visit. The doctor, much to Offred's surprise, offers to help her like he has "helped others" get pregnant before he lifts the sheet and reveals his face to her, and vice versa (*The Handmaid's Tale* 66). What the doctor is offering is dangerous, penalizable by death under the Gilead regime. This offer shows that the doctor is still upholding the institution of healthcare. After all, doctors take an oath to help their patients to the best of their ability. In offering (and supposedly, helping) his services to his patient handmaids, the doctor resists the Gilead rules that dictate that handmaids must get pregnant by their Commanders. Because he, at the same time, would save handmaids' lives in getting them pregnant when their Commanders are not able to due to their age, this also indicates that he is defending the institution of which only a small part still exists in Gilead.

Lesson 3, "Beware of the one-party state", is not necessarily followed in *The Handmaid's Tale*, but it is addressed in Offred's reconstruction of her past (*On Tyranny* 26). Snyder argues that "democracies [of the Twentieth century] often collapsed when a single party seized power in some combination of an election and a coup d'état" (*On Tyranny* 27-28). For Gilead, only the latter took place: "after the catastrophe, when they shot the President and machine-gunned the Congress and the army declared a state of emergency […] The entire government, gone like that […] They said it would be temporary" (*The Handmaid's Tale* 178-

79). Through several of Offred's reconstructions of her past, Offred remembers how Gilead took over governmental power one step at a time. After the coup, she describes that women were no longer allowed to hold property (her and all women's bank accounts were frozen) or keep a job (she and other women from her job at the library were all fired). She mentions that "that's how they were able to do it", silently and "without anyone knowing beforehand" (*The Handmaid's Tale* 178). The importance, as Snyder argues, lies in people's right (and ability) to vote. When this right gets taken away, the one-party state has seized control: "'where annual elections end, tyranny begins'" (*On Tyranny* 30). Similar are the events narrated by Offred on how the new government was able to move into an authoritarian state, by stripping citizens of all their rights, but starting with the most important one: their right to elect their government of choice.

Atwood's choice to include and address symbolism in her novel is in line with Snyder's fourth lesson on "Tak[ing] responsibility for the face of the world" (*On Tyranny* 32). Snyder mentions that "words and gestures […] count very much" (33). Offred's choice of words and her small defiant gestures, such as smiling at chauffeur Nick or engaging in illegal conversation topics with Ofglen, do count towards her resistance. In addition to gestures, Snyder goes into more extreme examples, such as symbolism in Nazi Germany or Soviet Russia that was used for "dehumanization" (*On Tyranny* 33). Atwood's choice to detail the handmaids' uniforms is symbolic of how the women are viewed in society: as baby-makers, with the red color symbolizing blood. The ankle-length skirts, long sleeves, and red gloves – all so that these fertile women will not be able to arouse men they encounter. The white wings covering their faces, so that men outside of their household cannot make eye contact with them. "Authoritarians need civil servants" as part of Snyder's fifth lesson, "Remember professional ethics" is defied by Offred's Commander Fred (*On Tyranny* 38). In having secret rendezvous with Offred in his office where he plays Scrabble with her and lets her read, while

she is not allowed to, he disobeys the Gilead regime. Moreover, in doing so, he is risking his position and possibly his life. However, Atwood also offers examples of "members of professions [that] confuse their specific ethics with the emotions of the moment" (*On Tyranny* 41). When the handmaids must show up to a birth of fellow handmaid Ofwarren, Offred describes seeing the "mobile doctors" in their "big Emerge van", "waiting" or "[p]laying cards most likely", as "they're only allowed in if it can't be helped" (*The Handmaid's Tale* 120). As stated before, the professional ethics that doctors are expected to follow are to help their patients to the best of their ability. The fact that doctors in Gilead have abandoned their ethics while a birth is taking place (with chances of a successful birth being "one in four" in Gilead) goes against their civic duty (*The Handmaid's Tale* 118).

Offred also seems to "be wary of paramilitaries", Snyder's sixth lesson in *On Tyranny* (42). Her noticing of the violence instigated by the Eyes or Guardians, as well as the fake sense of security they wish to instill in citizens by carrying guns and wearing military outfits, are examples of power plays by an authoritarian state. However, Offred does not appear to be frightened by what she sees. At times, her choice of words implies she does not even take them seriously, as she notices guns "slung over [their] shoulder[s]" (Atwood 120). It seems to be that she has become desensitized to their presence, much like she has grown accustomed to the various negative changes brought upon her by the new government. As is important to remember, she is already living under a totalitarian regime. However, Offred does observe that violence by either paramilitaries or official police and military was never the norm in her past, saying that they, or "whoever they were" had shot at resistance marches and that "a few things were blown up […] but you couldn't even be sure who was doing it" (Atwood 185). As Snyder notes, if situations involving that kind of violence take place; "the end has come", which is exactly what happened when Gilead came to be in Atwood's novel (42).

In his seventh lesson, "Be reflective if you must be armed", Snyder explains that

"[a]uthoritarian regimes usually include a special police force" and a "secret state police force whose assignments include the murder of dissenters or others designated as enemies" (*On Tyranny* 47-78). Offred, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, often describes either these forces or their assignments. She speaks of "Guardians" policing the streets, as well as the "Eyes […] grab[bing] a man who is walking along […] slam[ming] him back against the black side of the van" (*The Handmaid's Tale* 27, 174). "The Wall" is another prominent example of the assignments of Gilead's secret police, where "bodies" are "hanging from hooks" for having been involved in illegal activities or having opposed the regime (*The Handmaid's Tale* 37-8). Offred mentions that she has gotten used to this; there is little emotion in her narration of seeing the bodies – an indication that in Gilead society, this is something that many people, like herself, have grown accustomed to.

In Atwood's novel, we see several characters who follow Snyder's eighth rule: "Stand out" (*On Tyranny* 51). Most prominently, Offred's best friend Moira stands out. After all, she escaped from the Red Centre. She stood out by this escape alone; she was deemed "too dangerous to be allowed the privilege of returning to the Red Centre" when she was caught by the regime (*The Handmaid's Tale* 257). From the start, Moira's defiance which made her stand out resulted in her becoming a "corrupting influence" on those who obeyed the rules, which is exactly why individuals who stand out are a danger to a totalitarian regime (*The Handmaid's Tale* 257).

The two lessons by Snyder that Offred follows most are numbers10 and 14: "[b]elieve in truth" and "[e]stablish a private life" (*On Tyranny* 65, 87). Offred often reminisces about her past, and the people in it: her husband Luke, her daughter, and her mother. In thinking of them, she does more than keep their memory alive. Through remembering them, either dead or alive, she holds hope for change and beliefs in resistance, because "without shadow' or rather, no shadow", "there can be no light […] unless there is light" (Atwood 111). She

ponders over her past and especially these three individuals in the privacy she has created for herself, in a world where she is granted none. A lack of privacy, according to Timothy Snyder, is a ground rule for totalitarianism, or rather, "the erasure of the difference of private and public life" is (88). In Atwood's Gilead, this erasure is upheld in various ways. All citizens of different classes are expected to govern each other and their behaviors, and most of all, not engage in private conversation. This expectation by the Gilead regime to govern others is the reason why Handmaids must walk together to and from the stores, or why Marthas and Handmaids are not supposed to "fraternize" (Atwood 17). Moreover, prohibiting written language for anyone except men at the top of the hierarchical ladder decreases the risk of educating oneself, and thereby providing the tools for questioning or protesting the one-state government. If you cannot be "kind to […] language" or "listen for dangerous words" (lessons nine and 17 by Snyder), you cannot protect yourself from tyranny (59, 99).

Offred also investigates - Snyder's eleventh lesson. She does so in her room, but also through her interactions with others. Through these interactions, she and other characters all follow lesson number 12, "Make eye contact and small talk" (Snyder 12). As Offred explains to Rita that "[she] used to hate such talk" but "[n]ow [she] long[s] for it" because it is "[a]n exchange of sorts" (Atwood 17). Or Nick, her Commander's chauffeur, who "begins to whistle" to her, before "he winks" after they make eye contact – all examples of small talk and eye contact that are not allowed but happen nonetheless (Atwood 24).

These types of small talk lead, eventually, to Offred following the next lesson of Snyder's book, number 13, "practic[ing] corporeal politics" (83). In making small talk with Ofglen during their walks, Offred learns valuable information:

> "'Keep your head down as we walk,' [Ofglen] says, 'and lean just a little towards me. That way I can hear you better. Don't talk when there's anyone coming.' We walk, heads bent as usual. I'm so excited I can hardly breathe, but I keep a steady pace. Now

> more than ever I must avoid drawing attention to myself […] 'You can join us, she says. 'Us?' I say. There is an *us* then, there's a *we*. I knew it. (Atwood 173).

Finding a friend in Ofglen is, according to Snyder in explaining this lesson, the second "boundary" to "be crossed" in order "[f]or resistance to succeed", as "people must find themselves in places that are not their homes, and among groups who were not previously their friends" (84). The two women, during their quiet talks, engage in the first boundary: shared "ideas about change" albeit not always discussed in so many words (Snyder 84). Another person Offred secretly speaks to during her time in the Red Centre is Moira. Even though the two already know each other, their meetings at the washrooms count as solidarity and a form of resistance.

A further form of resistance that ties in with Snyder's lesson is when Offred and Serena Joy devise a plan to get Offred pregnant. Although Serena Joy defies the government's rules, her reasoning is selfish – she wants a child and knows her husband can no longer give her one. Meanwhile, Offred only goes along with the plan because Serena manipulates her with a picture of Offred's daughter, claiming that she knows the little girl is still alive. Regardless of reasoning, this too, is an example of two unlikely allies engaging in resistance against the regime.

Lesson 15, "Contribute to good causes", is followed most by Offred's mother, in Offred's review of her past (*On Tyranny* 92). In a viewing of women's protest from before, shown by Aunt Lydia in the Red Centre, Offred's spots her mother on the screen: "my young mother […] in a group of other women, dressed in the same fashion; she is holding a stick, no, it's part of a banner, the handle" (*The Handmaid's Tale* 125).

There is also an example of Snyder's sixteenth lesson: "Learn from peers in other countries" (*On Tyranny* 95). On one of their walks to the shops, Offred and Ofglen stumble upon a group of Japanese tourists. Offred narrates the encounter:

> They're diminutive, and neatly turned out […] They look around, bright-eyed, cocking their heads to one side like robins, their very cheerful aggressiveness, and I can't help staring. It's been a long time since I've seen skirts that short on women […] Their heads are uncovered and their hair too is exposed, in all its darkness and sexuality […] Ofglen stops beside me and I know that she too cannot take her eyes off these women. We are fascinated, but also repelled. They seem undressed. It has taken so little time to change our minds, about things like this. Then I think, I used to dress like that. That was freedom (*The Handmaid's Tale* 34).

According to Snyder's lesson, "sustained attention to the world around us […] is liberating" because "[i]t allows us to see how other people […] react" (*On Tyranny* 98). Even though the passage, as mentioned above, does not initially seem like Offred is trying to learn from the Japanese tourists, their presence does offer some reflection to her. Offred realizes that the cultural differences, shown through clothing, were not present in the past. Upon seeing another culture that is not under an authoritarian regime, Offred realizes how fast things can change, and how easy it is to adapt to such changes, even as banal as prescribed clothing.

The easy-going nature of obedience is also shown through the interpretation of lesson 18 in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Snyder's "Be calm when the unthinkable arrives" is followed when, despite "natural fear and grief, [one] must not enable the destruction of […] institutions" (*On Tyranny* 103, 110). Offred's retelling of how life went on without any real reaction from Americans to the coup, or the subsequent events that slowly marked the start of the Republic of Gilead, is precisely what following Snyder's lesson could prevent.

Lesson 19, "Be a patriot", is one that Offred follows after her story is narrated (*On Tyranny* 111). In recording her retelling of past and present events, and hiding the cassette tapes, she tries to help future generations from making the same mistakes that she and her peers made, to make a difference. In this brave attempt to tell her story, she fully adheres to

Snyder's argument that "[a] nationalist will say that 'it can't happen here,' [whereas] [a] patriot says that it could happen here, but that we will stop it" (*On Tyranny* 114).

Lastly, the analysis arrives at Snyder's twentieth lesson: "Be as courageous as you can" (*On Tyranny* 115). All characters of Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* are, in their own way, as courageous as they can be. Offred, in retelling her story, along with her many small acts of defiance, Moira, in all of her actions and words, or the Commander, in secretly meeting up with Offred in an attempt to make "[Offred's] life bearable to [her]" (*The Handmaid's Tale* 193). Ofglen, of course, who is part of the secret resistance, or even Serena Joy, who, in her arrangement with Offred and Nick to get Offred pregnant (albeit selfish), is breaking the law in doing so. Even though the characters in *The Handmaid's Tale* are already living in a totalitarian regime, the novel in itself shows the resilience and resistance that individuals will continue to have.

The relevance of analyzing how the characters in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* follow Timothy Snyder's lessons on tyranny, lies in the display of focal points of a totalitarian regime within a work of fiction. Where Snyder's *On Tyranny* manual calls attention to key aspects of resistance to a totalitarian state, seeing these lessons followed in Atwood's fictional narrative lends weight to understanding the importance of resistance in a new light. Seeing Snyder's lessons play out within Atwood's fictional narration could make his lessons easier to understand in real life. Even though the plot in *The Handmaid's Tale* might seem far-fetched, its narration style speaks to readers in a different way than the instructive way in which *On Tyranny* is written. This comparison between the two works not only places them next to one another as examples of active responses of resistance to authoritarian threats but contextualizes these threats within their respective genres. This comparison also highlights how valuable Snyder's advice is, and how significant the historical context is to understand the contemporary rise of authoritarianism in the U.S.

Chapter 3. Contemporary cultural use of *The Handmaid's Tale* and *On Tyranny*

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is not just an active response of resistance in its creation or within the imagined Gilead regime, but also in its cultural legacy. The importance of the novel's cultural legacy is evident in its adaptation and reception in popular media.

Firstly, there is the Hulu TV series adaptation, which debuted in 2017, after Donald Trump became the 45th president of the United States. Not only was the television series immensely popular (and remains to this day), but it also gave a visual representation of Gilead as Margaret Atwood had envisioned it to its viewers. In her novel, Margaret Atwood already forecasted "extreme measures that a patriarchal male-dominated society would take to control women and [showed] how women could rebel against oppression in resistance movements", but the show visualized this for twenty-first-century viewers (Kellner 44-45). As the first seasons of the series (of which only the first season followed the narrative of Atwood's novel) aired during Trump's first presidency, they "served as a critique of the patriarchal nature of [Trump's] administration, as well as anticipating the deep roots of an oppressive patriarchy in U.S. institutions" (Kellner 44). It is therefore no surprise that the red and white handmaid's costume, which Atwood modelled after Canadian advertisements of 1940s Old Dutch Cleansing packages, with images of women wearing face-obscuring bonnets, has become a symbol for women's rights activists. Trump's ideology of returning to traditional values has greatly undermined women's rights that had been steadily increasing over the past decades. The overturning of Roe v. Wade in 2022 that ended federal protections for abortion rights in the United States, and Trump's admission to "restrict access to contraception" seem to have blended Atwood's narrative with the real-life political and social landscape of the United States in a post-2016 election era, some critics believe (*ACLU*).

A more recent and far more extensive example has been Trump's decision to reinstate the Global Gag Rule on January 24, 2025. This policy "risks women's health and lives by forcing nongovernmental organizations outside of the United States to choose between receiving U.S. global health assistance and providing comprehensive sexual and reproductive health care" (*Global Gag Rule*). According to Madeline Yu Carrola, protesters wearing the red-and-white ensemble "draw on the story's portrayal of a totalitarian society that oppresses women by restricting what they do with their bodies, whom they can love, and where they can live" (90). The narrative of Atwood's novel that is echoed in the Hulu TV-series of the patriarchal control of the Gilead government on reproductive rights and freedom, according to activist participants in Yu Carrola's study "connect[s] […] with what they see going on in the current political situation in the United States" (96). These protesters, all "members of official handmaid chapters", all use the imagery of the handmaid's costume because it is viewed as a symbol of their oppression (Yu Carrola 99). The imagery of *The Handmaid's Tale*, drawn from Atwood's original novel and popularized through the TV-series adaptation, has therefore become a global reflection of (feminist) resistance in popular media. This appropriation of the handmaid's uniform and its symbolic importance in today's gendered political struggles is significant.

The costume's visual language has also appeared in various parodies, satire (such as the Saturday Night Live skit and many online memes) and in protest art, like Jill Kargman's 2018 NYC Billboard of a woman in handmaid's robe with the caption 'Don't let fiction become reality' or art exhibitions 'A Look Inside The Handmaid's Tale' at the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse, New York in 2018 and 'The Legacy of The Handmaid's Tale: June's Evolution from Handmaid to Rebel' at the New York City Paley Museum in 2025. The costumes made for the TV series by costume designer Ane Crabtree have even been acquired by the Smithsonian National Museum of American History in 2019 because of their cultural

significance. Further cultural discourse is noticeable on social media, with many online discussions on the novel and television show taking place on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok – bringing activism to even younger audiences through contemporary media platforms. The scratched phrase "Nolite te bastardes carborundorum" that Offred finds inside the cupboard in her room has also made its way into popular discourse in the form of tattoos (*The Handmaid's Tale* 58). The adoption of the cultural symbols from *The Handmaid's Tale* are used by individuals and (mainstream) media to gain visibility, create solidarity, and to mobilize like-minded individuals.

Timothy Snyder's *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons of the Twentieth Century* has also had an impact since its publication in 2017. The book has been published in over 40 languages and continues to read the book today. For example, the Rotterdam library has a consistent waiting list for loan reservations of at least 15 to 20 people at all times, and more copies of the book have already been ordered to keep up with the high demand by readers. The book has been at the top of the best-seller lists for three years since its publication. Snyder's later works, such as his book *On Freedom* (which also places totalitarian ideologies in a historical context, similar to how *On Tyranny* does this) have also reached best-seller lists during their time of publication. Unconventional for contemporary non-fiction, *On Tyranny* was adapted into a graphic edition in 2021. This adaptation helped to further broaden its reach to a younger audience and visual learners. It is a "simple text on the warning signs of creeping authoritarianism […] a mere starting point", which helps readers, even those unfamiliar with the historical or political context, form an idea of what Snyder means by the message he is conveying (Pierce).

The popularity of *On Tyranny* places the work within a tradition of public intellectual response to authoritarianism. Related to his growing popularity, Snyder has been invited to various interviews, many of which for high-profile media outlets, such as CNN or Democracy

Now!, as well as for major newspapers like The Washington Post, The Guardian, and The New York Times. Many interviewers consider Snyder to be a public intellectual whose historical scholarly work has extended into civic discourse. Additionally, Snyder has been invited to speak at high-visibility public forums and talks.

Apart from Snyder having published his twenty lessons on Facebook originally before turning them into a book, many social media users have quoted his work online. In March 2017, Snyder's twenty lessons were on display in London on Leonard Street by Vintage creative director Suzanne Dean, which was "believed to be an industry first" (Kean). Much like the visual representation of the handmaid costume, the public display of Snyder's lessons operates as a visual protest tool. Danuta Kean suggests that "the eye-catching designs" are "modelled on 1930s propaganda" (*The Guardian*), even though Snyder's lessons warn his readers to believe propaganda and using the propaganda from that time period as an example. The idea behind the photos, however, was that it would prompt London citizens to capture the images and share them on their social media. Despite the posters bringing in additional publicity for the book, this type of campaign did blur the lines between promotion and art.

Additionally, many protesters in both women's marches and anti-authoritarian protests around the United States have carried signs conveying some of Snyder's lessons. Snyder's lessons do find their place in protests, especially since they convey the message of the protests that they are used in as slogans or signs. The relation between his lessons and acts of defiance, such as marches and protests, shows that readers of *On Tyranny* see the value in the lessons within the context that Snyder had intended.

Both Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Timothy Snyder's *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* have had significant influence on popular media and social discourse. Where Atwood's novel has evolved into a cultural artifact that brings fiction into real-world resistance against the growing oppression of women, Snyder's book

has served as an impactful guide for recognizing and resisting authoritarianism, both in a changed political and social landscape in a post-2016 U.S. election era. The impact that both works have had and continue to have within popular or mainstream media shows the importance of both works within the changed political and social environment of not just the United States, but globally.

Chapter 4. Conclusion

Do Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Snyder's *On Tyranny* produce resistance, or do these works only symbolize resistance? It can be argued that limitations in *The Handmaid's Tale*'s symbolism are evident. Although it is admirable that many women march the streets in the red-and-white uniform of Atwood's handmaids, these marches seem to show an "ignore[ance on] how the United States has controlled the reproductive rights of Native, Black, Latinx, incarcerated, disabled, and poor people", according to Katie Fustich (*Teen Vogue*). An example of this type of control through US history was the Supreme Court ruling in the Buck v. Bell case of 1927, in which "[t]he Virgina statute provid[ed] for the sexual sterilization of inmates […] afflicted with a hereditary form of insanity or imbecility" (*Justia).* Another example was the accusations of "involuntary sterilization" by the HIS (Indian Health Services) on Native women in the 1960s and 1970s (Lawrence 400). According to Jane Lawrence, this caused damage to tribal communities who "lost much of their ability to reproduce, the respect of other tribal entities, and political power in the tribal councils" (411). It could be argued that using the symbol of the handmaid's outfit (worn initially exclusively by white characters), within this context, can be seen as an example of "white feminism" in which the "divide between white feminists and literally everyone else: queer, non-white, and working-class feminists" becomes clear (Beck 45).

Additionally, the adaptation of the handmaid's costume as a symbol could unintentionally marginalize certain groups within the discussion of resistance, such as those mentioned above. Another problem with such a recognizable symbol as the handmaid's costume, combined with the popularity of the television show, is that it may be worn by fans not solely for the symbolism within the costume. Since the Hulu TV series first aired, many women have dressed up in the red-and-white costume for Halloween. Women wearing the costume include celebrities like Kylie Jenner who wore the costume for a *Handmaid's Tale-*

themed birthday party. These celebrities, in turn, popularize wearing the outfit even more to their fanbase, who might also not be aware of the implications of wearing the costume, which could potentially decrease the value of the symbolism altogether.

A last argument for the limitation of the symbol of the handmaid's costume comes from Victoria Smith. She feels that protesting while wearing the handmaid's ensemble "has become a way of misinterpreting both" today's gender politics and Atwood's work (*The Critic*). She argues that "one of the benefits of the handmaid's costume [in today's protests] is that it doesn't require protestors to speak" and while many of the protestors are "mak[ing] use of symbolism, little [are] noticing that once you become the symbol, it ceases to be a symbol at all" (*The Critic*). I agree that the costume speaks for itself because of its unique (and popular) symbolism. However, there is room for discussion in that many people feel the handmaid's costume is in line with protests and acts of resistance. I think that the use and possible implications of the symbolism of the costume should be examined in more detail, especially in relation to the cultural discourse.

Timothy Snyder's *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* has been subject to criticism as well. Firstly, the question arises of its importance as the political environment may change in the future. The book may have had an urgent and potent message at the time of its publication, but its importance may become irrelevant in a few years. The book, unlike Margaret Atwood's novel, does depend on the context of specific cultural or political moments. Moreover, unlike *The Handmaid's Tale*, his work may not speak to audiences because it lacks emotional resonance or narrative depth. The book's instructive language could also be interpreted as preaching by a reader with much knowledge of history but less of politics. Furthermore, Snyder could be preaching to the already converted, since a liberal, educated audience mainly reads his text.

For both works, an additional argument could be made that they do not necessarily

represent universal resistance. As mentioned above, it could be argued that *The Handmaid's Tale* largely focuses on white women, and protesters mostly use its symbolic reference within that same context. Similarly, Timothy Snyder's *On Tyranny* is centered on the Euro-American democratic model of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and thereby does not account for systemic oppression experienced by marginalized communities within the US or even globally. However, since the political and social environment, not just in the United States but globally, is still subject to changes, more research is needed in the coming years on the continuation of the impact of Atwood and Snyder's works. Despite limitations and objections of these works, both *The Handmaid's Tale* and *On Tyranny* remain culturally significant in that they provide tools of resistance, both within their adaptations and in collective public discourse in a post-2016 election era of the United States.

Concludingly, both *The Handmaid's Tale* and *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* are active responses of resistance in the post-2016 era. Atwood's novel offers the narrative of a fictional main protagonist and other characters who are actively resisting an authoritarian government. Timothy Snyder hands his audience twenty easy-to-follow lessons, held up against historical events to illustrate their importance and urgency. In positioning his lessons in this way, his audience receives clear examples to help with the understanding of their importance. The popularity of both works illustrates that audiences see the works as tools of resistance. Both works instruct their audiences to respond to the rise in authoritarianism in different ways. Atwood's audience, as is discussed in this thesis, has embraced the works' symbolism. Snyder offers his audience the tools to understand and act. The rise in popularity indicates how many readers either agree with Snyder or want to be educated by his lessons.

However, it is important to note that a distinction can be made in the original function of the works. *The Handmaid's Tale* was written as a fictional 'warning' based on

contemporary and historical events, while *On Tyranny* was written as a handbook of sorts to give its readers the tools to resist tyranny actively. I believe that this distinction is based, in part, on the time of publication. *The Handmaid's Tale* was based on historical and contemporary social and political changes of the mid-1980s and warned of a potential consequence if there was to be a continuation of the events that Margaret Atwood used as inspiration for the fictional world of Gilead. While Timothy Snyder also used historical events as inspiration for his lessons, the threat of authoritarianism was already present at the time of publication – he did not warn his readers. However, he advised them on resisting this present threat. This distinction, however significant, does not take away from the fact that *The Handmaid's Tale* seems to hold more impact, especially in popular media.

As mentioned previously, a danger can be found in the cultural discourse of Atwood's novel. The rise in popularity of the handmaid symbol in popular media could distract from the importance of their relationship with resistance, as well as potentially take away from Atwood's intended message in the narrative. Additionally, the TV series adaptation may also shape the audience's perception of the narrative. Even though this adaptation helped with a rise in popularity for the novel, the original narrative ends after the first season. The following seasons, one could argue, are based on more provocative narratives and, in part, on shock value. Audiences could perceive the overall plot of the series as action-packed fiction far off from reality.

A critique of Snyder's *On Tyranny* is that he instructs his readers on his interpretation of his lessons as well as on the relation to the historical events in his book. As was argued in Chapter 2, this could lead to an elimination of an objective interpretation by his audience. However, because of the book's nature in handling the audience tools for resistance, Snyder calls for participation in a conversation on historical influences on contemporary political and social changes.

Nevertheless, both works inspire readers to actively resist the rise in authoritarianism in the US in the post-2016 era. Atwood's novel, even though it was published in 1985, paints a clear picture of a (dystopian) authoritarian regime that resonates with many contemporary readers and can be seen as a warning of what could potentially happen. Snyder's book can be classified as less subtle – not just a warning sign, but a handbook on how to act now that the U.S. 'has arrived at a point of no return'. Both works are essential tools in guiding their respective audiences on how to resist the rise in authoritarianism.

Note: At the time of rewriting this thesis, developments have taken place in the United States. Among them are the deployment of the National Guard to Los Angeles in July 2025 and the federalization of the Washington D.C. police department in August 2025.

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