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瑪格麗特·愛特伍《使女的故事》中的衣物寫作
Clothing as Writing Materials in Margaret Atwood's
The Handmaid's Tale

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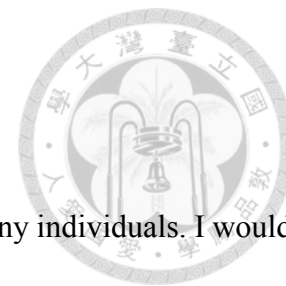
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中文摘要



本文透過探討瑪格麗特·愛特伍的小說《使女的故事》中的衣服寫作方式，來理解物質在寫作中扮演的角色。愛特伍的創作總是與她筆下的衣物描寫無法分割，故本文首先透過展示愛特伍本身與衣物的關係，以及探討愛特伍許多作品中各種樣態的衣物呈現手法，進而探討愛特伍如何將其對於衣物具體的知識展現在小說中的衣物描繪，使其作為一種物質在寫作中發揮影響力。本文透過詹姆斯吉伯森 (James Gibson) 的承擔特質理論 (Affordance Theory) 來檢視衣服作為一種物質與角色之間的互動產生的動態，不同的衣服以其物質性介入角色之間的影响力，以及作為一種權力關係流動的表現。最後本文也將分析愛特伍如何將衣物作為一種帶有物質性的寫作工具，來彰顯角色跟刻畫劇情。

關鍵字：使女的故事、衣服、物質性、乘載特質、瑪格麗特·愛特伍

Abstract



This research aims to explore the role clothing plays in the most representative novel of Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). Atwood's writing is inseparable from the clothing depicted in her works. The thesis first introduces Atwood's relationship with the clothing itself and the way she describes and uses clothing in many of her works, to show the importance of reading the clothing to understand *The Handmaid's Tale*. After that, with James Gibson's affordance theory, this thesis will examine how clothing affects the characters and becomes an important material in the interaction between different characters. This thesis further analyzes how Atwood uses clothing as a writing material to shape her characters and weaves her story.

Key words: materiality, affordance, *The Handmaid's Tale*, Clothing, Margaret Atwood

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Introductio



“As for the clothes, as for the accessories, those can be studied.”

Margaret Atwood, *The Robber Bride*

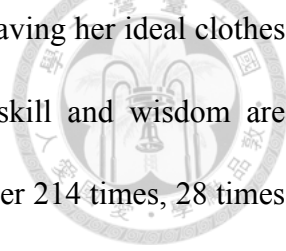
This research aims to explore the role clothing plays in Margaret Atwood’s most representative novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985). Atwood’s writing is inseparable from the clothing depicted in her works. The thesis first introduces Atwood’s relationship with the clothing itself and the clothing writing in many of her works to show the importance of interpreting the clothing in the novel to have a better understanding. After that, with James Gibson’s affordance theory, this thesis will further examine how clothing affects the characters and becomes an important material presenting the interaction between different characters. This thesis then further analyzes how Atwood uses clothing as metaphors to shape her characters and weaves her story.

The Handmaid’s Tale is one of Atwood’s most famous works, which won the Governor General’s Award in 1985 and the first Arthur C. Clarke Award in 1987, and it is also nominated for the 1986 Nebula Award, the 1986 Booker Prize, and the 1987 Prometheus Award. Hundreds of scholars have studied, discussed and analyzed this work, and even 30 years after this work was published, there are still many research papers dedicated to it. As a very influential work, it is not only popular in the literature world, but also presented in many other media forms. It is adapted into a film in 1990 and an opera in 2000. Since the horror atmosphere and the shadow

of the women's bodies being controlled by the religious and political power she depicts in the novel still resonate with the people today; therefore, this work has been adapted into a TV series since 2017. As an energetic lady who always likes to try new things, Atwood also joined the scriptwriting team of the TV series and she even showed up in one scene, as a villain slapping the protagonist, Offred.

The image of the handmaids in long conservative red gowns becomes an important protesting symbol in the protest activity over the world. Poland in 2016 had a group of protestors on the street to fight for their abortion right which was proposed to be canceled, and similar things happened in the U.S. where abortion ban was brought up in 2019. In the same year, a religious group in Taiwan also proposed a petition to forbid women to have an abortion. In all the above-mentioned protests, there were always some protestors wearing the uniforms of the handmaids, a red long gown with a white bonnet. The pictures of women wearing handmaid's uniforms circulated on many social media platforms with the hashtag "two-legged wombs," created a strong visual impact and helped these protestors raise the publicity. 34 years after the book published, she even publishes the sequel of this novel, *Testament*, in which she expands the dystopian world and reveals many details from different narrators' perspectives, making her dystopian narrative more well-rounded. This great work is still influential to our world and worth exploring.

Although this work has been discussed so many times, I find there are not enough attentions paid to the clothing in this novel. Clothing in Atwood's novels always interests me because it is obvious that in each of her works she puts great effort into describing those things — a hat, a dress, a garment, and even a pair of gloves. She doesn't just write about them creatively, but



also plays with them in her writing. Cynthia Kuhn says Atwood is “weaving her ideal clothes into her novels with words” (30), and Atwood’s amazing writing skill and wisdom are facilitated in this way. In this 324-page novel, clothing is mentioned over 214 times, 28 times about the colors of the clothing, 36 times about its shape, texture, and design, and 29 times about the clothing in the narrator’s memory. On almost two-third pages we read Atwood’s portrait of it, not to mention how the clothing functions multiple ways in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Atwood herself more than once emphasizes a close relationship between her writing and the dress in her works no matter in some of the interviews or in her novels through her characters by saying “I fabricated my life, time after time” (*Lady Oracle* 72).

The Handmaid’s Tale depicts a story of a female protagonist, Offred, trying to survive in a dystopian world. Offred is a handmaid in the Republic of Gilead, a totalitarian and theocratic country formed by Christian fundamentalists. At the time when most people are infertile, some fertile women like Offred are trained to be handmaids and assigned to the government officers’ house to bear children for them and their wives. Offred serves a Commander called Fred and his wife Serena Joy; therefore, her name consists of the word “of” and her Commander’s. Besides the handmaid’s daily shopping trip to a supermarket paired with another handmaid, every month Offred has intercourse with the Commander in a ritual called Ceremony, during which everyone in the household has to be there, and the wife is sitting behind Offred holding both of her hands and tangling her body with Offred’s as if the wife were the one having sex.

The whole story is narrated by Offred, the narration flashes back and forth between Offred’s reality and her memory where she keeps mentioning her interaction with her husband Luke and her daughter. Before forced to be a handmaid, Offred is a normal American citizen.

When the country is being overthrown, the family tries to cross the border to Canada, but their escape fails, and she then soon is sent to Red Center, a place training women to be handmaids. In Red Center, Offred meets her old-time friend Moira, who was a rebellious feminist. Moira finds it hard to follow the indoctrination in Red Center, and successfully escapes from this institution.

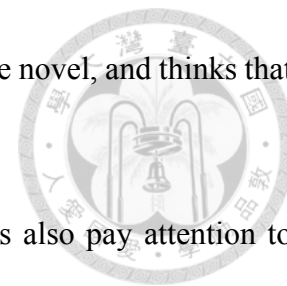
After couple Ceremonies, the Commander secretly asks Offred to meet him in his study regularly, and tries to be close to her. He even breaks the rule and secretly takes Offred out to have fun in a prostitute club, Jezebel's, where Offred again meets her friend Moira, who is caught back and becomes a prostitute in Jezebel's. Since Offred hasn't got pregnant after a long while, Offred agrees with Serena's arrangement to have sex with the Commander's chauffeur, Nick. During the process, she gradually falls for Nick. When Serena finds out the Commander secretly meets Offred in his study, she tries to punish Offred. It is Nick that comes out, confesses he belongs to an underground resistance association, and helps Offred escape from this house. In the last chapter, Offred's ending is not told. What we see is a group of historians in a meeting discussing the history of the Republic of Gilead through a voice record left by Offred.

This story reflects the rampant fear in 1980s of the control on women's bodies from some religious groups and the government authorities. Charlotte Sturges mentions *The Handmaid's Tale* is classed as a female survival narrative. "Survival, according to Atwood, has to do with moving from an attitude of victimization to one of empowerment through stages of growing awareness" (69). Sandra Tome further proposes the idea that the nationalism of the Gilead affects the development of the feminism in this story, and she regards this work as a failed

feminist doctrine. From the perspective of feminism, Amin Malak, as a scholar who studies many dystopian works maintains that this novel is beyond the dystopian writing. He claims that this novel combines the feminism and Atwood's satiric idea through the performance of all the misogynist behaviors of the totalitarian government.

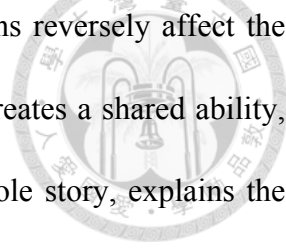
Thus, Atwood's tale is inspected from many different perspectives, but reaches a similar conclusion that the first-person narration is a subversion or resistance toward a repressive system. Besides Charlotte Sturgess who suggests that the narration about the women bodies in the story is a form of resistance, Hilde Stael, through analyzing the protagonist's mental status behind the narration, presents that the manipulation of the storytelling which affects the authenticity is the narrator's subversive behaviors. Glenner assumes that the fragmental narration as a special writing is to exhibit the fractures and the conflicts of the power in the story. Marta Dvork thinks the discontinuity of the story telling is like a collage by which Atwood builds up the story visually. Also paying attention to the discontinuity, Marlene Dolitsky considers it as a performance of the meta-narrative satire, and she thinks Atwood utilizes the polysemy to show many kinds of satires, especially to the scene where a group of historians gather together and regard the narrator's records as part of true history. Since this story is based on the history study of a group of historians who view the narrator's voice memory as a reliable source, the conflict between the public history and private memory is what Lynette Hunte further explores. He concludes that there is a contradiction between these two, but it is also the contradiction between them creates a space for Atwood's literary creation. Same as Hunte, Domnick M. Grace also focus on the history study of the story. He discusses

the complexity of the interpretation of the story, of the history and of the novel, and thinks that Atwood creates the story by intertwining all these ideas together.



Besides above mentioned subversion theme, many other scholars also pay attention to some interesting elements in this novel. Both Madonne Miner and Sharon Rose Wilson discuss the relationship of this story and the fairy tales. Miner presents the romance between the narrator and two male characters —the husband Luke and the chauffeur Nick — to point out the ironic fairy tales' trait — Princess' waiting for the saving from the prince. Wilson claims this novel is a reversed fairy tale, and its opposite ideas reflect the dark side of some fairy tales. The only discussion I read so far about the materials in the novel is Patrycja Kurjatto-Renard's exploration on the house and its interior design. He explains that the house style represents the control of the regime and their hope for the glory in the history; the interior design reflects the dilapidated and fragmental mental status of the protagonist. These explorations have covered many aspects of this novel, but I think these academic readings have not given a sufficient attention to Atwood's weaving in her writing. Her skillful writing with the clothing has shown in many of her works, and this novel is no exception. After a cautious study on the clothing in this work, I argue that clothes in Atwood's novels should be inspected by treating it as an important thing with the help of James Gibson's affordance theory, so we can see the potential influences of clothing to realize the creativity and possibilities of Atwood's writing.

Margaret Atwood sees clearly that clothes have a great power, especially in the interaction between their materiality and humans' perception, to help us understand the relationship between the characters and emotions that are not directly depicted. The design, the shape, and the materiality of the clothing all actively participate in the interaction by affecting the

The logo of National Tsing Hua University (NTU) is located in the upper right quadrant of the page. It is a circular emblem with a central bell and the university's name in both Chinese and English characters around the perimeter.

movement of the wearers, while at the same time, the wearers' actions reversely affect the clothing, such as making it sway; the interaction between these two creates a shared ability, which develops an indispensable momentum running through the whole story, explains the relationship between the characters, and unfolds the story. The ability will be further elaborated with Gibson's affordance theory later in the chapter two. In that chapter, I propose that the clothing, especially the uniforms, as designed products, combining both designers' ideas and its nonreducible materiality, is the key to recognizing the change of the power relationship between the characters.

To bring the clothing into everyone's vision, and be away from human-center narration to introduce a new materialist perspective in the study, I will draw on in particular affordance theories proposed by James Gibson and his successors' to demonstrate how clothing exhibits its power and claims its existence by interacting with the characters with their materiality and affordance in a complicated network, and also how it helps to connect the Atwood and her readers between this fictional dystopian world and reality through a common sensory experiences of the clothing. To better capture the whole ecosystem created by the clothing and Atwood's writing, I will explain later the notion of affordances proposed by James Gibson, which theorizes the interaction between a creature and its environment.



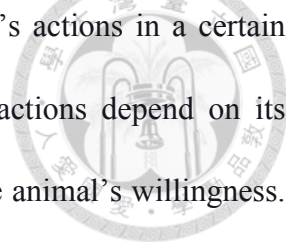
Gibson and the Affordance Theory

“An affordance cuts across the dichotomy of subjective-objective and helps us to understand its inadequacy. It is equally a fact of the environment and a fact of behavior. It is both physical and psychological, yet, neither. An affordance points both ways, to the environment and to the observer.”

James Gibson, “The theory of affordances”

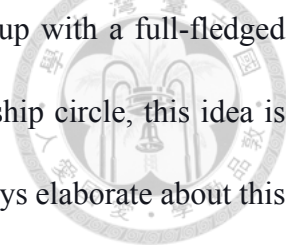
Different from the traditional reading, new materialism frees things themselves from passive objects, and brings things back to the attention. As Brown says, “there is a kind of indeterminate ontology in which the being of the object can’t so readily be distinguished from the being of animals, say, or the being we call the human being” (2). To better understand Atwood’s writing, the tension she created between the characters with the clothes and how she constructs the dystopian world in the novel, in this thesis I use Gibson’s affordance and also some of his successors’ studies on this theory to analyze the relationship between things and humans.

Gibson coins the word affordance to explain the idea that the potential abilities of an environment or a thing affords any organism to utilize. The affordances are different between different things and organisms, and he defines a set of specific affordances between a certain animal and the given environment as a niche. As a psychologist, he develops this concept to complete his own perception theory. To break the dichotomy between observers and things, he

The logo of National Taiwan University (NTU) is located in the upper right quadrant of the page. It is a circular emblem with a central bell and the university's name in Chinese characters around the perimeter.

needs an idea covering a system; therefore, he claims that an animal's actions in a certain environment cannot be completely subjective; instead, an animal's actions depend on its environment, because the environment usually doesn't change with the animal's willingness. The dynamics only exist when an animal perceives a thing, recognizing its ability and further take an action. The effectivity is therefore produced under the interaction between these two as Gibson mentions "The possibilities of the environment and the way of life of the animal go together inseparably" (139).

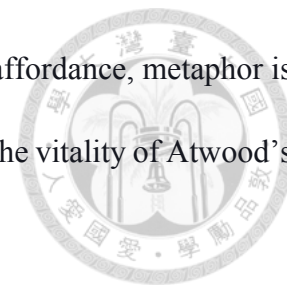
Furthermore, Gibson emphasizes that affordance is there beyond an animal's perception, which means even when the observer is not there, a thing still has its affordance. For example, a climbable tree will still be able to be climbed on even without any animal climbing it. He, therefore, claims that affordances do not change as the need of the observer changes. They are properties of the phenomenological world that depend upon the state of an observer; rather, they are ecological phenomena that exist in the environment. (139) Therefore, we can see the ideas of affordances are idea tries to capture the power between an actor and a thing he or it is using. An example given by Gibson himself is that "to identify the substance in such cases is to perceive what can be done with it, what it is good for, its utility: and the hands are involved" (124). In this context, users and the things being used both need to be considered in affordance's discussion. The affordance is not a property of a thing, but an ability which affords actor to take. From the perspective of the new materialism, the invariance of the affordance comes from the uncontrollable materiality of the things themselves, so all the perception from humans has to be built on the things providing to them, and this is the power of the things themselves.



When Gibson proposes the idea of affordance, he doesn't come up with a full-fledged theory, and therefore, as a revolutionary concept gets into the scholarship circle, this idea is then developed and derived into various possibilities, and two major ways elaborate about this idea — one is ontological and the other is about industrial design. The further exploration into this concept is beyond the range of this thesis, so what I like to do is to follow some of Gibson's successors talking about affordance which happens to be a good tool for us to understand Atwood's novels, *The Handmaid's Tale*. Three major scholars' ideas are applied to explain the ideas of the clothing in this thesis, Manuel Heras-Escribano's affordance and normativity, Rob Withagen's invitational characters of the affordance, and Terence Cave's literary affordance.

I refer to the invitational characters of affordances proposed by Rob Withagen to reinvestigate the dynamic between the uniforms and the wearers. In Withagen's theory, he argues that affordances of things can invite certain behaviors because these things are designed with certain intentions, which is suitable to examine the purpose of the uniform in *The Handmaid's Tale*. To elaborate on the power relation between the characters demonstrated through the uniforms, Heras-Escribano's discussion in his book *The Philosophy of Affordances* about the normativity and affordance is very helpful because the uniforms embody the social norms. Besides Withagen's and Heras-Escribano's arguments, I also propose my thoughts as a complement for understanding the novel from a new materialist perspective to see the irreducible materiality of things. After discussing the clothing, I use the literary affordances proposed by Terence Cave to explore Atwood's special writing with clothes. The affordance in chapter 3 is quite different from the one we talk about in the chapter 2 while this notion is also derived from Gibson's theory frame. Cave's ideas present another perspective to

understand not only Atwood's writing, which says that literature is an affordance, metaphor is an affordance, and clothes themselves are an affordance, so we can see the vitality of Atwood's writing in her description of the clothing.

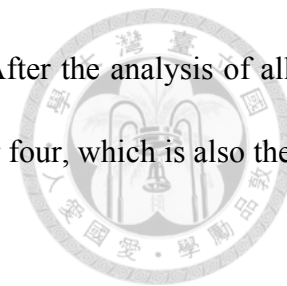


Affordance theory, as a concept focusing on the power from things, doesn't not only show its value in the psychological field but becomes a transdisciplinary idea. No matter we interpret this idea from Heras-Escribano's philosophical perspective, with an ontological approach, or examine it in the new studies of industrial design, affordance theory allows us to re-inspect many possibilities between things and humans' interaction.

Chapters plan

There are four chapters in this essay. In this introduction chapter, I have already summarized the purpose of my research, briefly introduced the text, and explained the approaches that are applied. In the first chapter, I'll discuss the relationship between Margaret Atwood and clothing. In the chapter two, starting a close reading of the novel, I'll analyze the activeness of the clothes, and demonstrate its ability to affect the interaction between characters, at the same time bringing out the strong tension between the uniform and people. To make the structure clearer, I will explain Heras-Escribano's and Withagen's statement of affordance, and my idea as a supplement. In the chapter three, I further explore the clothes functioning as a literary tool for Atwood. Similar to chapter two, I'll introduce Cave's literary affordance before I start to use it to examine my text to see how clothes under Atwood's pen creates a literary ecological space, and I also bring up some ideas to explain how clothing works for Atwood to

characterizing her roles and express their emotion through clothing. After the analysis of all the details in these two novels, the conclusion will be placed in chapter four, which is also the last chapter.





Chapter 1

Clothing and Margaret Atwood

In a Margaret Atwood's interview about "Fashion and Fiction"¹, the interviewer Rosie Goldsmith says she was impressed by Atwood at the first time they met because Atwood accurately guessed out the fabric and origin of her vintage dress which was 1950s American, and she always remembers a conversation with Atwood about lingerie in the Canadian embassy consulate (1:48). More than once, Atwood reveals her passion and intuitive for clothes in her biographies, articles and interviews. Speaking to *Sunday Times Style* magazine, she says she "had always been fascinated by how much trouble people would go to when getting dressed" (24). She continues to highlight that she is a competent seamstress of great knowledge about the fabric of clothing, so it is not hard to understand why she put so much effort into the details of the garments in her writing.

Born in 1939, the year of WWII, Atwood spent her childhood in a forest in northern Quebec because of her father's research in forest entomology. Not having too many choices of clothing, when she was 8, she started to learn to sew and to mend rips and tears, which also inspired her to make clothing later, and her 11-year younger sister became the one whom she could dress up like a doll. Atwood explains that she "wanted to be a fashion designer. [She]

¹ Fashion and Fiction is a regular interview hold by Victoria and Albert Museum. Famous celebrities are invited to join the interview to talk about fashion and fiction with the journalist Rosie Goldsmith.

wasn't just interested in making clothes, but more what they looked like" ("Hairdo" 7). In an autobiographic comic strip², *Hairdo*, she says she always wanted to be a dress designer. She still keeps a sketchbook containing all the creative and crazy ideas created by little Atwood. Not until she realized "people wore bananas on their heads only in magazines," Atwood decided to turn to literature, "where all things are possible" ("Hairdo" 6). Growing up with a mom who didn't care about clothes too much, without a good sense of fashion, Atwood had a hard time when she left the forest and got into high school as a teenager. "While other girls wore flowered skirts, Atwood, the daughter of a scientist, chose to decorate hers with 'reptiles' and 'trilobites'" ("Atwood and Beaulieu" 30-31). On her way to be fashionable or go after what she truly liked, there were always struggles between for the reason that she thought she could only choose one from them, so she decided to focus on pursuing a writing career until she met her high school teacher Miss Billings, who had a positive influence on her for letting her know the link between dress and literature.

"She was a terrific role model, in two ways: first, she obviously reveled in what she was teaching, and loved the power of words; second, she was a snappy dresser, proving to me that you could purse the literary life without necessarily turning into a bedraggled frump. Both of these were important to me, and who is to say whether or not I would have paid attention to the first if it had not been for the second?" ("English Teachers Speech" 11-12).

Although she had some mentors showing her that there is no conflict between the career

² In Margret Atwood's autobiographic comic strip, *Hairdo*, published in Weekend Magazine, she says "I concluded that people wore bananas on their heads only in magazines. I turned to literature, where all things are possible.

choosing and the desire of dressing up oneself, while growing up, Atwood's ambivalence between her literature career pursuing and the wearing continually bothered her when she got into university. At the time, there seemed to be many rules for dressing for certain identities. In her account of becoming a poet, she says "I was about to step into a whole set of preconceptions and social roles which had to do with what poets were like, how they should behave, and what they ought to wear; moreover, I didn't know that the rules about these things were different if you were female" ("Waterstone's" 12). Black clothing, as she claims, was compulsory for writers. Before she got the freedom for her own dress, being in the doctoral program, she found out that "At Harvard, you had to be serious too, but in different clothes. No black this time. You had to wear tweed" (*Two Solicitudes* 32-33). Her experiences give her a keen awareness of how everyone's dress choices are influenced by the social context, so she always pays attention to what her protagonists wear and how they feel about those clothes. After experiencing all those struggles of choosing the clothes, she seems very comfortable with her dress now when she is in public even when her wearing has been challenged.

In addition to changing social contexts, Atwood also shows a keen sensitivity to the impact of fabrics of clothing, even to those clothes worn in the army. In one of her book club sessions³, she said, "I'm very interested in clothing technologies and the effects that they had on armies, probably because my dad had many books about them. It's a neglected field of study." She mentioned that a number of military operations have fallen on sad times because people didn't put enough thought into fabrics and clothing. One example is the design of the zippers on the soldier's pants got many men killed in WWII, because when they scratched their match

³ Atwood says this in a Guardian book club discussion session on *The Blind Assassin*.

on the zipper and light their cigarette, they became clear targets. Atwood also shows her sympathy for those American soldiers who have sacrificed their lives due to the wrong choice of the trousers in the Korean War. A female historical professor, Tony, one of the characters in Atwood's *The Robber Bride*, mentions that the nylon-made tactical pants caused the heavy casualties for the American army during the Korean War due to the friction noise made by nylon material in marching (27). Her awareness and knowledge of clothing become the essence for her writing and make makes her writing different from other writers' clothing in their works.

Passion for writing and clothing intertwined

While reading Margaret Atwood's works, I'm aware that how Atwood weaves and tangles her characters' life and their wearing together. In many critical moments for her heroines, the clothes are never absent. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, on the way with her daughter escaping from Gilead, instead of directly saying how nervous or anxious she might be, Offred describes the appearance of the shoes they are wearing and the detailed feeling the shoes give her. "I wore my hiking boots, she had on her sneakers" (94). With clothing existing in almost all the important scene, I find clothes are functioning in certain ways that haven't been fully discovered and well explained.

Cynthia Kuhn writes a book discussing the relationship of Atwood's writing and knitting property of clothes in *Robber Bride*(19993) and *Grace Alias*(1996); besides, Carol L. Beran also exams the relationship between characters built upon the commodity exchange in *The*

Handmaid's Tale. "Cigarettes again represent connections between people; however, as trivial objects that become valued because of scarcity and prohibition, they also represent freedom and pleasure" (133). Since Beran only focuses on discussing the meaning behind the things, I'd like to put the discussion a bit deeper into the things itself, and also draw the attention back to the dynamic created between the things and humans.

Atwood's passion for clothing often reveals itself through the characters in her works. "Rennie enjoys creating articles on trends that didn't really exist, to see if she could make them exist by writing about them and she is often successful at conjuring up a new fashion" (*Bodily Harm* 25). Rennie of *Bodily Harm* is one of Atwood's female protagonists, and she is like Atwood herself possessing writing talent and her interests in clothes making. Dress also functions in many different ways. The dress worn by Zenia in *The Robber Brides* (1993) adorns her as a female vampire and miraculously endows her with some witching abilities that make her attractive but also dangerous. In *Surfacing* (1972), the unnamed protagonist abandons her civilized clothing which she regards as the constraints from society. The speaker in one of Atwood's poem, "Closet," connects the clothing to identity, and hopes to "clear the shelves, burn my coats, my shoes / or throw them where they cannot be found" so she can "leave no evidence of multiple selves" (46).

Investigating Atwood's clothing from a feminist perspective in *Self-Fashioning in Margaret Atwood's Fiction*, Cynthia Kuhn points out that although dress carries much weight in Atwood's works, and can be interpreted or examined for various possibilities, it is most commonly thought of as facilitating symbolic purposes in the literature (6). She further maintains "clothing is so much a part of the daily scenery that viewers may become insensitive

to its meaningfulness. However, when we examine dress closely, it quickly becomes apparent that as a cultural representation, it conveys an entire network of associations” (8). Some of Khun’s ideas on Atwood’s clothing are similar to the way by which new materialists explore the vitality and activeness in things. Her major attention is on the relationship of clothing with the construction of the characters’ identity. Kuhn gives an example that the narrator in Atwood’s *Hair Jewellery* claims to resurrect herself through clothes,

That’s my technique, I resurrect myself through clothes. In fact, it’s impossible for me to remember what I did, what happened to me, unless I can remember what I was wearing, and every time I discard a sweater or a dress, I am discarding a part of my life... (105)

Following this idea, Khun further explains the relationship between the clothing and the fashion, maintaining that as a survival technique⁴, clothing brings out how Atwood uses it as a tool to challenge the limitation set for the minorities. Atwood’s works, especially those called speculative fictions⁵, were written based on her close observation of the society and her introspection. They are the challenges from her to the social norms and her concern for the humanities’ future. In her dystopian novel, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Atwood reveals her doubt about religious groups, her concern with the unpredictability of human nature, and her care for those underprivileged or the oppressed women.

Leila G. Mitchell argues that Atwood shapes the external world by using clothing to create stereotypes and to signal characters’ development in her early novels, such as in *The Edible*

⁴ Survival is always Atwood’s major topic in all her works. She herself fights for the survival of Canadian literature under the pressure of British and American literature, for the right of oppressed women, and for nature that is being destroyed by human beings.

⁵ In a BBC interview, Atwood claimed that the difference between “science fiction” and “speculative fiction” is that the former one has monsters and spaceship and the latter one could really happen.

Woman, Surfacing, and Lady Oracle, the clothing give its wearers certain cultural symbols, by its value, its style or its shape (45). The clothing here is obviously just a tool to help readers know more about the characters. Lorraine M. York evaluates the clothing in Atwood's works with the concept of the uniform. She suggests that the uniform in Atwood's novels is "to enter a dark realm of experience and suffering." The uniform in *The Handmaid's Tale* is a method of control, under which, everyone has to wear the clothing with certain colors, until Moira, the most rebellious character in the novel, turns the uniform (also the control) into a subversive weapon (11). The uniform works as a guide leading the reader to walk into the world Atwood creates. Uniforms, a kind of clothing, works symbolically again in Marvin Carlson's study. He notes that the clothing which reflects cultural meaning interacts with the readers themselves (38). Readers imagine and build the type of the characters with their cultural identities on the clothing they read in the novels. All these studies on clothing just prove that clothing is a tool to accentuate the characters, and even Atwood herself admits that clothing articulates the adorned body, and frames gender within a cultural context (Kuhn 5). Readers regard them more as cultural symbols than the clothing itself; they unconsciously read the cultural meaning behind the clothes or the idea of the fear in the uniform, which reveals that the potential of the dress codes limits readers' understanding of the clothing.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood designs the uniforms as a form of control in a society that labels women's functions on them with color-coded uniforms: the handmaids who responsible for delivering children wear red, the wives of the powerful ruling class wear blue, the servants (also called Marthas in the novel) wear green, and the Red Center instructors who train handmaids (called Aunts) wear brown. Everyone is identified with the colors of the

clothes. Talking about the design of the uniforms in *The Handmaid's Tale* in the interview with Rosie Goldsmith, Atwood said the deep red color came from various places, and one of them is about controlling prisoners. German prisoners of the war in Canada in WWII were given red outfits because they show up so well against the snow (34:11). “On the other hand, red is the cross and red is blood” (38:50). Cross is mentioned because the world in *The Handmaid's Tale* is controlled by a Puritan-esque theocracy, and blood is related to childbirth. In the novel, the narrator, Offred, also explains the color by saying “Everything except the wings around my face is red: the color of blood, which defines us” (18).

Although it seems that there is no way for the characters in this novel to choose the clothes they want, Kuhn claims that Offred's memory of wearing whatever they in the Pre-Gilead time appearing from time to time creates the tension between the present and the past, rebellion and submission. Furthermore, the memory stands as a defiant existence (17). A similar idea is also proposed by Marta Dvorak, who takes Moira, the character fights against the regime in *The Handmaid's Tale*, as an example to explain the functions of cloth colors as an expression of rebellion. Before the birth of Gilead, Moira enjoys wearing purple, a color that synthesizes and rejects both of the primary female roles of Gilead signaled by the red and blue uniforms. When Moira tries to escape, she takes away the brown color uniform from an Aunt – an object that indicates a power providing opportunities for revolution (80).

Besides regarding clothing as the cultural symbols, some other scholarly writings on this topic review it from the perspective of psychoanalysis, and relate it to characters' emotions or mental status. Tetsushi Horikawa points out an important function of the dress in Atwood's novels, an emotional change for the transformation of the protagonists, especially in *Surfacing*

and *The Edible Woman*(1969). In his study on the handmaids' clothes, David Coad connects the function of handmaids' bonnet, which should prevent the handmaids from being seen and keep them anonymous, to these women's minds and ideas (58). The contribution to this field indeed shows various aspects of clothing, recognizes the importance of clothing in Atwood's fictions, and at the same time shapes the ideas of Atwood's clothing in her work. Especially since Atwood herself admits, as a member of academia, sometimes she reads those research papers analyzing her works. The problem is these papers do not put the clothing in the center of the concern, or discusses it as a thing independent from human agency. When Kuhn explains the existence of clothing is the characters' identity construction, and Coad reads it as an emotional state, clothing here is being discussed as accessories inferior to humans; therefore, in the following chapters this thesis try to analyze clothing from its materiality to unfold another side of this novel with the help of Gibson's affordance theory.



Chapter 2

Discipline and Subversion in Affordances of the Clothing

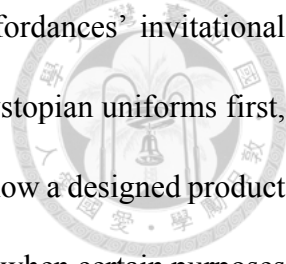
“There I sit in the chair, with the lights off, my red dress, hooked and buttoned.

You can think clearly only with your clothes on.”

Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*

As Cynthia Kuhn says clothing in literature is most commonly thought of as “facilitating symbolic purposes, deepening our understanding of character and theme” (2). However, in the quotation above, for Offred, we can see that clothing which exists prior to her thought affects her mental status. The clothing calms her down and only with it, she is able to think clearly. One of the explanation for this is that Offred doesn't have the right to decide when to put on or take off her clothes because she is just regarded as a “two legs” womb, and she feels worse every time after she has sex with the commander she serves. This quote is from a moment when she can finally put back her clothes on, and rest herself alone. Therefore, I claim there is a force created between the interaction of the clothing and its wearer, and the clothing actively participates in the relationship with its wearer with its affordance. In this chapter, I will further explain the affordance theory for exploring how clothing plays a key role in the interactions between different characters, and claims its own existence in the relationship, especially creating the fluidity of the power relation.

The affordance theory proposed by Gibson allows us to draw a picture of a dynamic

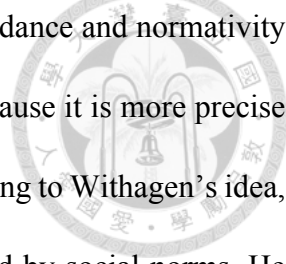


network between the clothing and the wearers. With the notion of affordances' invitational characters proposed by Rob Withagen, I focus on the analysis of the dystopian uniforms first, especially the bonnet, a white hat flanking the head of its wearer, to see how a designed product affects people's behaviors and whether this ability only exists in a thing when certain purposes are given. Furthermore, I apply Manuel Heras-Escribano's statement of the relationship between the normativity and affordance to examine the uniform's indoctrinating functions, and how the uniforms, when being put on and taken off, demonstrate the change of the power relations between the characters. Besides, I also propose some ideas to explain some critical clothing moments when the garments show their power and interact with their wearers by investigating the materiality of the clothing. Therefore, in the first section of this chapter, I will briefly introduce the affordance theory of these above-mentioned scholars and the ways they propose will be applied to examining my text. After that in the second section, there is a detail examination of the clothing in the novel.

Withagen's invitational characters of affordances illustrate that the ability of things triggers some corresponding behaviors of human beings. Different from Gibson's affordances which are just passive possibilities affording creatures to utilize, he points out that a designed "environment can prompt certain actions" (251), and people "sense the world's solicitations and response to their call all the time" (Dreyfus and Kelly 52). One of the example he gives in his 2012 research is the automatic door which invites people to walk into or stay out by the door's opening or closing. When a cup is designed with a handle, it is inviting people to hold it. He claims the designers' attention as invitational characters are embedded into the affordances when a thing or an environment is designed. And when we perceive a thing, we perceive the invitation, and it is possible to react accordingly. Furthermore, he also explores

the mutual force created between the interaction of an actor and a thing with invitational affordance. Even when a thing has this invitational affordance which can be perceived by actors, the thing may not always be used in a way that was designed to, and that is the moment when other possibilities are created.

The uniforms are obviously designed with certain intentions, and have their own effects on their wearers. According to the definition given by Nathan Joseph in *Uniforms and Nonuniforms*, a uniform is “viewed as a device to resolve certain dilemmas of complex organizations-namely, to define their boundaries, to assure that members will conform to their goals, and to eliminate conflicts in the status sets of their members” (29). Besides affecting people with special designs, I maintain that the invitational affordance of the uniforms in the interaction also comes from their materiality such as the texture of different cloths. When confined or guided by the uniforms, people can also take advantage of the feature of the uniforms to reach the goal they want, and the interaction between two creates some tension that should be read and interpreted. The whole story we read is a record under Offred’s self-censored. The narrator, Offred, as a repressed and controlled handmaid, rarely directly conveys her emotion and thought, but all these details can be seen through her clothing behaviors. The handmaids’ bonnets are good examples which are designed to confine their sight and to prevent the handmaids from seeing and being seen, so they are not allowed to adjust it. Those who want to live within the system would just get the implication from its design, and hide themselves behind, but it can also be used for the characters to reach certain purposes. Many times, Offred uses its unpenetrated ability to shun from the awkward moments when she has to look into the eyes of those who she doesn’t want to face or may have dangerous to have too much interaction with.



Heras-Escribano's discussion of the relationship between the affordance and normativity can help this thesis further to explore the idea behind the uniforms, because it is more precise to say the function of a uniform is to indoctrinate than to invite. Comparing to Withagen's idea, the interaction between a designed thing and certain behavior is guided by social norms. He thinks "One acts normatively when the action of that agent is subjected to and shaped by the normative feedback of a community" (93). Therefore, the most critical element to decide how to interact or how to use a thing depends on a person's perception of the normativity, and norm is about how to do something correctly as the expectation of the society, not about successfully reaching a goal or not, so it is impossible for the affordance exists inside a thing or come with a thing, because a thing may be able to trigger certain behaviors, but cannot make sure the corrections of the behavior.

He explains his notion through an example of a football team:

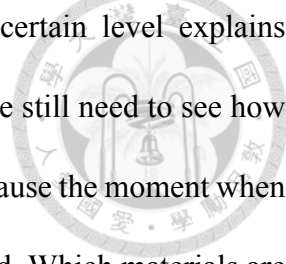
"When the league is already won before the ending of the season and the winning team aims to achieve more records, such as making one of their players the top scorer of the league, the coach tells the players that, if possible, they should pass the ball to the teammate who could become the top scorer. They deliberately avoid seizing the affordance of kickability, and they pass the ball to their teammate" (109)

He claims that only when agents possess a kind of practical rationality, they take into account the specific aspects of the situation in which they are immersed. Therefore, people perceive the affordance and normativity respectively. They are related but the normativity doesn't exist inside the affordance.

In light of this explanation, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, when people are assigned with certain identities and labeled by the uniforms, they then just behave conforming to the social

expectations of them because they consciously know the meaning of the clothing. When Moira, Offred's best friend who is also captured and forced to be a handmaid, tried to escape from Red Center, Moira takes away the uniform of an aunt, who trains and supervise them in the Red Center; therefore, she owns a kind of power that is perceived as a social norm and it is easier for her to get away. The perception of the power of the uniform can also explain the power relationship between different characters.

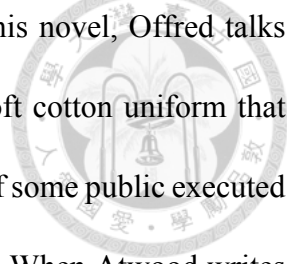
However, as I mention above when I explain Withagen's theory that the materiality is another affordance that participates in the relationship. Clothing creates a space where the social norms and the materiality of clothing meet. Therefore, I argue that in the case of *The Handmaid's Tale*, the normativity actually presents in the affordance of the clothing through both the materiality of the clothing and also the designers' attention; at the same time, the materiality of the clothing, especially the uniforms, is also subversively against the normativity and against human beings' willingness. To explain my idea, here I use the football example previously given by Heras-Escribano. The behavior of passing the ball to another teammate can be understood as a part of the player's perception of the social norm, but the materiality of the ball is ignored in this case. No matter how well trained a player can be good at shooting at a goal, the moment when he kicks the ball, the ball's flying trajectory is not only decided by the way he kicks it. The materiality of the ball is also involved in the motion majorly affecting the result, and the player cannot be sure if the ball always goes on the way he wants. The materiality of the ball is uncontrollable and irreducible by humans, and if the ball doesn't go on the way he wants, that's the moment we see things. This is what Bill Brown proposes in his Thing Theory that "we begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us" (4).



Both Heras-Escribano' and Withagen's affordance theory at a certain level explains several uniform-related actions taken by the characters in the novels, we still need to see how the materiality of the clothing works to affect the characters actively because the moment when designers finish their works, they cannot control how things will be used. Which materials are chosen to make a uniform may be decided by a designer but materiality is not given by the designer, like what Gibson claims "the affordance, being invariant, is always there to be perceived. An affordance is not bestowed upon an object by a need of an observer and his cat of perceiving it. The object offers what it does because it is what it is" (130). People perceive the affordance in a thing, interact with it and therefore take action. There may be an intention before they take an action but the process or the result may not be fully predicted or controlled since the materiality of things is always there providing many different possibilities, which is also stated in Gibson's original idea.

Atwood's full understanding of the clothing doesn't only play a critical role in the relationship between the characters, but also influences herself in her own writing. Clothing through its materiality claims its independence and autonomy. Withagen's theory overemphasizes people's intention, and neglect the thing itself. Any creations are still confined and affected by things' substance and physical properties, which is also some new materialists want people to pay attention to. Things passively exist but interact actively with people with their static powers. No matter how comprehensive a designer is, like Atwood who has already internalized the knowledge of clothing, as long as the moment a thing is created, the materiality of the things will be a part of the relationship between itself and its user.

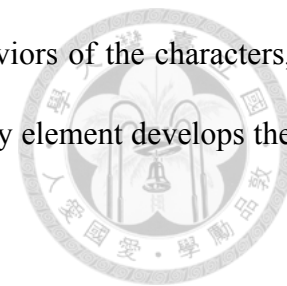
When Atwood depicts the uniforms, she gives the details of the texture of them. "[P]ure cotton, which is better than synthetics like the cheaper ones, though even so, when it's muggy,



in July and August, you sweat inside them...” (65). Many times, in this novel, Offred talks about cotton with ambivalent emotions because sometimes it is the soft cotton uniform that comforts her, sometimes it is the cotton cloth bags that cover the heads of some public executed criminals, and sometimes it is the cotton clothes worn by her daughter. When Atwood writes these garments, she frees and gives them their own lives with the sensory experiences of her familiarity with the materiality of the cloths. This kind of writing also makes clothing in *The Handmaid's Tale* create and become a space where the relationships between people are developed, not only with language and motions. Clothing in the novel provides some deeper meanings under the surface. In *The Social Life of Things*, Arjun Appadurai argues that “even though from a theoretical point of view human actors encode things with significance, from a methodological point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context (27)”. It is like Michelangelo who just freed David from a stone, Atwood also shows the vitality and power of clothes through her writing.

From Gibson's affordance theory to Heras-Escribano's discussion on normativity and affordances, and Withagen's derivative invitational affordances, we can see how clothing can be read and analyzed with this theory. Therefore, I suggest that the affordances of clothing have the normativity inside them given by both the materiality of the clothing and intentions of the designers, but at the same time, the affordances, through claiming its existence with its materiality, break through this limitation and fight against the normativity that endowed. In the following section, I demonstrate the affordance of the clothing through a close reading of the details between wearing and being worn, between wearers and clothing, to show how the clothing in this novel actively influences and shapes the relationship between people. The uniforms are the major focus for analysis in this chapter, since the materiality of them,

including the texture and the shape, is helpful to understand the behaviors of the characters, and also their subversion with it. I also reveal how the clothing as a key element develops the story and help to construct the whole network.



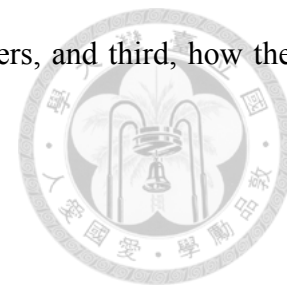
Affordance in the Clothing

The basic Female Body comes with the following accessories: garter belt, panty-girdle, crinoline, camisole, bustle, brassiere, stomacher, chemise, virgin zone, spike heels, nose ring, veil, kid gloves, fish-net stockings, fichu, bandeau, Merry Widow, weepers, chokers, barrettes, bangles, beads, lorgnette, feather boa, basic black, compact, Lycra stretch on-piece.

Margaret Atwood, "The Female Body"

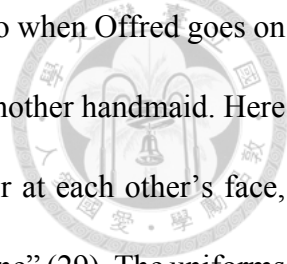
For Margaret Atwood, the relationship between women and their clothing is complicated. Clothing is a tool for them to communicate with society but also a device confining and labeling them. As Deborah Wilson mentions that dress is the cultural metaphor for the body, it is the material with which we "write" or "draw" a representation of our body into our cultural context (Wilson 6). Atwood had also been struggling as a teen for adorning herself with different attire, and therefore, the process of struggling with clothes choosing becomes a mean for her female characters to survive while facing all the odds. Offred is the one who struggles to survive under the indoctrination of the uniforms. This section has three discussions. First, I will present how Offred react to and survive under the limitation given by the uniform, second, how the uniforms

are interpreted to understand the power relations between the characters, and third, how the materiality of the clothing exhibit their power to affect people.



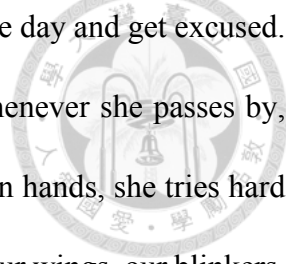
Discipline Function of the Uniform

I maintain that the uniforms interact with the protagonist with its discipline functions endowed by the government and its materiality. They do not only guide the protagonist's behaviors, but also actively participate in Offred's relationship with others, where tensions are formed between the characters. The bonnet which has been mentioned in the previous section is a good example. To prevent handmaids from seeing and being seen, each of them is required to wear a white bonnet flanking their face. Ironically, the bonnet is called "white wings," a phrase symbolizing freedom, but in their world, it is a constraint. The shape of the bonnet limits her sight into a very small range, and every time when she tries to look at something, the bonnet reminds her that her world is fragmented. "If I turn my head so that the white wings framing my face direct my vision towards it [mirror], I can see it as I go down the stairs, round, convex, and pier-glass, like the eye of a fish, and myself in it like a distorted shadow, a parody of something" (19). Feeling everything is turned funny when her perception is distorted, she has never again seen the world the way she did before. Everything she can see in her world is incomplete, and she cannot feel the emotion of the other either. "[T]he wings cover her face. I can see only a little of her forehead, and the pinkish tip of her nose" (37). It was the time when she meets another handmaid she used to know, but the bonnets stop them from having too much interaction, not to mention, having eye-contact.



All the handmaids are not allowed to be alone when they are out, so when Offred goes on her shopping tour for the food every day, she is assigned to walk with another handmaid. Here is how she depicts her shopping partner: “She reaches me and we peer at each other’s face, looking down the white tunnels of cloth that enclose us. She is the right one” (29). The uniforms make every one of them the same, but the bonnets isolate them and define the way they see this world. The affordances of the bonnets successfully weaken Offred, since she sometimes is not sure what she has really seen, having no idea where she is, and believing that she has no hope to escape. In the pre-Gilead time, the bonnet was a decoration for them, but now it means nothing more than controlling. The bonnet becomes the only way for handmaids to feel, to see or not to see the situation they are in. Less like Heras-Escribano’s idea that people follow the ways the society wants them to do, in this case, it is the shape of the bonnets designed to discipline them that prevents them from doing something and forces them to reach their targets, instead of just the normativity in the actors’ mind.

There is always a war between “seeing” and “not seeing” for these handmaids in their everyday life. Efrat Tseelon says: “Invisible as ignored and trivialized is powerless, but invisible as the source of the gaze is powerful. Similarly, visible as objectified is powerlessness, but visible as prominent and dominant is powerful” (Masque 68-69). A little freedom enjoyed by these handmaids is the right to choose the way they walk home, and sometimes they pass by a wall with some people get hanged to death because they are convicted of treason. Before the rule of the Republic of Gilead, Offred used to lead a normal American’s life with her husband and daughter. She loses both of them when the family is trying to escape from this country to Canada. All of them get captured, and as a woman who can get pregnant, she is assigned to be a handmaid after then, but she doesn’t know what happens to her husband after



their failed escape, so she keeps imagining that he might get arrested one day and get excused. Since her husband might be one of the people hanged on the wall, whenever she passes by, even with the rules stopping her from adjusting the bonnet with her own hands, she tries hard by moving her head and neck to fight for getting a wider sight. “Given our wings, our blinkers, it’s hard to look up, hard to get the full view, of the sky, of anything. But we can do it, a little at a time, a quick move of the head, up and down, to the side and back. We have learned to see the world in gasp” (40). The shape of the uniform participates actively to stop the characters from reaching her goal and reminds her the how worse the situation she is in. Although the uniforms are created by designers, once the uniforms finished by the designer, there is only the relation between clothing and wearers. The bonnets are designed for limiting the sight, but with the affordance, the protagonist starts to take advantage of her situation in response to the repression on her; thus, the affordance created “becomes a survivalist act” (Kuhn 2).

The uniform can be powerful with its physical traits, especially when all the uniforms are made to be in a certain shape for relative purposes. The first time when Offred brings up Nick, the driver who serves the same commander as she does, she takes advantage of the shape of the bonnet to shun from the staring from Nick (28). “The vestimentary frame possesses paradoxical powers: it makes the body visible and simultaneously renders it invisible” (Kuhn 42). The non-transparency of the cloth is the power of things as the one mentioned in Gibson’s theory “whereas a cloth curtain affords going through but not seeing through” (9). Here the uniform exhibits its existence through its materiality between different characters, and also represents the relation between Offred and Nick. Although they see each other almost every day, they never really see each other clearly, but leave some incomplete images in each other’s

eyes. Even later in the story, after they have sex for helping Offred to conceive, she cannot precisely describe this man and is confused with his images in her memory.

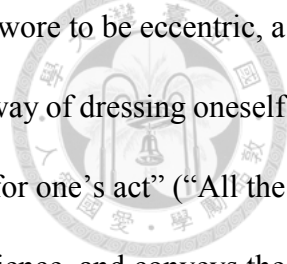
The bonnets are mentioned so many times to show how these handmaids react to the repression from the whole system, but the interaction between the bonnets and the wearers changes gradually when the materiality of them grants Offred the power to take advantage of them. To minimize the interaction between these handmaids, the bonnets are also an apparatus keeping them from talking to each other. However, “[W]e can talk. If you can call it talking, these clipped whispers, projected through the funnels of our white wings. It's more like a telegram, a verbal semaphore. Amputated speech” (211). Though they are not allowed to publicly chat with each other, whispering becomes the best way for them to pass some secrets. The bonnets cover their whispering and the moving lips, and creates a space for their privacy which shouldn't exist anymore. If through the bonnets is the only way they can interact with each other, then the limitation can be transformed into protection. Although the bonnets block out most of the handmaids' sight, since the color of the wings is white and they are slightly sheer, the wearers sometimes can tell things from the changing of the light and shadows on the white wings. As Offred finally gains the trust of another handmaid, Ofglen, she told Offred the password of an underground resistance organization. At the moment, Offred describes the scene in this way: “I can sense the blur of white as her wings move” (212). The bonnets connect and separate them at the same time, and with it, a blurry hope for Offred to feel and to grasp when she hears the information. From feeling tortured by all the constraints from the uniforms to the moment when Offred realizes how to utilize those things, she starts to be able to control her situation again through the affordance of the same uniforms.

The bonnets that used to disintegrate and weaken her become a tool when she knows how

to perceive it. Fighting against the limitation given by the uniforms is the only time we can see Offred's resistance demonstrated. Without reading the ways she interacts with the clothing, in the rest part of the novel, Offred has no obvious rebellious behaviors, and are relatively obedient to the oppression. Despite Offred's attempts to free her mind by recalling all the clothes worn in the past, she didn't do anything that directly goes against the rules. Even though she meets the commander Fred privately, and has sex with the driver Nick illegally, both of which are violations, those are required by the commander and his wife respectively, and she just follows their orders. All her real feelings and her subversion perform through her interaction with her clothes.

In a society where everyone has to wear a uniform, to put on a uniform means accepting to get into this system. The discipline function of the uniforms is more obvious when Offred is in the red center where women are trained to be handmaid. Comparing to other brutal physical punishments, forcing these women to put on the uniforms is the mildest way of discipline. Janine is another handmaid-to-be Offred met in the red center. For some unknown reasons, one day, she refuses to put on the uniform assigned to her. The behavior of refusing to get into the system is deadly. As Kuhn says, "These women are extremely aware of clothing's ability to speak, and they dress — or resist dressing — accordingly (16). She is trying to fight against the system in her own way; however, in the end, after being slapped, Janine gives in. Not because she is aware of the affordance of the clothes but the normativity which comes with it.

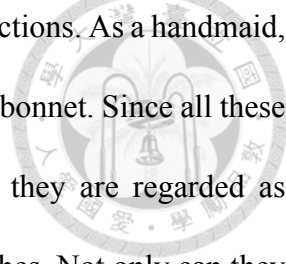
The same thing happens to Offred's best friend, Moira, who is one of the most interesting female characters in this book. Moira's clothes are always displayed with details in Atwood's writing. The first time she shows up in this book is in Offred's memory, and she is there with an image of a rebellious feminist. "Moira, sitting on the edge of my bed, legs crossed, ankle on



knee, in her purple overalls, one dangly earring, the gold fingernail she wore to be eccentric, a cigarette between her stubby yellow-ended fingers” (47). Although the way of dressing oneself is a personal choice, like Elizabeth Wilson says “clothes are the poster for one’s act” (“All the Rage” 33), it is the affordance of the things that interacts with their audience, and conveys the ideas behind these clothes worn by Moira, and defines her. At the moment when Moira goes into the red center, her clothes are telling her story. “She still had her old clothes on, jeans and a blue sweat shirt – her hair was short, she’d defied fashion as usual” (81). But it doesn’t last long, the uniforms as a discipline apparatus defeat her right after she gets punished. As Heras-Escribano’s explanation, people perceive a thing when they sense the normativity at the same time. The uniform is a tool to indoctrinate these women; however, at the moment it is not the uniforms that force the person to put them on, but they maybe will like the way they influence Offred.

The Uniforms and the Power

Besides conveying the situation of the characters, the clothing behavior has an important function to demonstrate the power relationship between each character, especially when it comes to who has the right to decide what and when can put on and take off the clothing. As Cynthia Kuhn says “[I]n *The Handmaid’s Tale*, where society is literally divided by a dress code. When such codes exist, vestimentary subversion usually follows” (18). Martha Dvorak elaborates the subversion through the color of the clothes by saying that the clothes’ colors of those rebellious characters like Moira wearing purple, a mixed color that blurs the line between handmaid’s red and those government leaders’ wives’ blue (Subverting Utopian 41). In the



novel, women wear uniforms in different colors marked for different functions. As a handmaid, Offred wears a red habit, a robe like the one worn by nuns, with a white bonnet. Since all these handmaids are assigned to bear children to the government leaders, they are regarded as properties, so almost all of their skin needs to be covered under the clothes. Not only can they be seen by others, but also, they are not allowed to feel themselves naked. “[I]n my nightgown, long-sleeved even in summer, to keep us from the temptations of our own flesh, to keep us from hugging ourselves, bare-armed” (201). As I mentioned in the previous chapter, the uniform is all about control for the government which deprives the right of what to wear and when to wear for everyone. When the long-sleeved nightgowns keep these handmaids from touching themselves, it conveys a message that even their bodies don’t belong to them.

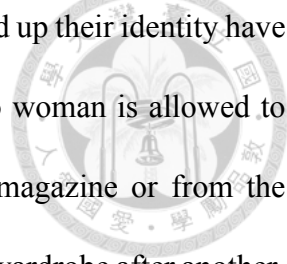
The first time when Offred shows up in front of the gate of the commander’s house and faces the commander’s wife, Serena, the only thing with Offred is her clothes (23), the only thing she owns by herself that can claim her own right. She doesn’t own her body, but she owns all kinds of uniforms that define her and weave her into the social system. Even though those uniforms are tools that are used to control her, every time when she is facing some difficulties, she starts to talk about her clothes, sometimes the ones she is wearing or the ones in her memory. The clothing becomes the only things she has and can identify herself with.

During the Ceremony, a ritualized sexual act between the commander and the handmaid for conceiving children with all household of people being around, Serena is always “in one of her best dresses, sky blue with embroidery in white along the edges of the veil: flowers and fretwork” (91). As a woman who is infertile, she has no choice but to accept this humiliating ritual seeing her husband having sex with another woman; therefore, that is the moment she needs to prove her value, even though she doesn’t need to take off her clothing in this occasion.

Wearing the best clothing is her strategy to claim her importance and her status. As a commander's wife, she also needs to wear the uniforms all the time, but she has the right to pick from many, and the right to decide when to put on and take off. As Heras-Escribano mentions, an action a person takes always includes a person's intellectual consideration of the normativity. Her best dress affords her to highlight her importance but still, she only can choose a dress to wear from all the "uniforms" she has. Contrasting to Offred's humiliating situation, Offred is forced to be partly nude and mated with someone she doesn't like.

Except for the Ceremony, the commander and the handmaid shouldn't even talk to each other, especially in private; however, the commander sends a message to summon Offred to his personal study through his driver Nick every time when his wife is not home or too busy to pay attention to him. The way Nick passes a signal to Offred is wearing his hat askew, a violated way for wearing the uniform implying the viola. After several times of the private meeting, when they are getting familiar with each other, the uniforms are not a thing that confines her that much as it did before. She is still asked to wear the uniform to meet him, but "no longer sit stiff-necked, straight-backed, feet regimented side by side on the floor, eyes at the salute... My red shoes are off, my legs tucked up underneath me on the chair, surrounded by a butress of a red skirt, true, but tucked nonetheless" (162). The casualty of the clothes is situationally created by both the clothes and the wearer. It is Offred's challenge to the commander presenting in the form of the clothes and it is also a territory where she tries to claim her right. So when he didn't say no to that, she thinks she has something on him.

The way the commander renders part of his right to Offred is also through clothes, not the real ones, but with the ones in some female fashion magazines which should have been destroyed. "[A] model on glossy paper, hair blown, neck scarfed, mouth lips ticked; the fall



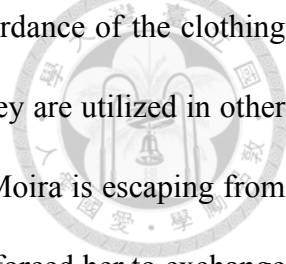
fashion” (164). All kinds of books or clothes that can help people to build up their identity have been all ruined during the overthrow of the previous regime. Since no woman is allowed to read in Gilead, for Offred, she can’t resist the temptation from the magazine or from the clothing images in it. “They suggested one adventure after another, one wardrobe after another, one improvement after another, one man after another. They suggested rejuvenation, pain overcome and transcended, endless love. The real promise in them was immortality” (165). Her desire for power transforms into a desire for the clothes in the magazine, those she once owned but were deprived of. “I don’t have those things anymore, the clothes and hair. I wonder what happened to all our things. Looted, dumped out, carried away. Confiscated” (74). Owing clothes as the personal property was the right Offred used to have but taken away later, and that was the moment when the commander shares a little bit of his power to Offred through the clothing in the magazines.

The turnover of the power relationship between them happens when the commander takes off his clothes. As I mentioned before, putting on and taking off the clothing is a right not every owns, especially the normativity always comes with the uniforms which define a person in this society. Although they’ve had sex many times, during the Ceremony, both of them are always well-dressed except having no underpants. Clothes that used to be orders and grant the superiority to the commander now becomes a thing which loosens the power structure between him and Offred, when he asks Offred to have sex with him in the Jezebels’, a secret prostitute club. “Will this be worse, to have him denuded, of all his cloth power? He’s down to the shirt; then, under it, sadly, a little belly. Wisps of hair... without his uniform he looks smaller, older, like something being dried.” (266) As one of the most powerful leaders in this regime, the commander always gives her a tough, serious and unapproachable image; however, all the

images actually only stay in his uniforms, so when he takes them off, part of him, especially his power, also fades away. From Heras-Escribano's perspective, we will see the power actually comes from the clothes because when a person puts on a garment, the others perceive both the affordance of it and the normativity – how the society see the garment.

The Materiality of the Clothing

One of the critical moments we can see Offred's subversion is in a scene when her shopping partner, Ofglen, and she are passing a guarded gate. Not having chances to meet strangers in their daily life, when she sees these the guardians, she tries to flirt with one of them. "I move my hips a little, feeling the full red skirt sway around me. It's like thumbing your nose from behind a fence or teasing a dog with a bone held out of reach, and I'm ashamed of myself for doing it, because none of this is the fault of these men, they're too young" (32). Obviously, she is venting her grievances by teasing the guardian, and it is the soft texture of the skirt that affords her movement and intention, and creates the effect she expected following her action, so this swaying provides a space accommodates a new possibility between the guardian and Offred. Heras-Escribano's normativity is how the society requires us to follow the norm, while the materiality of the clothes here lets Offred gains her power back to use it to go against the norm. The skirt was part of the relationship when it is able to be swayed and to help Offred to win back her right. After she played out what the skirt affords, she resumes her sense: "Then I find I'm not ashamed after all. I enjoy the power, power of a dog bone, passive but there. I hope they get hard at the sight of us and have to rub themselves against the painted barriers, surreptitiously (32)".



Besides this example, there are some other times, we see the affordance of the clothing when they function in a way which they are not designed for. When they are utilized in other ways, the materiality of the clothes goes back to our attention. When Moira is escaping from the red center, she jobbed a metal object into aunt Elizabeth's ribs and forced her to exchange her brown uniform with her. After that, she tears apart the clothes into strips and made them as a weapon to tie the aunt to a pole (258). Under a circumstance without too many things to use, it is the clothing that becomes an important tool which affords Moira to solve the problem and get out. When she leaves wearing a brown uniform, and the color comes with the power granted, and no one try to stop her since they think she is an aunt. It is the perception of the normativity which comes with the affordance in the uniform that proposed by Heras-Escribano, which is an ability Moira utilizes and to win back her right to revolt. The uniform's ability to be torn apart and becomes another shape enables Moira's escape. Following her escape, in another side of this dystopian world, we see a place where an underground resistance alliance exists.

However, sadly, no matter how hard Moira tries to get out of this whole system, she ends up giving in to it. The last time Offred meets Moira is when the commander secretly takes Offred to Jezebels' – a secret prostitute club for those high-ranking men in Gilead, and Moira yields to the oppression, wearing a revealing dress with much skin shown.

“She's dressed absurdly, in a black outfit of once-shiny satin that looks the worse for wear. It's strapless, wired from the inside, pushing up the breasts, but it doesn't quite fit Moira, it's too large, so that one breast is plumped out and the other one isn't. She's tugging absent-mindedly at the top, pulling it up. There's a wad of cotton attached to the back, I can see it as she half turns; it looks like a sanitary pad that's been popped like a piece of

popcorn. ... She has a black bowtie around her neck and is wearing black net stockings and black high heels. She always hated high heels” (250).

Moira works in Jezebel’s after she gets captured. In this chapter, both of them are wearing absurdly because when the Gilead starts to rule this country, they hold any activity called Manhattan Cleanup where they burn almost all the clothing from the past. Therefore, with not too much clothing left to this era, the dresses they are wearing here are not designed for this occasion. The commander gives Offred a purple garment which is transformed from a swim suit or a stage costume and now gets some sequins and feathers attached. Moira’s dress cannot be told what it was but is also one patched together from many. Since these clothes are not designed for this occasion, not to mention are suitable sizes for them, the uncomfortable feeling caused by the wired materials keeps reminding of them their own difficult situation and the struggles they are facing. When they finally find a chance to talk to each other inside a toilet and embrace each other, the wires of Moira’s bra prop up and dig into Offred’s chest. The garment of Moira hurts Offred both physically and mentally, since Offred has never thought brave as Moira is, she would surrender.



Chapter 3

Clothing into Metaphors

They(clothes) suggest an endless series of possibilities, extending like the reflections in two mirrors set facing one another, stretching on, replica after replica, to the vanishing point.

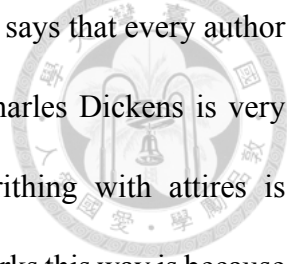
Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*

The endless series of possibilities of the clothes in *The Handmaid's Tale* can be explored through Atwood's special writing skill. As Jessica Munns calls clothing as "a series of cultural contradictions" (26), clothing definitely needs ongoing interpretation. I, therefore, maintain that Atwood consciously regards clothing as a writing tool, making it a kind of metaphor to evoke common sensory experiences. Same as the traditional metaphors, one thing is used to compare with the other for the readers to understand a new concept easier. What makes Atwood's metaphors different is the vehicles Atwood uses in the novel often are the clothing. It is different from other authors' writing because Atwood always fabricates many different sensory experiences of the clothing into her words, creating a vivid picture. In this chapter, I discuss how Atwood takes clothes as a metaphor with its affordance, and to explain the affordance in the writing, I introduce the idea of literary affordance proposed by Terence Cave. After a brief introduction to Cave's theory, I provide my supplement of literary affordance to understand the clothing in Atwood's writing, which is followed by my analysis of the clothing with close reading. To show the clothes function as a writing tool, I demonstrate them with two

functions — one is about clothes' characterization functions, and the other one is about their function of expressing the narrator's emotion through the clothes in the memory.

Same as the previous chapter, clothes are the key elements for us to understand the relationship between characters, but there is also a big different between the discussion in these two chapters. In chapter two, I explore the affordance of the clothes with their materiality, especially their texture, shape, and design, to understand the tactile feeling they give people and how they actively affect people. On the contrary, most clothing discussed in this chapter, as metaphors don't exist physically but only stays in characters' cognition; however, they are no less powerful than those physical ones, because the sensory experiences people have while they interact with clothes sometimes connect readers' feeling with characters'. When I say those clothes only stay in people's minds, there are two major kinds, one is the clothes which carry shared ideas imagined by both the readers and the writer, so Atwood use them to denote a feeling of a person gives; another one the clothing described and pictured in character's memory with given details, and these memories are combined with two kinds of emotions, the narrator's longing and trauma. Though functioning in different ways, they will all be scrutinized respectively.

Using clothes as metaphors is common in Margaret Atwood's writing. In Atwood's *Robber Bride*, she says "That was the thing about sins — they could dress up, they could disguise themselves so you hardly knew them" (89). According to the definition of metaphor given by a rhetorician Ivor Armstrong Richard in his work *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, "metaphor has two parts: the tenor and the vehicle. The tenor is the subject to which attributes are ascribed. The vehicle is the object whose attributes are borrowed" (37). The vehicles usually are the things that writers focus the most, like what Atwood mentions in one of her



interviews with Rosie Goldsmith about her clothing in writing. Atwood says that every author filters out certain things which they pay attention to; for example, Charles Dickens is very interested in furniture as she likes clothing (33:42). Therefore, writhing with attires is something very natural and instinctive to her. Being able to create her works this way is because of her proficiency and great understanding of the clothes making. Atwood has already internalized the knowledge of weaving clothes and fabricating stories. Cynthia Kuhn says these two things essentially are similar (Self-Fashion 17). What's more, the way she utilizes clothes creates an imagination space that accommodates all kinds of possibilities, the sensory experiences of clothing vary from people to people. In the same interview mentioned above, Atwood states that she enjoys the differences in her readers' imagination of the clothes she creates and also encourages people to do that. The color of the handmaids' uniform in the 2017 TV version is different from the one she planned at the beginning which was supposed to be as dark as blood, but she still appreciates the costume designers' work.

To examine the “endless series of possibilities” of the clothing in Atwood's works, I refer to Terence Cave's literary affordance. There are two important ideas he brings up are related to my thesis; one is that he claims affordance is like a platform, which allows another affordance to develop on, and the other one is the idea of interbreeding two different affordances creating all kinds of possibilities and great dynamics. First, he argues that language is a kind of tool for people to communicate, so it is like an “extended mind” (6) of creatures, and since it is a tool, it should have affordances. Literature, metaphors, and genres are also regarded as tools that carry and convey people's ideas, so they all have affordances. Second, he describes affordance as a platform, “empowering affordance, allowing the development of secondary language-based affordances, artefacts or instruments made out of language, such as

metaphors, literary genres, poetic and narrative forms, and individual literary works” (11). When many affordances as platforms can be piled up together, they become an ecology “in which individual things collectively form a complex network of reciprocal relations” (3). Third, he maintains that literary works are attractive when audiences or readers “are stimulated by defamiliarization⁶” in a familiar context, and this defamiliarization “often comes where two or more generic affordances ‘interbreed,’ disturbing established patterns, and creating an effect, precisely, disturbance” (12).

With his statements, I further propose, Atwood’s clothing is an interbred product of the metaphors and the physical traits of the cloths, so the clothing in Atwood’s writing creates an unfamiliarity upon shared familiar clothing sensory experiences. At the same time, we can also understand the characters’ memory as an affordance layered on literature, and view Atwood’s clothes writing as another affordance layered on the memory, so they form a network of reciprocal, where Atwood’s writing enriches the usage of those memories, and the idea of memories can be interpreted through Atwood’s clothing. Also in this network, many new possibilities can be generated, which corresponds to Atwood’s encouragement to her readers for breaking the limitation of her writing to have their own images of the clothing in her works. Sator Resautus says “Language is called the garment of thought: however, it should rather be, the flesh garment, the body, of thought. I said that imagination wove this flesh-garment; and does not she” (127)?

After all, affordances are the ways that material things act in social relationships (46 Nagy). To conclude, with the literary affordance I explained here, I separate my reading into

⁶ Defamiliarization is the artistic technique of presenting to audience common things in an unfamiliar or strange way in order to enhance perception of the familiar. According to the Russian formalists who coined the term, it is the central concept of art and poetry.

two parts in the following two sections. On the same direction with my thesis statement that the clothing actively participates in the relationship between characters, the following section is that Atwood uses clothing as a metaphor with its interbred affordance to capture the image of certain characters, and the one after talks about the memories woven by the clothing.

Clothing as Metaphors: characterization

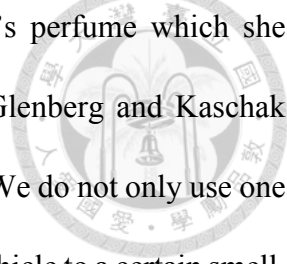
Without a god who plays tricks, you don't have a novel, you don't have a story

Margaret Atwood, *Two Solicitudes*

Weaving is like a way of telling a story. Barbara Hill Rigney states that's "In all literatures, particularly those written by women and particularly those written by Atwood, the image of the women as fabricator, seamstress, weaver, spider becomes one with the image of the tale-teller, writer" ("Alias Atwood" 158). Atwood exhibits her close relationship with clothing in her works in many ways, in this section, we will see how clothing capture the image of a person or convey this person's feeling, and also how clothing exists and acts to demonstrate the relationship between two characters.

As I already explained, all the things carrying thoughts can be viewed as tools with affordances, and affordances are viewed as platforms which can be piled up to be understood as a whole ecology, the sensory experiences of clothing gives are also affordances develop on the clothing. During the Ceremony⁷, when Offred lying on the bed tangling with the

⁷ The formal ritual where the intercourse for conceiving baby happen between the ruling class men (the commanders or angels) of Gilead and the handmaids. Following the instruction in the Book of Genesis (29:29),



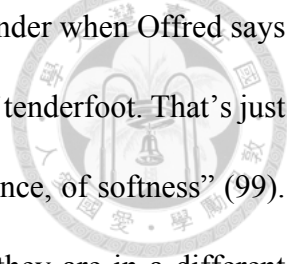
commander's wife, she has no choice but to be soaked in the wife's perfume which she describes as "white cotton socks and white cotton petticoats" (90). Glenberg and Kaschak proposed that language creates a corresponding image in our mind (3). We do not only use one smell to imagine another one; here in this novel, clothing becomes the vehicle to a certain smell, which conveys a whole picture for the readers, as Cave once describes that the successful affordances are the ones that enable us to grasp multiple phenomena as packages, or as integrated wholes (5). Under this circumstance, the smell of the wife, a white pure cotton socks which Offred thinks is supposed to belong to young girls, demonstrates the wife's desire of creating a young and innocent image, fighting against her aging body and also fighting against the handmaid who steals her man. Another innocent meaning of the white cotton socks comparing the degrading thing happening to Offred also an analogy for the contrast between them, as Atwood mentioned in her interview with Goldsmith that "Red (the color of handmaid's uniform) is Mary Magdalene, blue (the color of wife's uniform) is Virgin Mary" (38:40-39:10). The smell of her perfume even makes Offred ill, which implies the hostile relationship between these two women who share the same man.

Applying the smell as a metaphor in another occasion, Atwood depicts Offred's uncomfortable feeling of having sex with these ruling class men. "At least he's an improvement on the previous one, who smelled like a church cloakroom in the rain" (106). Cave says that language "is mapped onto the way we perceive the world at a quite fundamental level" but it also confines our ways to express things. When people's experiences are gained through five senses, clothing, which is usually perceived through vision, as metaphors, get many other possibilities. The smells of the clothing, not an extremely stinky smell or a fragrant one, but

The intercourse happens when the wife Rachel has her body tangled with her maid Bilhah, and so do the handmaid and the commander's wife.

just a normal smell of many different kinds of clothing, are applied to construct the image of the characters. Though the one here is not exactly the smell of the clothing, the smell of a closet whose image is related to constraining, molding, aging and heavy, reflecting the image of the person and also the relation between Offred and her previously served commander.

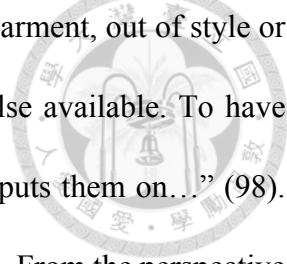
Besides using the smelling of clothing to shape the image of some characters, clothing is also important with its tactile feeling to present the relationship between the characters. Offred has sex with two men in this book, one is the commander Fred she serves, and the other one is Nick, the commander's driver. She is asked to have sex with Nick by the commander's wife because she wants to raise Offred's possibilities of conceiving babies. Instead of feeling being forced, Offred is excited to have sex with Nick for it gives her a feeling of violating the repressive system she is under, but she doesn't directly describe her true emotion with the words. This emotion can be interpreted when she describes the subtle interaction between them through their shoes. That is a few minutes before the Ceremony, when they are surrounded by everyone in the house, and Nick tries to have physical contact with Offred under her skirt secretly, so he touches her with his boots. The moment when "[T]he tips of his boot is touching my foot...two shapes of leather, I feel my shoes soften, blood flows into it, it grows warm, it becomes a skin" (91). The leather shoes have been brought up several times in this novel, and it is described as something soft only once when she is with Nick. The soften leather gives Offred a comfort and she is crying for having more physical contact with him in the later part of the story. The same thing can be interpreted or understood in totally different ways, as affordances always denote endless possibilities. In contrast to the situation between Nick and Offred, another interaction through shoes, in the one between the commander and Offred, are full of distance and indifference.



Shoes are used as metaphors to describe the attitude of the commander when Offred says “[H]e’s like a leather boot, hard on the outside, giving shape to a pulp of tenderfoot. That’s just a wish. I’ve been watching him for some time and he’s given no evidence, of softness” (99). Shoes with details are mentioned many times in the book and when they are in a different relationship, they function in different ways. Different from the feeling Offred have with the leather-made shoes of Nicks, she can only use “hard” to depict her feeling while interacting with the commander. Through this tactile feel of the shoes, Atwood shapes a strong image of the commander. On the way when Offred is secretly taken to Jezebel’s⁸, the commander asked her to get down onto the floor of the car so the guards at the gateway wouldn’t see her. That is another moment when she really touches and feels the commander’s shoes. “[M]y forehead is against his shoes. I have never been this close to his shoes before. They feel hard, unwinking, like the shells of beetles: black, polished, inscrutable. They seem to have nothing to do with feet” (245). Again, with the shoes, we sense that the commander is unapproachable. The commander as a man with the great power is a strong and unshakable existence, so weak as Offred is that she’s never even tried to refuse any demands from him even though she is unwilling to. As a metaphor, shoes here are the vehicle for Atwood’s readers to get closer to Offred’s mixture feeling with the image of the shoes, and for her readers to experience the tension in these two relationships.

Putting on and taking off clothing are interpreted about the power relation in the last chapter, and again here in this chapter, wearing clothing is also an interesting topic, which is more like a euphemistic expression for having sex. In one of the Ceremonies, Offred uses

⁸ Jezebel’s is a secret prostitute club where women serve the ruling class in the Republic of Gilead. Since all the handmaids are required to go nowhere, the commander takes Offred to this place both for himself and for pleasing her.



clothing as a metaphor to talk about the commander. “As if he were a garment, out of style or shoddy, which must nevertheless be put on because there’s nothing else available. To have them putting him on, trying him on, trying him out, while he himself puts them on...” (98). “Them” here mean all the handmaids the commander might have before. From the perspective of Offred, the process of having sex with the commander is like wearing him as a cloth. No matter it is he who tries those women on, or those women try him on, the wearing process is used to connect the experience of having sex. At the same time, Atwood’s words which shape an image of a shoddy and out of style present not only Offred’s unbearable feeling but also a clear picture of an old man who is losing vitality. Elizabeth Wilson suggests that “dress, which is an extension of the body yet not quite part of it, not only links that body to the social world, but also more clearly separates the two;” thus, dress behaviors can be unsettling since “clothing marks an unclear boundary ambiguously, and unclear boundaries disturb us” (Adorned in Dreams 2-3). Clothing here plays a role of a necessary connecting between these two people, since they must have sex in this ritual with almost all their clothing on but the ways the clothing is described also create an awkward feeling and eerie atmosphere when this ritual is carried out as the handmaid’s body tangled with the wife’s and they are surrounded and watched by everyone in the house.

Another time when wearing clothing is utilized to represent a relationship happens when Offred recalls the dating behaviors in the past when everyone “tries women or men on” to decide to get into a serious relationship or not. When a person has the chance to choose his or her clothing, which means they own their basic human right, and choosing clothing here also suggests choosing a partner. The moment when she is thinking of the description of “trying women or men,” she was staying in a hotel room waiting to have sex with her husband, Luke,

who, at that time, hadn't got married to her, and who was someone else's husband. Therefore, when she was talking about trying on women or men, those words carry vibes of impetus and excitement at that time, since that was the time she was trying to steal a man from another moment.

The last kind of wearing is different from the ones which have been mentioned. Under the ruling of the Republic of Gilead, Offred has never even once revealed her true name, which she owned before but has gone with the painful memory of losing her daughter. She still tries to find her name back by saying "I'm wearing my shining name" (94). Kuhn points out that Atwood's characters demonstrate how clothing is a fluid boundary that can both celebrate and complicate the internal world of the character (28). To save the name for herself is a way for Offred to protect her own ego. As a never revealed information, it is like a cloth that will never be taken off, and will keep covering her body. Name is like language affordances that let a person wear to get into this society, but "dress is the frontier between the self and the not-self" (Adorned in Dream 3). There is a conflict for her because Offred is both wearing her past identifies, her old name, and her new handmaid's uniform. She must carry an ambivalent feeling while choosing her identity between the one existing in the good old days and the one she has now. The struggle bothers her so much so Offred says "thinking can hurt your chances, and I intend to last." Between wearing a cloth and wearing words, Atwood plays tricks with words again.

Clothing as metaphors functioning many ways here to describe people, to present the relationship, and to reveal the situation of the narrator self. Instead of directly sharing her true feeling, lots of narrator's emotions hide underneath the behaviors of the clothing, and I think there are two reasons; for one, hiding the feeling without expressing them create a repressive

atmosphere in the whole novel and also shape the image of a depressed and scared woman. For another, Atwood can exert her writing power with one of the most familiar tools to create her work.



Clothing as Metaphors: Memory

I see his clothes in my mind, not his face.

Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*

In this section, the focus will be on the clothing in Offred's memory and imagination, and those garments in her memory are also separated into two parts, one representing her longing, and the other carrying her trauma. In her memory of longing, she recalls the shirt, the pajama, the suits that were worn by her family and attempts to keep them in her memory longer with these invariant things or try to capture the pleasure moment. While the memory of trauma is about some unprocessed emotions that she can't go through again that she can only remember those things with the form of the clothing. I claim it was the affordance, or the ability of these clothing supports her under the great pressure she suffers in this dystopian world, so she turns to soothe herself with the imaging the clothes which might be worn by her family now. One of Cave's literary affordances is the interbred affordance. In the previous section, the interbred affordance is the combination of the words and clothes, and in the section, we can read the interbred affordance as the combination of the tactile feeling in the protagonist's memory and

her emotions, which transformed and presented as her longing and trauma.

Being separated from her family, the greatest desire of Offred is to see them again. Offred's memory of her husband, daughter, best friend Moira, and her mother are all depicted with the details of the clothing they were wearing. The images of her husband in specific clothes complete Offred's memory and creates a space for her to escape into and to tranquilize herself. When she talks about her husband, her memories consist of some fragmental images of her husband's and her own clothes: she remembers the long green surgical gown and white mask he wore in the hospital when she was giving birth to their daughter and feeling extremely fragile (136). The color green and white mixture with both of their cheerful feeling of having their first baby and also present the meaning of support. She recalls the night, wearing bathrobes and nightcaps, she and her husband together watched the late-night news in which the commander's wife, Serena, was in, (55). In this paragraph, Offred only describes the difference of Serena in the past and now, but I think it is more reasonable that she is using Serena's existence to build a connection between her present horrible life and her sweet past, with a person she dislikes and a TV program she watched with someone she loves. The soft and comfortable feelings of the pajama are not enough for her to keep her memory, which is gradually fading away, and she cannot be sure if those were true or just in her fantasy, so desperately, she needs the existence of someone both in her current life and her past.

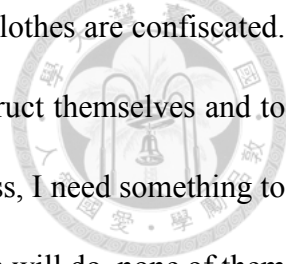
Offred is still able to picture the apparel of her husbands' but his face starts getting blurring and fading in her mind while the memories of the clothing are getting clearer. "I can see his clothes in my mind, bright as a lithograph or a full-color advertisement, from an ancient magazine, though not his face, not so well" (114). Comparing to his variant facial expression, she thinks the invariant clothing is something more reliable for her to keep her husband there

in her memory forever. I believe that was because the materiality of the clothing or her affection attached to those clothes is stable enough, so she can use some constant “things” to carry her memory; however, her husband, who she has already lost also becomes part of her trauma.

They planned an escaping before Gilead control the whole country but this family failed when they were crossing the border due to the problem of the fake passport. After being separated from her husband, she gets no information from him and has heard nothing about him anymore. To soothe herself, the thing she does is to imagine what he might be wearing now. “Does he have shoes? I picture the clothes. It comforts me to dress him warmly” (115). Clothing affords Offred to build an imagined mind connection with her husband, especially when she pictures him wearing the clothes she bought for him, and imagines the tactile feel of the clothing she used to have when they were embracing together — the feeling of leaning against the wool of his sweater (202).

Clothing carries more than her memories, representing her longing of going back to old-time and reuniting with her family. Clothing becomes a necessary tool that affords her to memorize another person, as she says she can only recall the interaction with her husband by clothing. She hopes to have her husband there, when she is changing clothing, even in a fight (210). Her relationships with others are built up during every cloth put on and taken off, and clothing as a literary affordance is the place where her mind exists. Affordances are not simply the social rules of the game. They “reflect the possible relationship among actors and object” (Nagy 4). In the novel, we don’t see the real situation of her husband, but when the clothing is utilized again and again, we realized that having clothing is a feeling of owning, keep her memory, claiming her own right.

Her desire of going back to the old time also demonstrated with her memory of her own



clothes. She feels that she is incomplete and shattered when all of her clothes are confiscated. Owning clothing is a common way for Atwood's protagonist to construct themselves and to feel secure. Therefore, in one of Offred's dream, she says "I need a dress, I need something to wear. I pull out dresses, black, blue, purple, jackets, skirts; none of them will do, none of them even fits, they're too big or too small" (84). With the clothes, there is an identity of herself, but through the whole story, only in the memory Offred had been free. Her emotion in memory is also attached to the clothes she used to wear. Before she married to Luke, she once was his mistress, and only met him at a hotel room waiting for him coming to her from his wife. The waiting was anxious but she can remember what she wore, each blouse, each scarf (60)". Clothing bears both her memory and emotion.

Another function of the clothing in her memory is for her unprocessed emotion of losing her daughter. On her way escaping with her family, Offred depicts every detail every about the shoes they wore – the shape, the color, the shoelace and the feeling of her feet. The boots she wore brought pains to her feet but also brought her hope to escape. The feeling of tying shoelaces for her daughter is still left on her hands, the shape and colors of her sneaker are still so clear – the laces of the sneakers had a design of hearts on them, red, purple, pink, and yellow (95), but she has already lost her daughter. The pain of losing her daughter is too heavy for her to go through again so she can only have all her emotions attached to the clothing in the scene. The memory bothers Offred so much for it keeps reminding her how awful her current situation is, but it also is the only thing that can comfort her for keeping alive, since she still keeps a hope to reunite with her family.

By utilizing all the sensory experiences about the clothing to build up Offred's affection to people around her, Atwood believes that there is an interdependency between people's

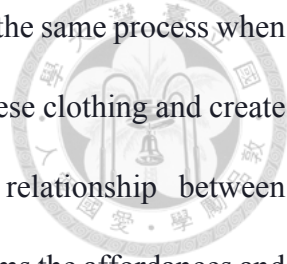
feelings to others and to their clothing, which makes clothing becomes essential for her writing. As a commodity, clothing is a thing for everyone must access to in their everyday life, so Atwood's detailed depiction of clothing carries an affordance as a space for the imagination, and is also an interbreed to resonate with her readers. No matter through the materiality of clothing I mentioned in the previous chapter or a shared image, clothing demonstrates "a shared understanding of cultural codes (Kuhn 9)", and solidify the reading experiences.



Conclusion

As an iconic novel, *The Handmaid's Tale* is influential even after published after over many decades, since it provides endless possibilities to be explored. This thesis analyzes the clothing in the novel from a perspective of the materialist reading to explore the relationship between the characters and their clothes, especially the influence of the garments on the protagonists, to see how materials work as tools to facilitate Atwood's writing. To enrich one's writing with things in stories is a common skill for most writers; however, it is hard to find someone else who does a better job of weaving the clothing and the story together so well as Atwood does, because she has great passion to clothing and talent in writing. In the first chapter, I discuss her love for clothing and how much she is inspired by it. In Atwood's history with the clothing and writing clothing, we see Atwood realizes that women's appearance and their identities are inseparable. Combining her own experiences of struggling with the dresses choices while growing up, she transforms the complexity of the relationship between the garments and women into a survival kit for most of her female protagonists facing different odds. Having clothing as a writing material is possible for her because of her mastery of the clothes making, sensitivity to the fashion and careful observation of life, the combination of which makes Atwood's use of clothing writing potent and interesting.

In chapter two, to explore the possibilities of the uniforms, I introduce Withagen's invitational characters of the affordances, which says that things can be designed to invite or trigger certain behaviors. As designed products of the totalitarian government in a dystopian world, the uniforms have the indoctrinating functions. With certain shapes, colors or texture,



the uniforms limit or constrain some of the characters' behaviors, but in the same process when the characters perceive the abilities of the clothing, they interact with these clothing and create many possibilities together. Heras-Escribano's discussion of the relationship between normativity provides us another perspective to read the clothing. He claims the affordances and normatively are related to each other, but don't belong to each other. The characters perceive that affordances, and at the same time, bear the normativity in their minds, so we see under certain social contexts, the possibilities of the uniform behaviors can be used to interpret the power relationship between the characters. The uniforms are the ones that grant the character's power to interact with others. Besides, analyzing clothing with these theories, I also explain how clothing affects their wearers' movements and behaviors with the ability of the materiality, and creates an affordance together with their wearers'.

In chapter 3, I use the literary affordances proposed by Terence Cave to explore Atwood's special writing with clothes. The affordance in this chapter is quite different from the one we talked about in the previous chapter but this notion is also derived from Gibson's theory frame. Cave theorizes the affordances of many literary tools, and claims literature, genres, and metaphors are all affordances that can be perceived and used by human beings. Inspired by his idea, I argue the clothing is another affordance functioning as metaphorical vehicles in Atwood's work. I also prove that what makes her writing special is that she uses the shared sensory experience of the clothing including textile feeling and olfactory sensation to build hybrid metaphors.

Since clothing is a linguistic metaphor carrying materiality of clothes, Atwood combines the images of them with the protagonist's memory. Therefore, I demonstrate how garments become the most important tools for the protagonist to keep her memory or convey her emotion.

Atwood's writing includes the detailed physical traits of the clothing, so the clothing here becomes both the text and also the textile, participating in the discourse, making her writing process as fabricating a cloth. Whichever way, the protagonist's emotions are woven into her clothing behavior. It is hoped that the thesis through the exploring of the garments in this novel can provide an insight into Atwood's writing with clothing.

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