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Anamorphosis: Symbolic Orders in *The Handmaid's Tale*

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Abstract

Margaret Atwood's most distinguishing novel is *The Handmaid's tale*. The novel has two narrators. First, the story is told in the first person through the eyes of a protagonist and ostensible narrator called Offred. Atwood describes the course of Offred's daily life under the oppressive regime of a patriarchal theocracy governed by religious fundamentalists. Second, the entire meaning of Offred's story is altered by the thirteen-page appendix 'Historical notes on *The Handmaid's Tale*' narrated by Professor Pieixoto. He shocks and disorients the reader who encounters it after having spent nearly 300 affecting pages with Offred and her narration. In this regard, two possible worlds are constructed in *The Handmaid's Tale* as the results of Offred's narration and Pieixoto's narration. This paper aims to study these two worlds from the viewpoint of Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek. Following Lacan, Žižek argues that fantasy provides a framework through which we see reality. They are anamorphic so that they presuppose a point of view, denying us an objective account of the world. Accordingly, there are two anamorphic symbolic orders, or two anamorphic levels, in the novel: the first phase of anamorphic perspective attributes to the handmaids' fantasy and the second phase relates to readers of the novel.

Key Terms: *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood, Žižek, Anamorphosis, Fantasy, symbolic order.

Introduction

With the inception of deconstruction in Jacques Derrida's poststructural view of the world in the mid-1960s modern understanding of the world challenged and turned on its head by postmodernism (Bressler, p. 99). Postmodernism defines a worldview that rejects the possibility of empirical or valid universal description and highlights the existence of different worldviews and concepts of reality. While we are on the subject a literary work as a comprehensive world, it seems reasonable as Atwood argues, "Novels are not slogans, if I wanted to say just one thing I would hire a billboard. If I wanted to say just one thing to one person, I would write a letter. Novels are something else. They are not just political messages. I'm sure we all know this, but when it's a book like this you have to keep on saying it." (Rothstein, p. 6). In this regard, Atwood paves ways for the possibility of multiple interpretations of her novels.

Margaret Atwood's most distinguishing novel is *The Handmaid's tale*. Set in a future in the Republic of Gilead, a country formed within the borders of what was formerly the United States of America, the novel consists of two narrative layers. The story is told in the first person by Offred. She is one of a class of individuals kept as handmaids for reproductive purposes by the ruling class in an era of declining births. Through the eyes of protagonist and ostensible narrator, Atwood "describes the course of her daily existence under the oppressive regime of a patriarchal theocracy governed by religious fundamentalists" (Porfert, p.1). In this regard, the novel "explores an alternate reality, which provides Atwood the space to explore issues of humanity while still remaining removed and keeping a broader perspective in relation to the current reality" (Guthrie, p. 28). While the reader understands Offred's story has an audience, "the entire meaning of Offred's story is altered by the thirteen-page appendix '*Historical notes on The Handmaid's Tale*'" (Shaffer, p. 152). The appendix is a "transcription of a Symposium on Gileadean Studies written some time in the distant future" the keynote speaker, Professor Pieixoto, "shocks and disorients the reader who encounters it after having spent nearly 300 affecting pages with Offred and her narrative" (Howell, 328). In *Historical Notes*, Pieixoto rereads Offred's story according to his own "prejudices and his suspense of moral judgment in studying

Gilead during the conference” (Michael, p. 166). Consequently, there are two possible symbolic orders, and two different systems of beliefs, in *The Handmaid’s Tale* emerging from Offred’s narration and Pieixoto’s narration.

There are several notable analyses of this novel. As a challenge that the novel handily meets, Glenn Deer observes that *The Handmaid’s Tale* tries to “portray the mechanisms of oppression as credible enough, as sufficiently powerful and seductive, to represent a believable evil, not an irrelevant or farfetched one” (Deer, 1992, p. 215). The novel represents Atwood’s thematic concerns, her scrutiny of relations between men and women, her engagement with the question of Canadian national identity, her ecological interests and increasingly urgent warnings about global pollution, her wider humanitarian concerns with basic human rights and their infringement by institutional oppression (Tandon & Chandra, p. 18). Considering the authoritative voice of Offred as a victim in his analysis of power paradoxes, Glenn Deer suggests that “Atwood’s narrator in this novel does not speak entirely in the voice of the victim, the writer who pleads ‘Mayday’; rather, she speaks in the skilled voice of the rhetorician and the fabulator who is purposefully telling a story” (Deer, 1994, p. 117).

All of these critical focuses are important, but they have missed to study separately the two possible symbolic orders constructed as the result of Offred’s narration and Pieixoto’s narration. In order to cover this lack, this study refers to the ideas of Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek. Žižek is a “highly influential figure in social theory, continental philosophy, cinema studies, literary and cultural studies. He is rightly celebrated for his introductions to the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, and his use of Lacanian psychoanalysis to interpret popular culture” (Sharpe & Baucher, p. 1). Thus, Žižek’s works are aligned resolutely with the thought of the psychoanalytic master, Jacques Lacan (Davis, p. 108). Following Lacan, he argues that fantasy provides a framework through which we see reality. They are anamorphic¹ so that they presuppose a point of view, denying us an objective account of the world. Following Slavoj Žižek, this research examines the notions of anamorphosis and fantasy on Margaret Atwood’s masterpiece *The Handmaid’s Tale* in an attempt to explain two anamorphic levels, or layers, in the novel. The first

¹ In this regard, Žižek uses two words, anamorphic and anamorphicotic. The word anamorphic refers to the condition created due to anamorphosis and anamorphicotic describes an adjective for the doer of anamorphosis.

phase of anamorphic perspective attributes to the handmaids' fantasy and the second phase relates to readers of the novel.

Anamorphosis: An Ideology in Post-ideological Age

It seems clear that, in the postmodern world, it is no longer useful to divide our experience into the levels of idea, matter and representation. This means that any notion of ideology in the sense of a differentiated sphere of ideas must be abandoned (Hawkes, 176). Many scholars claim that we are living in a post-ideological age, in which all encompassing redemptive ideologies have failed (Bell, D. 393). Denying the objective account of the world, Žižek believes although there are multiple interpretations of the world, we do not live in a post-ideological age. It is only a post-ideological age from the point of view of capitalism because it no longer has to compare itself with communism. From the point of view of communism, the current age of capitalist domination is thoroughly ideological (Myers, 77).

Lacanian psychoanalysis paves the way for Žižek to say that we still are living in an ideological society. In this regard, he uses three-part model of the human psyche: imaginary, symbolic, and Real. Lacan argues in imaginary order, a subject sees himself in a mirror or metaphorically in mother's image, which enables him to perceive images that have discrete boundaries. The scope of symbolic order includes everything from language to law, containing all the social structures. Therefore, symbolic order forms a good part of what we usually call reality. Since it is the impersonal framework of society, we take our place in the field as part of human beings' community. The third stage for Lacan is the Real order. Not only opposed to the imaginary, the Real is also beyond the symbolic. While the symbolic is constituted in terms of oppositions (i.e. presence/absence), there is no absence in the Real. The Real is outside language and resists symbolization absolutely. The only non-ideological position available is, in fact, in the Real-the Real of the antagonism (Lacan, 1998). For Žižek, "the Real is therefore simultaneously both the hard, impenetrable kernel resisting symbolization and a pure chimerical entity which has in itself no ontological consistency" (Žižek, 1995 a, p. 169). While the Real order has no ontological consistency, the symbolic order is inconsistent or structured around a gap. Žižek discusses when the body enters the field of signification or symbolic order it is castrated. Žižek comments:

“And the Real cannot be signified not because it is outside, external to the symbolic order, but precisely because it is inherent to it, its internal limit the Real is the internal stumbling block on account of which the symbolic system can never become itself, achieve its self-identity. Because of its absolute immanence to the symbolic, the Real cannot be positively signified.” (Žižek, 1997 b, p. 279)

Castration, materialization or incarnation of enjoyment (*jouissance*) is the price subjects pay for admission to the universal medium of language. Entrance into the symbolic order is equivalent to the evacuation of the Real of *jouissance* or enjoyment. However, not all *jouissance* does evacuated by the process of signification (some of it persists in what are called the erogenous zones); this entails that the inconsistency of symbolic order (Myers, 97).

One way at looking at the relationship between the Real order and the symbolic in Lacanian psychoanalysis is to think of fantasy as concealing the inconsistency of symbolic order. Following Lacan, Geneviève Morel maintains fantasy disguises the lack in symbolic order, the missing *jouissance* (Morel, 34). In this regard, Žižek often states that fantasy is organizing subjects' sense of self to manage or domesticate the traumatic loss of the *jouissance*, which cannot be symbolized. Lacan's gist often repeat by Žižek is “desire is the desire of the other” (Žižek, 1991, p. 49). Žižek claims:

One should always bear in mind that the desire 'realized' (staged) in fantasy is not the subject's own, but the other's desire: fantasy, phantasmic formation, is an answer to the enigma of *Che vuoi?*- 'You're saying this, but what do you really mean by saying it?' - which established the subject's primordial, constitutive position. The original question of desire is not directly 'What do I want? but What do others want from me? What do they see in me? What am I to others?' (Žižek, 1997 b, p. 8).

The technique of “filling in the gaps” is a manifestation of this in postmodern art (or postmodernism). In his comparative analysis of *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (book and film), Žižek identifies that Ripley's homosexuality is only indirectly proposed in Patricia Highsmith's novel, but in Anthony Minghella's film *Ripley* is openly gay. Žižek utters, “By way of 'filling in the gaps' and 'telling it all', what we retreat from is the void as such, which, of course, is ultimately none other than the void of subjectivity (the Lacanian 'barred subject'). What Minghella accomplishes is the move from the void of subjectivity to the inner wealth of personality: instead of a polite person who is at the same time a monstrous automaton with no inner turmoil, we get a person full of

psychic traumas - in short, we get someone whom we can, in the fullest meaning of the term, understand.” (Žižek, 2001, p. 148). Fantasy, then, is what Žižek terms intersubjective.

Reading Žižek, Rex Butler maintains that the same procedure “applies not only to reality but to those ideological systems by which we construct reality.” He argues that the meaning of a term, for example ‘ecologism’ is not the same in every ideological system but shifts between several possible meanings. There is feminist ecology, in which the exploitation of nature is seen as masculine; socialist ecology, in which the exploitation of nature is seen as the product of capitalism; conservative ecology, which urges us to get back to the cycles of nature; and even capitalist ecology, which sees the free market as the only solution to our current environmental problems (Butler, pp. 31-32). Here, Žižek focus on the ideological role of fantasy and articulates “what sets our desire in motion, thus allowing us to construct those historically mediated fantasies that constitute what we perceive as our self, our unique identity, is always our radical indecision vis-à-vis the other’s desire” (Vighi and Feldner, p. 44). With these lines, one bears in mind Žižek’s psychoanalytic understanding of ideology as he believes that ideology is “generative matrix that regulates the relationship between visible and non-visible, between imaginable and non-imaginable” (Žižek, 1995 b, p.1).

By claiming that ideology regulates the relationship between the two orders (in between symbolic and the Real), ‘ideology’ is not something which affects only our ideas, it is something which happens to the totality of our existence, including material practice. It is not to be conceived as a misapprehension of reality, but as a distortion in the form taken by reality itself. (Hawkes, 178). Considering the opposition between imaginary and symbolic orders, for Žižek “fantasy is not simply on the side imagination; fantasy is, rather, the little piece of imagination by which we gain access to reality [...] the frame that guarantees our access to reality, our sense of reality; in this regard when a subject’s fundamental (ideological) fantasy is shattered, he experiences the loss of reality” (Wright, p. 122).

In this regard, Žižek forms the idea of fantasy as a kind of frame that offers reality for subjects. Although the frame is constructed by the desires of others, and consequently it is interested, it represents a subjective view of reality. Žižek’s argument can be understood better by reference to the concept of an anamorphosis. Discussing Claude Lévi-Strauss’s exemplary analysis from *Structural Anthropology*

in *The Parallax View* (2006), Žižek's adoption of the notion of "parallax" is also a concept that pertains to his theory of "anamorphic perspective," which is in fact an extension of the idea that Lacan expounded and Žižek repeatedly used in his previous books. We have first the "actual," "objective," arrangement of objects in the Real order, and then its different symbolizations that are all distorted by anamorphic tools. Žižek contends, "The real is here not the actual arrangement, but the traumatic core of the social antagonism which distorts the tribe members' view of the actual antagonism. The Real is thus the disavowed X on account of which our vision of reality is anamorphically distorted" (Žižek, 2006, p. 26).

Hans Holbein's portrait *The Ambassadors* is most often cited example of anamorphosis by Žižek. The picture describes apparently two foreign emissaries at the court of Henry VIII, showing them amid all the accoutrements of Renaissance learning. However, at the bottom of the picture, a skull is located in such way that will be revealed when viewed from the side. Žižek explains that this skull is the paradox of what he would call an anamorphosis. He continues, "If you look at the thing too directly, the oppressive social dimension, you don't see it. You can see it in an oblique way only if it remains in the background [...]. There is this wonderful tension between foreground and background. [...]. This fate of the individual hero remains a kind of a prism through which you see the background even more sharply." (Arroyo, video). In this regard, Lacan refers to this stain as a "fantôme phallique," and believes the anamorphosis of this skull means that it presents its image to a viewer, but the viewer must take an unusual position in relation to the image in order to see its true form. (Richard F. et al, 1994, p. 101).

As an anamorphic reminder of death, the skull changes the meaning of the portrait, "staining all the worldly accomplishments it depicts with a sense of futility and vanity. It is not part of the field of the rest of the painting yet, at the same time, it utterly changes the meaning of the rest of the painting" (Myers, p. 99). In this manner, "fantasy designates an element which sticks out, which cannot be integrated into the given symbolic structure, yet which, precisely as such, constitutes its identity" (Žižek, 1992, p. 89). One may bear in mind the element that sticks out as "a surplus knowledge, one that contaminates the gaze, subjectivizing the viewer and making it impossible to look at the picture in an objective or neutral fashion." To be more accurate, while an anamorphosis is only the materialization of a surplus

knowledge, it is a form of suspense-it suspends the ostensive meaning of a picture or situation (Myers, p. 99).

The Handmaid's Tale: From Postmodern Description to Display of Anamorphic Stains

Showing her postmodern analysis, Atwood suggests the anamorphosis of perceptions throughout *The Handmaid's Tale*. Narrator's distrust of a specific truth emerges when she suggests to the reader that discourses are unstable or constructed in this case, for political motives (Guthrie, p. 49). The narrator describes:

What he's telling us, his level smile implies, is for our own good. Everything will be all right soon. I promise. There will be peace. You must trust. You must go to sleep, like good children. He tells us what we long to believe. He's very convincing. I struggle against him. He's like an old movie star, I tell myself, with false teeth and a face job. At the same time I stray towards him, like one hypnotized. If only it were true. If only I could believe. (Atwood, 1986, p. 83)

Atwood's postmodern meaning is clear, there is more than one way to understand or read a situation; in other words, "the true meaning of an event or description of an event is not actually apparent as it is meant to make for thought rather than to provide simple answers" (Guthrie, p. 49). Meaning is open, rather than closed, due to "a radical discontinuity, the shifting from reality to the real, produced by the very continuous movement of the tracking shot. That is, the tracking movement can be described as a moving from an overall view of reality to its point of anamorphosis" (Žižek, 1991, p. 59). Since the text draws attention to itself through passages like the one cited above, passages that disorient the reader and destabilize the fictional construct of simple first-person narration, *The Handmaid's Tale* "presents a series of gaps that must be bridged. Some of these gaps are recognized by Offred and others only by the reader" (Howell, 2010, p. 326). The nature, religion, anatomy, biology, science, statistics, and anything else could twist and manipulate in such a way that would serve as a surplus knowledge to prop up and support their ideological mission (Porfert, p. 6). Considering various points of anamorphosis, one may confront many anamorphic layers or symbolic orders in the analysis of this literary work. This section tries to uncover two levels, of anamorphosis in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*.

The Handmaids' Anamorphic Perspectives

The first phase of anamorphic perspective attributes to the handmaids' fantasy. As Hogsette maintains, "the Republic desensitizes individuals to social and political horrors by manipulating language so as to create a different reality and by controlling what its citizens see and hear" (268). The handmaids try to find their identity through the way they are seen by the others; in other words, what sets their desire in motion, thus allowing them to construct those historically mediated fantasies that constitute what they perceive as themselves, their unique identity, is always their radical indecision *vis-à-vis* the other's desire" (Vighi & Feldner, 2007, p. 44). In this regard, their fantasy is created against a permanent background of question that constantly addresses the subject's relationship with external reality (Žižek, 1997 a, p. 8). Since fantasy is only produced by the interaction between subjects and "desire is the desire of the other" (Žižek, 1991, p. 49) Offred, as a representative of all handmaids, "hasn't got an identity of her own, but she tries to find one worthy of the Other's desire. "Not knowing who she is and where she belongs, and having no control of herself, her fantasy is easily distorted by other people and through her constant flashbacks and surplus knowledges in her narration" (Parlama, p. 26).

One of the recurrent surplus knowledges resulting in anamorphosis of a handmaid's viewpoint is religious text that represents the ideology of Gilead. Constructing the handmaids' fantasy, religion provides an ideological structure that fills the gaps of symbolic order. The novel depicts a society where verses from the Bible, which is the very book on which the Republic of Gilead is supposed to be based, are being purposely modified and manipulated to distort the Real meaning to the point where it complies with the ideals of symbolic order. In this regard, the narrator remembers his shopping as,

We go to Milk and Honey, and to All Flesh, where I buy chicken and the new Ofglen gets three pounds of hamburger. There are the usual lines. I see several women I recognize, exchange with them the infinitesimal nods with which we show each other we are known, at least to someone, we still exist. Outside All Flesh I say to the new Ofglen, "We should go to the Wall." I don't know what I expect from this; some way of testing her reaction, perhaps. I need to know whether or not she is one of us. If she is, if I can establish that, perhaps she'll be able to tell me what has really happened to Ofglen. (Atwood, 1986, p. 283)

Lois W. Banner believes religion has long been used as a way to control the subjects in symbolic order. He argues religion as an effective ideological tool veiled in scripture, sacraments, and other dogmatic devices that divert people's point of view into believing in and adhering to a religious creed that, in reality, actually reinforces the political creed of the dominant power group. (27). Doing so, it distorts their perception of reality, producing anamorphic stains in it. The Real perception is the appearance as appearance; it not only appears within appearances, it is also nothing but its own appearance - it is simply a certain grimace at reality, a certain imperceptible, unfathomable, ultimately illusory feature that accounts for die absolute difference within identity (Žižek, 2002, p. xxvii).

Another representation of this ideological surplus knowledge reveals when Offred recalls his memory about conventional symbolic images:

In each of our baskets are strawberries-the strawberries are in season now, so we'll eat them and eat them until we're sick of them-and some wrapped fish. We got the fish at Loaves and Fishes, with its wooden sign, a fish with a smile and eyelashes. It doesn't sell loaves though. Most households bake their own, though you can get dried-up rolls and wizened doughnuts at Daily Bread, if you run short. Loaves and Fishes is hardly ever open. (Atwood, 1986, p. 164)

Apart from the use of names such as Angels, Guardians of the Faith, Commanders of the Faith, and the Eyes of God, draws references directly from religious doctrines, the different stores, where the Handmaids goes shopping, are called "Milk and Honey" (Exodus, 3), "All Flesh" (Leviticus, 4), "Loaves and Fishes" (Matthew, 15:36), which are symbols found in the Bible. Porfert maintains that "although that fact is highlighted numerous times throughout the novel, the best example lies in the use of the line from Genesis that states 'I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children' as a justification for refraining from the use of anesthetics, epidurals, and other pain-relieving methods during childbirth." (Porfert, 6). All these religious symbols and texts are anamorphic entities that gain their consistency only in retrospect, viewed from within the symbolic horizon - they acquire their consistency from the structural necessity of the inconsistency of the symbolic field (Žižek, 1994, p. 31).

In addition to religious images and symbols, Offred's distorted "observation of Aunt Lydia's manipulative use of Scripture is representative of the way Aunt Lydia functions" as one who constructs their fantasy in the symbolic order (Boulware, p.

41). Since she is a prominent figure in the cadre of Aunts, women assigned to train and construct the handmaids, and are repeatedly referenced as the voice of Gileadean ideology at the Re-Education Center, they affect the handmaids in such a way that Offred explains:

I've learned to do without a lot of things. If you have a lot of things, said Aunt Lydia, you get too attached to this material world and you forget about spiritual values. You must cultivate poverty of the spirit. Blessed are the meek. She didn't go on to say anything about inheriting the earth. I lie, lapped by the water, beside an open drawer that does not exist, and think about a girl who did not die when she was five; who still does exist, I hope, though not for me. Do I exist for her? Am I a picture somewhere, in the dark at the back of her mind? (Atwood, 1986, p. 64)

It is clear that handmaids are created against a permanent background of questions that constantly address the subject's relationship with external reality. It bears in mind Žižek's argument that desire 'realized' (staged) in fantasy is not the subject's own, but the other's desire. In this regard, as Žižek states, the handmaids' anamorphic fantasy provides a framework through which they see reality (Žižek, 1997 a, p. 8). This fantasy is an answer to the enigma of Che vuoi. Although the aunts' speeches distort the scenario made by handmaids to answer Che vuoi, it protects them from the confusion of not knowing what the others' desire really wants through making an "error of perspective" or an "ideological anamorphosis" (Žižek, 1995 a, p. 99). However, religious references and aunts' speeches are the same as skull on the famous painting *The Ambassadors*. They change the handmaids' perception of all other elements of symbolic order under the rules of the Gileadean Society.

The Readers' Anamorphic perspectives

The next phase of anamorphosis, which reminds the example of the famous painting *Two Ambassadors*, relates to audiences of the novel. Even though the narrator's narration, and consequently his construction, ends in the last line of the book, the novel is continued by another chapter entitled "Historical Notes". Since the Historical Notes introduce several crucial shifts in the narrative, it is necessary to examine this final frame of the novel to discover the anamorphic aspects of the novel towards the reader's fantasy (Kottiswari, 36). Presenting by keynote speaker Professor James Darcy Pieixoto in 2195 and dealing primarily with "Problems of Authenticity in

Reference” to the narrative, the “Historical Notes,” tries to be “*a partial transcript of the proceedings of the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies.*” (p. 300). In this speech, Pieixoto makes a number of dim sexist remarks and displays some surplus knowledges to disorient reader’s fantasy by concentration on historical facts Offred’s narrative can provide about the regime of Gilead. While the speech is shocking, it disorients the reader who encounters it after having spent nearly 300 affecting pages with Offred and her construction (Howell, 327). As Atwood implies: “keep in mind, dear reader, that the story you have just read is possible to become true in the future”, (Palarma, 48) the reader is struck by the narration that is “anamorphic in that they presuppose a point of view, denying us an objective account of the reality (Myers, 109).

Repeating Gilead’s ideology with the power of technology, it seems Pieixoto’s “desire for twenty pages of printout from Waterford’s computer is unsettlingly reminiscent of the Commander’s blithe assertion of the power of statistics over human experience” (Grace, 489). Nevertheless, Grace’s close reading of “Historical Notes” shows its anamorphosis and reveals a phase of ideological diversion. Pieixoto announces,

It appears that certain periods of history quickly become, both for other societies and for those that follow them, the stuff of not especially edifying legend and the occasion for a good deal of hypocritical self-congratulation. If I may be permitted an editorial aside, allow me to say that in my opinion we must be cautious about passing moral judgment upon the Gileadeans. Surely we have learned by now that such judgments are of necessity culture-specific. Also, Gileadean society was under a good deal of pressure, demographic and otherwise, and was subject to factors from which we ourselves are happily more free. Our job is not to censure but to understand.” (Atwood, 1986, p. 302)

In this regard, since he is in possession of biases and misreads the narrative, it is clear that Pieixoto’s contextualizations and explanations create a new anamorphic symbolic order. While “the emergence of language opens up a hole in reality”, using the words such as ‘certain periods of history’, ‘editorial aside’ and ‘my opinion’ redoubles reality in itself and the gaps of symbolic order is filled with speeches of Peixoto (Žižek, 1991, p. 13).

In addition, the title of Pieixoto’s lecture, “Problems of Authentication in Reference to The Handmaid’s Tale” indicates clearly that his approach to to analyze Offred’s narration is only historically, and therefore, anamorphic. Here, history plays

the role of skull in *Two Ambassadors*; it distorts the meaning of Offred's narration. Historical approach, as the provider of ideology, is a pure semblance that we can perceive clearly only by looking away from a specific point out of Gileadean values and rules. With his anamorphic comprehension of what constitutes the narration, Pieixoto misreads the Handmaid's text, when he bothers to consider it at all (Brownley, 12). Saying "I compose myself. My self is a thing I must now compose", Offred emphasizes on her story as a composition or reconstruction of facts (Atwood, 1986, p. 66), but Pieixoto insists on his anamorphic discoveries about the historical truth of her story. In his historical discovery, he removes what is of no historical interest for him even if it is very important for Offred as he says, "The other names in the document are equally useless for the purposes of identification and authentication. "Luke" and "Nick" drew blanks, as did "Moirra" and "Janine" (Atwood, 1986, p. 305). Moreover, his sexist jokes, his euphemisms—"birth services" for childbearing and "serial polygamy" for late twentieth-century marriage (Atwood, 1986, p. 386) show his anamorphic biases and misogyny (Brownley, 11). Historical, and consequently anamorphic, hypotheses about Offred's tale preoccupies the greater part of Pieixoto's concern. Confirming his 'error of perspective' or ideological anamorphosis (Žižek, 1995 a, p. 110), He continues:

This is our guesswork. Supposing it to be correct-supposing, that is, that Waterford was indeed the "Commander"-many gaps remain. Some of them could have been filled with our anonymous author, had she had a different turn of mind. She could have told us much about the workings of the Gileadean empire, had she had the instincts of a reporter or a spy. What would we not give, now, for even twenty pages or so of print out from Waterford's private computer! However, we must be grateful for any crumbs the Goddess of History has deigned to vouchsafe us. (310)

The extent to which Pieixoto usurps Offred's tale, and distorts our perception of reality, producing anamorphic stains on it (Žižek, 2002, p. xxvii) is evidenced due to the fact that he attempts to discredit Offred's narrative by accusing her of not paying attention to significant things (Kottiswari, 36). While telling history is always a question of interpretation, Vevaina argues that one can "not to deny that the real past existed, but simply to point out that any historical account is only a reconstruction from fragments of the past which are available to us, and that any historical narrative

is largely governed by the perspective adopted by a particular historian” (Vevaina, 86).

All this draws attention to the fact that there is not an objective perspective from which a phenomenon can be apprehended. Instead, the perception and comprehension of all cultural phenomena preclude the observation of another. In this way, the procedure that enables us to discern the structural inconsistency of an ideological edifice is that of the anamorphic reading (Žižek, 1997 b, p. 75). Respectively, the reader is forced to realize that our perception of the handmaids, and those of the other characters described in the text, is a function of the way in which official others, namely the narrator and Professor Pieixoto, have constructed them (Guthrie, 53). The inconsistency of the field of (perceived) reality, the gap between reality and the Real, is filled with the knowledge provided by the narrator or Pieixoto because reality is already subjectively constituted (Žižek, 2002, p. xxxii). With all these lines, as Kacandes maintains this passage and others mean to lead readers to the conclusion that these scholars have diverted the Real meaning of the text. Since the Real meaning is impossible to be obtained, their implicit and explicit criticisms of the Handmaid completely gloss over the narrators intention over her story [...]. They miss all the insights her tale provides about her own life and even about the workings of the Gileadean Empire because they seem interested only in historically verifiable fact, in the most limited political and military events and their agents (Kacandes, 118). Again, it proves Žižek’s deliberate announcement as he states, the Real meaning, like trauma, has no existence of its own prior to symbolization; it remains an anamorphic entity that gains its consistency only in retrospect, viewed from within the symbolic horizon - it acquires its consistency from the structural necessity of the inconsistency of the symbolic field” (Žižek, 1994, p. 31).

Conclusion

While we are accustomed to thinking about fantasies as the stories we tell ourselves about getting what we want, Žižek follows Lacan in highlighting the function of fantasy at a more fundamental level. This more fundamental fantasy, insofar as it tells us how to desire, keeps our desire alive, unfulfilled, and intact as desire (Dean 12). Fantasies provide an anamorphic framework through which we see reality. In

Žižekian viewpoint, anamorphosis is “the element that, when viewed straightforwardly, remains a meaningless stain, but which, as soon as we look at the picture from a precisely determined lateral perspective, all of a sudden acquires well-known contours” (Žižek, 1991, p. 91). Following Žižek, this study has applied the concept of anamorphosis to Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*. The novel presents a series of gaps that must be bridged. Some of these gaps are recognized by Offred and others only by the reader. While there is more than one way to understand or read a situation, the present research has shown that two levels, or layers, of anamorphosis exist in Atwood’s masterpiece according to two narrators of the novel.

The first anamorphic layer attributes to the handmaids’ fantasy. This study has uncovered how the handmaids’ anamorphic fantasies are constructed through recurrent surplus knowledges such as religious text that represents the ideology of Gilead and the use of names such as Angels, Guardians of the Faith. Since desire realized in fantasy is not the subject’s own, but the other’s desire, these surplus knowledges disorient the reader and destabilize Offred’s fictional construct of simple first-person narration. Providing an ideological structure that fills the gaps of symbolic order, anamorphic entities that gain their consistency only in retrospect, viewed from within the symbolic horizon - they acquire their consistency from the structural necessity of the inconsistency of the symbolic field. All these confirm Žižek’s idea that the fantasy provides an anamorphic framework through which they see reality. The second phase of anamorphosis relates to audiences of the novel. Even though the narrator’s narration, and consequently his construction, ends in the last line of the book, Atwood has added the epilogue, called “Historical Notes” in order to communicate a number of things about Gilead that Offred could not have known, and also to express the author’s own optimism that Gilead (Ingersoll, p. 217). The evidences of this research have explained how Pieixoto’s contextualizations and explanations create a new anamorphic symbolic order. The extent to which Pieixoto’s anamorphosis affects Offred’s symbolic order, and distorts our perception of reality, is evidenced because he attempts to discredit Offred’s narrative by accusing her of not paying attention to significant things.

No other Atwood’s fiction has aroused the public debate that has accompanied *The Handmaid’s Tale*, thus it should provoke lively discussions in different fields. This research has thrown up many questions in need of further

investigation. Further work needs to be done to establish the impacts of environment on the creation of these anamorphic views. Following Cheryll Glotfelty's ideas, as supporting theoretical framework, one should examine the "physical environment" and attempts to "recoup professional dignity" (p. xxxi).

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