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**AUNT LYDIA'S NARRATIVE VOICE  
IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE TESTAMENTS***

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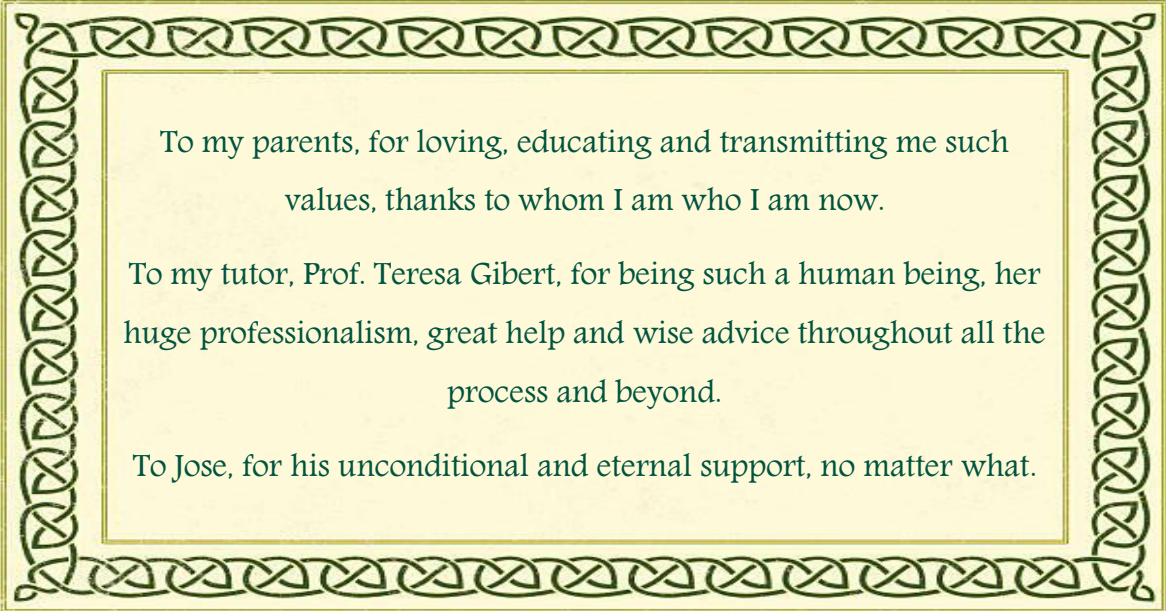
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## **Abstract:**

The purpose of this paper is to study of Aunt Lydia's narrative voice in Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments* to validate my thesis statement: Aunt Lydia is the main narrative voice which paves the way to a better future in *The Testaments*. To do so, I have used a qualitative methodology, researching the objectives formulated, that are related to narrative voice, the notions of memory, power and justice and the characterization of the Aunts in the novel.

**Keywords:** Margaret Atwood, *The Testaments*, narrative voice, memory, power, justice, dystopian fiction.



To my parents, for loving, educating and transmitting me such values, thanks to whom I am who I am now.

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“– If you don’t behave yourself, Aunt Lydia will come and get you!”

“– What would Aunt Lydia want you to do?”

“– What would Aunt Lydia have to say about that?”

(*The Testaments* 32)

## 1. Introduction.

The topic chosen for this end of Degree paper is Aunt Lydia’s narrative voice in Margaret Atwood’s *The Testaments*.<sup>1</sup> My motivation to do this research is, on the one hand, to study about an author as important and up to date as Margaret Atwood, whose literary trajectory is quite prolific and awarded. On the other hand, when deciding which work to choose, it was determining the fact of being her latest novel, becoming also a challenge as it is a quite recent work (2019) and bearing in mind that it is the sequel of one of her most popular novels, *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985).<sup>2</sup>

Although there are three narrators in *The Testaments*, Aunt Lydia’s narration is the most powerful voice that makes us understand and get closer to the development of the story from her perspective. I feel necessary to mention that I also think important focusing on a female character written by a female author whose writings are focused on women’s points of view and gives voice to them. This has caused an impact, with women dressed as handmaids in different demonstrations all over the world.

I consider that this topic also has an academic relevance, because since *The Handmaid’s Tale* was published, the number of books and academic works about it are countless, which created a big expectation on the publication of its sequel, *The Testaments*. I would like to remark that there are not so many

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<sup>1</sup> All citations from *The Testaments* (TT) are drawn from the Chatto & Windus edition (2019).

<sup>2</sup> Citations from *The Handmaid’s Tale* (THT) are taken from the Vintage edition (2016).

studies about this novel, possibly because of the short time elapsed since it was first published and not due to its relevance.

In addition to that, Margaret Atwood's presence in social media and conferences sums up importance, as we can read or hear her views about her own works. The fact that there are a film and television series of *The Handmaid's Tale* gives relevance to the topic as well, being a question of time that *The Testaments* follows that path.

This paper is related to several subjects from UNED's Degree in English Studies. The subject that first comes to mind is Canadian Literature, being directly connected with Margaret Atwood, as she is Canadian and one of the authors studied in its programme. Subjects such as Literary Commentaries in the English Language, Gender and Literature, or the different subjects coursed about literature are related in order to understand literary concepts and even to analyse and tackle a novel like this one in its mother tongue. Thanks to the skills developed in Instrumental English or Grammar, I have improved my level of English, the language used for this dissertation.

While doing this initial bibliography's research, it was really useful having done the course Generic Competences of Information, where I have learnt about the most important databases which, with my tutor's helpful advice, led me to reliable sources to make this work objective and trustworthy.

### **1.1. Thesis statement and objectives.**

The thesis statement of this end of degree project is: Aunt Lydia is the main narrative voice which paves the way to a better future in *The Testaments*.

To prove it, I will proceed to analyse a series of objectives that will be helpful to reach trustworthy conclusions. These objectives are:

- Define narrative voice and its characteristics.
- Clarify the notions of memory, power and justice in fiction and, more specifically, in *The Testaments*.

- Analyse the Aunts' characterization in the novel.
- Identify and contrast Aunt Lydia's narrative voice with the other two narrators from *The Testaments*, Aunt Victoria (Agnes Jemima) and Jade (Nicole/Daisy).

## 1.2. State of the art.

There are many studies of Margaret Atwood's works. Amongst them, there is a good deal of research related to *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). Regarding *The Testaments*, in spite of the fact that numerous book reviews have been written, there are not as many scholarly contributions, due to the novel's recent date of publication (2019) in comparison to the other one. This is the reason why, bearing in mind that the latter is *The Handmaid's Tale* sequel, I have used some studies related to the first novel, since the information provided is relevant for the object of this end of Degree project. The same has happened with research regarding narrative anchors and Atwood's novel, *The Blind Assassin* (2000).

Firstly, it is important to clarify the term *narrative anchors*, a concept introduced by Barbara Dancygier "to describe some of the mechanisms which underlie the construction of a coherent story out of several substories and explain some of the sources of various understandings of the text individual readers may arrive at" ("Narrative Anchors" 134). The same author also defines them as "expressions which set up or suggest the availability of narrative spaces, but do not elaborate them right away" (*The Language* 42). In her article, Dancygier analyses the novel *The Blind Assassin*, and the way she develops it drew my attention on how *The Testaments* begin, with Aunt Lydia's voice narrating: "Only dead people are allowed to have statues, but I have been given one while still alive. Already I am petrified" (3). This start involves different meanings and nuances, such as the correlation that Atwood makes with the words *dead* and *statue*. The term *petrified*, enhanced by the adverb *already*, should not be overlooked as it gives the reader an impression of statism and horror, the one that Gilead provides to women. At the same time, Aunt Lydia states that she has

a statue in spite of being alive. By this initial sentence readers can feel the character's power and distrust, since it seems unusual that a woman has a statue in a totalitarian regime like Gilead's (see Annexes, [fig. 1](#)).

I consider that another important concept to analyse is the *type of narrator* from a literary point of view. According to Uri Margolin, this term

designates the inner-textual (textually encoded) highest-level speech position from which the current narrative discourse as a whole originates and from which references to the entities, actions and events that this discourse is about are being made.

Dancygier refers to this notion paying attention to intentionality and the epistemic status, being important features of what she calls *narratorship*,

since, regardless of the scope of knowledge the narrator displays (ranging from omniscient, constituting a narrator who knows everything including characters' thoughts, to unreliable, with a narrator who has a very limited view of the facts), a narrator gives the reader access to crucial narrative facts. (*The Language* 59)

I think this definition is completely coherent with Aunt Lydia's narration, whose omniscient voice has a clear intentionality in telling us her memoirs, and the way of portraying it is exactly which confers her the power in her goal of doing justice.

Hence, memory, power and justice are three important words. The word *memory* appears four times in the novel, and not in Aunt Lydia's narration, but the concept is present as she is remembering and telling us her story. As Teresa Gibert puts it,

the relationship between memory and the narrative construction of personal identity constitutes a major thematic concern in many of Margaret Atwood's novels, because her protagonists develop their sense of selfhood through a specific kind of storytelling which is mainly based on the twofold process of retrospection and recollection of their past experiences. ("Haunted" 41)

In *The Testaments*, Aunt Lydia is recollecting her memories: "In my own present day I am a legend, alive but more than alive, dead but more than

dead” (32). Another example can be seen when, at the beginning of the novel, she says: “I write these words in my private sanctum within the library of Ardua Hall ...” (4).

The word *power* appears thirty-three times in the novel. Lee Briscoe Thompson describes the Aunts as “a paramilitary cadre in charge of indoctrinating Handmaids and enforcing female (even Wifely) obedience to the new rules” (qtd. in Johnson 73).

The Aunts, in comparison with the rest of Gilead’s women, have some privileges. Reading and writing are two examples of them, since they are the only females with access to literacy.

Aunt Lydia is quite aware of the importance of having power: “Knowledge is power, especially discreditable knowledge” (35), or “I’ve made it my business to know where the bodies are buried” (61). Even the other narrators are conscious of her power. In Aunt Victoria’s words: “Aunt Lydia ... must know the most secrets of all because she had the most power” (86).

Nevertheless, Aunt Lydia is quite realistic about power and its implications:

I’ve become swollen by power, true ... I am everywhere and nowhere: even in the minds of the Commanders I cast an unsettling shadow. How can I regain myself? How to shrink back to my normal size, the size of an ordinary woman? (32)

*Justice* is another keyword. It appears six times in the text, but it is a recurrent theme in the novel, as doing justice is constantly sought. Aunt Lydia acknowledges its importance: “But it is our duty to see justice done” (278). So, her search of justice will guide her actions against Gilead. She even expects being judged by the reader: “I am well aware of how you must be judging me, my reader; if, that is, my reputation has preceded me and you have deciphered who I am, or was” (32).

In her narration she addresses to the readers seventeen times, even asking them for advice, and being the only one she trusts: “You’ve become



somewhat of an obsession – my sole confidant, my sole friend – for to whom can I tell the truth besides you? Who else can I trust?” (172).

Oana Celia Gheorgiu and Michaela Praisler state that Aunt Lydia

writes herself in diaries addressed, metafictionally, to an unknown reader; she writes her-story, which becomes the history of the totalitarian Gilead itself, and brings women to writing by creating an order of feminine power in its own right – one that would regain language and power, or the power of language, whichever comes first. (94)

Sonja Zeman remarks that “narratives are commonly characterized by multiple viewpoints which can, but must not be, equivalent alternatives, since the viewpoints of characters and narrators can be embedded in each other” (8).

The novel has three narrators: Aunt Lydia, Agnes Jemima/Aunt Victoria (Witness 369 A) and Nicole/Daisy/Jade (Witness 369 B). Aunt Lydia is the voice of experience. Aunt Victoria and Jade, in spite of being both young females, have grown up in a completely different way. In Ewelina Feldman’s words,

since the novel consists of the interspersed testimonies of three different women, their stories differ significantly in terms of life experience, language and narrative techniques, imitating successfully the way these characters see the surrounding world, and expanding the definition of female experience and womanhood. (79)

I believe that Atwood enriches the narration using these three female voices. Each of them will make us understand the story from their personal experience. Ewelina Feldman affirms that

Aunt Lydia resolves to use the power she has gained through collaboration with the Gileadean regime to overthrow it (...). Agnes Jemima forms her feminist identity first through the rejection of a Wife role, then by learning to read and subsequently studying books (...). Nicole/Jade, (...) is a self-empowered teenager (...). She understands that the personal is political, and actively participates in rallies against Gilead. (80)

To conclude this section, I consider that Aunt Lydia's character was quite an antagonist in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Probably Atwood wanted to make her justice and through *The Testaments* she made us understand better her reasons and make her the decisive figure destroying Gilead's totalitarian regime.

### **1.3. Methodology and resources.**

Once I chose the topic for this paper, I collected the data by a close reading of the novel, *The Testaments*, and a bibliographic research related to it. Apart from these sources, I have used websites and information taken from official social networks.

Taking into account the thesis statement proposed and its main objectives, I have used a qualitative methodology, by observation of the aims of this project, writing down the most relevant features found in the novel, books and journals related with the object of study. The journals have been found by database search in platforms, provided at UNED's course Generic Competences of Information, such as JSTOR, Linceo+, LION and ProQuest. In order to do so, I have used keywords related to the novel and the writer: Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood + *The Testaments*.

A minor difficulty I found was that by the name of *The Testaments* there was a lot of biblical material, not related with my work, so I had to be more specific.

Although the ideal would be the use of a mixed methodology in order to find a methodological complementarity, the nature of this research does not make possible to apply quantitative methods. To compensate this lack, I have used a descriptive method, selecting, analysing and contrasting the most suitable data in a critical way.

In a nutshell, I have followed these steps:

- a) Data collection: taking information relevant for the aims of this project.
- b) Information analysis: A selection of information that is relevant, objective and trustworthy.
- c) Data synthesis: the process of synthesising the information collected, with the objective of being systematic and coherent.
- d) Assessment: after having done the previous steps, relevant conclusions towards the thesis statement and the objectives of this work will be made.

Therefore, I hope that with this selection and analysis of information this work can reach accuracy and reliability standards.

## **2. Theoretical framework: Narrative voice.**

I feel it important to analyse the concept of narrative first, going from general to specific terms that are essential and related to narrative voice. This is the reason why I start with these concepts before, developing afterwards the ones directly addressed to narrative voice.

According to Gibert, narrative is “the telling or the recounting of real or invented events” and distinguishes the narrator, “one who relates the story” from the author, “who has created the story” (*A Study*, 107). Peter Brooker also defines narrative as “a recounted tale or story, whether of fictional or non-fictional material (termed ‘narratology’)” (189) and highlights the distinction between story, or plot, “used to refer to a sequence of events” and “the narration of these events” (190). He understands this concept as “the organizing of the linear sequence of events into a structured narrative and as ascribing a cause or motivation to it” (190). From his point of view, “narrative requires two things: an actual or implied narrator who brings a point of view, style or tone to the narration, and an audience of readers or spectators, depending on the medium of narration” (190).

As I have already given Dancyger’s definitions about *narrative anchors* and *narratorship* in section 1.2., I will quote the questions we should make

ourselves when analysing a narrative (see Annexes, [fig.2](#)), taken from the author's presentation at the Style in Fiction Symposium (SIFS 33):

- What is the cognitive status of the 'story'?
- What is its relationship to the 'text'?
- How is the 'sequence of events' constructed?
- Is the 'sequence of events' the main aspect of narrative structure?
- To what extent does an 'author' or 'narrator' matter for the story?

Regarding cognitive processes, in "Toward a Definition of Narrative" Marie-Laure Ryan, when defining the term *narrative*, affirms that its importance is due to that "the definition covers mental operations of a more fundamental nature than passing global judgments of narrativity" (33). These *operations* consist in "asking in what order did the represented events occur; what changes did they cause in the depicted world; what do the events (and their results) mean for the characters; what motivates actions and how does the outcome of these actions compare to the intent of the agent" (33). She finally asserts that "if a text confronts us with such questions, and if we are able to answer them, we read the text as a story, or rather, we read the story told by the text" (33).

David Herman establishes four basic elements of narratives (*Basic Elements* 9): situatedness, event sequencing, worldmaking/world disruption and what it's like. (See Annexes, [fig. 3](#)).

Thomas Bronwen, when deciphering how a story is told in terms of narrative voice and of the varied perspectives of events, asserts that "an analogy is often drawn with the rings of an onion or a tree, as stories are embedded within each other, or we are offered more and more perspectives on the 'same' events" (*Narrative* 43). This comparison making layers is very interesting, because Atwood interweaves in her narration three different voices, as we will explain in the following epigraph. Bronwen carries on with the comparison saying that "at the outer level of the onion rings, we have

narration, the telling of the story” (*Narrative* 43) and this again makes us think about Aunt Lydia’s omniscient narrator. He adds that

even when we can clearly identify a distinct narrative voice or entity, the inner layers of the onion represent the various ways in which other voices and perspectives may be embedded within the outer layers, offering the reader or audience multiple points of view which may conflict or contradict one another.  
(*Narrative* 44)

When Ryan asks herself about the importance of the definition of narrative, she states that there are varied and diverse approaches to establish the boundaries of narratives, though that variety of opinions “do not carry significant cognitive consequences because when we read a text, we do not ask *is it or isn’t it a narrative*, nor even *to what extent does this text fulfill the conditions of narrativity*, unless of course we are narratologists” (31). So making people choose whether or not a text is a story is one of those artificial situations in which results are produced by the act of investigation” (31).

So, from my point of view the narrator gets into action to amplify the readers’ understanding of the narrative. This is why I am going to develop now several classifications of narrators according to different scholars.

Bronwen (*Narrative* 47) and Ruth Page (197) tell us about a classification of narrators made by Genette and they distinguish the heterodiegetic narrator, “positioned outside the events of the narratives” and homodiegetic, “he/she takes part in the events of the narrative.” (See Annexes, [fig. 4](#)).

Gibert’s classification takes into account first-person narrator, “the one who tells the story using the pronoun *I*” and third-person narrator, “the narrator is not one of the characters, but stands outside the story so that the narrative seems to be told from an external source” (*A Study*, 207-208). At the same time, first-person narrator can be observant, “when merely reporting,” or participant, “if the function of telling the story is combined with that of a major or minor character actively engaged in the plot.” A detached observer, neutral or effaced narrator is “one who seems not to be emotionally involved in the story, and remains impartial, avoiding any evaluation of the of the characters or judgment about the reported events” versus an intrusive narrator, “one who

gives subjective comments, and may even address the reader directly.” This author also distinguishes the reliable narrator, “one whose statements of fact and judgement with narrative authority and therefore are accepted by the reader without question” from the unreliable narrator, “one who may not always tell the truth (deliberately or not), and as a result, is not to be entirely trusted by the reader.” (See Annexes, [fig. 5](#)).

Gibert finishes establishing

the features that may indicate a narrator’s unreliability ... 1) a limited knowledge or insight, 2) a strong personal involvement that leads to a strikingly subjective presentation and evaluation, and 3) the representation of something that comes into conflict with the system of values that the discourse as a whole maintains. (*A Study Guide*, 208)

I agree with Bronwen when he affirms that it is “crucial” to choose a proper narrative voice to the narrative and the audience (*Narrative* 45). In the same study, he also refers to the presence of the narrator “as an intimate, trusted companion may be so powerfully felt as to make it almost impossible to imagine that fictional world without that familiar voice” (46). He points out the probable difficulty of emphasize “how influential the concept of the narrator has been not just in the development of the novel form, but in its criticism” (46) because readers have been guided by them “to distinguish between the historical real-world author of a novel and the textual entity and narrative stance that shapes events for us in the telling of the tale” (46).

This paragraph above is quite appropriate to conclude this section, as it is directly connected with the topic of next one, the novel’s narrative voices. As you will read, one of the voices of the novel is Aunt Lydia, since she is charismatic, and much more experienced than the other ones.

## **2.1. Narrative voices in *The Testaments*.**

Before *The Testaments* was launched, Margaret Atwood talked about the novel’s three narrators in a YouTube video, emphasizing that

none of which is the narrator of *The Handmaid’s Tale*. So, two of them are young girl women, one of them is in fact a teenager and one of them as early

twenties and they are, possibly, maybe, they are the two children that Offred had in *The Handmaid's Tale*. One of these people has grown up inside Gilead and the other one ... outside Gilead. The third one is a surprise person, a person of power in the Gilead establishment, she is a female person, and she is older.

In this short overview we are told that there are three narrators. Now we know that Aunt Lydia is the one that Atwood wanted to keep as a secret. This aura of mystery was deliberately created by the author to give more importance to this narrator.

The fact that these three narrators are females is not a coincidence, as Atwood herself was a pioneer. In Coral Ann Howells' words, amongst other female writers, Atwood has "paved the way for the reception of many women writers since, whose fiction shifts traditional emphases while continuing to reflect the cultural and ideological concerns which characterize contemporary multicultural Canada" ("Writing by Women" 195).

In her essay "Margaret Atwood's Dystopian Visions," Howells also remarks that

with *The Handmaid's Tale* her choice of a female narrator turns the traditionally masculine dystopian genre upside down, ... Atwood gives us a dissident account by a Handmaid who has been relegated to the margins of political power. This narrative strategy reverses the structural relations between public and private worlds of the dystopia, allowing Atwood to reclaim a feminine space of personal emotions and individual identity, which is highlighted by her first-person narrative. (164)

Hence, I believe that by choosing these three narrative voices in this novel, Atwood wanted precisely to continue reclaiming that feminine space and identity that Howells mentions, and by adding two more voices achieves that readers can see and understand better the events through these different perspectives, enriching the story's narration: the voice of two young women and an older one. Even between the young women there are differences, due to their different upbringings.

Ewelina Feldman makes an overview saying that the novel takes place fifteen years after *The Handmaid's Tale*, and the three characters' voices "interspersed first-person narrative" (68) give us the reasons and how Gilead is coming into an end. She also specifies more about these narrators, taking into account Aunt Lydia's alliance with Mayday and "Offred's two daughters: Agnes Jemima, born in the pre-Gilead world and taken from her mother at five, and Nicole, smuggled as an infant out of Gilead to Canada." She concludes pointing out how the three of them, under Aunt Lydia's orders, "succeed in smuggling evidence that exposes the corrupt nature of leading Commanders and eventually helps to overthrow the Gileadean regime" (68).

The same scholar justifies the use of three narrative voices as she affirms that "the shift in narration from the single voice of Offred into three parallel first-person narratives ... answers the third-wave feminists' urge to contest the essentialist understanding of womanhood" (E. Feldman 79). She adds that "identity is multifaceted and layered. Since no monolithic version of 'woman' exists, ... we need to consider that such issues are as diverse as the many women who inhabit our planet" (79).

In short, this is a brief summary of the three novel's narrators (see Annexes, [fig. 6](#)):

- Agnes Jemima that becomes later Aunt Victoria and being also Witness 369 A. Born and educated in Gilead.
- Gilead's famous "baby Nicole," whose name in Canada was Daisy and when she has to change her identity is known as Jade. Also, Witness 369 B. She was born in Gilead, but she was taken away as a baby, so she was educated in Canada.
- Aunt Lydia, one of Gilead's founders. The oldest one and the main narrator of the story, who knows who the other narrators are and their connection.



I agree with Bronwen when he states that “where multiple embedding of narratives occurs, the metaphors of ‘Chinese boxes’ or ‘Russian dolls’ are used to help convey the idea of stories ‘nesting’ within one another” (*Narrative* 50). This idea, linked with the onion analogy explained in the previous section, makes me think how Atwood cleverly intertwines these three narrators, where Aunt Lydia would be the biggest box, knowing the story and helping the other narrators to destroy Gilead’s regime. We can also appreciate Agnes Jemima’s naïve view due to her education and how Jade overcomes her fears to get inside Gilead. Both of them have different perspectives about life due to their upbringings (clothes, diction, and other features). Even their opinions about persons. For example, when Aunt Lydia thinks of Baby Nicole in section III, she says

As I prayed for her return, all eyes were focused on her picture ... So useful, Baby Nicole: she whips up the faithful, she inspires hatred against our enemies, she bears witness to the possibility of betrayal within Gilead and to the deviousness and cunning of the Handmaids, who can never be trusted. Nor is her usefulness at an end, I reflected: in my hands—should she end up there—Baby Nicole would have a brilliant future. (33)

The only one who knows everything is Aunt Lydia, who in that last sentence foreshadows, without the reader knowing, what is going to happen. Unaware of all this, the first time Agnes Jemima mentions Baby Nicole is when she narrates that

There were five of these pictures: Baby Nicole at the top, because we had to pray for her safe return every day. Then Aunt Elizabeth and Aunt Helena, then Aunt Lydia, then Aunt Vidala. Baby Nicole and Aunt Lydia had gold frames, whereas the other three only had silver frames. (77).

Jade, who at this stage of the novel is called Daisy, shows her opinion about Baby Nicole, before knowing it is actually her:

I’d basically disliked Baby Nicole since I’d had to do a paper on her. I’d got a C because I’d said she was being used as a football by both sides, and it would be the greatest happiness of the greatest number just to give her back. The teacher had said I was callous and should learn to respect other people’s rights and feelings, and I’d said people in Gilead were people, and shouldn’t their

rights and feelings be respected too? She'd lost her temper and said I needed to grow up, which was maybe true: I'd been aggravating on purpose. (45)

Regarding postmodern narratives, Bronwen convincingly contends that the most important should be “the telling of the story,” as it embroils “the reader or audience in a game where the boundaries between what is real and what is fictional are blurred and creating a hall of mirrors effect where what we think we see is endlessly refracted and even distorted” (*Narrative* 48).

Aunt Lydia involves the reader throughout the whole novel, and being an omniscient, homodiegetic and intrusive narrator, she explicitly addresses the reader seventeen times. She asks the readers for advice, hoping he/she understands why she did everything, to get some kind of redemption and expecting that there will be a reader of what she writes. At the very beginning, this is an example: “... my unknown reader. If you are reading, this manuscript at least will have survived. Though perhaps I'm fantasizing: perhaps I will never have a reader” (5).

Other examples from the novel are these assertions: “I am well aware of how you must be judging me, my reader; if, that is, my reputation has preceded me and you have deciphered who I am, or was” (32). “Here, my reader, I owe you an explanation” (254). As we can infer by these cites, Aunt Lydia involves the audience in the game Bronwen mentions. The novel's last words are for the reader, narrating afterwards what comes next:

But now I must end our conversation. Goodbye, my reader. Try not to think too badly of me, or no more badly than I think of myself. In a moment I'll slot these pages into Cardinal Newman and slide it back onto my shelf. In my end is my beginning, as someone once said. Who was that? Mary, Queen of Scots, if history does not lie. Her motto, with a phoenix rising from its ashes, embroidered on a wall hanging. Such excellent embroiderers, women are. The footsteps approach, one boot after another. Between one breath and the next the knock will come. (404)

This quotation makes a reference to the Cardinal John Henry Newman (1801-1890), who Aunt Vidala when talking to Aunt Lydia referred to as “such a notorious heretic” (313). He is mentioned in the novel five times. He

was considered an enemy in Gilead, so why Aunt Lydia would hide her manuscript in Newman's *Apologia Pro Vita Sua: A Defence of One's Life* (1864)? She explains to the reader that this book was considered "one of our X-rated books ... No one reads that weighty tome anymore, Catholicism being considered heretical and next door to voodoo, so no one is likely to peer within" (35-36). According to Owen Chadwick in *Britannica Encyclopaedia*, Cardinal Newman, beatified in 2010, "by 1845 he came to view the Roman Catholic Church as the true modern development from the original body" and wanted to reform the Church of England, converting to Roman Catholicism. This would be unforgivable in Gilead, as well as his book, which is a defence from Charles Kingsley's attacks about "his moral teaching." As Chadwick explains, "Kingsley in effect challenged him to justify the honesty of his life as an Anglican. And, though he treated Kingsley more severely than some thought justified," with the result of the book. From this story, Aunt Lydia could choose to keep it there for the reason aforementioned (no one would look inside of such a book) but also because she feels close to Cardinal Newman and her manuscript is her defence for posterity, as it happens to be in *The Testaments'* epilogue. There, professor Pieixoto explains how Aunt Lydia's text was found inside Newman's book, "purchased at a general auction by J. Grimsby Dodge, lately of Cambridge, Massachusetts. His nephew inherited the collection and sold it to a dealer in antiques who recognized its potential" (409).

Ewelina Feldman points out that "the most astounding and confounding aspect" in the novel is the new portrayal of Aunt Lydia's character if compared to her role in *The Handmaid's Tale*, arguing that

through the rehabilitation of this character ... Atwood underscores the need for women's solidarity ... The discovery of the statue dedicated to Becka ... who sacrificed her life so that Agnes and Nicole could escape Ardua Hall and expose the corrupt face of Gilead, is an unambiguous tribute to women's solidarity that seems to extend the fictional world. (80)

I coincide with Feldman's view and I would like to highlight two ideas. First, when I was reading *The Testaments*, I was utterly astonished because I would never have expected that Aunt Lydia would turn out to be

as she is characterized in this novel. Especially, if we bear in mind that in *The Handmaid's Tale* she was clearly an antagonist and an evil character. Secondly, perhaps with this different characterisation, Atwood aimed for the need of women's solidarity.

And these ideas are also reinforced in Clare Morris' online article, where she questions about the character's redemption when she recognizes asking herself if Aunt Lydia's behaviour would "cancel out her previous crimes" and wonders if survivalism can justify her previous attitude or if "does her final sacrifice amend her abuses as described in *The Handmaid's Tale*?" Morris asserts that in *The Testaments* "moral judgement is temporarily suspended" and that this idea is highlighted by Aunt Lydia while describing "her ideal reader, the bright and ambitious young woman who 'would never have done such things! But you yourself will never have had to.'" Her conclusion to these reflections is that "the novel's priority seems to be to focus on a wider view that implies hope for future change by endorsing women's stories." In *The Handmaid's Tale* Hulu series there is a quite recent trailer called "Aunt Lydia's Journey," where she is asked for help by an ex-Commander that has help some Handmaids to escape in previous episodes and she answers "I might consider a collaboration" (min. 00:48). This means that in this new season from the series, they could be starting to change her attitude so it would be linked to *The Testaments* in future seasons (see Annexes, [fig. 7](#)).

Definitely, Aunt Lydia is the soul and the strongest voice in the novel (see Annexes, [fig. 8](#)). Her speech and the way that she explains her reasons, admitting the horrible things that she has done, make us see her as a reliable narrator, being the voice of experience. I believe that Atwood's intention was to get readers into Aunt Lydia's shoes: how she got to be such a person, the choices she had to make to reach her position, why she did those horrible things thus giving her the opportunity of changing the readers' minds about her character.

To conclude, I agree with Lucy Feldman's statement that says that in *The Testaments*, "their narrators record their stories for the benefit of

history, a perspective that leaves room to hope for a better world” (“Margaret Atwood” 57), (see Annexes, [fig. 9](#)). Atwood recognises in another interview made by the same author that she selected the green colour for *The Testaments* asserting that “spring green evokes hope.” In an interview made by Bettany Hughes, when Atwood is asked about her description of stories as being a gesture of hope, she answers “yes, because you just assume there will be a reader, ... a future which is different from the present moment and that in that future there will be people who read and that you can communicate across this vast distance.”

### **3. The notions of memory, power and justice in fiction.**

Memory, power and justice are key concepts in *The Testaments*, so I will provide an overview of these terms in fiction, as well as reflexions with examples from the novel. According to Roger Schank and Robert P. Abelson, “memory consists of stories” (qtd. in Ryan 28).

Teresa Bridgeman asserts that

all reading is a combination of memory and anticipation. Our focus on whatever moment in the text we have reached will invariably be colored by our memory of what has gone before and our anticipation of what is to come. The order in which events are presented in the text is therefore crucial to our temporal experience of narrative. (57)

Margolin highlights the mental dimension from which “characters will identify themselves from the inside” (75) and, to do so, they need to hold onto their remembrances of the past, and thanks to this “they will think of themselves as the same continuing individual, even if their body is radically transformed” (75). Hence, memory plays an important role in the characters’ development. With this statement, I think that Aunt Lydia’s transformation corresponds to her actions rather than a physical one. Or perhaps she could not fight against Gilead until that point, when she was a trusted person in the regime and her memories helped her to remember all that had happened along the process.

Nevertheless, regarding conversational storytelling performance, Neal R. Norrick believes that “storytelling is more than a process of retrieving information from memory, selecting from it, and verbalizing it in serial, narrative form” (138) and gives more importance to a “contextually appropriate reconstruction rather than simple recall of ordered events” (139). So, when personal stories are told, “we create and recreate our past in light of our present needs and concerns, instead of simply recapitulating stored experience” (139).

All these references are directly related to narrators, as they become in some way *writers* of their own story. In *The Testaments*, Aunt Lydia reconstructs all the events that happened from the beginning, regretting of not having escaped before the Sons of Jacob took her: “If only I’d packed up enough early enough, as some did, and left the country ... My arrest came shortly after the Sons of Jacob attack that liquidated Congress” (66).

Aunt Lydia’s narration about her memories could be a technique used by Atwood so that the reader could understand the character better, idea that Colin Nicholson highlights when he says that “memory is duplicitous, and an unstable sense of personal past contrasts with an ability to ‘place’ others in the narrative” (7).

In her recollection of memories, Aunt Lydia uses her testimonies, that Dominick LaCapra defines as “significant in the attempt to understand experience and its aftermath, including the role of memory” (qtd. in Katarína Labudová 101). Related to this idea, and linking it with testimonial literature, Labudová argues that it “draws attention to the complex interaction of memory and revision involved in the process” (101) and states that “Atwood brings together elements of autobiographical genres: the diary, testimony, witness narrative, and survivor narrative. She produces a chorus of witnessing voices” (101). And this scholar concludes her analysis reinforcing Atwood’s support of “the power of female testimony in the novel” (102), and this is possible through the three narrators’ perspectives that “overlay each other and create a palimpsest of (historical) memory of the cruelty and violent abuse of human rights by the Republic of Gilead” (102).

These female testimonies that the three novel's narrators provide us not only give us a wider vision, but also of their feelings of belonging and identity. On Paul Ricoeur's words: "on the deepest level, that of symbolic mediation of action, it is through the narrative function that memory is incorporated into the formation of identity" (qtd. in Gibert "Haunted" 41-42).

Another term to bear in mind is used by Gibert when she asserts that "one of the most fascinating aspects of *The Blind Assassin* is how Iris converts *traumatic memory* into *narrative memory*" ("Haunted" 59). Although the scholar refers to *The Blind Assassin*, another novel from Atwood, this sentence can perfectly be extrapolated to *The Testaments*. Particularly, when Aunt Lydia narrates how she and the rest of women were treated once the Sons of Jacob arrested them:

... we were treated to a spectacle. Twenty women, of various sizes and ages ... were led into the centre of the field. I say led because they were blindfolded. Their hands were cuffed in front ... A man in a black uniform orated into a microphone about how sinners were always visible to the Divine Eye and their sin would find them out. Then the men who'd escorted the blindfolded women raised their guns and shot them. (117-18)

In spite of this traumatic experience, Aunt Lydia survives and becomes one of the leading figures of Gilead. To arrive to such position, she recognizes to have done terrible things, as Heidi Slettedahl remarks: "in exploring memory, Atwood claims, 'As a rule, we tend to remember the awful things done to us, and to forget the awful things we did'" (21).

Memory makes that these experiences are not forgotten at all, and their evidence make that historians can analyse in order to get their own conclusions. In Hilde Staels' opinion, pain survives due to memory, which is "what the narrator tries to keep alive. The destruction of memory, which Gilead aims at, involves a numbing of the site of personal desire and creative energy" (463). Although this statement refers to Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale*, it is perfectly applicable to Aunt Lydia's situation in *The Testaments*.

At the novel's epilogue, in "The Thirteenth Symposium," when professor Pieixoto analyses the inscription in Becka's memorial (see Annexes, [fig. 10](#)), he says

I myself take this inscription to be a convincing testament to the authenticity of our two witness transcripts. The collective memory is notoriously faulty, and much of the past sinks into the ocean of time to be drowned forever; but once in a while the waters part, allowing us to glimpse a flash of hidden treasure, if only for a moment. Although history is rife with nuance, and we historians can never hope for unanimous agreement, I trust you will be able to concur with me, at least in this instance. (415)

In relation to this epilogue, Morris thinks that the "acknowledgement of the authenticity of women's stories, which are endorsed by Professor Pieixoto ... validates women's words and gives them power."

Brooker refers to Michel Foucault's theories of power as the most influential, as he does not associate power with repression or inhibition, but with domination "as working through institutionalized and accustomed discourses that open up delimited forms of action, knowledge and being" (228). So, as he convincingly contends, "the exercise of power constitutes, as it simultaneously controls, individual subjects" (228).

Michael Toolan affirms that "narratives are ... a kind of political action" (qtd. in Bronwen *Narrative*, 62). In some way, Aunt Lydia's discourse is political, as she describes how a totalitarian regime as it is Gilead works and its ideology.

Katie Wales defines ideology as "any system of values based on ideas or prejudices and cultural and social assumptions which amounts to a pervasive, unconscious, world-view" (qtd. in Bronwen *Narrative*, 62). Atwood is criticizing how ideologies like Gilead's are damaging women, and how politics uses its power to promote it. Before doing both novels, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*, Atwood explains in an interview to Penguin how she got historic evidence making a research to document her plots (see Annexes [fig. 11](#)). Hence it must be the reason why Atwood, at the novel's epilogue, asserts "As they say, history does not repeat itself, but it rhymes" (*The Testaments* 407).



Atwood described *The Handmaid's Tale* as “a study of power” (qtd. in Bouson 136). I think that this affirmation also applies to *The Testaments*. Brooks directly identifies with power the figures of the Aunts, as I will explain in the next section. Obviously, in this hierarchy the most powerful characters on both novels are males, the Commanders.

Gheorghiu and Praisler argue how Aunt Lydia would probably decide to become a powerful figure in Gilead, as she had to choose between “‘eat or be eaten’; side with the male power to become powerful yourself” (92) and that her choice was “over femininity,” so she accepted “to join the masculine ranks of the tormentors” (92). In the same line of thought, and applicable to Aunt Lydia’s character, Jerome H. Rosenberg speaks about the novel *Surfacing* asserting that

To renounce power, to remain a passive victim of others, she sees, is an exercise in futility: if she wishes to survive in the historical, struggle-ridden world into which we are all born, she must ‘join in the war, or ... be destroyed.’ She wishes there were ‘other choices’ but sees there are not. What is morally essential, however, is for her to acknowledge her power, accept her imperfection, take responsibility for her actions, and ‘give up the old belief that I am powerless and because of it nothing I can do will ever hurt anyone’. (105)

Richard Lane, referring to Atwood’s choice of narrators, argues that it “implies more than a representational technique,” which entails “either accepting the power structures of panopticism, or, realising that the alternative is a complex, but possible deconstruction of the technology of total surveillance” (63). According to him, readers “are implicated in the power-knowledge network as much as the narrator” (63).

In this way, it is interesting Agnes Jemima narration about their parents’ choice for a husband, when the real truth was that her stepmother wanted to get rid of her. We see her, powerless, as she seems to have no choice:

Paula and Commander Kyle favoured Commander Judd: he had the most power. They put on a show of persuading me, since it was better if the bride was willing ... I’d overheard the Marthas saying that before some weddings tranquilizing drugs had been administered, with needles ... It was clear that I would be married to Commander Judd whether I liked it or not. Whether I hated

it or not. But I kept my aversion to myself and pretended to be deciding. As I say, I had learned how to act. (224-25)

Gilead's authorities have a rigid control over population, especially women. Therefore, its infrastructure is created by means of fear and punishment. A way of making them less aware of what is going on, is by not allowing women to read. Only men and Aunts can do so, but the last ones under a strict supervision. This will be exposed in the next section.

Bronwen states that "we can learn a great deal about the power relations between characters by analysing who is in control of a conversation, who speaks most, and for the longest amount of time." ("Dialogue" 85). Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck add that "as the agent that relates and creates the story, the narrator exerts power and authority, which may turn him or her into an essential component of what Wayne Booth calls the *implied author*." (226). This fits with our main narrator, Aunt Lydia and, as Ewelina Feldman puts it, she "resolves to use the power she has gained through collaboration with the Gileadean regime to overthrow it, thus positioning herself firmly on the women's side" (80).

Glenn Deer points out that in *The Handmaid's Tale*

Atwood is caught in the dilemma faced by many creators of satiric dystopias: the author needs both to condemn particular social injustices and to portray the mechanisms of oppression as credible enough, as sufficiently powerful and seductive, to represent a believable evil, not an irrelevant or far-fetched one. (95)

Nevertheless, Aunt Lydia is aware and recognizes the terrible things she has done with the power that Gilead provided her: "over the years I've buried a lot of bones; now I'm inclined to dig them up again" (4). However, she is resolved to redeem herself and end the injustice.

Aunt Lydia tells us at the beginning of *The Testaments* that she has a statue, "larger than life" (3), and as if she had divine powers, "votaries have taken to leaving offerings at my feet: eggs for fertility, oranges to suggest the fullness of pregnancy, croissants to reference the moon" (4).

Therefore, power is related to different things such as the narrative itself, politics, relations and beliefs. Aunt Lydia is very aware from the beginning that she needs to get power in order to achieve her aims and get justice done. It should not be overlooked that not only she is a powerful figure, but also a cunning one. This, linked to the power of her speech, is what definitely makes her such an important character in the novel. Related to these ideas, she says that “knowledge is power, especially discreditable knowledge ... every intelligence agency in the world has always known it” (35). As Atwood puts it in her documentary, “a word after a word after a word is power” (see Annexes, [fig. 12](#) and [13](#)).

In the novel, *memory*, *power* and *justice* are terms very related to each other. Labudová affirms that Aunt Lydia’s remembrances take “readers close to the apex of Gilead’s monstrous power structure” (99), and this is what led her to make justice. As Roberta Rubenstein points out, “in the presence of injustice, one must take a stand” (273).

Gilead’s way of doing justice is justified by being done in the name of God, but their justice responds to a mixture of personal interests and religious fanaticism. Some of their justice rituals are Particutions and Salvagings, defined by Mark Evans, “where a man presumed guilty of the rape of a fertile woman is handed over to the otherwise powerless Handmaids to be tom apart by them in a form of licensed reprisal, of ritualised victimisation” (180). In the novel, there are two particutions, as Aunt Lydia narrates:

an Angel who’d been caught selling grey market lemons smuggled in through Maine, and Dr. Grove, the dentist. The Angel’s real crime was not the lemons, however: he’d been accused of taking bribes from Mayday and aiding several Handmaids in their successful flights across our various borders. But the Commanders did not want this fact publicized: it would give people ideas. (278)

Aunt Lydia justifies the dentist’s particution to Commander Judd, “but it is our duty to see justice done” (278), as he tried to abuse physically of Agnes Jemima when going to his consult.

So, another way of getting justice done is Aunt Lydia’s protection of the girls. Idea that Labudová suggests when she states that while Aunt Lydia

pretends to be utterly compromised to Gilead's regime, she "orchestrates the most important act of women's solidarity when she plans the exfiltration of evidence of corruption and human rights abuses in Gilead" (108), keeping the girls safe from Commanders Judd's cruelty, "a pedophile and murderous, Bluebeard figure, who has married a series of young girls and poisoned them in turn to get a new, possibly younger bride" (108).

In *The Testaments*, we can see how Aunt Lydia does not agree at all with this regime from the beginning: "the corrupt and blood-smeared fingerprints of the past must be wiped away to create a clean space for the morally pure generation that is surely about to arrive. Such is the theory" (4). This is the reason why she needs to act, but she only has to wait for the precise moment. And due to this way of proceeding, Kiss states that Aunt Lydia "is revealed as a ... double agent" (61).

We should not overlook Aunt Lydia's profession before going to Gilead. In the novel she explains that she was

a family court judge, a position I'd gained through decades of hardscrabble work and arduous professional climbing, and I had been performing that function as equitably as I could. I'd acted for the betterment of the world as I saw that betterment, within the practical limits of my profession. I'd contributed to charities, I'd voted in elections both federal and municipal, I'd held worthy opinions. I'd assumed I was living virtuously; I'd assumed my virtue would be moderately applauded. Though I realized how very wrong I had been about this, and about many other things, on the day I was arrested. (36)

Aunt Lydia also affirms for the first time her disagreement with Gilead's procedures, and this is the reason why she decides to make justice. From the previous statement in which she talks about herself, I assume that in the novel she acts as a judge and while keeping herself alive, she had to become an Aunt in order of getting *power* and, while not forgetting her *memories*, making herself sure that *justice* prevailed. These terms are also related to next section's matter. Her role as a judge, acknowledging the terrible things she has done, could probably be because in her previous life, she was one. And this could be a way of redeeming herself, although she never says so. Even though she

apologises to the reader on several occasions, she definitely is not a victim, but a person that is consistent to her reasonings.

Her behaviour as a judge and her resolution to fight against injustice is what makes her help Becka and Agnes Jemima to become Aunts. At the same time, she wants to help Agnes Jemima to know her sister Nicole and reunite them with their mother in Canada, that turns out to be Offred. In this way, she restores all the bad things that happened to this Handmaid in the previous novel and makes *justice* to erase the pain of losing her children when fleeing from Gilead. So, notions related to women empowerment and solidarity raise for the first time. Notions that coming from Aunt Lydia would have been unthinkable on *The Handmaid's Tale*.

#### **4. Characterization of the Aunts.**

To begin with, I strongly believe that it is important to clarify the symbolism of the *spinster* and the *single woman* in literature. This is directly related to the Aunts, since they were not married, as Agnes Jemima points out in the novel: “the Aunts were not married; they were not allowed to be. That was why they could have writing and books” (10).

Religious fervour is something that characterises the Aunts. Amongst their roles and duties were preparing young girls to get married. In Agnes Jemima's words, “a married women's role” (82), and she refers to this religiosity when she is upset about getting married and says “I wanted to ask why it had to be like this, but I already knew the answer: because it was God's plan. That was how the Aunts got out of everything” (82). When Agnes Jemima speaks to Becka, she tells her that she heard that Becka had “a higher calling” (241) and Becka knew that Agnes Jemima was going to get married with someone important. Agnes Jemima said: “I'm supposed to,” I said. I started to cry. “But I can't. I just can't!” I wiped my nose on my sleeve” (241). Aída Díaz Bild also reflects these women's refusal to get married, since “they were quite aware if the terrible risks of marriage” (58) and the ones with money could achieve it, a thing that was not possible for Agnes Jemima or Becka. And this is the reason why they decided to become Aunts, to avoid marriage. Becka tells Agnes

Jemima: “Act crazy ... Then they won’t want you marrying anyone: it will be their responsibility if you do anything violent” (244). But when Agnes Jemima decides to become an Aunt, her stepmother does not like the idea: “Have you no idea of the trouble your father and I went to in order to secure the connection with Commander Judd? ... “You have dishonoured your father ... You are not the kind of girl God would ever single out” (244). Agnes Jemima had everything planned, linked to religion, and she answered shouting: “How dare you question the Divine Will? ... Your sin will find you out! I didn’t know what sin I meant, but everyone has a sin of some kind” (244).

Díaz Bild explains that the “social marginalization of single women made spinsters an excluded category ... English society considered them a social failure” (56) to the extent that “families were not only ashamed of their unmarried daughters but tended to *erase* their very existence” (56). This happens in *The Testaments*, with the difference that girls were taught since school how they should behave. Agnes Jemima was enrolled in another school to prepare her for marriage. It was “Rubies Premarital Preparatory, a school for young women of good family who were studying to be married. Its motto was from the Bible: “Who can find a virtuous woman? For her price is far above rubies” (161). This negative concept of single women can be seen along the novel. Becka does not want to marry when her time of doing it arrives, so in the novel they refer to her saying that “If she reached eighteen unmarried, she’d be considered dried goods and would be out of the running for Commanders: she’d be lucky to get even a guardian” (162). Hence, the goal of women was getting married and have children. If this could not be possible, a Handmaid would go to the house to have children for her.

From my point of view, this was a terrible situation, not only for the young age of the brides-to-be. In the novel, one of the most extreme aspects of the girls that did not want to marry is mentioned by Agnes Jemima, when she recognises having heard Marthas “saying that before some weddings tranquilizing drugs had been administered, with needles” (224). And explains that they had to give the exact dose of it: “mild staggering and slurred speech could be put down to emotion, a wedding being a hugely important moment in a

girl's life, but a ceremony at which the bride was unconscious did not count" (224).

Díaz Bild states that "the word spinster took on a pejorative cast" (56) and it certainly happens in the novel. The same author asserts that "single women were scorned and viewed with contempt" (59). Aunts were respected in Gilead, and this could be, according to Díaz Bild because "one way in which women could show their usefulness to society... was by undertaking philanthropic and charitable work." In the Aunts' case would be training the girls to be future wives, keeping Gilead's tradition, and teaching women to behave.

The Aunts are analysed by Evans, telling us where these characters could come from, so the name *Aunt* sounds as if they were from the family, "but here too can be shown an inheritance of centuries of domination and oppression" (185). In the seventeenth century, a diary written by a woman whose name was Hetty Shepard evidenced what her aunt made her suffered, "... she faced censure by her aunt on account of wearing a 'fresh kirtle and wimple, though it be not the Lord's Day ... my Aunt Lydia coming in did chide me and say that to pay attention to a birthday was putting myself with the world's people'" (185). By chance, Hetty's aunt's name was Lydia. Curiously, "this kirtle was a dress, and the wimple a head-covering not dissimilar to those the Handmaids are compelled to wear in the novel" (185).

Levi Homstad reinforces what we have already said defining the Aunts as "an elite," which is true if we compare them to the other women in Gilead. They are considered "unique ... they are the only women allowed to read and be educated and they are forbidden from marrying. They operate entirely behind the scenes, using information that they gather to control and manipulate events in society" (7). Another term from the same author is *Founders*, that "refer to Aunt Lydia, Aunt Vidala, Aunt Helena, and Aunt Elizabeth, the four women who developed not only the Aunts but all of Gilead's social structures and rules as pertaining to women. The Founders are legendary figures across Gilead" (7).

Reingard M. Nischik declares that the Aunts colour to dress is brown, and reinforces their "power in society, yet it is used exclusively for the

indoctrination of future Handmaids and for the general control of women” (138). To be obeyed, they do not hesitate of using electric cattle prods for indoctrination if need be” (138) and they cooperate with Gilead’s government.

Tore Sefland states how Atwood highlights “both how religion permeated every aspect of Gilead, and how hypocrisy and greed ultimately betrayed this virtuous façade” (58) and explains about the figures of the Supplicants and the Pearl Girls: “While the former are essentially Aunts in training, thus a kind of junior Aunts, the latter act as missionaries, who visit countries outside the Republic to recruit more women to Gilead” (58).

As I have explained above, something that characterises the Aunts is their religiosity, or at least their apparent one. Agnes Jemima does not really have faith when she realises of all the lies: “as I discovered what had been changed by Gilead, what had been added, and what had been omitted, I feared I might lose my faith. If you’ve never had a faith, you will not understand what that means” (303), and she compares it to a friend that is dying, adding “that everything that defined you is being burned away; that you’ll be left all alone. You feel exiled, as if you are lost in a dark wood. It was like the feeling I’d had when Tabitha died: the world was emptying itself of meaning. Everything was hollow. Everything was withering” (303). She decides to tell Becka about these feelings and she answered her that she felt the same, “Everyone at the top of Gilead has lied to us ... God isn’t what they say” (303-304) and told Agnes Jemima that “you could believe in Gilead or you could believe in God, but not both” (304). Agnes Jemima does not feel sure of which one to choose, and was afraid of not being able of believing in any of them, “still, I wanted to believe; indeed I longed to; and, in the end, how much of belief comes from longing?” (304).

And this is what I think that happens to Aunt Lydia’s faith. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, she was a devout Christian and started believing in Gilead, but afterwards she gets deceived by Gilead’s totalitarianism and that is the reason why she changes in *The Testaments* and ends up destroying Gilead. In Anna Beránková’s words, this is when Aunt Lydia “placed all her faith on a single card” (39).



Ann Dowd, the actress that portrays Aunt Lydia in *The Handmaid's* Hulu series explains in an interview that Aunt Lydia “never signed up for the religious take on things like Aunt Vidala in *The Testaments* really did. [Lydia's] a realist about such things; I don't know if you would say she's an atheist, but she's certainly not religious” and reinforces the idea of her as a survival and “that she treated it as she would a court case, which is to say not engaging it as she would heart and soul, but intellectually.”

But Aunt Lydia has faith in her intended or possible reader, to whom she addresses quite often and is worried about the impression she might cause him. Beránková establishes a parallelism with Offred, suggesting that she “communicates with the reader, and the faith in the existence of the reader also gives her reassurance of her own being” (43). Aunt Lydia has also the role of being a guide, in order that the narration of her memories can be better understood, as she says in the novel: “Think of me as a guide. Think of yourself as a wanderer in a dark wood. It's about to get darker” (141).

J. Brooks Bouson criticises that Aunts, “who ironically place a high value on *camaraderie among women* (287), uphold the male supremacist power structure of Gilead with its hierarchical arrangement of the sexes” (141) contributing, thus, to the Handmaids' oppression, while Staels adds that the Aunts are the ones “who save their skins by collaborating and who train the Handmaids in self-suppression” (455) and Marta Dvorak refers to them as “the agents of indoctrination” (146).

Howells, referring to *The Handmaid's Tale*, calls them “the terrible Aunts” (131) and refers to Aunt Lydia as “probably the most sadistic character in the novel” (*Modern Novelists* 131). One of Aunt Lydia's sentences in this novel is when she speaks to the Handmaids at the Rachel and Leah Re-education Centre: “There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it” (*The Handmaid's Tale* 39).

Pilar Somacarrera highlights that “the function of the Aunts in this totalitarian regime is to disseminate the doctrine among women, exercising a

matriarchal power which is disguised as a spirit of camaraderie, similar to that of the army” (“Power Politics” 53).

As it is reflected from all these studies cited, is that Aunts were part of the system and cruelty was amongst their way of acting, with harsh punishments to those Handmaids who tried to rebel as they would become a threat for Gilead’s regime. In Johnson’s words, “the Aunts are very honest about their willingness to use violence to accomplish their goals” (73).

But what could make these women become Aunts to behave in such a way? Are they victims or executioners? Kormali affirms that “it is the Aunts, as best exemplified by Aunt Lydia, who are probably the most guilty of enforcing this patriarchal/totalitarian rule on the members of their own sex” (qtd. in Johnson 74).

Thompson “claims the Aunts to be a classic depiction of Victim Position #1 ... While the Aunts may be victims of a male hierarchy, they certainly chose to utilize the power that they have over other women” (qtd. in Johnson 70).

These opinions make me consider the different possibilities that a woman could have in Gilead, if not being an Aunt. If she was not fertile, becoming an Unwoman and going to the Colonies, “composed of portable population used mainly as expendable toxic-cleanup squads” (Johnson 70). If she was fertile, becoming a Handmaid and being raped in the Ceremonies. Other options could be becoming a Wife and having to bear the awful Ceremonies. Or becoming a Martha (a servant), an Econowife (lower classes of married women) or a Jezebel (sex workers). Definitely they are not options of what a woman aims for. (See Annexes, [fig. 14](#)).

If I would have to choose one type from the classification above, not being an easy or comfortable situation, I would consider a better option becoming an Aunt, like Atwood interpreted (see Annexes, [fig. 15](#) and [16](#)) at *The Handmaid’s Tale* Hulu series. Related to the series, Glenn Willmott highlights that it “is a story about power whose message is clearly grounded both in the presentational power of its media and in the representational power of its narrative events” (qtd. in “Thank you” Somacarrera, 86).

It is Gheorghiu and Praisler's "eat or be eaten," or Rosenberg's "join in the war, or be destroyed" quoted in the previous section when we were analysing the term power. In Aunt Lydia's words, "dog-eat-dog" (*The Testaments* 61). So probably this is why "While the Aunts may be victims of a male hierarchy, they certainly chose to utilize the power that they have over other women" (Johnson 70).

Nevertheless, in addition to all the power the Aunts have, there is something else that no one in Gilead could do, except the Commanders. As Slettedahl's assures: "Only the Aunts have access to the written word, and in return for this power, they re-educate the women into their roles" (54).

When Aunt Lydia in *The Testaments* says, "not for nothing do we at Ardua Hall say *Pen Is Envy*" (140), implying a double meaning. As Bouson states,

this Gileadean motto encodes yet another motto *Penis envy* it also may be a self-conscious allusion ... to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's analysis of the *metaphor of literary paternity*, the notion that the pen is a *metaphorical penis* ... the text's author is a father, a progenitor, a procreator, an aesthetic patriarch whose pen is an instrument of generative power like his penis. (149)

In Gilead, reading and writing is a privilege for men and the Aunts which does not extend to other women, not even to the Wives. Agnes Jemima mentions this situation in the novel: "reading was not for girls: only men were strong enough to deal with the force of it; and the Aunts, of course, because they weren't like us" (156). Later she explains the alleged reasons why women should not read: "they said women's minds were too weak for reading. We would crumble, we would fall apart under the contradictions, we would not be able to hold firm" (303). The reality of doing so is to keep women away from critical thinking and avoiding their intellectual development, so they would not revolt against Gilead's norms, being more easily to control them while adopting the submissive and expected attitude.

Johnson considers that "the Aunts are not only training the Handmaid's, they are creating women who will not only submit to their Commanders but also further goals" (72) and that "while the Commanders are undermining the

Gileadan theocracy with their behavior, the Aunts are promoting the future of Gilead” (75). And this is the reason why this author concludes that “Atwood portrays the Aunts in such a manner as to suggest that they have as much if not more power as the males in positions of Commanders ...” (77).

In relation to this, Aunt Lydia acknowledges

By now you may be wondering how I’ve avoided being purged by those higher up ... You might assume that, being a woman, I would be especially vulnerable to this kind of winnowing, but you would be wrong. Simply by being female I was excluded from the lists of potential usurpers, since no woman could ever sit on the Council of the Commanders; so on that front, ironically, I was safe. (*The Testaments* 61)

Atwood recognizes that “the character of Aunt Lydia is created on the history of imperialisms ... So, if you want to control women, you have to grant some women a tiny bit more power so that they’ll control the others” (qtd. in Johnson 69).

Ashley Thompson and Shoshannah Ganz mention that “Atwood also said Aunt Lydia is reminiscent of her fourth-grade teacher” (144), and this could be due to her strict methods and definitely being a controlling one.

There is no wonder why the Aunts were not precisely an appreciated group, not only by the Handmaids, but also by readers. In *The Handmaid’s Tale* Aunt Lydia was a really wicked character and that is the reason why readers were so surprised with her narration in *The Testaments*. I think that this a sentence from *The Handmaid’s Tale* where Aunt Lydia shows some empathy: “Don’t think it’s easy for me either” (88).

The big difference, what humanizes Aunts, is how Atwood portrays them in *The Testaments*. Basically, their functions are the same than in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. It also can be seen their conspirations, but there are new narrations. For example, readers know how Becka and Agnes Jemima became respectively Aunt Immortelle and Aunt Victoria and their stories to flee from their future as Wives and their innocence and fears were shown. They are more than

friends; Aunt Immortelle even gives her life so that Aunt Victoria and Nicole could escape.

And, of course, in this novel Aunt Lydia's narrations were a big surprise, as I have been arguing about it throughout different sections from this paper: how she explains how she became an Aunt, how difficult it was, the bad things she had done, repentance and helping Mayday to destroy Gilead. Now I see the association of Aunt Lydia's behaviour with one of Johnson's previous quotations, seeing her as "a promoter of the future," helping to end with the totalitarian regime.

Secrets are another characteristic that Aunts look for to become more powerful, as it is already said in *The Testaments*: "It was how the Aunts got their power: by finding things out. Things that should never be talked about" (286). It is also evident how Aunt Lydia and Aunt Vidala suspect from each other, and how Aunt Vidala tries to discredit Aunt Lydia. Therefore, to be powerful you have to know it all. And in doing so Aunt Lydia is an expert:

In the early days of Gilead, I used to ask myself whether I was Fox or Cat. Should I twist and turn, using the secrets in my possession to manipulate others, or should I zip my lip and rejoice as others outsmarted themselves? Obviously I was both, since—unlike many—here I still am. I still have a bag of tricks. And I'm still high in the tree. (254)

In her path of becoming an Aunt, Agnes Jemima narrates:

This was what the Aunts did, I was learning. They recorded. They waited. They used their information to achieve goals known only to themselves. Their weapons were powerful but contaminating secrets, as the Marthas had always said. Secrets, lies, cunning, deceit—but the secrets, the lies, the cunning, and the deceit of others as well as their own. (309)

And further on, we can see her humanity, as she even questions her decision, and compares Aunt's behaviour to men's:

one day I felt it would be a blessed state to be a full Aunt—knowing all the Aunts' carefully hoarded secrets, wielding hidden powers, doling out retributions. The next day I would consider my soul—because I did believe I had one—and how twisted and corrupted it would become if I were to act in that way. Was my soft, muddy brain hardening? Was I becoming stony, steely,

pitiless? Was I exchanging my caring and pliable woman's nature for an imperfect copy of a sharp-edged and ruthless man's nature? I didn't want that, but how to avoid it if I aspired to be an Aunt? (328)

Aunt Lydia tells all her secrets addressing to her possible readers, being aware that writing the story could be a problem for her: "... the stash of incriminating documents I've been hoarding for so many years will have featured not only at my own trial—should fate prove malicious, and should I live to feature at such a trial—but at the trials of many others" (61).

To end this section, my aim has been to analyse and know more about the Aunts and their role in Gilead's society, in order to prove the objectives proposed in this paper.

## 5. Conclusions.

While doing this paper I have born in mind the objectives proposed, to prove the validity of my thesis statement. This is the reason why my theoretical framework has analysed the concepts related in the objectives. I decided to change the order for practical issues, as I will explain now.

The first thing I started researching were narrative voices and their characteristics in a general way, to then apply it to *The Testament's* narrators. This second objective is the one whose order I have altered, linking it to the first one, since it had more sense to carry on with the same topic, but specifying it in the novel.

With this objective, an idea to highlight is Aunt Lydia's voice as a key element. Agnes Jemima and Nicole voices are also important, as they give us different visions, for being younger and with a very different upbringing. It is really interesting how Atwood interweaves these three narrators and makes us understand and know more about Gilead's secrets.

Afterwards, my third objective, to analyse key terms for the development of my paper. These words are *memory*, *power* and *justice*. They are totally related to each other, not only in this novel, but also in other novels by Atwood.

In *The Testaments*, Aunt Lydia is narrating us her story. But at the same time, to possible readers, to whom she addresses during all the novel, making them witnesses of the events. This metafictional writing makes this character closer to the readers, which could be a strategy to make them empathise with her and in this way, polish a bit the prejudices and the remembrances of her bad deeds in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Aunt Lydia is a double agent who fights against Gilead, while being one of its leading figures.

To do so, she is telling her testimonies, her remembrances since all started, when she was arrested by the Sons of Jacobs. In this way, her memories are what make readers become her judges in some way. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, we only had Offred's details about how Gilead started, but with Aunt Lydia's narration in *The Testaments* this view widens our scope and we know even more about her previous life. Also, we can understand her choice of becoming an Aunt, that is directly related to power and this power will enable her to construct a better future by ending up with Gilead. As I have argued, Aunts were powerful figures that used Gilead's ways of making justice to achieve their aims. This way of making justice for them was through fear and punishments. The Aunts' characterization is the last objective proposed in this paper, but it is also closely related to the terms analysed.

Aunt Lydia is acknowledged as one of the most evil and strict of the Aunts and, as a Founder, she has to abide by Gilead's norms. She has a great deal of power, and probably that is the reason of her becoming an Aunt, because it was the better option she could choose. To keep this power, Aunt Lydia has to know all the secrets and go steps ahead from the other Aunts, like Aunt Vidala, who will not hesitate to betray her to achieve more power.

Definitely, for everything exposed I can say that my thesis statement is valid. My thesis statement is that Aunt Lydia is the main narrative voice which paves the way to a better future in *The Testaments*. I think so, because it is clear that it is the main narrative voice and through her way of becoming an Aunt and getting inside the Gilead's mechanisms of power, she manages to do justice. Not only to Offred and her daughters, but also to the world, by destroying a totalitarian regime such as Gilead's.

As I have already said, Aunts were considered to be promoters of the future, and is definitely what Aunt Lidia achieves, a better future without Gilead's tyranny.

I would like to finish with one of Aunt Lydia's words with which she wishes a good arrival and hope for Agnes Jemima and Nicole: "The clock ticks, the minutes pass. I wait. I wait. Fly well, my messengers, my silver doves, my destroying angels. Land safely" (392).



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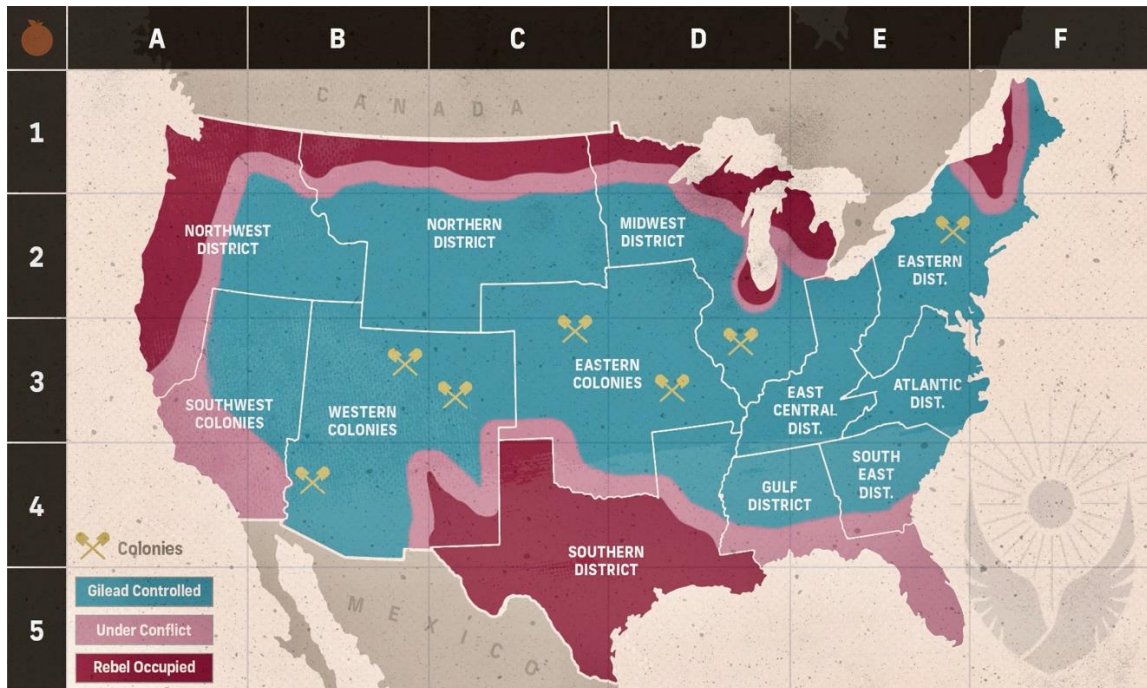
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## 7. Annexes.



[Fig. 1](#)

Source: Gilead's map. Image taken from *THT* Hulu Series on <https://twitter.com/HandmaidsOnHulu/status/1382416325708976129/photo/1> (2021).

So.....

- > What is the cognitive status of the 'story'?
- > What is its relationship to the 'text'?
- > How is the 'sequence of events' constructed?
- > Is the 'sequence of events' the main aspect of narrative structure?
- > To what extent does an 'author' or 'narrator' matter for the story?

Barbara Dancygier, *Narrative anchors*, SIFS, Lancaster 2006 33

[Fig. 2](#)

Source: Dancygier's PowerPoint (33) at SIFS. Lancaster, 2006.

## Narratives, four basic elements (Herman):

### Situatedness

- a mode of representation that is situated in a specific discourse, context or occasion for telling.

### Event sequencing

- this mode of representation focuses on a structured time-course of particularized events.

### Worldmaking/ world disruption

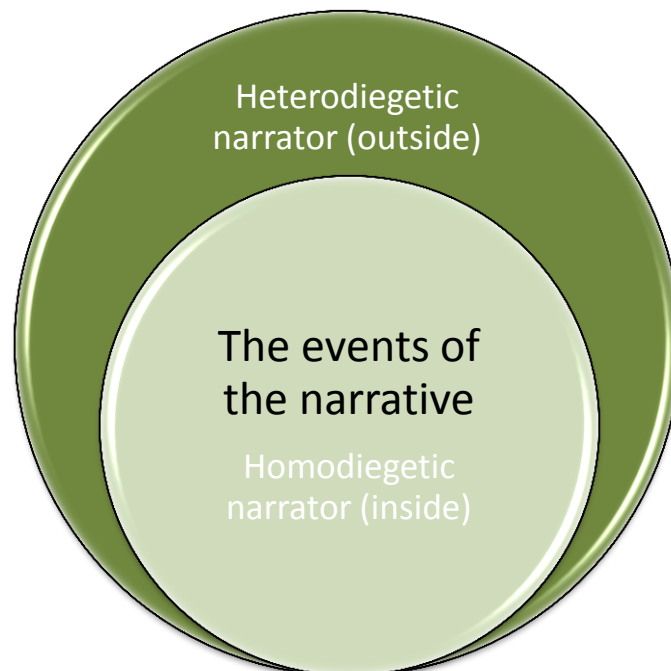
- the events represented introduce some sort of disruption or disequilibrium into a storyworld.

### What's it like

- what it is like to live through this storyworld-in-flux, highlighting the pressure of events on real or imagined consciousness.

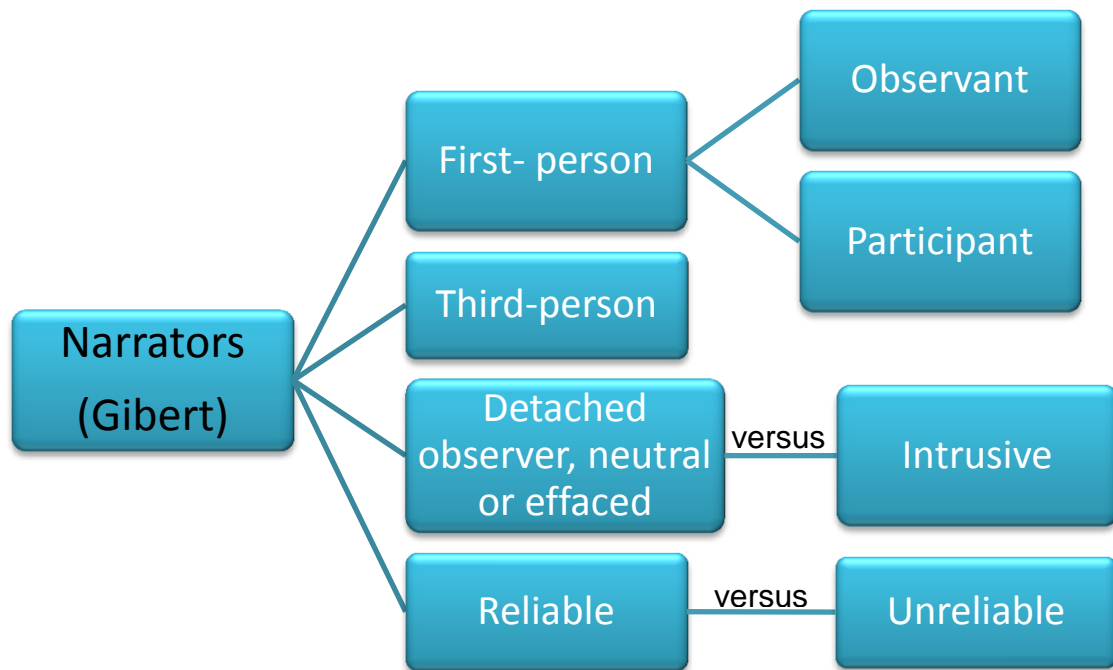
[Fig. 3](#)

Source: Own elaboration based on Herman (9).



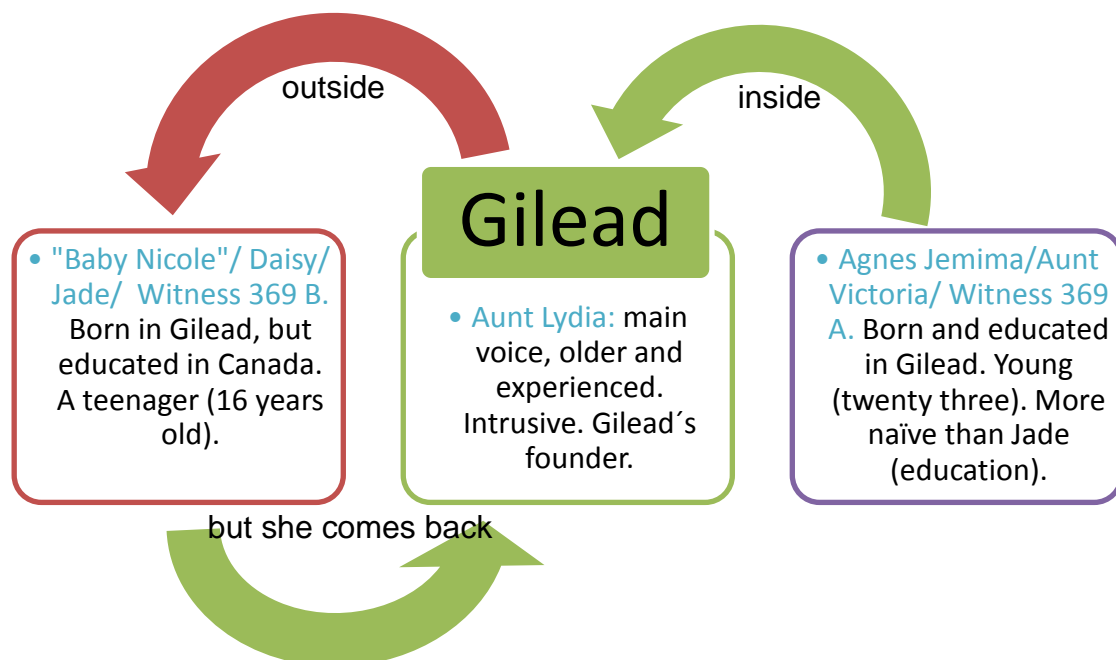
[Fig. 4](#)

Source: Own elaboration based on Genette's classification of narrators (Page, 197 and Bronwen, 47).



[Fig. 5](#)

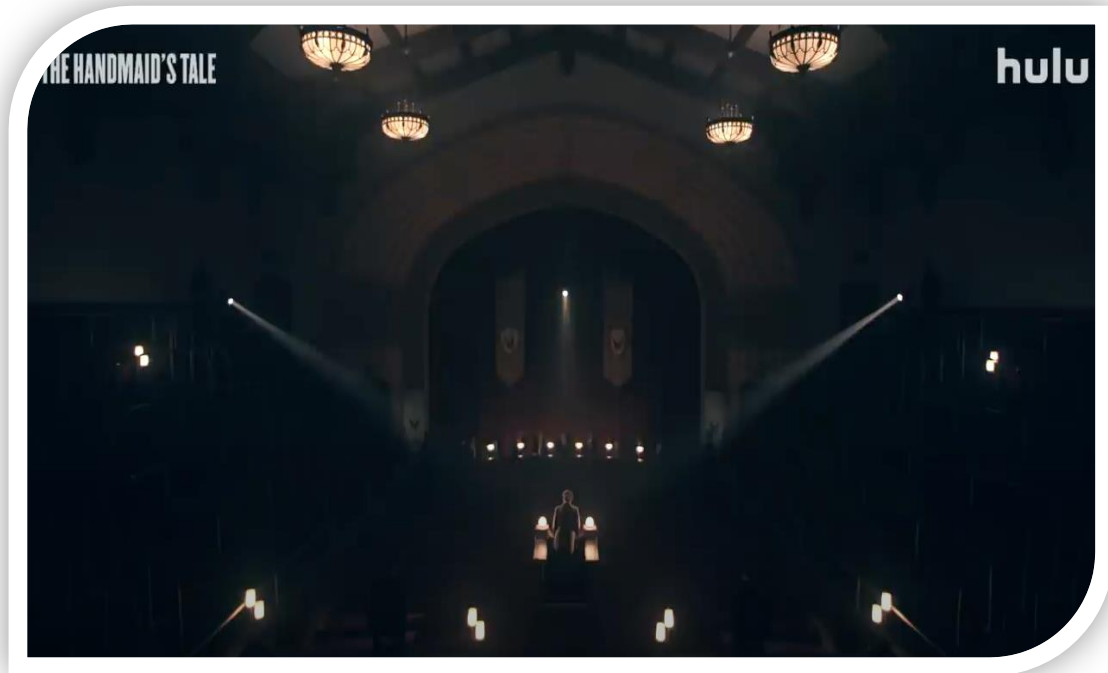
Source: Own elaboration based on Gibert's glossary of the term narrator (*A Study*, 207-208).



[Fig. 6](#)

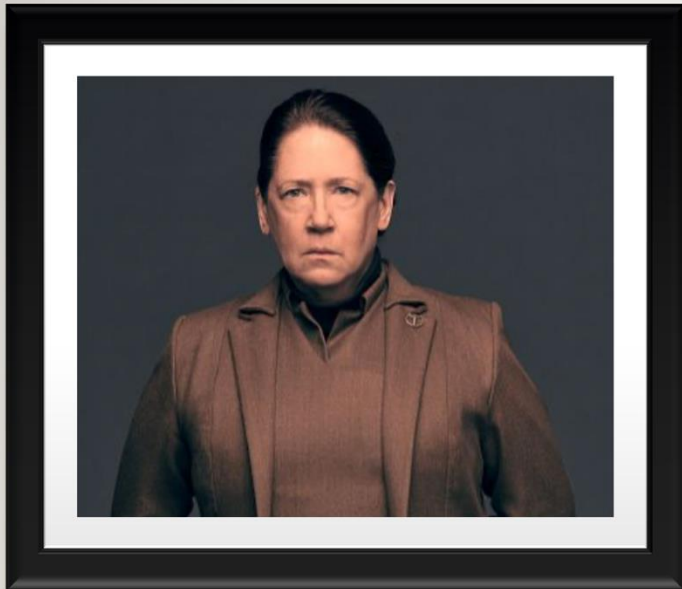
Source: Own elaboration. *The Testament's* narrators.





[Fig. 7](#)

Source: Picture taken from *THT* Hulu Series trailer (2021): Aunt Lydia's Journey: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DKxZ2bCxwyM>



### AUNT LYDIA: MAIN NARRATOR

- Homodiegetic, omniscient and intrusive narrator.
- First-person narrator: participant.
- Reliable.
- Voice of experience.
- The strongest voice.

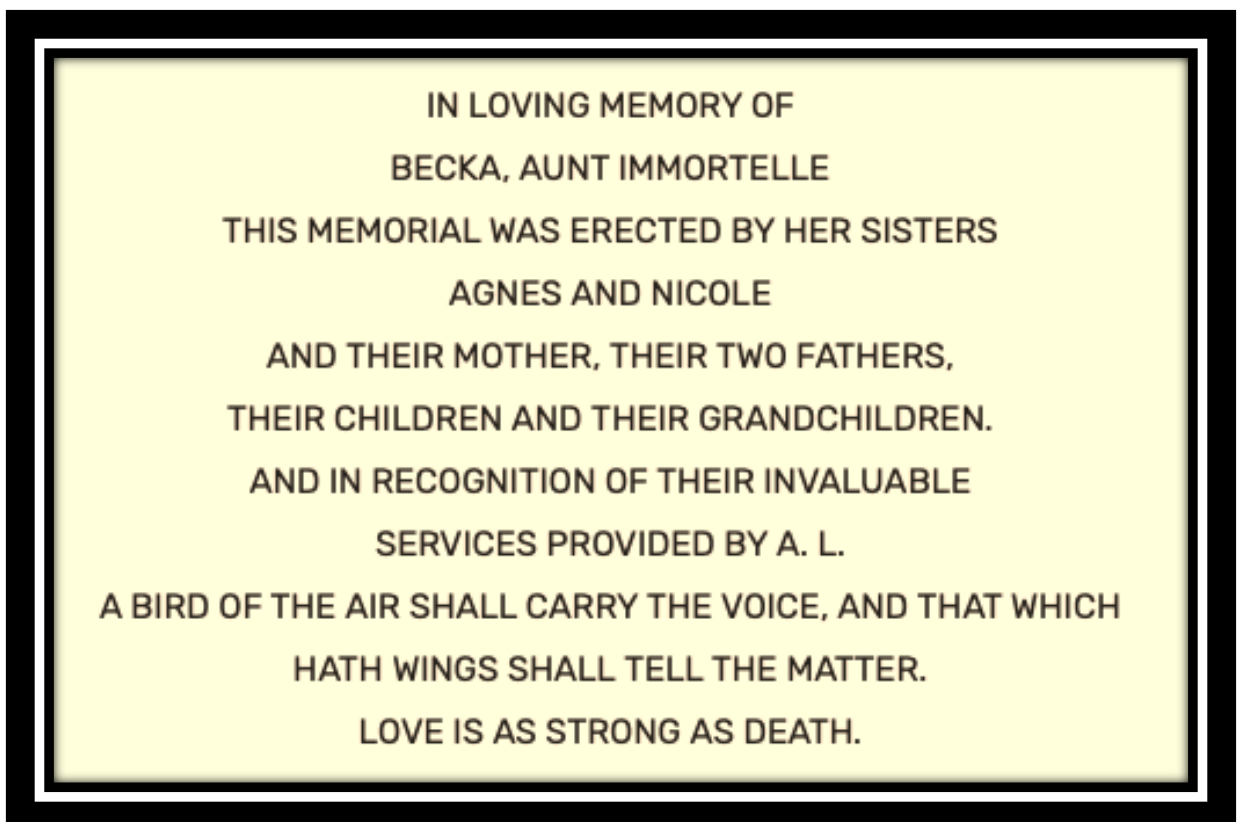
[Fig. 8](#)

Source: Own elaboration. Picture taken from *THT* Hulu Series, 2017.



[Fig. 9](#)

Source: Image taken from *Time's Magazine*, vol 10, Sept. 2019.



[Fig. 10](#)

Source: Own elaboration. From *The Testaments'* Epilogue (415).



Fig. 11

Source: Own elaboration. Images taken from:

<https://www.penguin.co.uk/articles/2019/sep/margaret-atwood-handmaids-tale-testaments-real-life-inspiration.html>

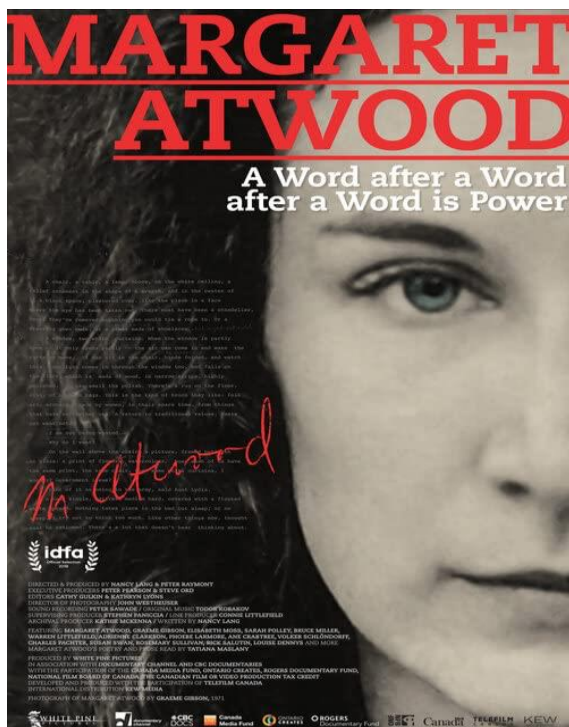


Fig. 12

Source: Margaret Atwood's documentary

(2019) <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt11197082/>



[Fig. 13](#)

Source: own elaboration. Images taken from *TT*'s launch and *THT* Hulu Series, 2017.



[Fig. 14](#)

Source: own elaboration. Images taken from *THT* Hulu Series, 2017.



[Fig. 15](#)

Source: Image taken from

<https://www.newsweek.com/2018/05/11/handmaids-tale-season-2-how-margaret-atwood-and-bruce-miller-agreed-disagree-901162.html>



[Fig. 16](#)

Source: Image taken from *The Handmaid's Tale* Hulu Series, 2017 (S01E01).

To see the scene: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=chUmz3IG--Q>