

## Veiled Realities: Unraveling The Everyday In Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

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'Everyday' refers to the routine and commonplace aspects of daily life, encompassing the ordinary moments, activities, and interactions that collectively shape our existence. It represents the fabric of our routine, where the familiar and mundane intertwine to form the backdrop against which we navigate the complexities of the human experience. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, everyday takes on a chilling significance within the confines of Gilead's dystopian regime. The ordinary becomes a battleground for the characters, as rituals and interactions, once mundane, transform into acts of resistance, highlighting the profound impact of the everyday in shaping identity and resilience within a repressive society. Our exploration unfolds within the constraints of Gilead, a society where individual autonomy is sacrificed on the altar of authoritarian rule. Against the backdrop of the characters' daily struggles for survival, this research paper meticulously examines the ordinary moments that become acts of resistance. From the constrained rituals of the Handmaids to the subtle rebellions woven into the fabric of their existence, this study unravels the layers of the everyday, revealing its transformative power in the face of oppression. The analysis encompasses the characters' rituals, relationships, and moments of defiance, contributing to a nuanced understanding of the ordinary's resilience in oppressive environments. As we unravel the complexities of the ordinary in Gilead, this study emphasizes the enduring relevance of the everyday in shaping our understanding of autonomy, resistance, and the indomitable human spirit. "Veiled Realities" seeks to bridge the gap between fiction and reality, prompting reflection on the parallels between the novel's dystopian landscape and the universal quest for individual agency and freedom.

**Keywords:** Everyday, Dystopian, Oppression, Autonomy

### Introduction

In the dystopian tapestry of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, the everyday takes center stage, transformed from the routine and mundane into a battleground for survival and resistance within the oppressive confines of Gilead. This research paper embarks on a comprehensive exploration of the ordinary moments within the novel, delving into their nuanced significance as acts of defiance and resilience in the face of authoritarian rule.

The study of the everyday is rooted in the works of influential theorists such as Henri Lefebvre, who emphasized the spatial and temporal dimensions of daily life. Lefebvre's concept of "lived space" provides a theoretical framework for understanding how individuals navigate and experience the everyday within the physical and social structures of their environment. In this research paper we have applied Lefebvre's insights to dissect the spatial constraints and temporal dynamics shaping the characters' daily lives in Gilead, where space is meticulously regulated, and time is both a tool of control and a space for resistance.

The concept of "bio-power," as articulated by Michel Foucault, further informs our exploration. In Gilead, the regime exercises bio-political control over individuals' bodies and reproductive capacities. Foucault's examination of the intertwining of power and biology provides a critical lens through which to analyze how the everyday experiences of the characters are intricately linked to broader systems of societal control. "Veiled Realities" situates these bio-political dynamics within the characters' daily struggles, shedding light on the profound implications of the everyday in the context of reproductive oppression. This research paper draws parallels between the characters' slow spiraling through their constrained lives and the broader human experience, reflecting the global challenges to personal autonomy and the transformative power embedded in the everyday.

Simultaneously, Michel de Certeau's exploration of "tactics" and "strategies" in the realm of everyday life offers a lens through which to interpret the characters' subtle rebellions. De Certeau's ideas illuminate how the Handmaids, confined within the oppressive strategies of Gilead, employ tactical maneuvers in their daily rituals and interactions, carving out small spaces of agency and resistance. This paper seeks to unravel these tactical responses, revealing the subversive nature of the everyday in the characters' quest for autonomy.

As we journey through Gilead's oppressive landscape, this paper seeks to recognize the everyday within the novel's narrative. Through a multidimensional analysis, encompassing Lefebvre's spatial-temporal insights, de Certeau's notions of tactics, and Foucault's bio-political lens, this research paper endeavors to unravel the complexities of the ordinary. The exploration extends beyond the fictional realm, inviting readers to reflect on the enduring relevance of the everyday in shaping identity, resistance, and the universal quest for individual agency and freedom.

### **Spatial Confinements and Temporal Dictates in Gilead**

In the dystopian society of Gilead, spatial constraints and temporal dictates converge to shape the everyday experiences of its inhabitants. Henri Lefebvre's theory of "Lived and Representational space" provides a valuable framework for understanding the ways in which individuals navigate and perceive their spatial environments. Lefebvre emphasized that space is not just a physical or geometric entity but is socially produced through human activities, perceptions, and interactions. Lived space encompasses the subjective, personal experience of space, considering how individuals navigate and make meaning of the spaces they inhabit within the broader socio-cultural context. "Lived space is an elusive space, so elusive in fact that thought and conception usually seek to appropriate and dominate it" (Crang and Thrift 174). "Representational space is directly lived space, the space of everyday experience. It is space experienced through complex symbols and images of its inhabitants' and 'users,' and 'overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects'" (Crang and Thrift 174). Gilead is not merely a physical setting but a space deeply intertwined with symbolic meanings, complex images, and the daily experiences of its inhabitants. In Gilead, the lived space of the Handmaids is meticulously regulated, confined to the oppressive structures devised by the regime. The spatial constraints, from the hauntingly silent "Red Center" (Atwood 113) to the tightly monitored households, dictate the boundaries of the everyday. Within these spatial confines, the characters engage in daily rituals that both conform to and subvert the prescribed norms. The spatial configurations of Gilead become a physical manifestation of power structures, influencing the characters' behaviors and interactions. Lefebvre's emphasis on the social production of space is evident as the everyday unfolds within the designated spaces of the Red Center, the Commander's household, and the haunting streets of Gilead.

Temporal dictates involve the imposition of rigid schedules, routines, and ceremonial events that structure the characters' daily lives. "But they need to be here, they all need to be here, the Ceremony demands it. We are all obliged to sit through this, one way or another" (Atwood 95). The regime in Gilead uses time as a tool of control, orchestrating events like the monthly fertility rituals, prayers, and executions to assert dominance and reinforce societal norms. The characters, particularly the Handmaids, are subject to a predetermined temporal landscape, emphasizing the regime's authority over their time and activities as mentioned below:

The old ones they send off to the Colonies right away, but the young fertile ones they try to convert, and when they succeed, we all come here to watch them go through the ceremony, renounce their celibacy, sacrifice it to the common good. They kneel and the Commander prays and then they take the red veil, as the rest of us have done. They aren't allowed to become Wives though; they're considered, still, too dangerous for positions of such power. There's an odor of witch about them, something mysterious and exotic, it remains despite the scrubbing and the welts on their feet and the time they've spent in Solitary. They always have those welts, they've always done that time, so rumor goes: they don't let go easily. Many of them choose the Colonies instead. (Atwood 250)

The concept highlights how Gilead not only controls physical spaces but also dictates the temporal dimensions of the characters' existence, showcasing the intricate ways in which authoritarian regimes can manipulate both space and time to maintain power. The regime uses time not just as a neutral measure but as a tool for societal control, underscoring the profound impact of temporal manipulation on the characters' autonomy. Space in Gilead is not merely a physical container; it is a meticulously crafted product of the regime's ideology and a means of controlling human relations. The Red Center, households of the Commanders, and even the silent streets of Gilead are socially produced spaces, designed to reinforce the oppressive structures of power. The physical environments are imbued with symbolic meanings, dictating the roles and behaviors of the Handmaids. Gilead's spatial organization reflects the regime's bio-political control, illustrating how space is not neutral but actively employed as a tool for societal manipulation. The social production of space in *The Handmaid's Tale* underscores the profound impact of ideology on the physical and symbolic landscapes within a repressive society.

### **Bio-Political Dynamics and Reproductive Oppression**

In the context of *The Handmaid's Tale*, bio-political and reproductive dynamics are intricately intertwined within the oppressive regime of Gilead. Central to the dystopian narrative of *The Handmaid's Tale* is the intersection of everyday life with the bio-political apparatus of Gilead. Michel Foucault introduced the concept of bio-power to describe the modern mechanisms through which societies regulate and control individuals, focusing particularly on the management of populations at a biological level. Bio-power operates through various institutions and practices that exert influence over bodies, health, and reproduction. It involves the administration and optimization of life processes, intertwining the political and biological realms. This concept of "bio-power" provides a critical lens through which to analyze the characters' experiences, emphasizing how the control of bodies and reproductive capacities becomes a central tenet of the regime's power. "This new mechanism of power applies directly to bodies" (Cisney and Morar, pp. 3).

I rub the butter over my face, work it into the skin of my hands. There's no longer any hand lotion or face cream, not for us. Such I things are considered vanities. We are containers, it's only the in-sides of our bodies that are important. The

outside can become hard and wrinkled, for all they care, like the shell of a nut. This was a decree of the Wives, this absence of hand lotion. They don't want us to look attractive. For them, things are bad enough as it is. (Atwood 113)

Bio-power delves into the subtle ways societies influence and govern the bodies and lives of individuals, illustrating the intricate connections between political authority, social structures, and the biological aspects of human existence. In *Gilead Handmaids* are reduced to vessels for reproduction - "we are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (Atwood 156), bodies subjected to stringent bio-political control mechanisms. The regime employs a form of bio-power that dictates the very essence of the everyday—their fertility, menstrual cycles, and physical well-being. "Power now appears not to limit but to provoke, purify, and disseminate force for the purposes of management and control..." (Cisney and Morar, pp. 3). The Ceremony, a ritualistic act of sexual reproduction, epitomizes the bio-political regulation of the Handmaids' bodies, reducing their agency to a reproductive function. Foucault's insights into the relationship between power, knowledge, and the body resonate within the narrative, highlighting how Gilead's bio-politics extend beyond mere physical control. The Aunts, acting as agents of bio-political education, indoctrinate the Handmaids, shaping their perceptions of their bodies and their roles in the society. The everyday experiences, from the scrutiny of bodies to the monitoring of reproductive cycles, become integral to the regime's exercise of power. Their movements are restricted, and even daily activities become subject to bio-political regulations. Gilead employs a form of disciplinary power to control and regulate the bodies of the Handmaids for reproductive purposes. "Discipline involved the training of individual bodies to increase their productive forces while also maximizing control over their activities. It sought to organize the spatial distribution and sequential activity of individuals organized into functional multiplicities of various kinds (military, industrial, educational, and so on), all the while ensuring control by means of constant surveillance" (Cisney and Morar 104).

### **Everyday as Subversive Resistance: Tactics in Gilead's Silence**

In Gilead's silent resistance, Michel de Certeau's idea of "tactics" and "strategies" comes to life in the realm of everyday life. "According to de Certeau, strategies are the overarching framework of the dominant institutions and their objectives (e.g. to discipline or gain profit) and tactics are the individual actions included in everyday activities and how ordinary people use and appropriate the products created by the dominant institutions" (Zaykova, 2014). In "Making Do: Uses and Tactics," a chapter from Michel de Certeau's work, the idea revolves around how ordinary individuals navigate and resist within systems imposed upon them. It emphasizes the creative ways people exercise agency by tactically employing elements of these systems in their daily lives. This involves users interpreting and adapting to constraints, finding subtle ways to assert their autonomy and make choices within the limitations imposed by larger societal structures. The term "making do" encapsulates the notion of individuals resourcefully managing and finding agency within the confines of the systems they inhabit, showcasing resilience and creativity in navigating their everyday experiences. He suggests that individuals, especially those within marginalized or controlled environments, employ tactics to navigate and resist the overarching strategies imposed upon them. Tactics are characterized by a nimble and adaptive utilization of time, seizing opportunities, and introducing a dynamic play into the foundations of power and strategies refer to approaches or methods that focus on the establishment and defense of a fixed position or place. In the context of *The Handmaid's Tale*, de Certeau's ideas find resonance in the subtle rebellions and tactical maneuvers of the Handmaids within Gilead's oppressive regime. The Handmaids, confined within the strict strategies of the regime, strategically navigate their daily rituals and interactions to carve out small spaces of agency and resistance. Clandestine gatherings, whispered conversations, and shared glances among them represent tactical responses, reflecting the subversive nature of the everyday in their quest for autonomy. "We learned to whisper almost without sound. In the semi-darkness we could stretch out our arms, when the Aunts weren't looking, and touch each other's hands across space. We learned to lip-read, our heads flat on the beds, turned sideways, watching each other's mouths" (Atwood 10). In this way De Certeau's insights illuminate the nuanced ways in which individuals, even in constrained circumstances, can employ tactics to resist and assert a degree of agency, providing a framework to understand the subversive undertones in the characters' everyday actions in Gilead.

Furthermore, the formation of clandestine networks draws inspiration from the works of Antonio Gramsci and his concept of "counter-hegemony." Counter-hegemony refers to a resistance or opposition against prevailing dominant ideologies, beliefs, or power structures within a society. It involves challenging the established norms, values, and authority to create an alternative or opposing cultural, social, or political narrative. Counter-hegemonic movements aim to subvert or transform the dominant hegemony, providing alternative perspectives, values, and practices that challenge the existing power dynamics. This concept is often associated with the work of Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci, who explored the role of cultural and intellectual leadership in maintaining or challenging social order. Counter-hegemony encompasses various forms of dissent, activism, and cultural production that seek to undermine or offer alternatives to the dominant ideologies shaping a society. In the face of Gilead's hegemonic control, these networks become sites of resistance, fostering a sense of collective identity that stands in opposition to the ruling ideology. Gramsci's emphasis on the role of intellectuals in challenging dominant narratives resonates as individuals within these networks share knowledge as a form

of intellectual resistance. The everyday actions of the Handmaids underscore the agency individuals can exhibit within oppressive systems, employing tactics to carve out spaces of resistance. The clandestine networks in Gilead exemplify counter-hegemonic efforts, challenging the dominant ideologies and fostering alternative narratives. These narratives underscore the enduring human spirit to resist, adapt, and assert agency even in the face of formidable power structures. *The Handmaid's Tale* becomes a compelling illustration of how theoretical concepts manifest in the lived experiences of individuals, offering insights into the complexities of resistance in dystopian societies.

### Conclusion:

In conclusion, this research paper has embarked on a profound journey through the dystopian landscape of Gilead, unveiling the transformative power inherent in the ordinary moments of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. Grounded in the theoretical frameworks of Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau, and Foucault, the paper has dissected the spatial, temporal, and bio-political dimensions of the characters' daily lives, exposing the subversive nature of their subtle rebellions. The characters' slow spiraling through constrained lives echoes the universal challenges to personal autonomy faced by individuals worldwide during times of upheaval.

This exploration transcends the fictional realm, inviting readers to re-cognize the significance of the everyday in shaping identity, resistance, and the universal pursuit of individual agency and freedom. As we navigate Gilead's oppressive landscape, "Veiled Realities" stands as a testament to the enduring relevance of the ordinary, prompting reflection on the intricate interplay between the mundane and the extraordinary in the ongoing quest for human autonomy and resilience.

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