



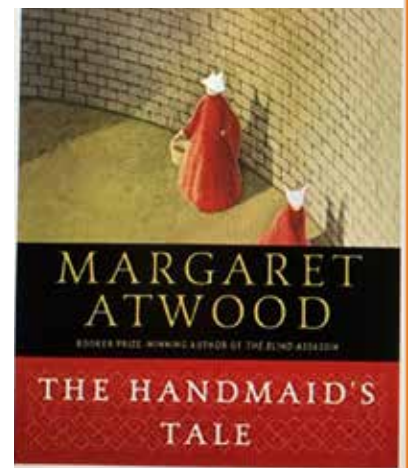
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Revisiting *A Handmaid's Tale* in the Age of Post-Truth Politics



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Every year the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), the preeminent English-language reference source, selects a word of the year. In 2016, the OED selected “post-truth,” an adjective defined as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.”¹ While this is not a new word, the OED explains that it was selected because there “was a spike in frequency this year in the context of the EU referendum in the United Kingdom and the presidential election in the United States [and] it has been associated with a particular noun, in the phrase *post-truth politics*.”² I would like to focus on the post-truth politics associated with the Trump administration and how this connects to fiction’s ability to engage with truth in contemporary society by examining the recent Hulu adaptation of Margaret Atwood’s 1986 dystopia novel, *A Handmaid's Tale*, and the original novel. These two texts are worth exploring in relation to Trump’s misogynistic comments and the current attack on women’s rights. The television series and book blur the lines between fiction and reality much the same way that the Trump administration seeks to confuse the distinction between fake news and facts. In her review of the Hulu series, Caroline Crampton articulates this connection: “*The Handmaid's Tale* forces us to consider the unthinkable consequences of misogyny on a national scale. Perhaps what begins as chants to ‘Lock her up!’³ at a political rally ends—as in Atwood’s





narrative—with women losing the right to vote, to own property and to determine what happens to their own body.”⁴ The loss of women’s rights in the television series and novel mirrors real fears some women today face about losing their reproductive rights in the current political climate in the United States. Kenneth Burke’s discussion of dramatistic language and terministic screens offer a framework for examining how language both reflects and shapes attitudes toward truth and women’s rights in the novel and the Hulu adaptation. The specific changes to the novel made in the television adaptation invite viewers to draw parallels between the Gilead regime’s treatment of women and the Trump administration’s stance on women’s rights. Both the fictional Gilead government and the Trump administration seek to minimize misogynistic actions by using language that casts doubt on the concept of truth.

Post-Truth Politics and the Trump Administration

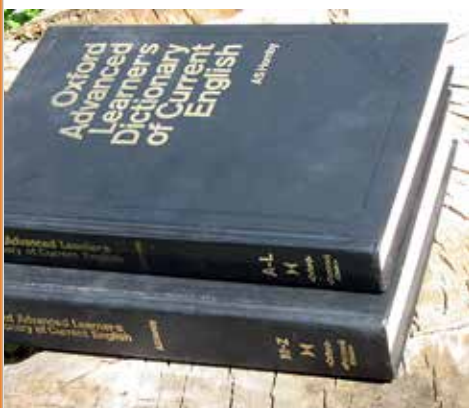


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The origin of the term “post-truth” predates the OED’s 2016 word-of-the-year decision, but the phrase “post-truth politics” is particularly relevant to the Trump administration. Playwright Steve Tesich first used the term a 1992 essay from *The Nation* to describe the American people’s choice to accept the government’s lies, beginning with the

Watergate crises and continuing through the Iran-contra scandal.⁵ Tesich argued that “All dictators up to now have had to work hard at suppressing the



truth. We [the public], by our actions, are saying that this is no longer necessary...In a very fundamental way we, as free people, have freely decided that we want to live in some post-truth world.”⁶ More than ten years later, Ralph Keyes makes a similar claim in his book *The Post-Truth Era: Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life*. Keyes contends: “we live in a post-truth era. Post-truthfulness exists in an ethical twilight zone...Few of us want to think of ourselves as being unethical, let alone admit that to others, so we devise alternative approaches to morality.”⁷ Gleb Tsipursky connects Trump directly to this concept, claiming “Donald Trump is our first post-truth president. And he may well be the first of many.”⁸

From a rhetorical perspective, the Trump administration’s attempt to label stories that it does not agree with as “fake” reveals a troubling shift away from an appeal to logic (logos) and toward negative appeals to emotion (pathos) and credibility (ethos), a move that is common in the totalitarian governments represented in famous dystopian novels, like George Orwell’s *1984* and Atwood’s *A Handmaid’s Tale*. Indeed, Kellyanne Conway’s claim that Sean Spicer used “alternative facts” in his statement to the Press Corp about the size of Trump’s inauguration crowd set off heated discussions on social media about Orwell’s *1984*.⁹ CNN’s *Reliable Sources*, *Washington Post* reporter Karen Tumulty stated that “alternative facts is a George Orwell phrase” and that





it reminded her of “doublespeak,” a euphemistic language used by the government in 1984 to manipulate and deceive its people.¹⁰ Interestingly, as *The Washington Post* noted, sales of 1984 in the US spiked after Conway’s comment.¹¹ Trump himself has repeatedly sought to undermine the media by calling stories “fake news.” In an infamous Tweet from February 17, 2017, Trump claimed that “the FAKE NEWS media...is not my enemy, it is the enemy of the American People!” As reporter Danielle Kurtzleben claims, “the ability to reshape language—even a little—is an awesome power to have. According to language experts on both sides of the aisle, the rebranding of fake news could be a genuine threat to democracy.”¹² The controversies over fake news and alternative facts are symptomatic of living in a post-truth era.

Burke, Terministic Screens, and Trump

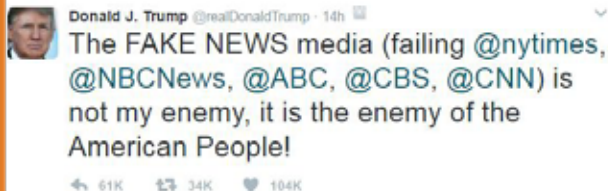


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Kenneth Burke’s discussion of dramatism and terministic screens also apply to the Trump administration’s invocation of “fake news” and “alternative facts.” The invocation of these terms is meant to deflect

criticism away from the Trump administration by undermining the credibility of facts and, more specifically, of the news media. This is precisely what Burke describes as a terministic screen. As the title of Kenneth Burke’s book *Language as Symbolic Action* would indicate, words have power and are a form of action. He identifies two approaches to the nature of language: the scientific



and the dramatic. According to Burke, the scientific deals with language as definition and is common in fields that engage with symbolic logic, while the dramatic deals with language as action and is common in literary works.¹³ A dramatic approach highlights how language reflects and shapes reality: “Even if any given terminology is a *reflection* of reality, by its very nature as terminology it must be a *selection* of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a *deflection* of reality.”¹⁴ Since it is impossible to reflect every aspect of reality, language must also select part of reality to reflect, and by doing so, other aspects of reality are ignored. Burke uses the term “terministic screens” to describe how “any nomenclature necessarily directs the attention into some channels rather than others.”¹⁵ The use of certain types of language not only directs attention; it also affects behavior.

Connected with this discussion of post-truth politics, fake news, alternative facts, and terministic screens is the Trump administration’s response to the President’s misogynist comments, particularly the response to the Access Hollywood tape. In that infamous tape, Trump brags about his star status giving him the power to “grab’em by the p—y. You can do anything.” After the Access Hollywood tape was released, Trump admitted it. On his Facebook page on October 7, 2016, Trump said “I said it, it was wrong, and I apologize.” But he



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also tried to dismiss his comments and deflect the attention away from himself and toward the Clintons: “This was locker-room banter, a private conversation that took place many years ago. Bill Clinton has said far worse to me on the golf course—not even close.”¹⁶ At the second presidential debate, Trump attempted to downplay the significance of the tape; he stated: “It’s just words, folks. It is just words. Those words I’ve been hearing for many years.”¹⁷ More recently, though, Trump has claimed that he did not speak those words, telling a senator that “we don’t think that was my voice” on the recording, again casting doubt on the truth-value of the media.¹⁸ The past several months have shown that the Access Hollywood comments were not just an isolated incident; instead, they are part of a larger problem of offensive rhetoric directed against women that is then later downplayed or denied.



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As Kenneth Burke argues, language is a form of symbolic action; words reflect and shape how one sees the world. Trump’s comments against women are also accompanied by a strong anti-abortion agenda. In a review of a new book titled *About Abortion*, *New Yorker* writer Margaret Talbot explains how “When the interviewer, Chris Matthews, of MSNBC, asked whether

women who’d had abortions should be punished, Trump answered in the affirmative.”¹⁹ His selection of Mike Pence, an anti-abortion evangelical Christian,

as his vice president reinforced a conservative anti-abortion agenda. As Talbot explains, “Since the nineteen-nineties, states have enacted hundreds of new restrictions on the constitutional right to abortion...The cumulative effect has been to transform the experience and the reputation of a safe, legal medical procedure into something shady and disgraceful that women pursue only because they don’t know enough about it or because they are easily manipulated emotional time bombs.”²⁰ Since Trump has taken office, such restrictions on abortion have increased significantly. On his first day as President, Trump signed an executive order to ban federal money to international groups that perform or provide information about abortion.²¹ In April of 2017, he reversed Obama’s order, which barred states from denying federal funds to Planned Parenthood.²² He supported the passage of House Bill 36, named the Pain-Capable Unborn Child Protection, which criminalizes abortions after twenty weeks (except under specific circumstances).²³



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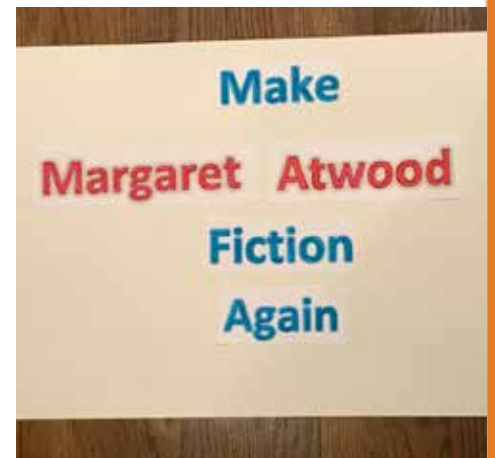
***A Handmaid's Tale* in the Era of Trump and Post-Truth Politics**

In light of President Trump’s critical rhetoric directed towards women and his administration’s moves to limit access to abortions, it is unsurprising that some women today are feeling anxious about their rights. In her new introduction to *A Handmaid's Tale*, published

in 2017, Atwood connects her novel to present day anxieties about the loss of women's rights:

In the wake of the recent American election, fears and anxieties proliferate. Basic civil liberties are seen as endangered, along with many of the rights for women won over the past centuries. In this divisive climate, in which hate for many groups seems on the rise and scorn for democratic institutions is being expressed by extremists in all stripes, it is a certainty that someone, somewhere—many, I would guess, are writing down what is happening as they themselves are experiencing it.²⁴

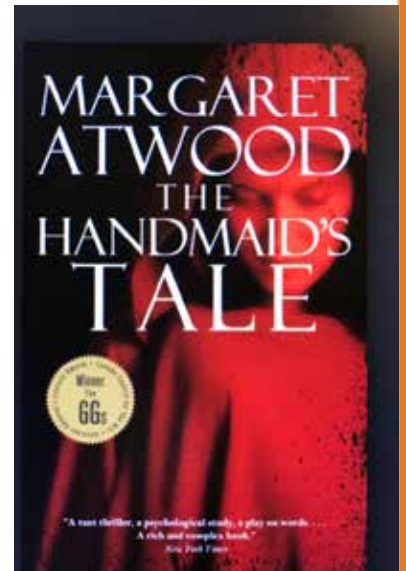
Atwood specifically links the new television adaptation to the present day in a *New Yorker* interview from April 17, 2017: she claims that “the timing [of the television adaptation] could not be more fortuitous, though many people may wish it to be less so. In a photograph taken the day after the Inauguration, at the Women’s March on Washington,



a protester held a sign bearing the slogan that spoke to the moment: ‘MAKE MARGARET ATWOOD FICTION AGAIN’.”²⁵ Season one of the ten-episode series, starring Elisabeth Moss as Offred, premiered on Hulu in April 2017, and a second season is scheduled to premier in April 2018. The series has been a critical success, winning five Emmy Awards in 2017 and two Golden Globe Awards in 2018. The release of this series after the release of the Access Holly-

wood tape, after the Women's March, and after the passing of several restrictive abortion laws, does indeed seem timely. The call to make Atwood "fiction again" on the Women's March sign referenced by Atwood implies that her dystopian vision of a totalitarian theocracy that controls all aspects of women's lives may already be happening. Misogyny and the loss of reproductive rights are key elements in both the original novel and the Hulu adaptation. However, the specific changes made in the adaptation from the novel invite viewers to draw parallels between the Gilead regime and the Trump administration.

The general plot of the novel remains the same in the adaptation. Offred is the main character and the narrator in both versions. She lives in the Republic of Gilead, which Atwood explains "is built on a foundation of the seventeenth-century Puritan roots that have always lain beneath the modern-day American we thought we knew."²⁶ After the President of the United States and Congress are killed in a coup, the army declares a state of emergency and suspends the Constitution. A new theocratic and totalitarian government takes control and imposes strict controls on society, particularly on women. Environmental pollution has led to a serious infertility crisis, so the new regime captures all fertile women and forces them to serve as "handmaids" to the ruling class. Offred is one of the women forced into servitude. The handmaids are required to complete a training program at the Red Center



conducted by women called “Aunts.” As in 1984, the government conceals the brutal reality of the system through euphemistic language, or to use Burke’s terminology, through language that acts as a terministic screen. In the training program at the Red Center, the handmaids are taught not only how to act but also the appropriate language to use to describe those actions. While the term “handmaids” is supposed to connect to a biblical story of Rachel and Leah, the handmaids are basically the sexual slaves of the ruling class. The “ceremony” that the handmaids are required to participate in, during which the male head of the household tries to impregnate the handmaid as she lies still and the wife holds her arms, is essentially rape. Rather than providing protection or support to their fellow women, the “Aunts” in Atwood’s tale are tasked with “reeducating” the new handmaids at the Red Center by physically and psychologically brutalizing them. Aunt Lydia, one of the Aunts in charge at the Red Center, even tries to convince the main character that she has more freedom as a handmaid than she ever had before by twisting the concept of “freedom”: According to Aunt Lydia, “There is more than one kind of freedom...Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don’t underrate it.”²⁷ Aunt Lydia justifies the control of women by telling them it is done for their own protection.

In the novel and show, women have



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lost their freedom; they are treated only as property and are valued solely for their ability to procreate. Offred is forced to give up her former life with her husband and daughter to become a handmaid. Her life before the take-over



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is revealed in a series of flashbacks in the book and the show. However, the show provides more flashbacks than the novel of Offred's former life. One flashback in the first episode reveals June as a college student discussing a paper she is writing about sexual assault on campus with her

best friend, Moira. The show also reveals that Offred's original name was June before she was renamed "of Fred" to indicate her status as the property of men; this name is never revealed in the book. In a key scene in episode three, after the Constitution has been suspended, all women have been fired from their jobs, and their money taken away, June and Moira take to the streets to protest against the government. The beginning of this scene looks similar to the televised videos of women walking in the January 2017 Women's March at various cities across the United States. However, the protest on the TV episode turns deadly; armed government officials open fire on the peaceful protestors while June and Moira flee for their lives. This does not occur in the book. In contrast, more than halfway through the book, Offred explains that after the take-over and the suspension of the Constitution "there wasn't even any rioting in the

streets. People stayed home at night, watching television, looking for some direction.”²⁸

The difference between the 1986 book in which the characters did not resist the small changes that led up to the collapse of democracy and the 2017 television adaptation in which Moira, June, and others did actively protest is significant. June is cast as a feminist hero in the television show and any men-



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tion of her mother, who in the novel is presented as a rough-talking, second wave feminist actively protesting for women's rights, is removed. In the novel, Offred's mother chastises her daughter and other women of her generation for taking gender equality for granted: "You young people don't appreciate things, she'd say. You don't know what we had to go through, just to get you where

you are.”²⁹ The novel presents a complex representation of feminism through the character of Offred's mother. In the novel, Offred remembers attending a book burning with her mother in which women were burning pornographic books and magazines; she describes how "I threw the magazine into the flames. It riffled open in the wind of its burning; big flakes of paper came loose, sailed into the air, still on fire, parts of women's bodies, turning to black ash, in the air, before my eyes.”³⁰ This scene presents a dark and violent side to women's

protests, reminiscent of Nazi book burnings, and suggests that some aspects of the feminist movement may do more harm than good to women. This complexity is simplified in the adaptation. June is a strong woman fighting against a system that constantly oppresses her. She agrees to smuggle a package for the resistance and refuses to participate in the stoning of fellow-handmaid Jeanine. These acts of resistance do not occur in the novel, and this difference in Offred's characterization leads to two different endings.

In the novel, Offred's fate remains a mystery. Readers never know for certain whether she joined the resistance or escaped from being a handmaid. Her one act of resistance is recording her story on cassette tapes for future generations to find. Throughout the course of the novel, Offred draws strength from her role as a storyteller: "I would like to believe this story I'm telling. I need to believe it. I must believe it. Those who can believe that such stories are only stories have a better chance. If it's a story I'm telling, then I have control over the ending."³¹ Her words become, to use Burke's terminology, a symbolic action of resistance. Offred's tapes are located years later, and the last chapter of the novel consists of an academic conference in which scholars attempt to reconstruct details about Gilead based on Offred's narrative. The scholars make off-color jokes, like renaming "The Underground Femaleroad," a group that helped handmaids escape to Canada and



overseas, to “The Underground Frailroad.”³² Offred and all of the characters in the narrative become mere objects of study in the hands of the academics. As Atwood explains in her introduction, “there are two reading audiences for Offred’s account: the one at the end of the book, at an academic conference in the future, who are free to read but not always as empathetic as one might wish; and the individual reader of the book at any given time. That is the ‘real’ reader, the Dear Reader for whom every writer writes.”³³ Atwood identifies her novel as part of the “literature of witness” with two audiences.³⁴ The history professors view Offred’s narrative through their own terministic screen, consisting of a patronizing, academic tone that discounts the humanity of Offred’s story. Readers, however, are left to come to their own conclusions about Offred, and Atwood seems to be more optimistic about the “real” reader’s capacity for empathy.

All that remains of Offred in the final section of the novel is her narrative. In contrast, the camera follows a silent Offred as she is taken by a group of men and put into the back of a truck in the final episode of season one. It

is unclear whether these men are from the government or the resistance. Is Offred being punished for standing up to Aunt Lydia and refusing to stone a fellow handmaid, or is she escaping from Gilead to be reunited with her husband and friend in Canada? Viewers will have to wait until



the next season to find out what happens to Offred. But who are the television viewers? Atwood's comments about the timeliness of the adaptation suggest, as other critics claim, that the audience for the Hulu series could be those who are afraid that Atwood's fiction is becoming a reality under the Trump administration. Crampton claims that the audience could be shocked progressives: "The defeat of Hillary Clinton, a lifelong feminist and women's rights advocate, by Trump, a misogynist who admits to grabbing women 'by the pussy,' shocked many progressives who thought that the movement towards equality in the past five decades could not be reversed."³⁵ Similarly, Christine Rosen claims that dystopian works, like Atwood's tale, offer a way of coping with contemporary politics, claiming that "The most enthusiastic audience for today's dystopian entertainments isn't angsty tweens grappling with love in the time of the



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post-apocalypse; it's adults on the left still trying to process Trump's presidency."³⁶ The popularity and critical success of the series would suggest that there is and will continue to be an enthusiastic audience for this series and other dystopian narratives in this post-truth age.

Conclusion

Fictional narratives, like the television show and novel *A Handmaid's Tale*, offer a productive way to explore real anxieties people are facing in the age of the Trump presidency. The differing characterizations of Offred in the

novel and adaptation reflect responses to two different time periods. Offred's recorded testimony in the novel serves as a symbolic act of resistance. While the academics approach Offred as merely as an object, a historical curiosity, at the end of the novel, readers are given the freedom to envision their own ending for Offred's story. In contrast, the final message of the adaptation seems to be that words are not enough to combat the threats to democratic freedom in contemporary American society, particularly when the President and his administration seeks to conceal the truth through euphemistic language or to undercut the very notion that truth exists with references to fake news and alternative facts. Offred's act of recording her narrative for future readers does not seem to be enough to cut through the oppressive regime in the Hulu adaptation. Instead, Offred becomes June, the feminist hero who marches in the protest before the government take-over and actively participates in the resistance. In the 2017 introduction to *A Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood refutes the



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claim that her novel is a prediction, stating “no, it isn't a prediction, because predicting the future isn't really possible: there are too many variables and unforeseen possibilities. Let's say an anti-prediction: if this future can be described in detail, maybe it won't happen. But such wishful thinking cannot be depended on either.”³⁷ Let us hope that Atwood's tale ends up being anti-prediction rather than a prediction of the future under the Trump administration.

Notes

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¹⁰Lynn Neary, "Classic Novel '1984' Sales are Up in the Era of 'Alternative Facts,'" *NPR.org*, National Public Radio, January 25, 2017, accessed July 30, 2017, <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/01/25/511671118/classic-novel-1984-sales-are-up-in-the-era-of-alternative-facts>.

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¹²Danielle Kurtzleben, "With 'Fake News,' Trump Moves from Alternative Facts to Alternative Language," *NPR.org*, National Public Radio, February 17, 2017, accessed July 30, 2017, <http://www.npr.org/2017/02/17/515630467/with-fake-news-trump-moves-from-alternative-facts-to-alternative-language>.

¹³Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 45.

¹⁴Ibid., 45.

¹⁵Ibid., 45.

¹⁶David Fahrenthold, "Trump Recorded Having Extremely Lewd Conversation about Women in 2005," *The Washington Post*, October 8, 2017, accessed July 30, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-recorded-having-extremely-lewd-conversation-about-women-in-2005/2016/10/07/3b9ce776-8cb4-11e6b-f8a3d26847eed4_story.html?utm_term=.c80eff090dc4.

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²⁰Ibid., 86.

²¹"Trump's Order on Abortion Policy: What Does it Mean," *BBC News*, January 24, 2017, accessed January 14, 2018, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-38729364>

²²Julie Hirschfeld Davis, "Trump Signs Law Taking Aim at Planned Parenthood Funding," *The New York Times*, April 13, 2017, accessed January 14, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/13/us/politics/planned-parent-hood-trump.html>

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²⁴Margaret Atwood, Introduction to *A Handmaid's Tale*, xviii-xix.

²⁵Rebecca Mead, "The Prophet of Dystopia," *The New Yorker*, April 17, 2017, 38.

²⁶Margaret Atwood, Introduction to *A Handmaid's Tale*, xiv.

²⁷Margaret Atwood, *A Handmaid's Tale* (New York: Anchor Books, 2017), 24.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 174.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 121.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 39.

³¹*Ibid.*, 39.

³²*Ibid.*, 301.

³³Margaret Atwood, Introduction to *A Handmaid's Tale*, xviii.

³⁴*Ibid.*, xviii.

³⁵Crampton, "Dystopian Dread," 16.

³⁶Christine Rosen, "Dystopian Style of American Politics," *Commentary*, June 2017, 9.

³⁷Margaret Atwood, Introduction to *A Handmaid's Tale*, xviii.