

## **Colors of Gilead**

Color-coding as a Means of Power in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*

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Colors are an integral part of how we perceive the world. Our eyes detect colors automatically, which makes them efficient communicative devices. If you see a text, you can decide not to read it. Contrastingly, if you see a color, you have already perceived it and connected it to your previous knowledge about the functions and meanings it has. A systematic use of colors can therefore act as a powerful tool for subjugation, which is what I found in Margaret Atwood's novels *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and *The Testaments* (2019).

In this thesis I study how the systematic use of colors turns into color-coding that labels, distinguishes, and controls people and entities in the fictional Republic of Gilead. Together with other suppressive and restrictive policies, color-coding is a vital part in the creation, execution, and maintenance of theocratic power structures. I examine Gilead's most important colors and their meanings through Western connotations and explain how these colors are used for color-coding in these novels. Finally, I examine how protagonists with different social statuses perceive the color-coding and analyze how the level of suppression applied to them affects their perspectives.

Despite the dystopian echoes these novels have, the main events have a historical background. Together with the interconnectedness of the color palette and the subjugated groups this offers a rich ground for further research, which I propose in the last section.

**Key words:** color-coding, Margaret Atwood, dystopia, subjugation

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## 1 Introduction

The Canadian writer Margaret Atwood's novels *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and its sequel *The Testaments* (2019) introduce a dystopian society through a lens that has been stained by real-life events. Atwood classifies the novels as "speculative fiction" (Halliwell 2003, 259) but reveals that the events have a historical background. Newspaper clippings Atwood used for *The Handmaid's Tale* and its setting are exhibited in an interview included at the end of *The Testaments* (Atwood 2019, 425–435). The clippings cover the forced births under the era of the Romanian dictator Ceaușescu in the 1960s, conservative Christian campaigns against birth control, polygamy of old-order Mormons, and government-issued use of chemicals that turned out to have far-reaching fertility consequences, to name a few.

The novels' setting balances between obvious distortions of truth and subtle, almost unnoticeable, abnormalities that persistently shape the surroundings. This disturbance of the familiar is what Bennett and Royle (2009, 35–43) describe as *uncanny*, a crossroads where fiction and reality converge. In The Republic of Gilead, individual freedom is a thing of the past and the fundamentalist country operates with strict theocratic policies that regulate individuals on all levels of society. This is justified in the name of God and by battling the collapsed fertility caused by a nuclear accident. Albeit the regulations nominally limit everyone, the most prominent restrictions fall on women, whose duties and obligations are dictated by their fertility, age, obedience, and general usefulness for the society. Among other measures of suppression, women are color-coded according to their roles and their usefulness to the society.

In this thesis I study color-coding as a means of power in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*. I examine how power structures are applied, executed, and consolidated through the colors of clothing and accessories, interior design, and other goods and infrastructure. The power structures of *The Handmaid's Tale* have been thoroughly researched, but most studies dismiss color-coding as a system. A distinguished literary piece such as *The Handmaid's Tale* seems to have evaded analyses of how thoroughly the subjugated protagonist Offred observes and classifies the colors around her. Violently oppressed for breeding purposes of the country's high-ranking officials, she battles to figure out whether to settle into her new obligations, risk her life in an escape, or commit a suicide. While she tells her story and weighs her options, she observes her surroundings in a detailed manner, and many of the observations relate to colors. Through Offred's observations, the colors connect to the overpowering extent of the totalitarian rule. The long-awaited sequel *The Testaments* was

published in 2019, and it brings relevant contrast to the prevalence of colors in *The Handmaid's Tale*. In my reading the protagonists of *The Testaments* pay less attention to colors because they do not experience the same suppression and bodily violations as Offred does. To her, the color-coding visualizes the power structures.

I study the use of color as a means of power in Gilead from two perspectives: first in a generic sense and then from a more detailed perspective, which sheds light on the protagonists' relations to color. My analysis centers on Offred's observations in *The Handmaid's Tale*, which coyly hints at the importance of the color-coding already in the name of the protagonist. Contrastingly, *The Testaments* presents three narrators who represent different levels of subjugation within the society and, accordingly, reveals different approaches to color.

It is important to note that I do not use the units '[use or observation of] color' and 'color-coding' interchangeably. Semantically, color terms such as *red* or *blue* are labels that "enable concepts to be communicated to others who understand the same language" (Biggam 2012, 20). In this thesis I further develop this idea into the concept of *color-coding*. This means that colors are used as a mutually agreed code, which not only labels but also classifies and values different goods. As I explain later, the mutuality of this agreement only concerns the ruling parties of the country as the goods, women, have no say in matters related to them. In other circumstances the code markers could be words, numbers, barcodes, or symbols, but because reading, writing, and most technologies are strictly prohibited in Gilead, the coding requires colors. In this thesis I examine color-coding in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* with the presumption that the code is more evident to the society's suppressed parties. To those who possess power, color-coding seems to represent more practical aspects than symbolic meanings. Therefore, I use the terms *color-coding* and *use of color(s)* for different purposes: to highlight the different stances of the protagonists.

I examine the use of color-coding as a means of power from three perspectives. For a theoretical frame I briefly discuss some of the psychological aspects of perceiving color with the help of Biggam (2012) and Davidoff (1997) and explain Gilead's power structures and address López-Rúa's (2021) views on the role of neologisms in them. Within this theoretical frame I exemplify different uses for the most important colors in Gilead and connect them to the concept of color-coding. I then demonstrate the Western connotations of these colors studied by Allan (2009) and examine potential connections to the typical use of color in literature studied by Zhao and Abdullah (2024). After this, I focus on selected protagonists' observations of color(-coding) and whether these relate to their societal status and the level of

oppression applied to them. Finally, in the conclusion I propose further research related to the meanings and use of color in these novels.

## 2 Color as a Means of Power

Color is a powerful means of communication that can be applied to endless uses across all areas of life. The use and origin of color terms are lively debated in various disciplines, but from the linguistic perspective, Biggam argues that despite the “vital messages” colors convey, they are often mistakenly considered as self-explanatory (2012, 1). Biggam’s extensive study suggests that color term’s functions depend on culture, context, vocabulary, and conventions (ibid.) whereas Gibson et al. (2017, 1) argue that communicative needs are the primary factor in how color terms are used. According to the latter theory, the usefulness of color terms depends on cultural factors: “Industrialization, which creates objects distinguishable solely based on color, increases color usefulness” (ibid.). In a way, Gilead has indeed industrialized their women for production purposes and therefore assigns profound significance on each color term. The color terms gain more meaning as the storyline develops, because the systematic use of color-coding establishes individual colors as communicative devices and imperative behavioral patterns.

In general, colors tend to have multiple connotations. The same color can ooze implications of love, passion, and intimacy, but also of danger, violence, and aggression. Did you, too, just think of *red*? Because of this ambiguity, colors have served the purposes of gaining and maintaining power across centuries. As Allan (2009) exemplifies through color term connotations, colors can simultaneously communicate sense of unity within groups, emphasize distinction from other groups, and act as symbols of superiority, authority, and power. As Atwood based *The Handmaid’s Tale* on events that emerge from recent history, there are several examples of color-coding as an instrument of power and manipulation in these two novels.

### 2.1 The Psychology of Color

Even though colors are perceived individually and bear context-related meanings and uses, there are certain fixed connections between colors and meanings. Davidoff (1997, 118) explains that from a neuropsychological perspective, colors are attributes. He continues that if we want to discuss color, we should “disentangle talk of the surface appearance from talk of the boundary within which it is contained” (ibid.). However, this can be challenging because of the way our brains process color:

The yellow color of a ripe banana appears to us as an integral part of its surface. The yellowness helps to define its shape, and to make it stand out from a clutter of other things. When we are asked to think of something yellow, we readily think of bananas, and when we imagine a banana, we find it hard to imagine it without imagining it as yellow. (Davidoff 1997, 133)

This automated mechanism of connecting colors to certain objects works well for Gilead's authoritarian purposes and the industrialization of women. Reading and writing are prohibited and talking is strictly limited to the predetermined ritualistic utterances. As a result of these restrictions, a system for labeling and classifying entities and hierarchical rankings is coded into colors. Because human eye detects colors automatically (Allan 2009, 626), colors can replace words. The presence of color-coding is loudest in *The Handmaid's Tale*, but what greatly fascinates me is the unmistakably mundane status it receives in *The Testaments*. Next, I explain how loudness becomes mundane when there are no other options than to adjust.

## 2.2 Structures of Power in Gilead

As explained previously, in the totalitarian Republic of Gilead color-coding is a means of power used to label, classify, unify, and separate people into distinct groups with different functions and obligations. The totalitarian rule rests upon a fundamentalist conviction that values individuals only according to their usefulness to the regime. This authorizes processes that treat women as disposable instruments. The division of power, or lack thereof, is reasoned with biblical references altered to suit the seemingly noble goals, as one of Gilead's official slogans illustrates: "From each according to her ability; to each according to his needs" (Atwood [1985] 1996, 123).

Gilead's power and authority are exclusive to a small group of men called the Commanders, who distribute power to lower-ranking groups and segregate them: half-militant soldiers called Guardians, Angels, or Eyes (Macpherson 2010, 54). The groups most blatantly stripped of human rights and freedom are the Handmaids, fertile women who work as breeding equipment for the Commanders. The group slightly above the Handmaids but nonetheless under strict rule are the Wives married to the Commanders. Non-fertile women are either Aunts, who are responsible for the Handmaids, or Marthas, domestic servants for the Commanders. If a female is neither fertile nor meek, she is sent to clean radioactive waste in the Colonies and to wither away out of sight. In addition to these groups there are also Econofamilies, lower-ranking citizens who live in Gilead outside the breeding arrangement. Each group wears uniform clothing in the colors appointed to them, which underlines the

segregation between the groups (López-Rúa 2021, 33). The segregation applies This is true also for the men, who seemingly

Besides the color-coded uniforms and strictly limited leeway, there are strict measures to ensure unconditional discipline. As numerous literary studies explore the aspects of this subjugation in more detail, I only summarize the aspects that are, in my view, closely connected to the use of color as a controlling tool. These aspects include ways that dissolve the subjugated women's identities and seize interaction with other people. In Gilead, most women attribute their identities to the Commanders: a Handmaid in the household of Commander Fred Waterford is called *Offred* as the patronymic from *of-Fred* (Macpherson 2010, 53) and his Wife is referred to as Mrs. Waterford. All Marthas of the household are called simply a Martha, and the Aunts have a selection of pre-determined names they can choose from. For further analysis of neologisms as a subjugation tool, see López-Rúa (2021).

In addition to the Handmaids' seized identities and forced bodily obligations, most interaction and non-verbal communication is forbidden: eye contact, touching, an unwanted tone when allowed or expected to speak, and even the slightest variations of posture. These restrictions seek to turn women into obedient faceless units in their appointed herds and to encourage their animal-like treatment, an ethical dilemma Svoboda (2021) brilliantly elaborates. Any resistance is answered with cruel punishments, as Offred describes the consequences of a Handmaid's attempted escape:

It was the feet they'd do, for a first offence. They used steel cables, frayed at the ends. After that the hands. They didn't care what they did to your feet and hands, even if it was permanent. Remember, said Aunt Lydia. For our purposes your feet and your hands are not essential. (Atwood [1985] 1996, 98)

While the suppressive practices and brutal sanctions assure a social balance of sort, it is important to recognize the multi-faceted nature of power in Gilead. Because the Handmaids are the only ones who can bear children in a country paralyzed by an infertility epidemic, the Handmaids possess an unusual form of power: the option to kill themselves. Should a Handmaid commit suicide, she would erode Gilead's sparse and valuable resources. Consequently, Handmaids and their wombs are not only precious possessions but also potentially dangerous insurgents and color-coded accordingly. In addition to the strict behavioral standards, non-negotiable civic duties, brutal punishments, and dissolved identities, I argue that color-coding is one of the main components used to control Gilead's

subjugated groups. To further justify my stance, in the following section I explain how colors turn into color-coding in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*.

### 3 The Colors of Gilead

As established above, the Gileadean power structures rely on violence, violations of human rights, and treating the subjugated groups as anonymized instruments instead of human beings. In my reading of *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* I argue that the colors appointed to these groups carry metaphorical meanings with historical connotations. These colors are used for color-coding, which plays an important role in how the fictional country is organized and how their power structures are maintained. Previous research around this concept appears sparse, as most studies focus on the prominent color, red, and overlook the interconnections within the color palette.

#### 3.1 Color-coding the Society

One of the factors that support the effectiveness of the Gileadean color-coding is how limited the color palette and its applications are. Each color is allotted to a group: red for Handmaids, blue for Wives, brown for Aunts, dull green for Marthas, and black for the Commanders and Guardians. The girls of wealthy families use pink or plum depending on season, and as soon as they approach their marital age, they switch to spring green. The women and occasional men sent to the Colonies wear grey dresses. The Econofamilies, as if to underline their otherness, wear multi-colored and striped clothes. White is the only color not related to societal status, and is assigned to births, deaths, and doctors. Finally, silver and gold are guardedly used in decorations related to high-profile officials. The limitedness of the color palette reveals how strictly the citizens' lives are controlled. In my reading, color-coding is one of the main enablers of subjugation because of the accountability it conducts: everyone in Gilead knows how a person that wears red, blue, or dull green should behave, and any exceptions to this behavior are considered punishable. Hence, the color scheme gains or loses meanings according to the protagonist's social status and the level of restriction applied to them.

Gilead's most prominent colors are red, blue, and black, which are worn by an important triangle that revolves around the core challenges of fertility: Handmaids, Wives, and Commanders. Additionally, white has a central role in the turning points of life: birth, sickness, and death. Because Gilead is founded on the rubble of the former United States of America, the prevalence of red and blue seems symbolic. To assign these colors to the most important women in Gilead and turn the third former flag color, white, into an attribute of life and death communicates Gilead's fundamental values. In addition to the clothing, the color-

coding extends to interior design and various other items, as I illustrate in the following sections. The extent of the color-coding underlines the thoroughness of the new world order, as if to say: look at all the details we have thought of, there is no way out.

An example of this thoroughness is the overpowering redness of the Handmaids. Everything they wear is red: their dresses, shoes, gloves, and cloaks. This redness controls the Handmaids at all times, because it draws attention: the red figures are constantly under the watchful eye of others, which prevents escape attempts and other unauthorized activity. Although not emphasized in the novel, I find the red shoes to be the center of this precaution. For an attempted escape, clothes could be stolen from someone but because the country is at war and their resources are limited, there are no spare shoes. Without the shoes, the disguise is incomplete and dangerous. Running away without shoes would be difficult, and even a glimpse of red shoes under any other dress than red would expose the fugitive. The power of this redness has since been adopted by activists, who wear red Handmaid costumes in protests around the world (Birkin 2022). Next, I present further evidence of the extent of the Gileadean color-coding and analyze the meanings and metaphors behind the most important colors red, blue, black, brown, green, and white. I draw support from Allan (2009) who studies the figurative uses of English color terms and from Zhao and Abdullah (2024) who discuss the metaphorical meanings of color in literature.

### **3.2 The Primary Colors: Red, Blue, Black**

In Gilead, red has multi-faceted and discordant meanings. Because it is the assigned color for the few remaining fertile women, it signs fertility, vitality, and hope. Contrastingly, because red is the color of blood and menstruation, it is also considered the color of shame and failure: “Each month I watch for blood, fearfully, for when it comes it means failure” (Atwood [1985] 1996, 70). The proposed shamefulness of red is attested in *The Testaments*, where young girls chant “red, red, red” to shame the loser before she is slapped in the head (Atwood 2019, 107). According to Allan, red is “the most salient colour for human beings” (2009, 631) and conveys meanings of warning and danger, but also of love and lust. This contradiction goes hand in hand with the hypocrisy of Gilead. Red is the color of things to steer away from, but also of the most precious beings that are handled with utmost care and generous nutritive and medical resources, considering the financial stress because of the war. Because of the saliency of red, it functions as a safety color and warns others to keep their distance to the women coded in red.

The oppressive color-coding brands everything related to Handmaids red: their clothes and shoes, umbrellas (Atwood [1985] 1996, 15), bathrobes (71), the car that takes Handmaids to their monthly doctor's appointments and the armband of the Guardian who drives them there (65), the car called birth mobile that transfers Handmaids to support their peers in birth (117), and the telephone in Aunt Lydia's office used for Handmaid-related emergencies (137). There are also small but consistent red details scattered in the interior.

What I personally find most interesting in the theme of redness is how Atwood seems to have implied Offred's intentions already in her name. Officially Offred derives from the patronymic of-Fred, but as López-Rúa (2021, 44) and Macpherson (2010, 56) suggest, Offred also implies *getting off the red*, the desire to escape from Gilead and run away from everything that is *red*. Her will to escape is portrayed through suicide plans and as blunt observations of her dispossessed identity. Occasionally Offred describes herself as an emotionless piece of red lifeless material, "bundles of red cloth" (Atwood [1985] 1996, 133), as if to contrast herself from the *bundles of joy*, babies, she is supposed to produce.

As a contrast to the strong emotions linked to red, blue communicates the serenity expected of the Wives in exchange for their ostensible freedom. The Wives oversee the households and especially matters related to Handmaids, Marthas, and the eventual children. The Wives are allowed social gatherings and certain pastime activities: gardening, needlework and interior design. Their use of time is not as strictly monitored as that of the Handmaids or Marthas, but as for each subjugated group, there are clear rules of what is or is not allowed. In addition to the Wives' blue clothing and shoes, blue is present in small interior details as if to remind whose territory it is: blue bath mat and toilet cover in the Handmaid's bathroom (68), the forgotten petit-point letters in a cushion that spell FAITH (63), blue stripes in a white dish towel (54) and egg cup (116), blue flowers in the bed spread (Atwood 2019, 22) and in the picture hanging in the Handmaids' room (91). An interesting exception to the applications of blue is found in *The Testaments*, when Aunt Lydia runs out of black ink and reluctantly notes the needs to switch to blue (115). A detail like this could easily be overlooked, but this incident indicates a shift in social status, which I elaborate in section 3.3.

In Western traditions and art, blue is often connected to holiness, melancholy, and to the calming allegories of sky and sea. According to Allan, blue also has a euphemistic reference to aristocracy, where *blue-blooded* has a historical meaning of the family heritage not being contaminated by unwanted outsiders (2009, 633). All the above connotations fit the Wives of Gilead. They are expected to act according to the holiness preached by the regime and aristocracy proven by their marital status to the Commanders. Wives are expected to maintain

overall calmness and grace and remain reasonable with their corrective actions with their Handmaid: “They can hit us, there’s Scriptural precedent. But not with any implement. Only with their hands” (Atwood [1985] 1996, 22). Assumably, they feel occasionally melancholic, *blue*, for not being able to produce children of their own and thus being appointed a Handmaid in the first place. The Gileadean regime considers fertility issues solely women’s fault as men are considered flawless and impeccable by nature.

To highlight their impeccability and the contrast to the subjugated women, the men of Gilead have black clothes and cars. While Zhao and Abdullah (2024, 638) argue that black here simply acts as the metaphor of death, I trace more complex meanings. In contrast to colors in general, black can be considered a non-color or the absence of color, which Allan further specifies as “the absence of light” (2009, 627). Thus, the primary role of black is to create contrast to women and move the spotlight of blame to them: they are the cause of the infertility issues not only in Gilead, but also in the pre-Gileadean era. From the regime’s perspective the freedom women used to have led them to neglect their reproductive responsibilities long before the radiation accident caused irrevocable damage to their fertility. This rhetoric underlines the authority and purity of the men in their black uniforms as opposed to the women, who are color-coded according to their current usefulness. Further, as black is the color traditionally worn in funerals in Western societies (*ibid.*), the black uniforms can here also be seen as symbols for mourning for the lost fertility. Mourning men are often portrayed as hard-bitten and distant, which aptly describes the Commanders and Guardians.

An interesting exception to the otherwise consistent use of black is found in *The Testaments*, where one of the four founding Aunts, Aunt Vidala, wore a black uniform before the Gileadean regime was founded and the female layers of the society were properly adjusted (Atwood 2019, 173). The four founding Aunts were tasked to create a caste-like system for maneuvering the Handmaids and other women, and during this process Aunt Lydia replaced Aunt Vidala as the leader of the Aunts. The change from the black uniform reserved to the highest authority in the society into the brown gown-like uniform of the Aunts underlines a painful shift in Aunt Vidala’s status. This presents a great opportunity to proceed to the subsidiary colors of Gilead: brown, green, and white.

### **3.3 Subsidiary Colors: Brown, Green, White**

In addition to the most prominent colors red, blue, and black, the Gileadean color palette includes colors that are not as dominant but carry important meanings and connotations.

These colors include brown for the Aunts, green for Marthas, and white for the selected turning points of life. In addition to these, there are also several interesting metaphors connected to the occurrences of yellow, purple, and grey, which unfortunately fall outside the scope of this thesis.

In Gilead, brown is the color worn by the Aunts who are responsible for the productivity and obedience of the female layers of the society, mainly that of the Handmaids. Zhao and Abullah (2024, 642) view brown simplistically as the symbol of individuality and independence, but in my reading, brown has more nuanced metaphorical meanings. To me, brown is associated with the militant nature of how Aunts use and express their authority, and with the deterioration they represent as women because they cannot have children. The fact that Aunts use violence and humiliation as their tools of oppression is, together with the brown uniforms, easily associated with various military references both in literature and in Western history. The Aunts resemble an army commanded to herd the ignorant Handmaids and make use of their still fruitful wombs in the most efficient way, regardless of the means. The military-like cruelty does however contrast with the Aunts' previous careers as judges and doctors (Atwood 2019, 115), which, together with their suggested maturity, allows me to approach the essence of brownness from the perspective of rotting. The metaphor of rotting ovaries, values, and personalities draws support from Allan, who notes that brown is the color of dying vegetation (2009, 630). The metaphor of brown rotting vegetables blends into two distinct themes. First, aging women are no longer fertile and fruitful and, thus, not *consumable* from the society's point of view. Because they are incapable of advancing the country's needs, they are color-coded accordingly. Secondly, any individual accomplishments or personal values that existed before Gilead have now rotten in the shadow of the society's needs. Although Aunts are not useful for producing children, they have been given authority over other women. One of these groups are the Marthas, who are equally useless for reproduction, and thus assigned as domestic servants.

The anonymous Marthas wear aprons described as *dull* green which, to me, represents somewhat similar tones as *muted* or *earthy*, which suits the implied modesty and imperceptibility of the Marthas. It is their responsibility to stay out of sight and keep the household routines organized: they clean, cook, and run errands but have no individual names. The earthiness related to green reminds the reader not to overlook the fact that this quiet group of servants forms a highly efficient grassroots organization. Marthas are quickly up to date on latest gossip and happenings, as the word travels from Martha to Martha between the Commanders' houses. An additional analogy can be drawn to the camouflage

effect green supposedly has. Dull green blends Marthas into the surroundings and, as a contrast to the flamboyant redness of the Handmaids and the serene blue of the Wives, advises men to ignore them. This camouflage is vital for their grassroots operations and is supported by a narrative choice: Marthas are mostly kept out of the spotlight in both novels.

The contrast between the earthy dullness of Marthas with their everyday duties and the attention-seeking redness of the precious Handmaids is profoundly set in Gilead's color-coding. This contrast can be assessed through the universal balance opposites are bound to create as green is the complementing color of red. According to color theory, when green is added to red, it cancels the redness. This is also the concrete outcome of the grassroots operations Marthas run. They help Handmaids escape.

The third subsidiary color is white, which is the color for birth, death, and doctors. Through these turning points of life, it again underlines the contradictions of the Gileadean color-coding. In Western traditions, white conveys meanings of purity, innocence, and cleanliness (Allan 2009, 628–629). In Gilead, white fulfills these implications as the color of the gowns worn in births by the Handmaid and the Wife (Atwood [1985] 1996, 122). It is however also used as the purest form of shaming and conclusion: the people sentenced to death are hung on the Wall in white bags for others to see (38). Because white is the color of birth and death, the two important turning points in life, it occasionally represents also personal watershed moments, which I exemplify in section 4.3.

## 4 Perceiving Color: The Meanings Hidden in Color-coding

As discussed in the previous sections, the colors of Gilead contain multi-faceted meanings. Through color-coding they reinforce hierarchies and organize the Gileadean childbirth industry. However, there are differences in how each protagonist perceives the color-coding around them. In sections 4.1–4.3 I examine how the societal status and power the protagonists possess or lack affect the way they perceive colors. The oppressed protagonists Offred and Anges observe the color-coding more systematically, in greater detail, and give more underlying meanings and metaphors to the colors. Aunt Lydia, who is not equally affected by the consequences of color-coding, rarely mentions colors. The fourth protagonist Daisy is excluded from this comparison. Her observations emerge from an outsider's perspective but do not carry the burden of oppression, which is why her narrative offers a rich, but inevitably oversized analytical ground for the scope of this thesis.

### 4.1 Offred: The Observant Oppressed

Offred, the oppressed protagonist of *The Handmaid's Tale* observes, classifies, and categorizes colors constantly. She notes different hues and attributes them to adjectives because to her the colors represent the obscurity of Gilead. She is a Handmaid against her will and therefore experiences the color-coding more vividly than the other protagonists. In addition to the self-evident redness around her, Offred observes even the slightest occurrences of red retrospectively. She observes and names the colors and hues around her and in her past to resist relinquishing her identity as an individual with a history. Observing also helps her dissociate from the violent situations she is forced into: “One detaches oneself. One describes” (Atwood [1985] 1996, 102).

The majority of Offred's observations land on clothes, both in Gilead and in retrospect. In Gilead, Handmaids are denied of eye contact and interaction with other people which means that the details in clothing replace the information previously provided by facial expressions and tones. Because Offred now pursues information mostly through the colors, textures, and movements of cloth, clothes also become the focal point in her memories. She struggles to remember the faces of her husband and daughter but has a vivid image of what they wore: “His face is beginning to fade, possibly because it wasn't always the same: his face had different expressions, his clothes did not” (Atwood [1985] 1996, 110).

As if to underline the effect color-coding now has in her life, Offred remembers several red details from her past. In hindsight, these were the early warning signs: the red light of the

card machine in the corner store signaling her bank card was not valid (180); a red hexagon near the border she tried to cross to flee the country (26); a fallen leaf in the woods that had turned red early (81); the red balloons in the propaganda video that features Offred's mother (126); the red text SHAME on the dunce hats of the manufacturers of women's clothes who are forced to repent beside the bonfires burn their stock live on evening news. The red glow of past warning signs and the current surrealness of Gilead force her to study the color-coding in detail.

One of the red instances Offred acknowledges several times is found in Mrs. Waterford's garden: "The tulips are red, a darker crimson towards the stem, as if they have been cut and are beginning to heal there (Atwood [1985] 1996, 18)". Although this passage invites the reader to equate tulips and Handmaids as vulnerable objects cultivated by the Wives, this reading is soon proved wrong. Offred observes the corpses hanging on the Wall in their white blood-stained bags (39) and remarks that there are different reds:

I look at the one red smile. The red of the smile is the same as the red of the tulips in Serena Joy's garden, towards the base of the flowers where they are beginning to heal. The red is the same but there is no connection. [. . .] I put a lot of effort into making such distinctions. I need to make them. I need to be very clear, in my own mind.

This suggests that even though the redness Offred observes might seem analogous, it is not uniform to her, because by dismantling the color-code into units with different meanings she dismantles the power structures projected on her.

#### **4.2 Aunt Lydia: The Possessor of Power**

In contrast to Offred's constant need to classify colors and analyze the color-coding, Aunt Lydia rarely mentions colors. To her they are self-evident, because she was one of the four founding Aunts and in charge of creating the system. Because the objectives of color-coding are self-explanatory to her, she only addresses colors a few times. The first occasion is when she runs out of black ink and needs to continue writing her secret memoirs in blue ink (Atwood 2019, 115). What may seem like a minor detail carries profound allegories to the Gileadean power structures. The shift from black to blue ink indicates the beginning of a downward slope in societal hierarchy, just as the change in Aunt Vidala's uniform color did earlier. Black is the color appointed to the highest authorities and as such represents a selection of benefits and concessions not available to others. Aunt Lydia uses the black ink in

secret library sessions where she documents the atrocities of Gilead for reasons that she herself dithers. However, she knows that upon exposure, she would be dissected for treachery. The change of ink acts as an augury of trouble and indicates a shift in Aunt Lydia's social standing. Expanding this, blue, as explained in section 3.2 from the Wives' perspective, is the color associated with resigning oneself to something: in this case to the current circumstances that are a nuisance also to the Aunts. The Gileadean blue oozes serenity and holiness, but also melancholy. Although Aunt Lydia does not portray herself as religious, there are distinct traces of melancholy in her reminiscences.

The second passage related to colors occurs when Aunt Lydia is confronted by Aunt Vidala. She wants to know why, instead of interrogating a suspected spy in the traditional Gileadean way, Aunt Lydia wants to settle for subtle methods: "You didn't prefer them in the early days. [. . .] You were all for the primary colors. You didn't used to mind a little blood" (Atwood 2019, 314). While the exact meaning of *[to be] all for the primary colors* remains ambiguous, I propose it refers to the function of primary colors. They are the key elements needed to produce other colors, which can here for the sake of clarity be conceptualized as 'preferred outcomes'. In a way, primary colors are both a physical entity and a state of mind: there is nothing controversial about them and they can be treated as mere tools for the preferred outcome. Here the preferred outcome is a successful interrogation that leads to answers to the questions Aunt Vidala has. I draw support from Atwood's career as a painter (Wilson, 1993), which suggests familiarity with color theory.

In the above conversation this would, then, imply Aunt Vidala's disappointment to Aunt Lydia's implied softness which inconveniently hinders the processes the Aunts are appointed with. This short conversation summarizes the tension between the two rivaling Aunts. To me it seems that Aunt Vidala wants to treat the harsh means of color-coding simply as a practicality: processing certain elements as necessary, without undue emotional connection. Whereas Aunt Lydia is, perhaps because she realizes the internal and external rotting of her earthly vessel, already ready to subside. Regardless of how close this hypothesis is to Atwood's intentions, *The Testaments* reveal unexpected sides of Aunt Lydia who in *The Handmaid's Tale* is portrayed as nothing short of a monster.

### **4.3 Agnes: Raised the Gileadean Way**

The third perspective is offered by young Agnes, who was born and raised in Gilead. She mostly pays attention to colors in clothing because, to her, different colors attribute different things: seasons, maturity, obligations, rights, and societal functions. Anges sees color-coding

as a commonplace practicality, because she was born in Gilead and does not know life in other surroundings. Because colors do not carry decorative or qualitative value to her, she defines grass as “soft” (Atwood 2019, 84) but does not mention greenness, which in most other contexts is used as a measure of a lawn’s vitality or overall quality. Because she has only been exposed to the well-attained lawns of Gilead, she a grass other than green, which is why it only occurs to her as *soft*.

At first, Agnes treats color-coding in a neutral way from a young girl’s perspective: pink is for spring and summer dresses, plum for fall and winter, white for special occasions, and stripes and mixtures for the Econofamilies (11). Because she is not exposed to any other ways of using colors, the colors represent the ordinary. To her it is ordinary that the school curriculum consists of manners, biblical stories, and needlework and coloring, which have replaced reading and writing long ago. Nevertheless, she acknowledges the strict rules for how colors can be used:

We were given colouring books, and we coloured in the signs of the shops—ALL FLESH, LOAVES AND FISHES—as a way of learning them. We coloured the clothing of people too—blue for the Wives, stripes for the Econowives, red for the Handmaids. Becca once got in trouble with Aunt Vidala for colouring a Handmaid purple. (Atwood 2019, 107)

Although the Gileadean color-coding leaves no room for creativity or ambiguity, it is only when Agnes reaches her marital age she begins to lose her neutrality towards colors: she realizes that she has obligations, too. Agnes struggles to understand what is expected of her and views the obligations related to marriage and birth as “thick red knowledge” (Atwood 2019, 102) that young girls are not supposed to possess. To her, *red* is a shaming word (107). Because of the uncertainty, she associates the colors of young girls’ dresses with macabre violence in one of her nightmares:

It turned up in my nightmares: the shattering of the glass house, then the rending and tearing and the trampling of hooves, with pink and white and plum fragments of myself scattered over the ground (Atwood 2019, 11).

The scene portrays deep disturbance of a child. Pink and plum axiomatically belong to young girls, not Aunts, and are to be worn in specific seasons only. Because these colors cannot be worn interchangeably, they should not co-exist in the same space. When these two colors are accompanied by white, the color of birth and death, and then violently torn apart, the scene

implies severe distress and distortion in Agnes's reality. Further, when Agnes approaches her marital responsibilities, she pictures this formless and threatening turning point with its imminent obligations in her dream as an "opaque white blob" (Atwood 2019, 226). Here whiteness seems to signal transcendental otherness, something so unthinkable and scary it has no exact shape, form, or name.

The way Agnes perceives colors illustrates that she considers them to be part of one's identity, more than a code. When she defines the multicolored clothes and grey cloaks worn by Econofamilies as "ugly" and claims that pink, plum, and white are for "special girls like us" (11), she underlines their social statuses. This othering illustrates how fundamentally Agnes identifies herself and others through the color-coding, although she mistakes it with identity.

I had begun to wonder how a woman turned into an Aunt. [. . .] Did they have special brains, neither female nor male? Were they even women at all underneath their uniforms? Could they possibly be men in disguise? [. . .] I wondered what the Aunts would look like if you made them wear pink (Atwood 2019, 156).

This illustrates how central the role of systematic color-coding is in shaping individual identities for the purposes of a theocratic tyranny such as Gilead.

## 5 Conclusion

In Margaret Atwood's novels *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* the perceived extent and effects of color-coding vary according to who perceives them. Color-coding is most apparent and overwhelming to the protagonist of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred, who is violently exposed to it and suppressed by it. In *The Testaments* Aunt Lydia does not pay much attention to the color-coding because initiated the creation of it. The third protagonist Agnes grew up surrounded by the color-coding and identifies herself and others through the explicit meanings the few colors carry. This shows that, together with other suppressive means, color-coding is a viable means of power and should not be overlooked merely as an aesthetic solution.

The underlying meanings and connections between the Gileadean colors and their applications, both in the fictional surroundings and as a mirror of the contemporary Western cultures, provide numerous research possibilities for further studies. Especially the observations of Daisy, the third protagonist in *The Testaments*, offers several interesting perspectives. Because she is not truly oppressed and retains her identity, her perspective differs greatly from the three other protagonists. There are also other, more nuanced, colors with interesting connotations and metaphorical implications that did not fit the scope of this thesis. Finally, alluring research frames can also be found in the linguistic field with more data-driven approaches to the density and detailed contextualization of color terms.

I chose to study these two novels because of their connection to historical events. Even though the novels are classified as speculative fiction, their connections to past events in the real world highlight the importance of the often-overlooked details around us. I find that to study the color-coding as a storytelling instrument in these two novels is to study something that might happen again.

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