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April 26, 2010
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Honors Capstone/ Literature Thesis

**Legacy, Identity and Time: Exploring Generational Feminism
in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale***

In this paper, I will explore how the form and character development of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* can be used to examine the implications of the generational legacy of feminism on the future progress of women. By using Atwood's novel as a way to explore the pitfalls of generational feminism and the opportunities provided by bringing new ideas to feminism through spontaneous generation, the reader can see how these new ideas are integral to reshaping society's understanding of the role of feminism in society. In "Generational Difficulties; or The Fear of a Barren History," Judith Roof defines the paradigms of generational legacy and spontaneous generation as metaphors for progress in order to better understand the history of consciousness-based feminism.¹ It can be difficult to completely separate these two opposing paradigms because they share the word "generation," but it is important to remember that each paradigm uses the meaning of generation in different ways. Generation can be used to refer to a body of living beings born and living contemporaneously, but it can also be a form of "to generate" or the act of creating something new. According to Roof's ideas, any feminist movement begins with a "spontaneous" generation in which a generation bases its actions on the oppressive conditions it faces or the need to redefine women's history. After this initial "spontaneous" generation, the legacy of feminism demands that younger generations of feminists pay a social debt to their foremothers as they continue to work for female equality by pursuing the same goals and by using the same social methods.

¹ These paradigms are based on the history of feminism presented by Betty Friedan in her book *The Feminine Mystique*.

These expectations set up for later waves of feminists can effectively guilt women into perpetuating the same kinds of feminism as their foremothers embraced, without giving the younger women the opportunity to decide if those ideas about feminism still fulfill their social needs. By setting up the expectation that one generation's understanding of feminism must work for all generations, generational feminism posits a universal idea about the needs and identity of all women regardless of generation. When this generational debt or expectation is not fulfilled, it ruptures the unity among feminists because the generations no longer feel connected, which can create irreparable rifts in feminism and even lead some people to believe that feminism is dying.

The relationship between generations of feminists is best depicted in *The Handmaid's Tale* in the characters of Offred and her mother. Because Offred's mother holds expectations about how Offred should show her appreciation for the sacrifices made by feminists of previous generations and Offred fails to meet those expectations, the pair tends to fight and sometimes struggles for common ground. Also, Atwood's depictions of Offred's mother as a vocal 1970s feminist and the issues she cared about most provide a sharp contrast with the needs of the women in the totalitarian theocracy of Gilead. Atwood emphasizes these differences by using gaps and juxtapositions within the novel to more closely link contrasting events in the narrative. By examining how Atwood alternates the time period and perspective within sections, chapters, pages and even sentences of *The Handmaid's Tale*, the reader can better understand the varying social conditions of women over time. This helps the reader to understand that no single generation has all of the answers, but rather that each generation can contribute useful ideas and social tools to feminism to address women's needs.

In this paper I argue that generational feminism not only imposes an expectation of the correct purposes and beliefs of feminism, but it also imprisons women within one understanding of time. The second wave of feminism emphasized women's need to get out of the home and into public culture. This emphasis on the movement from domestic to public space simultaneously signifies a movement from the domestic cyclical time that is most often associated with women in the home, including housework, menstruation and pregnancy, to the patriarchal chronological time associated with society, culture and history. More specifically, the ideas of cultural feminism popular during the 1970s declared the need for women to organize antipornography campaigns, work for women's reproductive rights and seek alternative female institutions, thereby requiring them to engage in the male-dominated chronological time of society (Loudermilk 136). Yet the demands made by cultural feminists that women remove male influence over their lives and enter chronological time is equally as restrictive as the conservative belief that women's place is within the home. Both demands impose an identity with a specific set of responsibilities upon women and thus limit an individual woman's choice to control her own life. It is not that antifeminists are winning; it is not that feminism is no longer relevant; it is that many feminists' understanding of feminism as a historical and thus linear-based movement has become incompatible with the current needs of the women it serves. By examining the depictions of the problems caused by these generational expectations, the reader can see that the expectations women hold up for each other and in particular the debts created by mother-daughter relationships are helping to break feminism apart. This is not to say that Atwood completely condemns generational feminism as a barrier to the progress of women. Generational feminism allows the history of feminism to take shape by existing in the chronological part of society and is thus one useful tool for the

social movement of feminism. However, Atwood's novel shows that generational feminism must remain as a tool for feminism rather than its foundation because otherwise it has the potential to limit women's choices rather than opening them up.

The character of Offred shows the reader how feminism can embrace spontaneous generation as an antidote to the restrictions imposed by the generational legacy of feminism. According to the idea of spontaneous generation, a feminist generation decides upon its course of action based on its recognition of the oppressive conditions it faces, thus ignoring the struggle of its foremothers and establishing a new struggle based on its own perceptions of social need. Throughout the novel, Offred clearly rejects her mother's and best friend's definitions of feminism and the generational expectations of legacy feminism. Instead, she lives her life according to her own terms by having an affair with and eventually marrying a married (then-divorced) man, and then presumably escaping from Gilead to record the thirty tapes on which the novel is "based." Throughout the narrative, Offred shows an obvious desire to rejoin cyclical time. The reader learns Offred misses having her own job and bank account, which represent her previous links to the masculine world of chronology and history. As a handmaid in the republic of Gilead, she resents being confined to the home and domestic life, as well as the cyclical time structure that accompanies her role as a "two-legged womb" (Atwood 136). While Offred outwardly resents the cyclical time associated with domestic life in Gilead and wants to return to linear time, she also experiences deep connections with the cyclical phases of the moon that coincide with her monthly menstrual cycles. This connection with the moon shows that cyclical time is still an integral part of Offred's understanding of her life, despite the fact that she more often focuses her attention on returning to her old life with a job. Offred also chooses to write—or rather record—her story

as a nonlinear narrative with breaks, gaps and flashbacks scattered throughout the text. By talking about her present day situation, mentally revisiting and describing her prior life with Luke, and then returning to the present day, she creates cycles of narrative that are simultaneously changing yet repetitive. Her use of this form breaks the reader's expectation of a chronological narrative as it has most often been used by male writers in the past. Instead, it indicates a deep association with cyclical rather than linear time during stages of her life when she was involved in society and the male chronology, despite the fact that generational feminism encourages her to join the chronological and historical understanding of feminist change. She even apologizes to the reader for the irregular and broken way in which she has told her story, which indicates that this is the best form she can use to express herself.

Throughout the novel, this struggle between the cyclical and the linear form a significant cornerstone to understanding women's places in society, and allow the reader to understand how women have been traditionally pigeonholed into specific understandings of time. Offred uses her narrative to describe the experiences of a variety of women and their encounters with time, and these experiences show that women often need to be able to be involved in not just one understanding of time but embrace both chronological and linear time as a way to lead productive and fulfilling lives. By giving voices to a variety of women throughout the text, Offred engages in her own form of spontaneous generation, even though she does not recognize her tale as feminist and creates a new more accepting form of feminism that allows women to choose to be simultaneously involved in both public and private spaces as a way for women to gain more latitude in discovering themselves and embracing fulfilling lives.

The Debt of the Generational Legacy of Feminism

Many aspects of Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, including its form, allow the reader to see a critique of generational feminism. Atwood categorizes her novel not as science fiction or feminist fiction but instead as speculative fiction, which she defines as "a walking along of a potential road, and the reader as well as the writer can then decide if that is the road they wish to go on" (Loudermilk 125). Unlike realistic fiction, which must follow the reader's understanding of social norms, speculative fiction is like a toy kaleidoscope in which the author has the ability to twist those social norms into new and interesting patterns. By mixing up the little colored pieces of glass that represent specific social norms or expectations, the author can examine the limits of what it means to be human, examine the implications of proposed changes in a social organization and investigate various realms of the imagination (Atwood, "Aliens" 5). Speculative fiction is a projection of what could exist rather than a physical experience of those ideas, which is particularly useful because the conditions examined in speculative fiction can be quite socially extreme. Just as a kaleidoscope can be turned over and over again to create new patterns, an author can use the tools of speculative fiction to show several different "patterns" of social expectations in one novel. In the speculative fiction of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood specifically explores "what happens at the intersection of several trends, all of which are with us today: the rise of right-wing fundamentalism as a political force, the decline in the Caucasian birth rate in North America and northern Europe, and the rise in infertility and birth-defects, due, some say, to chemical-pollutant and radiation levels, as well as to sexually-transmitted diseases," according to the author (Howells 128). By juxtaposing the patterns of historically accurate twentieth-century life with the imagined republic of Gilead, Atwood's speculative fiction compares the lives of a

variety of women, including each of their individual needs and wants. By depicting a variety of women, it shows how generational feminism fails to address the unique social problems each woman faces. The intense relationship that Atwood creates between the narrator and reader furthers the effectiveness of the narrative by investing the reader in the novel. As the narrator, Offred speaks directly and candidly with her reader. She highlights her strengths as an individual, but does not shy away from her weaknesses; she describes events fully and concretely, but admits there may be flaws in her depictions. Offred's close relationship with the reader therefore gains the reader's trust and increases the narrative's power to captivate the reader. By maintaining the novel's label of speculative fiction (and thus removing it from real life) yet creating this strong narrator-reader relationship, Atwood is able to draw parallels and even level criticisms at present-day culture without causing readers to reject the narrative as false or heavy handed. Atwood's speculative fiction thus becomes more than a structure through which the emotionally-invested reader can explore generational feminism; it is also a way in which the reader can examine the inadequacies of generational feminism to fit the problems faced by the women in each society. Because nearly every form of feminist or antifeminist thought in the novel presents specific visions about how to improve society either for women or the human race, Atwood's novel provides a useful forum for readers to view the potential effects of allowing a single mode of thinking to dominate feminism.

While the form and contents of Atwood's speculative fiction offer readers a satisfying commentary on both Gileadean and our own society, Atwood's ironic awarenesses add even deeper layers of meaning to the work. On the surface, Atwood's depiction of Gilead can be seen as a polemic against the society's patriarchal tyranny over the lives of the women of Gilead. As soon as the Gileadean government takes over, women lose their rights to vote, own

property, hold a job and even read. The individual names of the handmaids are even changed. Now bound to her Commander, the narrator's new patronymic name is now formed by placing *of* in front of her Commander's name, *Fred*, resulting in the name *Offred*. These new names, which change every two years when the handmaid switches Commanders, draw attention to the way in which the handmaid belongs to, or is even the possession of, the Commander. The formation of Offred's name may seem extreme to the reader at first, but it matches our society's tradition in which a woman changed her last name when she became the legal possession of her husband after marriage. Although wives are no longer considered to be their husbands' legal possessions, the tradition of women changing their last name is still practiced by many women today. Yet these are fairly obvious connections for a reader to make; a truly engaged reader will recognize that Atwood's commentary goes much deeper than the male subjection of women. Deeper examinations of the novel show, for example, shows the way in which women tyrannize other women. Throughout the novel, Offred shows the reader a variety of examples of the ways in which her mother tries to control her life and impose an obligatory gratitude from Offred for the work of previous generations of feminists. Therefore Atwood calls attention to the very thing that critiques male domination—that is, feminism—actually imposes forms of domination as well. Atwood's depiction of one gender over a group of women in the novel follows the way in which it occurs in society: she overemphasizes the perceived male domination over women by creating such an extreme way in which the handmaid's names are formed, yet makes sure to more subtly (but no less extremely) show how older generations of women tyrannize younger ones. By overemphasizing the changing of a handmaid's name, Atwood encourages the reader to

examine how much emphasis society places on this specific “domination” of women in order to encourage readers to pay more attention to the tyranny that often goes unnoticed.

Just as it is necessary to examine how one generation of women dominates another, it is equally necessary to consider how a new form or understanding of feminism is a reaction to the previous one. That is, in order to understand the goals of a new generation of feminists, one must also understand how that those women embrace or resist the previous generation’s ideas about feminism. Each generation of a social movement, including feminism, has at least two potential paths: it can rely on generational legacy, in which the generation continues struggles begun by the previous generation; it can decide upon spontaneous generation, in which the generation chooses its course of action based on its recognition of oppressive conditions or social need; or it can use a synthesis of the two. Generational legacy is the easiest path to choose because it produces a history that is passed down among its members. Feminist history therefore becomes a familial discourse in which “mothers influence daughters and daughters look to mothers for identity, reproducing what they see” (Roof 69). By being part of this succession, women are assured they are acting as a part of a positive, passionate trajectory that produces real change (Roof 69). By following the same paths as the feminist foremothers who made tangible progress in the past, a new generation can confidently suppose it will create change as well. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Offred could have easily followed her mother’s definitions of feminism in her own life and accepted her legacy of feminism as it was clearly laid out in front of her. Offred’s mother spent a great deal of Offred’s childhood as a second-wave feminist engaged in pornographic book and magazine burnings, as well as marches to help women take back the night, reclaim their bodies, and move out of the kitchen and into the working world (Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* 119-120). Offred knew the beliefs of her

mother's feminism well, and thus it would have been easy for her to pick up where her mother left off, particularly because she was raised without a father figure to balance out her mother's strong views on cultural feminism.

The generational legacy of feminism can help give feminists a sense of history and purpose, and even unite women. Generational legacy does not simply allow but instead requires women to prize historical memory; because of its emphasis on the collective, generational feminism "depends on feminism as a historical agency" (Wiegman 811). The existence of this history allows generations to see when feminism creates change, regardless of whether this change is considered to be positive or negative. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the dystopian society of Gilead "unconsciously and paradoxically [meets] certain feminist demands," likes those of Offred's mother (Tolan 19). The women of Gilead are considered freed from the constraints and objectification of pornography because the government has outlawed pornography, just like Offred's mother wanted. The women are also given alternate female institutions in society including the Rachel and Leah Center, in which women learn how to be handmaids and about their duty to society to conceive a child. In the words of Atwood, Gilead shows social progress over today's society because "[w]omen aren't whistled at on the street, [and] men don't come climbing in the window in the middle of the night. Women are 'protected.' Sardonicly speaking, in totalitarian countries the streets are much safer, for the most part" ("Reader's Companion"). Offred's intimate knowledge of and discussion of feminism through the work of her mother allows both Offred and the reader to see that feminism has made progress under the Republic of Gilead.

Social change does not always equal progress, and therefore the reader must also consider the irony (and even sarcasm) that lies beneath this "progress." While Atwood can

point to specific positive changes within society, Offred's understanding of the history of feminism also allows her to recognize the "women's culture" that exists in Gilead is nothing like what her mother had hoped for (127). Offred's mother's generation of feminism fought against pornography as an example of the objectification of women, yet some members of Offred's generation may view pornography as a way in which women can reclaim their bodies and express themselves. Therefore, the outlawing of pornography would become a negative social change rather than a positive one to these women. Offred's mother was among the generation of women who worked hard to protect women from rape and to allow them to "take back the night" (Atwood 119). In Gilead, women no longer fear being waylaid on the street and raped because it has virtually ceased to happen. This seems like progress until the reader realized that handmaids are forced to submit to the will of their Commander during the Ceremony. During the Ceremony, the handmaid lies down on the bed between the legs of the Wife, clasps her hands and waits for the Commander to finish:

My red skirt is hitched up to my waist, though no higher. Below it the Commander is fucking. What he is fucking is the lower part of my body. I do not say making love, because this is not what he's doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and only one is involved. Nor does rape cover it: nothing is going on here that I haven't signed up for. (94)

Although Offred denies the Ceremony constitutes rape because it does not occur against her will, the Ceremony is extreme, impersonal and potentially emotionally scarring. The horror of the Ceremony is not a social problem that Offred's mother ever faced or could have imagined facing. In fact, it is a fictitious event that Atwood creates in her novel. The Ceremony is often startling, upsetting or even repulsing to readers, but the brutality of the Ceremony can help the

reader become more emotionally invested in the narrative. A more careful examination of the event also shows the Ceremony is not that far removed from today's society. Just as Offred is not "raped" by the Commander, today's definition of rape does not necessarily include women who "willingly" submit to intercourse because they prefer it to the alternative punishments inflicted by their husbands or boyfriends. Therefore, Atwood's creation of the Ceremony is a way in which she can call attention to the problems of our society today and the flaws in our definition of rape. The form of her speculative fiction allows her to depict an outrageous ceremony that grabs both the readers' attention and emotions without causing them to feel affronted by using a real example.

Just as the real feminist progress shown in the novel is limited, the history of generational legacy is also limiting. Generational feminism creates a context in which "maternal time writes feminism's future as an accumulation of its past *and* posits feminist subjectives through an insistence on a continuous historical consciousness" [emphasis in original] (Wiegman 812). This dependence upon the past consequently "posits political time as accumulation...[which] requires memory, begetting and succession" (Wiegman 811). By requiring an accumulation of ideas, it depends upon the past as the sole means for feminist's self-fashioning and validation rather than allowing women more freedom define themselves (Wiegman 811). It is significant that generational legacy requires feminists to "beget" because it indicates that women are both expected to accept those beliefs for themselves as well as to indoctrinate those same ideas in the children they are expected to produce, thus perpetuating the cycle and keeping alive this "symbolic tie to the mother, [and] the figure for 'feminist history'" (Wiegman 811). Generational feminism also often torpedoes new ideas based on the "debt" new generations owe older ones: "No matter what we might wish to retain from the

collected experience and wisdom of those who have participated in feminist critical debates, what is forgotten is that after a lifelong investment, new ideas may become a threat” (Wiegman 811, Roof 84). By making new ideas a threat to feminism, the generational legacy prizes uniformity between generations as a way to prove that feminists deserve to enter into political, linear time.

Many women feel as though they need to fulfill this debt, and may even feel guilty if they fail to fulfill it according to their foremothers’ expectations. According to critic Robyn Wiegman in “Feminism’s Apocalyptic Futures,” the political time of feminism “has been mastered by a teleological impulse that converts feminist movement into linear narration and produces origins for feminism that inculcate affective models of debt, betrayal, and guilt as the foundation for relationships among feminists” (810). As a representative of the new generation of women, Offred recognizes the strict expectations set up by her mother: “She expected too much from me, I [Offred] felt. She expected me to vindicate her life for her, and the choices she’d made. I didn’t want to live my life on her terms. I didn’t want to be the model offspring, the incarnation of her ideas. We used to fight about that. I am not your justification for existence, I said to her once” (122). From Offred’s perspective, Offred’s mother wanted her daughter to follow in her footsteps and hold the same sets of beliefs. Offred’s feeling that her mother wanted Offred to be her “justification for existence” limits Offred’s actions to those that either use the new rights gained by feminists or work to gain more rights to validate her mother’s lifelong work, without having the opportunity to make her own decisions. Offred feels as though her mother wants Offred to perpetuate the same ideas about feminism as an “incarnation of her [mother’s] ideas” rather than addressing her own concerns about

womanhood (122). This rift between the women becomes a point of major contention, and causes Offred an enormous amount of guilt:

You were a wanted child, God knows.... She [Offred's mother] would say this a little regretfully, as though I hadn't turned out entirely as she'd expected. No mother is ever, completely, a child's idea of what a mother should be, and I suppose it works the other way around as well. But despite everything, we didn't do badly by one another, we did as well as most. I wish she were here, so I could tell her I finally know this. (181)

Because Offred repeatedly brings up the fact that she did not meet her mother's expectations in the novel, the reader can infer this is a fact that truly troubles Offred, that it makes her pause and feel guilty. Offred also knows that she did not entirely meet the expectations of her mother, as indicated by her use of the word "regretfully" in which to describe the way her mother speaks. Offred's emphasis that she "finally" knows they did as well as most mother-daughter pairs indicates she previously felt they did worse than most, that they fought more and understood less than most mothers and daughters. Most of this resentment and misunderstanding between Offred and her mother can be attributed to the unrealistic expectations set up by the generational legacy of feminism: Offred resents her mother for embracing feminism while Offred's mother resents her daughter for *not* embracing feminism in the way she expects of her.

Because Offred's mother focuses her attention on the generational debt that she has created for her daughter, she fails to recognize the changes that exist between herself and her daughter. According to Judith Roof, this is because the generational model "privileg[es] a kind of family history that organizes generations where they don't exist," ignores differences and commonalities as necessary, and "thrives on a paradigm of oppositional change" (72). Offred's

mother follows this model exactly. Rather than acknowledging the social problems each woman faces, she focuses upon those issues that she believes are most important. For example, while getting men involved in household chores was a major battle for earlier feminists, Offred does not need to fight to get her husband involved in household chores because Luke embraces cooking as a hobby (Atwood 122). Although she no longer faces the problems her mother fought, she faces new problems in each of the societies in which she lives. During her married life, for example, women had already gained the right to hold a steady, paid job and therefore she did not need to fight for one. However, many feminists of Offred's generation fought to get women equal wages for the work they now completed. The 1973 *Roe v. Wade* case also meant Offred could obtain a legal abortion, a right her mother's generation of feminists worked hard to get and one that was eventually realized. While Offred seems to face fewer obstacles as a woman in the republic of Gilead than her mother faced, Offred faces very different problems or decisions. For example, Offred must decide upon her social position at the outset of the new society. She can either choose to be a handmaid, a role in which she is relegated to domesticity with few freedoms and charged with giving birth to a "keeper" baby, or choose to be an "unwoman" who is sent to the colonies, which are areas of agricultural production and deadly pollution, to clean up waste until she dies of cancer. Of the two routes, Offred chooses to be a handmaid and she is stuck with the consequences of that decision for many years: "There wasn't a lot of choice but there was some, and this is what I chose," she says of her duties (94). Offred also no longer has the right to an abortion—but she does not want one. As a handmaid, it is her duty to society to give birth to a healthy, normal baby, and with the dangerously low reproduction rate and high infertility rates, this is quite a challenge. To have an abortion in Gilead would be to kill off the most precious asset a woman can obtain. Because so many of

these social problems are either different from or entirely contradictory to the experiences of Offred's mother, it is only logical the methods must useful for Offred's mother are no longer relevant or fruitful for Offred.

By ignoring these differences and placing these generational expectations on Offred, Offred's mother tried to shape the beliefs and actions of her daughter. When Offred's mother comments to her daughter, "You're just a backlash. Flash in the pan. History will absolve me," she indicates that she recognizes her daughter has rejected her version of feminism, yet believes that her understanding of feminism is so correct that her daughter will change her mind (121). Her use of the word "absolve," which the reader can interpret as a release from sin and guilt, clues the reader into how broken the relationship between Offred and her mother has become. Not only does Offred feel guilty toward her mother, but her mother thinks history will absolve her own sin or guilt regarding the matter. The fact that she can dismiss her daughter so quickly by saying she is a "backlash" or "flash in the pan" further emphasizes the distance of the gap created by generational expectations. The nearly sacred mother-daughter relationship has been severed because of their lack of understanding of one another.

The nonlinear form of Atwood's novel emphasizes the differences between the generations of women by allowing the reader to more closely compare the lives of 1970s women with the women of Gilead. Within a single paragraph or even a sentence, Offred often mentally contrasts typical life pre- and post-Gilead. When Offred enters the Commander's study, she is startled when he says "hello" to welcome her, and immediately flashes back to memories of her old life: "It's the old form of greeting. I haven't heard it for a long time, for years. Under the circumstances it seems out of place, comical even, a flip backward in time, a stunt" (137). Obviously to a modern reader this greeting seems quite natural, yet the

juxtaposition between the reader's and Offred's respective responses to the greeting remind the reader of the great changes that can occur in very small amounts of time. If an action as natural as greeting someone with "hello" can change over a matter of a few years, then it becomes much easier to accept that larger issues, such as the social needs and struggles of feminists, can change over that same time as well. Therefore, Atwood's juxtapositions of time and events emphasize the differences that exist between generations of women, as well as differences in the experiences of a single woman over time.

While Atwood's nonlinear timeline emphasizes the differences between generations of women, the character of Offred's mother is an example of how previous generations of feminists can act as static, controlling figures to "prevent 'Others' from escaping the law (of legacy and debt)" and to inhibit movement away from the generation's core founding ideas (Roof 75). When Offred rejects the feminist expectations laid out before her, Offred's mother feels her efforts were in vain: "You don't know what we had to go through, just to get you where you are. Look at him [Offred's husband], slicing up the carrots. Don't you know how many women's lives, how many women's *bodies*, the tanks had to roll over just to get that far?" [emphasis in original] (Atwood 122). Her emphasis on the physical cost of women's bodies to make progress is designed to remind Offred that many women gave up their own bodies in their fight for the rights and social conditions she thinks Offred is now taking for granted, such as having a husband who helps to cook. Offred's mother is trying to communicate that these women sacrificed their lives and bodies so that other women, like Offred, could choose what to do with their own bodies. Her reference to the women's bodies rolled over by tanks is designed to remind Offred of her unfulfilled social debt by reminding her of the actions of past women. Offred's mother clearly wants her daughter to be grateful for

her sacrifices and to show that gratitude by fulfilling her social debt to feminism, yet the generational gap between the two means the message is not received as intended. Therefore, Offred's gratitude, or Offred's mother's expectation of her gratitude, is not just an expression of appreciation but instead an obligation that Offred must fulfill.

The lack of understanding and respect between Offred and her mother caused by the expectations of generational feminism creates a great divide in their relationship for many years. At first, the young Offred resents feminism because it pulls her mother's attention away from her. When Offred mother's takes her to the park to feed the ducks, Offred soon realizes her mother is actually there to see her friends and burn pornographic books. Hurt by her mother's deception, Offred plays with the ducks and sulks for a while: "She'd lied to me, Saturdays were supposed to be my day" (38). As Offred matures, she continues to resent her mother and her mother's feminist friends: "My mother and her rowdy friends. I didn't see why she had to dress that way, in overalls, as if she were young; or to swear so much" (180). Although there is always disagreement between mothers and daughters about how the other should dress, Offred also wants her mother to lead a fundamentally different lifestyle, "a life more ceremonious, less subject to makeshift and decampment" (181). The lifestyle of cultural feminism is thus what ultimately severs their relationship. Offred disapproves of her mother's way of living and wants something else for herself, while Offred's mother enjoys that lifestyle and wants her daughter to live the same way. Once Offred marries Luke, the break between Offred and her mother grows even more obvious as the differences in their preferred lifestyle become clear. In contrast to the seemingly normal qualities of the character of Offred who gets married, settles down and begins a family, her mother is described as a cultural feminist in search of a strong women's culture. Cultural feminism, as defined by Alice Echols in *Daring*

to be Bad, is “a movement aimed at reversing the cultural valuation of the male and the devaluation of the female.... Cultural feminists were generally essentialists who sought to celebrate femaleness...[and to organize] women around the principle of female difference” (Loudermilk 136). These feminists, including Offred’s mother, organized antipornography campaigns, worked for women’s reproductive rights and sought to create alternative female institutions based on the idea that women could only be truly free if they lived in a world free of male influence (Loudermilk 136). Offred’s mother asserts her views regarding the importance of a women’s culture to her daughter, even in the presence of her son-in-law: “I don’t want a man around, what use are they except for ten seconds’ worth of half babies. A man is just a woman’s strategy for making other women” (121). This announcement clearly shows her disapproval of Offred’s lifestyle because it does not fit in with her understanding of the needs of women. Offred’s mother then criticizes Luke for considering cooking to be simply a hobby: “Once upon a time you wouldn’t have been allowed to have such a hobby, they’d have called you queer,” she retorts (121). By saying “once upon a time,” Offred’s mother recognizes this social stereotype is not true anymore—that Luke will no longer be called queer for cooking—yet it seems like she is stuck in that outdated understanding of an individual’s place in society. To the reader, it is almost as if Offred’s mother cannot escape her own understandings of generational feminism to embrace new ideas about society, even though she recognizes her understandings are no longer valid. In an attempt to diffuse any hard feelings, Offred responds, “Now, Mother.... Let’s not get into an argument about nothing” (121). Offred’s attempt to bring peace only creates more anger as Offred’s mother claims her daughter does not understand the sacrifices of the women who came before her (121). Offred’s use of the word “nothing” signifies to Offred that she does not think an argument over whether Luke

is queer for enjoying cooking is pertinent to life anymore, yet her mother interprets it as a brush off of the struggles of previous generations of feminists. The lack of understanding about what social problems continue to be relevant deepens the split between Offred and her mother. This rift leaves Offred in a hard situation; she cannot talk about her mother's expectations because she does not fulfill them, yet she cannot simply change the subject because then she appears indifferent or rebellious. It also makes Offred appear as though she does not participate in feminism or perpetuate its beliefs, while in truth Offred simply does not participate in her mother's definition of feminism.

The relationship between Offred and her mother symbolically represents the relationships between whole generations of women. Just as their mother-daughter relationship is damaged by unfulfilled generational expectations, those same expectations can damage the relationships between whole generations of women. When one generation of feminists fails to fulfill the expectations put forth by an earlier generation, their common goals and beliefs are broken and they begin to lose their connections with one another. When a woman chooses to ignore this generational debt and introduce new beliefs and causes to feminism, she introduces diversification in the form of spontaneous generation. These new ideas can eventually lead to less unity among feminists who are fighting for different things and lead to the fragmentation of one feminism into many. The disintegration of a unified feminism into a myriad of disconnected or loosely tethered beliefs can cause some people to believe that feminism is dying. The relationship between Offred and her mother therefore represents both the strengths and weaknesses of the generational legacy of feminism as a useful tool for thinking about feminism, yet the relationship also shows that generational legacy cannot be the sole foundation for the continuation of feminism.

Spontaneous Generation in *The Handmaid's Tale*

While the experiences of the characters in Atwood's novel show the pitfalls of generational feminism, the author uses both the character of Offred and the form of her narrative to argue that spontaneous generation offers women a better opportunity for social progress. According to the idea of spontaneous generation as defined by Judith Roof in "Generational Difficulties; or The Fear of a Barren History," a feminist generation decides upon its course of action based on its recognition of the oppressive conditions it faces or the need to redefine women's history. Unlike the "mobilizing historical consciousness" that leads generational feminism, a spontaneous generation of feminism is characterized by "originary self-creation" (Wiegman 810). This new spontaneous generation "will in some way ignore their forebears and either pay no attention to the previous generation's fecundating matrix, letting progress lapse, or will effect an Oedipal rebellion, rejecting their mothers' model and commencing a new and different battle" (Roof 70). Spontaneous generation is therefore designed to fit the needs of the generation it addresses rather than being skewed by the expectations of earlier women. Because spontaneous generation "arrives from instantaneous recognition, not historical (generational) memory," spontaneous generation also marks an interruption or break that is "erratic or unpredictable" in the line of patriarchal understanding of history and time (Wiegman 811).

This break with memory is an important attribute of spontaneous generation because it completely changes the way one thinks about one's actions. In Atwood's novel, Aunt Lydia refers to the first generation of handmaids as the "transitional generation": "It is the hardest for you. We know the sacrifice you are being expected to make.... For the ones who come after you, it will be easier. They will accept their duties with willing hearts. She did not say:

Because they will have no memories, of any other way. She said: Because they won't want things they can't have" (117). According to Aunt Lydia, the handmaids' memories draw them back from their willingness to embrace new things (including the new Gileadean government), just as the debt of generational legacy draws women back from embracing their own ideas or needs. By referring to these handmaids as the transitional generation, Aunt Lydia is virtually separating the generations of women into generational legacy and spontaneous generation: Offred's generation still clings to its old life and its memories of those freedoms as an example of generational legacy, while the new generation will not have these memories and thus will embrace their duties willingly as a new spontaneous generation. While Aunt Lydia uses these terms for very different purposes than the way they have been used in this paper, the end result is the same. History and memories can serve necessary functions, such as allowing a person to see the social progress that has been made, but by focusing on the present instead of the past, one can have a more open and accepting future.

Because spontaneous generation is not based on memory, it is therefore deeply rooted in the present without making claims about the past or future. On the one hand, spontaneous generation's loss of history represents the loss of collectivity and collective thought. History demands conscious thought beyond the individual self, which is essential to creating a social movement that applies to an entire group or population rather than just an individual. Because memories serve these important social functions, it is therefore integral that a generation does not lose all of its connections to its past. However, by removing feminism's basis from a patriarchal understanding of time, spontaneous generation renegotiates and even redefines feminism's relationship to society as well as its role in producing social progress: "In a paradigm where history, governed by linear time, becomes the cause of ensuing events, the

concepts of originality, pioneer, tradition, and precedent make sense. But if we challenge the very notions of time and history that ground these ideas, *generation* becomes an insignificant term in the creation, re-creation, sharing and proliferation of feminist knowledges” (Roof 86). Spontaneous generation therefore breaks down the boxes created by feminism and replaces them with entirely new ways of thinking about women’s problems, rather than just solutions that have been slightly tweaked.

Because all social movements must begin with a first generation that reacts to oppressive social conditions, every social movement begins with spontaneous generation, regardless of the choices of later generations. While theoretically it is not difficult to begin a spontaneous generation, it can be quite difficult to maintain. According to literary critic Robyn Wiegman, the spontaneous generation that began and continues to control U.S. feminism’s future “is not so much eradicated as incorporated into sequential time as the original founding moment, the now-canonical scene of feminist self-invention” (811). By incorporating this spontaneous generation into sequential time rather than rejecting it, generational feminists effectively take power away from many of the characterizing features of spontaneous generation, including its roots in the present time:

Generational legacy operates, then, through the strategic foreclosure of the possibility of existing *in time with new* and radically discontinuous modes of spontaneous generation. This foreclosure is the necessary bar to—quite literally—nontraditional productions of feminist subjectivity, and it is the transgression of this bar, the irruption of nontraditional (that is, non-originary) subjectives, that threatens feminism’s future by pulling it out of sequential time. To think about feminism’s political time as non-linear, multidirectional, and simultaneous as [Judith] Roof discusses means engaging with a

highly mobile and nonidentical feminism, one whose historicity is not captured by crafting for feminism an identity based on continuities of feminism's political time.

[emphasis in original] (Wiegman 811)

Because it is so easy to convert and incorporate spontaneous generation into generational feminism, it becomes easy to lose the new and unique perspective that sparked the spontaneous generation. This is not to say that spontaneous generation is more important than generational legacy. However, because each of these social tools serves different functions, it is important for individuals to be mindful of the social tool they are using to be sure it has not changed into something else.

One of the many—but also one of the most important—questions feminist spontaneous generation allows women to answer is about women's place in the social contract. In her essay "Women's Time," Julia Kristeva asks, "No longer wishing to be excluded or no longer content with the function which has always been demanded of us (to maintain, arrange, and perpetuate this symbolic contract. . .), how can we [as women] reveal our place, first as it is bequeathed to us by tradition, and then as we want to transform it?" (qtd. in "Julia Kristeva"). Atwood's novel helps the reader to answer this question in *The Handmaid's Tale*, first by exploring the experiences of Offred and her mother, and then by contrasting them with the conservative functions of a variety of women under the totalitarian theocracy of Gilead. This single question, this search for the limits of the "sociosymbolic contract," inevitably "leads to the active research, still rare, undoubtedly hesitant but always dissident, being carried out by women in the human sciences; particularly those attempts, in the wake of contemporary art, to break the code, to shatter language, to find specific discourse closer to the body and emotions, to the unnameable repressed by the social contract" [sic] (qtd. in "Julia Kristeva"). As a novel

that probes female subjugation and agency, Atwood's novel certainly examines women's proper position and proper social functions through the narrative.

In order to consider Offred's narrative to be probing this question, one must first consider Offred to be a feminist. Throughout *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred shows such a disdain for her mother's feminism that this may be difficult for some readers to accept. In fact, some critics have identified the novel's romance plot, including Offred's affair with Nick and his potential involvement in her rescue from Gilead, as "follow[ing] decidedly conservative narrative forms" and thus not feminist at all (Miner 148). With Nick described as the fairy-tale prince and Offred as the damsel in distress, some critics argue that narratives that enact the emotion of love have "a limited number of scripts" from which to follow, and "undermine the very possibility of individuality (and love)" and thus any hope of considering Offred to be a feminist (Miner 164). This reading, however, ignores the implications of the form through which Offred conveys her narrative. While the "traditional dystopia (and eutopia) generally assumes, and to some point depends upon, a linear conception of time," Offred uses a nonlinear form that contrasts sharply with these time-based patriarchal expectations to tell a story no male could ever tell (Ketterer 213). Offred's story does not end with a happily ever after. In fact, Offred's story never ends: "Readers are left to write their own ending, and those unwilling to relinquish the traditional ending will...cling to the idea of a hero motivated by love of the heroine," yet it is the reader's decision to embrace that traditional ending (Morrison 328). While the novel may provide multiple romance plots throughout the story, the ending is "nonetheless effectively deprived of a hero" (Morrison 328). Therefore, these critics are incorrect. Offred gives her readers a new way of thinking about women's place in society, a glimpse into the daily life of a handmaid, and a fuller understanding of the obstacles women

face in today's society. Rather than presenting a traditional ending, Atwood's abrupt and uncertain ending urges readers to examine why they feel dissatisfied and how aspects of this fictitious republic parallel with their own culture as a way for the reader to enter into feminist discourse.

Other critics may argue that while Offred shows some of the characteristics of a feminist, Moira offers the reader a better example of a revolutionary and determined one. Unlike the other handmaids in the novel, Moira is described as the only female character with the guts and know-how to buck the Gileadean system. Although her first attempt to escape the Rachel and Leah Center is unsuccessful, she is determined to try it again. Offred and the other handmaids idealize their image of Moira and her power: "Moira was our fantasy.... In the light of Moira, the Aunts were less fearsome and more absurd," Offred says (133). While Moira may seem like a super-rebel out to create real change, a closer look reveals that Moira is less successful than Offred gives her credit for. After Moira's second attempted escape from the Center, she ends up as a prostitute serving the sexual needs of the male Commanders at Jezebel's. As a lesbian who seeks female relationships and the "equal" balance of power they provide for sexual relations, Moira's position as a prostitute marks a significant failure because it compromises the way in which Moira wants to live her life (Atwood 172). Moira also follows Offred's mother's version of feminism, and more specifically cultural feminism, but Moira's decisions reflect the exact feminist beliefs that seem to make the least sense. Even Offred recognizes Moira's naivety for thinking she can live in a world totally free of male influence: "There [is] more than one way of living with your head in the sand and if Moira thought she could create Utopia by shutting herself up in a women-only enclave she was sadly mistaken. Men [are] not just going to go away" (172). The reader never hears Moira's version

of the events or learns about her fate because Moira's story is recounted by Offred instead. By including Moira and her story in the novel, Atwood in effect strengthens the case for Offred as a strong feminist. To the reader, Offred is a female role model, a woman who admits to her own flaws and can connect with the wants and needs of other women, and an example of successful spontaneous generation. While Moira seems like the stronger woman of the two characters, her lack of ability to fulfill these roles in the novel allows the reader to see how Offred can blossom as an everywoman who can, and does, represent the needs of a variety of women.

Although Offred rejects her mother's version of feminism, the form and contents of *The Handmaid's Tale* allow Offred to claim a new type of feminism for herself by using the ideas of spontaneous generation. Throughout the narrative, Offred is constantly aware of the power she holds over her story, particularly as she draws attention to how the narrative is a loose reconstruction of events. Toward the end of the novel Offred tells her readers, "I've tried to put some of the good things in [the story] as well. Flowers, for instance, because where would we be without them?" (267). In this passage, Offred calls attention to the way in which she can manipulate her narrative as a tool to further engage readers and draw upon their emotions. Throughout the novel, Offred refuses to identify her real name to the reader: "I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I'll come back to dig up, one day. I think of this name as buried... the names floats there behind my eyes, not quite within reach, shining in the dark" (84). Offred's emphasis on her power over the narrative and even her own name ensures the reader understands that Offred is using the novel as a tool to convey a message, rather than describing a play-by-play of events. Offred also addresses her novel to *Dear you*, without giving the specific identity of *you*: "Just *you*, without a name.... *You* can

mean more than one. *You* can mean thousands” [emphasis in original] (40). Atwood’s decision not to reveal Offred’s real name, just like Offred’s narrative addressed to simply *you*, allows these words to ambiguously refer to anyone the reader chooses. By keeping her real name secret, Offred can represent anyone or even no one in particular; thus she can represent not only *any* woman but also *every*woman. She can tell the story to any *you*—or any number of *yous*—who read the novel. Because of the ambiguity surrounding Offred’s past and her ability to simultaneously represent multiple women, the novel becomes a social tool for the investigation into the plight of many individuals rather than simply a biography of one woman.

At the end of the novel, Offred openly admits she does not like her story, and says she wishes it “showed [her] in a better light, if not more happy, then at least more active, less hesitant, less distracted by trivia” (267). By using the word *active* in this sentence, which is a word commonly associated with social movements and feminist activities, Offred indicates she wishes she had taken a larger role in determining the path of her life before Gilead, whether through personal decisions or by joining a social movement such as feminism. While Offred may not classify her narrative as particularly revolutionary to feminism or even feminist at all, a reader can certainly classify it in this way because Offred speaks for entire generations of women. By telling the story of all of these women within her own narrative, Offred begins to act as a self-appointed spokeswoman for the women of Gilead. Offred’s flashbacks to her lifestyle before Gilead contrast with her depictions of the restricted lives of handmaids. This contrast in turn further emphasizes both the similarities and differences between the reader’s society and the fictional one presented in the novel: “Through the description of her loss of freedom, ...the narrator [Offred] attempts to redress her own contribution of the former conditions of the other women around the world and to the current conditions of the

Handmaids” (Dodson 17). Therefore, not only does Offred’s narrative figuratively represent many women, but her single voice also literally “doubles and multiplies to become the voices of ‘women’ rather than the voice of a single narrator” (Howells 133). These women include Janine, Serena Joy, her best friend Moira, her mother, herself and even the handmaid who carved a secret message in the wardrobe. By the end of the novel, Offred understands “that women’s conditions cannot be conflated,” that each woman’s story and social desires are unique, and therefore equally deserve to be told (Dodson 17). Offred’s narrative is unique and therefore revolutionary because it tells a tale that many other people would choose to hide or ignore. By using her power as storyteller to select the tidbits she tells to the reader and the order in which she tells them, Offred’s tale “claims a space, a large autobiographical space, within the novel and so relegates the grand narratives to the margins as mere framework for her story which is the main focus of interest” (Howells 127). Offred therefore makes the stories of these other women a part of her narrative, while pushing the larger narrative of Gilead to the side. Offred even volunteers to tell the story of other women she meets: “I keep going on with this sad and hungry and sordid, this limping and mutilated story because after all I want you to hear it, as I will hear yours too if I ever get the chance, if I meet you or if you escape, in the future or in heaven or in prison or underground, some other place” (268). By validating each woman’s struggle and agreeing to hear their stories along with telling them her own, Offred encourages every woman to participate in her own form of spontaneous generation, or to at least allow Offred to help her tell her story. Offred’s choice to record her narrative can be seen as an act of spontaneous generation because it breaks the patriarchal expectations that accompany her position as handmaid. By willingly sharing her sometimes-graphic story with her audience, Offred presents the reader with “a mosaic of alternative female worlds which

undermine Gilead's patriarchal myth of women's submissiveness and silence" (Howells 134). The novel therefore becomes a tool through which to bring attention to the oppressive conditions women face, including those created by the generational legacy of feminism, in the form of spontaneous generation to create social change.

Social Links to Time

A reader's interest in the generational legacy of feminism in *The Handmaid's Tale* is inherently linked to time because the legacy compares the similarities and differences between generations over the decades. Generational legacy is associated with a linear or chronological understanding of time in which earlier elements seem to cause, or at least shape, later ones (Roof 71). Because women are more traditionally associated with the cyclical realm of domesticity and the home, generational feminism therefore imprisons women within this linear understanding of time with which they are not usually associated. To understand how this generational legacy of feminism is depicted in the novel, the reader can examine how Atwood manipulates the various structures of time. Atwood's narrative is highly interested in time, yet it is equally as invested in the cyclical as it is in the linear. For example, Offred's narrative clearly maps the expectations of Offred's mother and her generational feminism, which are associated with linear time. However, the nonlinear structure Offred uses to tell her story breaks the reader's expectations in order to juxtapose events within the narrative, and offers an example of how cyclical time can be a useful tool. Throughout the novel, this struggle between cyclical and linear time forms a significant cornerstone to understanding women's places in society. The contrast between these two understandings of time allows the reader to understand the negative social implications of pigeonholing women into just one understanding of time.

The novel also shows the benefits of using both of these forms of time simultaneously through the decisions of the characters. By embracing both cyclical and linear time, women are able to choose which understanding or understandings of time, and therefore the social function, they wish to be associated with. According to Barbara Adams, society naturally embraces both cyclical and linear time because they “are integral to social life.... Repetition always involves variation; it takes place within rather than outside the irreversibility of time. In other words, linear and cyclical times are always mutually implicated and interdependent” (Felski 19-20). For example by embracing both the linear and cyclical, women can simultaneously be devoted mothers with successful careers. While not all women will choose to embrace both understandings of time, it is necessary that women have the opportunity to choose the path they think is best for themselves. Women who have the ability to actively choose which understandings of time to embrace in their lives have more freedom and control over the paths of their lives. Embracing both understandings of time also helps women reclaim the cyclical as an integral part of life. Because the ideas put forth by cultural feminists strictly encouraged women to engage in linear time, a woman’s choice to remain in the home and associate with the cyclical can be interpreted as social regression. By choosing to return to the household, these women can be seen as forgoing the progress of previous generations of feminists. However, by examining how Offred’s narrative shows the benefits and shortcomings of each understanding of time individually, the reader can see how the two understandings can work together to help women lead more fulfilling lives, as well as offer new perspectives on life.

The associations between generational feminism and spontaneous generation with linear (or chronological) time are easy to identify. Generational feminism uses a familial understanding of time in which “the past produces the future as parents produce children,” and

thus it must be unidirectional (Roof 71). Since it is based upon the idea of maintaining continuity between generations of women in order to make social progress, it is intent upon joining the same historical, linear time in which men engage. Because of the guilt caused by the generational debt set up by previous feminists, women may feel trapped into perpetuating these ideas of generational feminism and its engagement in the linear. Consequently, besides imposing an understanding of the appropriate aims of feminism upon women, generational feminism also imprisons women within this linear understanding of time. Spontaneous generation can also be interested in the linear. Although members of a spontaneous generation ignore the work of their foremothers, their efforts mark turning points from the previous work. These turning points can be historically significant to the linear timeline of feminist progress and even mark the beginning of new feminist waves. Although this seems to show new and different progress, the word *wave* actually “obscures and repeats the generational metaphor” that organizes feminism, and therefore implies an expectation of consistent aims with linear progress (Roof 77). While *wave* seems like a “benign and neutral” term, in reality it “evades but still implies the familial apparatus and at the same time figures change as aggressive, foreign, and superficial,” because waves center around the idea of rising and falling in a pattern of constant, undulating, potentially even unchanging motion (Roof 77). These new waves can serve as new linear pathways for feminist progress, thereby reinforcing the generational legacy of feminism and its connection with linear time. Even the definition of feminism can emphasize the influence of the linear. In her book *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture*, literary critic Rita Felski writes, “[f]eminism defines itself in a critical relationship to the past, and aspires to a better future. Feminism is, in other words, a *project*, requiring a purposeful and hopeful relationship with future time” [emphasis in original] (21-

22). Just as she uses the word “project” to describe feminism, Felski also says men have traditionally been encouraged to think of their lives as a “project” that ideally leads “toward the goal of individual and public achievement through a series of well-defined stages” (21). By drawing on the same language to define each of these, Felski links the goals that underlie feminism with the project of linear time associated with men’s lives.

The first generations of feminists began their movement as a way to fight against the limiting nature of their association solely with domesticity and its cyclical association. When women fought to gain the right to vote, they were fighting to have direct say over who was elected in order to affect the future progress of society, just like men; when they fought to hold the same jobs as men, they were fighting to be allowed to participate in the economy and make social contributions, just like men. By entering into social discourse, these women sought to penetrate “the time of linear history, where women’s accomplishments could be inserted into the linear timeline of human history” (McAfee 93). The cultural feminists of the 1970s in particular pushed women to be involved in the linear. Cultural feminists believed women could only be free if they lived in a world free of male influence, and therefore demanded that women had to enter into society in order to become autonomous individuals (Loudermilk 136). To get rid of this “male influence,” women were presented with two options: they could either attempt to live in a world that did not contain men or they could insert themselves into society with men to fight for more equal rights. Since the first option is unrealistic because some interaction with men is required to continue the human race, these cultural feminists were essentially arguing for women to break out of the domestic, cyclical sphere and engage in society as free individuals with equal rights.

The novel's associations with linear time are best viewed through the characters' constant daydreams about pre-Gileadean life. Throughout the novel, both Offred and Serena Joy wish for their old lives and the freedom to return to the linear. The character of Serena Joy, or Pam as she was previously known, is the antifeminist who, under Gilead, has now succeeded in attaining the exact place for women for which she strongly advocated. Once a talented singer, Pam left her profession to make speeches about the sanctity of the home and how it is the woman's natural place to remain within the home (45). Yet when Pam's cries for women to remain in the house are finally realized in the republic of Gilead, Serena Joy is unhappy in the home: "She doesn't make speeches anymore. She has become speechless. It [the home] seem[s] to disagree with her. How furious she must be, now that she's been taken at her word," Offred explains (46). No longer able to travel around to give speeches, Serena Joy is effectively removed from the linear time of society and stuck in the home. Although the reader never hears Serena Joy say she misses her old life, her resentment toward the other women in the house and their freedoms insinuates to the reader that she misses the freedoms formerly afforded to her through her associations with linear time.

Offred also clearly misses her connection to linear time. While Offred does not act resentful toward other women like Serena Joy, she spends most of her free time in Gilead reminiscing about her past life as a mother and wife. She often tries to escape from Gilead by lying on her bed and allowing herself to daydream back to her life before, remembering her conversations with Moira and her mother, or picturing her daughter and husband. Offred's narrative shows that she desperately wants to return to her old life: "I want her [Offred's mother] back. I want everything back, the way it was. But there is no point to it, this wanting" (122). Of her daydreams about her previous life, a surprising number of them are about

Offred's job, her affair with Luke and her life before her daughter. This preoccupation with her old job, which she contrasts with her new position as a handmaid, shows that Offred misses her old job and its link to linear time. Because Offred returns to these memories several times throughout the novel, the reader is left feeling like Offred's loss of connection with linear time has debilitated her as a person: "I feel as if somebody cut off my feet," Offred tells her husband when she first loses her job (179). Because Offred spends more time reminiscing about her previous life without her daughter rather than with her, the reader can infer that Offred's broken connection to linear time weighs more heavily on her mind than her loss of cyclical time related to raising her daughter. In Gilead, Offred is stuck in the house so much that she mostly reminisces about the past when she had the ability to go where she wanted, do what she wanted and earning her own living, rather than dwelling heavily on her former connections to domesticity.

While the novel clearly depicts examples of women who wish to return to linear time, the novel also shows how limiting it can be to be associated with only the linear. As Offred laments her current situation in Gilead, she tries to console herself by saying she must forget about her old lifestyle: "But that's [Gilead] where I am, there's no escaping it. Time's a trap, I'm caught in it. I must forget about my secret name and all ways back. My name is Offred now, and here is where I live" (143). While Offred resents her current situation and her powerlessness to rejoin the linear, it is exactly that linear time that she condemns in this quotation. By saying "[t]ime's a trap," she is referring to the way in which linear time forces the individual to consider one's life to be a forward linear progression, without the possibility of returning to the past. She wants to rejoin the linear time, but the only way she can get around it linear "trap" is to use cyclical time as an escape into her previous memories. This

example therefore calls attention to the way in which linear time can frustrate itself, yet one can escape this limitation by combining it with the cyclical. Offred's solution of embracing the cyclical and living through memory is certainly not perfect because it does not represent true living at all. However, Offred's memories serve a larger function than simply consoling her as an individual. By putting her memories in the form of the narrative, these memories are shared with a large audience of readers who can listen to her story and take action on her behalf.

A woman's association with both the linear and the cyclical is not always easy in real life, nor it is easy for the characters in the novel. In a few cases in the novel, a character wants to or seems to want to embrace cyclical time yet society gets in the way of that wish. Serena Joy's previous job as a speaker who advocated for women to remain in the home ironically meant Serena Joy could not stay in the home. Serena Joy could choose one or the other of these dreams to fulfill, yet she could not simultaneously fulfill both. While this is not an ideal situation in which to be placed, today's society offers women some ways of getting around such a roadblock. For example, women today can "telecommute," write books or blogs from home, and participate in lectures via telephones. Although these are more modern options that may not have been technologically available when Atwood wrote her novel, Atwood still did not provide Serena Joy with a way around this ironic problem. Therefore by not allowing Serena Joy to fulfill the exact social conditions for which she called, Atwood's novel begins to show how society forces the two understandings of time to remain mutually exclusive by only allowing women to exist within one understanding at a time.

Offred's mother gets stuck in a similar bind because of her association with cultural feminism. Offred's mother sings the faults of men and claims she does not need a man in her life, which places her somewhat at odds with domesticity and cyclical time. By rejecting men

in her life, she forces herself to be involved in society and do the social tasks a man is typically responsible for, including earning a salary. As a feminist who is politically active in working for women's issues, Offred's mother is expected by her peers to remain within her society of feminist friends and work for additional rights for women, which further strengthens her connection with society and its chronological time. However, Offred's mother also chooses to step outside of linear time and embrace the "other" role of women in which women stay in the home to raise children, thereby choosing to engage in cyclical time as well as linear time. Offred's mother emphasizes her involvement in both cyclical and linear time when she tells Offred's father to "bugger off" because she makes a decent salary and can afford daycare for Offred (121). Her job, and therefore her link to linear and social time, allows her to appropriately raise her daughter, who connects her to cyclical time. However her decision to have a baby does not go over well with many of her other feminist friends. Her oldest friend Tricia accuses her of being "pronatalist," indicating that by participating in the biological role of mother, Offred's mother is somehow betraying feminism and her feminist friends; she is trying to inhabit both social and domestic time (120). Her decision to have a child clearly distances her from her friends because they do not understand her decision and consider the age of thirty-seven to be too late in life to risk having a child (120). Although Offred's mother successfully raises Offred and lives her life according to her own terms, she also admits that she would cry because she was lonely: "You have no idea how lonely I was. And I had friends, I was a lucky one, but I was lonely anyway," she tells her daughter (122). Offred's mother does not explicitly say why she was so lonely, but the reader can infer it was because she felt cut off from deep relationships with her friends, Offred's father and any other potential men because of her feminist beliefs. Therefore, society's lack of acceptance of women who are involved in

both understandings of time proves to be detrimental to many of Offred's mother's relationships and leaves her feeling lonely and unfulfilled. From this example of Offred's mother, the reader can see how society works to limit women to only one understanding of time by its lack of acceptance.

Yet society is not the only one to blame in the case of Offred's mother. While society as a whole discourages women from simultaneously engaging in multiple understandings of time, generational feminism pushes for women to associate with the linear rather than the cyclical because it believes this is the single association that will allow women to make progress. By requiring women to embrace the linear, generational feminists therefore uphold the existing patriarchal system that separates the two understandings of time rather than working to overturn it. These feminists therefore assimilated into the male status quo in an attempt to establish their place within society (McAfee 94):

When the women's movement began as the struggle of suffragists and existential feminists, it sought to stake out its place in the linear time of planning and history. As a result, although the movement was universalist from the start, it was deeply rooted in the sociopolitical life of nations. The political demands of women, their struggles for equal pay for equal work and for the right to the same opportunities as men have, as well as the rejection of feminine or maternal traits considered incompatible with participation in such a history all stem from the logic of identification with values that are not ideological (such values have rightly been criticized as too reactionary) but logical and ontological with regard to the dominant rationality of the nation and the state. (Kristeva 207)

By embracing this movement, these women were validating the rejection of their “feminine or maternal traits,” along with the association of cyclical time that accompanies these traits, in order to try to join linear time. For example by arguing that women can only be made truly free by removing all male influence from their lives, cultural feminists validated—at least in part—the separation of men and women. In order to remove this male influence cultural feminists, including the friends of Offred’s mother, often shied away from having children. Since the ability to have a child is a biological truth for most women, these women were therefore denying or compromising a part of their social identity to try to join linear time. The decision of these women not to raise children furthered the separation between women who chose to be socially active and women who chose to be mothers, which emphasizes that women cannot be both mothers and socially active simultaneously. Therefore, the cultural feminist’s argument that women must become involved in society and therefore chronological time and thereby leave behind the cyclical, is just as restrictive as relegating women to only cyclical time. Both of these options limit the choices available to women, place specific expectations as to what is appropriate upon them and even work to impose an identity upon women.

While the novel depicts the wants and needs of women in relation to linear time, it contrasts linear time with the benefits and pitfalls of the cyclical. Female cyclical time has traditionally been most often associated with a woman’s place in the home and her duties to her family. Within the home are the cycles of sleeping, eating and getting rid of waste (Felski 20). Obviously women are not the only ones connected with these cycles; they apply equally to men, women and even children. However, since women have traditionally been the social group connected to the home and these cycles occur in the home, women have been considered to be the group connected to these cycles. Women are also connected to the other cycles of

housework that occur in the home, which include cooking, cleaning and running errands.

These cycles are repetitive and never-ending: “Nothing new is ever created—that would be production—instead the old is recreated or reproduced” (McAfee 94). Without a sense of the newness of creation, a woman’s connection with cyclical time is not necessarily glamorous, and can even seem monotonous. Therefore, linking women’s bodies to cycles and cyclical time does not, in and of itself, seem liberating. In fact, many of the first feminist movements were based upon women’s recognition of the limitations imposed on their lives by domesticity and cyclical time. Yet cyclical time can be liberating for a woman if that is the, or part of the, life path she chooses. By ensuring that each woman constantly has the ability to choose whether to embrace cyclical time, society ensures that each woman is allowed to seek out the life that she finds most fulfilling.

By the nature of their bodies, women are also connected with the cycles of menstruation, pregnancy and child rearing. The cycles of a woman’s body are due to hormone levels, and therefore they are unavoidably a part of women’s lives. Even if a woman chooses not to give birth to a child, the natural processes of her body continue to connect her to these cycles until she is no longer biologically able to have children. When a woman becomes pregnant and gives birth, her pregnancy and childbirth can potentially and temporarily interrupt her life, with the cycle beginning again when she becomes pregnant with another child. In Gilead, a handmaid’s connection with the cycles of menstruation and pregnancy identify their sole duty to society because of the dangerously low birthrate: “Everything [I wear] except the wings around my face is red: the color of blood, which defines us,” Offred explains to her reader (8). She knows she is defined by the menstrual cycles of her body, which is why handmaids are forced to wear red (or the color of blood). Offred’s position within Gilead is

very limiting because this is what society demands. As a handmaid, she is not allowed to participate in linear time or even in other domestic functions that are related to cyclical time. Yet a woman's connection with cyclical time does not have to be so limiting. While Offred suffers from an obligatory and limiting connection with cyclical time, her mother was free to choose whether she wanted to have a child. Offred's mother's choice to embrace cyclical time even though it does not sit well with her friends shows she feels a pull to the female cyclical time. Her decision to have a child so late in life is also a strong example of how society needs to allow women to continue to choose the understanding of time with which to be associated because as a woman matures and changes, her decisions may change.

There are clearly many examples in the novel that depict the drawbacks of cyclical time, yet these instances are contrasted with examples of Offred unconsciously identifying with or even using cyclical time. These connections with cyclical time help to redeem it as an integral part of a woman's life and a useful tool for the feminist movement, even though Offred wishes to be more connected with the linear. While Offred outwardly appears to yearn for her old life, her job and her connections to linear time, her offhand comments about baking bread, for example, show the reader that she still values her place within the home too. When she enters the kitchen at the Commander's house and smells the yeast used to bake a loaf of bread, she describes the "nostalgic smell" of the kitchen: "It reminds me of other kitchens, kitchens that were mine. It smells of mothers; although my own mother did not make bread. It smells of me, in former times, when I was a mother" (47). According to Merriam-Webster Online, the word "nostalgia" implies "a wistful or excessively sentimental yearning for [a] return to or of some past period or irrecoverable condition" ("Nostalgia"). In other words, Offred's use of the word "nostalgic" to describe her reaction to the smell of yeast and its relationship with her

connection to a domestic duty shows she still feels a connection to her previous domestic duties. This smell not only reminds her of the past when she was a mother baking bread but it also makes her want to return to that time in her life, which proves that Offred values her connection to cyclical time more than she initially lets on.

While Offred's connection to the smell of the bread offers a momentary glimpse of her embracing cyclical time, her consistent connection throughout the narrative with the moon shows a deeper relationship with the cyclical. For Offred, the moon and its lunar calendar offer her a way of rethinking nature and her connection to it. The phases of the moon mimic a woman's biological calendar from beginning to end: the new crescent moon represents the virgin, who is young, thin and without child; the full moon is "gigantic, round [and] heavy" like a mother who is pregnant with life; and the waning crescent is the old woman who is no longer full of new life (Hall 3). The moon's phases act a natural calendar for Offred because every time she sees another new moon, she knows she has been barren for one more month and thus is one month closer to being an "unwoman": "Every month there is a moon, gigantic, round, heavy, an omen. It transits, pauses, continues on and passes out of sight, and I see despair coming towards me like famine. To feel that empty, again, again. I listen to my heart, wave upon wave, salty and red, continuing on and on, marking time" (74). For Offred the moon marks two separate kinds of time; it represents the time it takes for a baby to form inside the growing belly of a pregnant woman, as well as the memory of the passage of multiple months at once by making her feeling "that empty, again, again" at once (74).

While at first Offred's connection with the moon appears to be based solely on the obsession that Gilead places on female fertility, a deeper reading reveals the moon represents female existence to Offred. It is possible that Offred feels a connection with the natural

calendar of the moon because Gilead has decreed she must either give birth to a child or be sent off to the Colonies as an “unwoman.” Likewise, Offred’s statement toward the end of the novel that she marks “time by the moon. Lunar, not solar” follows the Western cultural bias of the associations of the masculine sun and the feminine moon (Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* 199). However, the reader learns Offred’s connection to the moon goes much deeper than simply the associations of her society. Offred describes her need in the middle of the night to get up and see the moon: “[Y]es, in the obscured sky a moon does float, newly, a wishing moon, a sliver of ancient rock, a goddess, a wink. The moon is a beautiful stone and the sky is full of deadly hardware, but oh God, how beautiful anyway” (97). Offred’s appreciation of the moon as beautifully floating in the sky like a “goddess, a wink” show that she feels a connection that involves a deeper appreciation of what the moon can represent rather than just the representation of fertility that her society has associated it with. Rather than referring to it again as the symbol of her biological calendar or a grim representation of her empty womb, Offred appreciates both the beauty of the moon and its resiliency for showing up in the sky despite the “deadly hardware” or bright searchlight that makes its way back and forth across the sky each night (97). The image of the moon also reminds her of her own husband Luke, and she says she wants him to be there so she can be valued in the way that she used to be, before becoming a handmaid (97). Offred’s connection with the fertility of the moon cannot only be related to her wish to become pregnant in Gileadean society because her wish for Luke connects her to a previous time when her pregnancy was a choice rather than a governmental requirement. Instead, the moon symbolizes Offred’s existence as a woman. Just as Offred admires the resiliency of the moon to remain up in the sky despite the harsh light cast the government’s lights, the reader can admire Offred for her efforts as a handmaid under the harsh

control of the same government. Offred even makes the comparison between herself and the moon for her reader. While speaking to the Commander about her opinion of Gilead and her place within it, Offred tries to clear her mind by imaging “the sky, at night, when there’s no moon” (211). She resists answering his question regarding how she feels about Gilead because she does not want to give him intimacy: “I have no opinion,” she responds (211). By imagining the empty night sky and thus trying to imagine away her own opinion, Offred is mentally equating herself and the existence of her beliefs with the existence of the moon in the sky. Offred’s connection with the moon and appreciation of its beauty therefore prove she prizes her relationship with cyclical time, even if she is not fully aware of it. Offred is not alone in her perceived connection with the moon. According to Nor Hall in *The Moon and the Virgin*, there are many “literal and unexplainable relationships between the lunar body and our own” feminine bodies or the feminine principle, including “a rhythm of constant change, the waxing and waning of creativity, of love of life, of the ability to be with people, of our alertness and sexuality and health” (4). Offred’s relationship with the moon and its cycles is just one example of a widespread connection with the moon that is felt by many women. Therefore the contrast between Offred’s connection to the moon and her mother’s connection to linear time, which is emphasized by Atwood’s use of juxtaposition throughout the novel, helps the reader see how the generational legacy of feminism obscures women’s ability to connect with and appreciated cyclical time. By reducing women’s connection to time to simply a linear understanding, generational feminism therefore hides a potential essence within a woman, as well as reduces her agency over her life by limiting her potential choices.

For Offred, the cyclical form of her narrative represents more than a choice. Instead it is the only way she finds she can express herself and her story. Toward the end of the novel,

Offred apologizes for the irregular way she has told her story: “I wish this story were different. I wish it were more civilized.... I’m sorry it’s in fragments, like a body caught in crossfire or pulled apart by force” (267). Her reference to the story not being “civilized” (therefore, conversely, it must be “uncivilized” or “uncultured”) refers to the broken expectations of her society for the narrative to be linear, and her narrative’s “fragments” break the patriarchal expectations of uninterrupted or complete chronology. Offred’s simile in which she compares the fragments of her story to a “body caught in crossfire or pulled apart by force” indicates violence upon the “body” of the text, and therefore violence upon the body of Offred, since it is after all her story. Her text—and her body—fall under “crossfire” as she works to navigate her needs among the social expectations she faces, and she feels “pulled apart by [the] force” of attempting to reconcile the two distinct ideas of time together. In this passage, Offred indirectly identifies one of the great difficulties facing women experimental writers, even fictional ones: reconciling patriarchal standards with feminine needs. Yet the nonlinear way in which the narrative of the novel proceeds indicates that this is the only way possible for Offred to recount it; she clearly wishes it better fit those expectations but this is the best she could do. Her desire to apologize for telling her story in a form that best suits her own needs, one that mimics her thought processes and the erratic nature of the memories from which the fragments are told, indicates that the social standard of patriarchal chronology weighs heavily on Offred’s consciousness. Although she wants desperately to rejoin linear society, she is unable to manage it in her narrative.

While Offred resents at least part of her connection to the cyclical, she finds that her nonlinear narrative is a successful way to tell her story because it mimics the conditions under which she lives. Unlike those unlucky people who were left for dead in ditches beside the road

or bludgeoned to death that Offred read about in the newspapers, Offred considers herself and those around her to live in the “blank white spaces” at the edges of the pages of print: “It gave us more freedom. We lived in the gaps between the stories,” she says (57). Since Offred feels like she lived in the “gaps,” she therefore creates those gaps in her narrative as a way to use the form of the novel to explore and explain the conditions under which she lived. For example, a great deal of Offred’s life exists outside of her physical body as she uses her memories to escape from Gilead. This lack of connection between the present of Gilead and the present of her memories create pockets of space in which she can alternate between various “present times” (even if the present occurred in the past but exists as the present in her memory). While Offred waits with the rest of the household for the Commander to begin his Biblical readings for the night, she describes what is going on in the room: “We wait, the clock in the hall ticks, Serena Joy lights another cigarette, I get into the car” (84). In this sentence, Offred is simultaneously conscious of the present time of Gilead yet also inhabits the present of her old life while she still had her husband and her car. While Offred’s narrative appears to go off on a tangent about her attempted escape with her family to Canada, she returns to the present in Gilead a few pages later with the words, “The Commander knocks at the door” (86). By cyclically returning to the same exact location in Gilead with only a few moments apparently having lapsed, Offred creates a gap in her narrative that emphasizes her agency as a storyteller, her reconstruction of herself as an individual, and her significance as a Gileadean historian (Howells 127). In the beginning of this paper, I discussed how the form of speculative fiction is like a kaleidoscope because it allows the author to show and compare multiple different social patterns. This is particularly true in places in which Atwood employs this technique of creating special gaps in the narrative that allow Offred to move around to another time or place.

By placing the events of Gilead directly next to events from Offred's former life—literally on the same page and within the same paragraph—Atwood forces the reader to compare the two lifestyles and the opportunities they offer by showing them a kaleidoscope of images. This comparison allows the reader to not only sympathize with Offred's position, but also recognize the ways in which the two depictions of society are more similar than different. By forcing the reader to confront these similarities, Atwood can turn a reader's more distant sympathy with an event into something that hits closer to home.

Besides creating a cyclical narrative that is full of gaps to break the reader's connection with the linear, Atwood further breaks the reader away from a linear narrative by avoiding specific time words. Offred's phrases such as "by that time," "when the time comes" and "at the time of the interview" give the reader a sense of time of events in relation to one another, yet avoids identifying a specific date for events (46, 109, 145). By removing identifying dates, Atwood allows her readers to more engage in imagining the narrative. Rather than supplying a specific date and place, and risking that the reader does not have a connection to that information, Offred's "vagueness" allows the reader to fill in information that can make the narrative apply to his or her own life. Rather than the traditional linear narrative that Offred wants to give her readers, the reader can therefore find that Offred's wandering, cyclical story is more valuable. This structure empowers both Offred as a storyteller to emphasize certain events or facts as well as the reader to apply the text to his or her own life. Rather than replicating the time scheme of many of the authors who preceded her, Offred's nonlinear narrative instead becomes a tool through which she can create new art.

By showing throughout her story how linear time can be useful yet also breaking her readers away from a linear narrative in the form of the novel, Offred as acts as an example to

her readers about the power of embracing both understandings of time. The happiest time depicted in the novel, and the one in which Offred often returns in her daydreams, is when Offred lives in the United States as a free citizen with a job and a family. During this time Offred holds a paid job with a bank account, raises her young daughter with the help of her husband, and travels around as she pleases. Offred's choice to live her life in this way may not meet the expectations of those around her, but it does connect her participation in chronological and cyclical time simultaneously: she brings home money from her job and gradually works her way up the employment ladder, yet she is still intimately connected with the cycles of menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth as indicated by her unnamed daughter. Offred's life during this time can therefore act as a symbol of happiness not only for herself but also for the reader.

A final call for the reader to embrace both linear and nonlinear understandings of time can be seen after the novel's formal end, when Atwood contrasts the nontraditional structures of the novel with a return to present society. Throughout the novel, Atwood sets up a series of expectations, albeit broken ones: she refuses to tell the reader the true name of Offred, Offred's mother and Offred's daughter; she refuses to identify the exact years in which the narrative takes place; she even refuses to describe what happens at the end of the novel to the narrator, thus denying the reader closure. As the reader begins the novel these nontraditional structures can seem strange and surprising, by the time he or she reaches the last few pages the structures have become more accustomed to the gaps in the narrative. Therefore, the thirteen pages of Historical Notes at the end of the novel can seem startling and abrupt. The introduction to the Historical Notes clearly names June 25, 2195 as the date of the symposium's proceedings and as the only section of the novel with a specific date, it clues the reader into the fact that the

narration of the novel has significantly changed from Offred's point of view (299). Readers can also see that the narrative has returned to a society much more similar to their own. Women are once again allowed to engage in a variety of aspects of society including working as professors, yet they are still at the mercy of men and their sexist jokes. By returning the reader to the present, Atwood forces the reader to compare the two societies together for the last time. Gone are Offred's search for "perspective" and carefree attitude about time in the new society of Gilead, Nunavit (143). Instead, they have been replaced by Pieixoto's incessant search for truth and linearity. For example, at the end of the novel the reader learns that Offred's story is not in its original form. First found as a group of thirty loose tapes in the bottom of a metal footlocker, it was up to Professors Pieixoto and Wade "to arrange the blocks of speech in the order in which they appeared to go" (301-302). Pieixoto's preoccupation with arranging the tapes in the correct order and even promising "further research" on the topic reminds the reader of his linear intentions. He is literally attempting to impose a timeline upon Offred's narrative, despite Offred's narrative telling him that is not at all what is necessary: "What I need is perspective.... Perspective is necessary. Otherwise there are only two dimensions. Otherwise you live with your face squashed up against a wall, everything a huge foreground of details, close-ups, hairs, the weave of the bedsheet, the molecules of the face. Your own skin like a map, a diagram of futility, crisscrossed with tiny roads that lead nowhere" (143). The juxtaposition between the narrative approaches of Pieixoto's search for truth and Offred's perspective shows how the typical linear narrative that is in search of truth, like the ones we use today, "obliterates Offred as a person; he never tells what happened to her because he does not know and he is not interested" (Howells 146). The professor's emphasis on the need to learn the truth about Gilead contrasts with Offred's mode of telling her story and alienates the reader

from his position. Despite the fact that Pieixoto is a recognized historian, his interest in increasing his knowledge about Gilead and finding the truth seems out of place and disrespectful to Offred's suffering. While Pieixoto's lecture is disappointing, it is not surprising. In fact, Pieixoto does exactly what Offred had feared that historians would do: "From the point of view of future history... we'll be invisible," Offred laments in the novel (228).

Therefore Atwood's Historical Notes provide the final evidence in the novel that we, as readers, *need* Offred's cyclical novel structure as a way to think about history, or else we risk losing out on all of the insights that Offred has given the reader. While linear timelines are a useful way of thinking about the past, present and future, Offred's narrative contrasts with the Historical Notes to show the reader that cyclical time can also be beneficial because it emphasizes different but equally important aspects of life and ways of thinking about that life. This final bit of evidence truly globalizes the novel. While female readers who interpret the novel as a reminder of the impositions of the generational legacy of feminism can apply this to their own lives, both male and female readers can understand the importance of adding new perspectives of understanding to one's life.

Conclusion

By examining *The Handmaid's Tale* through the lens of the generational legacy of feminism and its effects on time, the reader gains a new understanding of the social functions of feminism. Atwood's novel can serve as a tool through which to examine specific examples of how generational feminism can be limiting to future generations and damaging to women's relationships. With Offred's narrative as an example of spontaneous generation, and one that

draws attention to the benefits and downsides of both the cyclical and linear as well as how the two structures can work together, the reader can see how Offred's narration encourages women to embrace, or at least consider, multiple understandings of time. By using Offred's narrative as an example of successful spontaneous generation, Atwood's readers can also see how it is possible and productive in nearly any situation, including the conservative and restrictive republic of Gilead.

My mode of examining the novel is, of course, only one of a myriad of approaches; there are countless other valid methods of interpreting the novel. As with any interpretation, one must be careful not to reduce the novel down to its preoccupations with just one topic, or else risk losing the value of novel as a piece of fictive literature and replace it with polemical discourse. In some ways it is indefinitely more valuable to leave *The Handmaid's Tale* in the realm of fantasy and fiction because then each reader can read and apply the novel to his or her own life rather than only reading for its feminist undertones. Therefore, rather than reducing the novel down to simply its discourse on feminism, I hope my paper helps further the reader's enjoyment of the novel by offering new aspects of the novel to interpret on the way to understanding, evaluating and appreciating *The Handmaid's Tale*, as well as applying it to today's society.

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