

EGO-IDEALS AND SUBLIME OBJECTS OF IDEOLOGY: A STUDY OF SYMBOLIC IDENTIFICATION IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*

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ABSTRACT

Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* describes a futuristic society where all sexual affairs, except that for procreation, have been abandoned. This investigation tries to show that the acquisition of identity in the symbolic order portrayed by Atwood consists of a process of identification with figures of authority. Žižek's reworking on cultural notions introduces the concept of fantasy into the political field. In Žižekian view, the symbolic identity is achieved by the register and internalization of cultural norms through identification with figures of symbolic authority in the field of fantasy. In Žižek's Lacanese, the subject is decentered and a person's sense of identity is constructed by external Ego Ideals that center upon sublime objects of Ideology. They allocate the subjects different places in the socio-political totality and give them a social mandate, a definite role to play in worldly affairs. The Handmaids' fantasy is created into believing that the repression and lack of freedom, they experience, is the ideal condition for a human being. Virginity and pregnancy are two sublime objects of ideology that help the government to regulate the Handmaids' fantasy. This study uncovers the ways system refers to Virgin Mary, Jesus Christ, and a character called Janine to present Ego-Ideals for the Handmaids as the most important group in the novel.

KEY WORDS: Ego-Ideal, Sublime Object of Ideology, Symbolic Order, the Handmaids.

INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood occupies a central place in recent development of North American literature. Today she has published more than forty books of fiction, non-fiction, and poetry dealing with diverse themes as feminism, ecology, gothic tradition, political relationship between Canada and the United States, and power politics. The American Library Association (ALA) lists her masterpiece *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) as number 37 on the 100 Most Frequently Challenged

Books of 1990–2000. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, published in 1985, Canadian writer Margaret Atwood paints her most vivid portrait of a futuristic state, named Gilead that deals with themes of identification and the various means by which it gains agency. Atwood also satirically comments upon the deeply flawed ideology of Gilead; society is constructed to maximize the possibility of reproduction. In such a theocratic society, identities are simplified into different roles, each serving only one role and all forming an efficient machine of household and procreation.

Many critics work on Atwood's masterpiece *The Handmaid's Tale*. Coral Ann Howells (1995) remarks the novel is "closer to the new feminist scholarship which has moved beyond exclusively female concerns to recognition of the complexities of social gender construction" (p. 128). J. Brooks Bouson (1993) announces that Atwood "lays bare the cultural and literary script that assigns women the passive self-effacing roles and encourages them to collude in their oppression as they consent to femininity" (p. 9). These critical notions are crucial but they ignore the point that in any symbolic order different discourses operate all together to identify subjects with the symbolic values. Therefore, the study of characters' identification with a methodology that covers psychological and political elements all at once is still essential. In order to fill the mentioned gap, this thesis refers to Slavoj Žižek.

Born in 1949, Slavoj Žižek is a Slovenian philosopher and cultural critic who participates in various disciplines such as political theory, film theory, and theoretical psychoanalysis. He has a gifted mind, with a surprising understanding of contemporary theory. Studying Žižek is a stimulating experience, "one is simultaneously informed, edified, and entertained" (Sciull, 2011, 296). Žižek's works draw on three main areas of influence, philosophy, politics, and psychoanalysis. In each of these areas, Žižek is influenced by the writings of a single individual, "Georg Hegel in philosophy, Karl Marx in politics, and Jacques Lacan in psychoanalysis" (Myers, 2003, p. 14). He is influenced by Hegel's account of totality as the product of a process that preserves all of its moments as elements in a structure (Sharpe & Baucher, 2010, pp. 38-9), Marx's focus on the mechanics of society as one "to clarify how the workings of individuals should be regarded" (Myers, pp. 17-20), and Lacan's psychoanalysis and philosophy as "the most controversial psycho-analyst since Freud" (Macey, 1994, p. xiv).

This investigation tries to show that the acquisition of identity in the symbolic order portrayed by Atwood consists of the process of identification with figures of authority. Different Ego-Ideals allocate the subjects different places in the socio-political totality and give the subjects a social mandate, a definite role to play in worldly affairs. The Handmaids' fantasy is created into believing that the repression and lack of freedom, they experience, is the ideal condition for a human being. Virginity and pregnancy are two ideas that help the government to manipulate the Handmaids' fantasy. This study uncovers the ways system refers to Virgin Mary, Jesus Christ, and a character called Janine to present Ego Ideals for the Handmaids as the most important group in the novel.