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Structuralist analysis of Margaret Atwood's novels *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Cat's Eye*, and *The Robber Bride*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood's contribution to Canadian and world literature is immeasurable and today she is one of the most famous award-winning Canadian female authors. Her works include books of poetry, story collections, short prose works, and – what she is best known for – novels. This thesis will provide a structuralist analysis of three of her novels – *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Cat's Eye*, and *The Robber Bride* – and show that there is a way in which those texts unify themselves into a coherent system composed of elements of storytelling, their combination and articulation.

Chronologically, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) was published first, followed by *Cat's Eye* in 1988, and *The Robber Bride* in 1993. These were published in a row (no novels were published in-between), establishing a pattern of thematically similar texts. Atwood often portrays female characters in the patriarchal society, who are most of the time victimized and oppressed either by men or by other women. This thesis will try to show that this kind of setting in the chosen novels affects her female characters, exhibiting similar characteristics and similar type of narration.

Also, Atwood explores the relation between history and narrative, and the processes of creating history – not only the world's history, but the character's as well. Hayden White describes history as “a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse” (preface, ix) and uses a term “metahistory”, signifying a structural element of history which is poetic and linguistic in its nature (preface, ix). This relationship between history and metahistory is what connects the chosen Atwood's novels. The similarity of structural elements and the way they fit in the story's puzzle provides a template for a narrative of an oppressed and victimized female narrator who tries to establish a relationship between history and metahistory of her experiences through flashbacks and fragmented memories, in order to glue back the broken

pieces of herself. This thesis will try to bare the skeleton of these narratives and provide examples of their similarity, while also explaining why these precise structural elements (character, plot, setting, point of view, narrative voice) were chosen for analysis and how are they relevant for claiming the existence of connection between the novels.

2. STRUCTURALIST ELEMENTS AND HISTORIOGRAPHIC METAFICTION

Structuralism is a form of literary theory which seeks to uncover underlying principles governing the composition of a larger structure, e.g. a narrative. It argues that there must be a structure in every text, composed of features such as character, setting, narrative voice, point of view, and plot. Structuralists attempt to identify the smallest meaningful units in a text in order to study their modes of combination. This leads to understanding how meaning is created rather than interpreting the actual meaning conveyed by the particular text. The primary text for the structural analysis will be Seymour Chatman's *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*. He argues that according to structuralists, two main components of a narrative are story and discourse. Story is "the content or chain of events (actions, happenings), plus what may be called the existents (characters, items of setting)" and discourse is "the expression, the means by which the content is communicated" (Chatman, 19).

The first aspect of analysis will be characters and their role in the narrative. Some structuralists¹ argue for a rather narrow notion of character, saying that characters are secondary to plot, and should only be analysed as functions. They are to be seen as means rather than ends of the story, and are to remain subordinate to other narrative features, such as plot and setting. Others² argue for a wider, afunctional notion of character, meaning that character is "no longer subservient to action" (Chatman, 115). This thesis will use the second notion and present Atwood's characters as more than mere functions of the narrative. Presented characters will follow a pattern of structuralist binary oppositions – they will be either flat or round, open-ended or closed – and their importance will be proven to be at least the same as the importance of other features of the texts. According to the modernist's E. M.

¹ Vladimir Propp, Boris Tomashevsky

² Tzvetan Todorov, Roland Barthes

Forster's classification of characters, flat characters are "constructed round a single idea or quality" (67) and usually possess very few traits, whereas round characters have a variety of traits, some of which can be contradictory. Round characters are "capable of surprising in a convincing way" (Forster, 78), which is another way of saying they are open-ended and prone to change (Chatman, 132). A modern character usually possesses traits of a round character: "Its foundations – in heroism, stereotype, virtue, social norms – were attacked and replaced by uncertainties more true to modern experience" (Matz, 45). These characters are in a way anti-heroes, "remarkable not only for [their] positive traits and accomplishments, but for [their] negative ones" (Matz, 46).

Another important feature, the setting, represents a space in which the characters exist and by which they are influenced. It contributes to the mood of the narrative and this contribution can range from minimal to significant, so Chatman proposes Robert Liddell's five-type setting division:

- 1) utilitarian (simple and emotionless),
- 2) symbolic (type of setting equals the type of action),
- 3) irrelevant (the setting has no effect on characters),
- 4) „countries of the mind“ (character's inner landscape),
- 5) kaleidoscopic (moving back and forth from external landscape to inner world of character's mind) (qtd. in Chatman, 143)

The chosen novels will show the importance of setting and the degree in which this importance varies from narrative to narrative.

Furthermore, it is necessary to differentiate between point of view and narrative voice and to establish their place in the text. Narrative voice expresses and states, whereas point of view refers to a perspective in terms of which this expression is made (Chatman, 153). This means that the character's point of view is the best insight into his thoughts and opinions. Chatman distinguishes between three types of point of view: perceptual, conceptual, and interest point of view (152). Perceptual point of view refers to seeing through someone's eyes (literally), conceptual refers to someone's way of thinking (attitude-wise), and finally interest point of view is concerned with someone's general or specific interest-vantage (Chatman, 153). In terms of reliability, a character can only be unreliable to himself, willingly deceitful to his consciousness (but the reader is aware of it), whereas an unreliable narrative voice is deceitful to the reader. Some narrators tell deliberate lies or omit crucial information, while others simply do not know enough to give an accurate account of what actually happened so they speculate. Establishing the reliability of the narrator is an important step in narrative analysis because the narrator's interests can be so marked that he deliberately chooses to deceive the reader:

An unreliable narrator is one who tells lies, conceals information, misjudges with respect to the narrative audience – that is, one whose statements are untrue not by the standards of the real world or of the authorial audience but by the standards of his own narrative audience. (Rabinowitz, 134)

All three novels analyzed here have a female first-person narrator, who is also a character in the story. This is called homodiegesis and the homodiegetic narrator is, according to Gerard Genette, “the narrator present as a character in the story he tells”. (244) In addition,

if the homodiegetic narrator is the hero of the story, he is called autodiegetic. Furthermore, the narration here is mostly monologic, which is a term used by Mikhail Bakhtin:

Monologism ... denies the existence outside itself of another consciousness with equal rights and equal responsibilities, another *I* with equal rights (*thou*). With a monologic approach ... *another person* remains wholly and merely an object of consciousness, and not another consciousness. (292, emphasis in the original)

This means that the narration does not expect any kind of response and is utilised solely to express a single world view, unlike its opposite – dialogism, which seeks answers.

Structuralism is well known for its focus on binary oppositions. As far as the plot is concerned, the comparative analysis of the three novels will show that they have a similar structure, consisting of flashbacks and (sometimes false) memories on one side and present time on the other. The plot is a summary of the story, a cause-and effect sequence. This thesis will show that all three novels have a similar structure of main causal events, which change from past time to present time in an orderly way. Another binary opposition, „fiction-fact“ or more precisely „fictive-real“, will be explored in terms of history and metahistory inside the stories themselves. This notion is connected to the reliability of the narrator and her ability to differentiate between real and false memories, and more importantly, between telling the truth and deciding to alter the reality. Structuralists attempted to accentuate all of the mentioned patterns in the text, showing that they are universal, related, and can thus be used to develop general conclusions about individual systems from which they emerged. In other words, all analyzed elements will prove to be of a similar structure in all three novels.

Other theoretical concepts used in this thesis are historiographic metafiction and the notion of reference. Historiographic metafiction is a term coined by Linda Hutcheon in her

essay “Beginning to Theorize Postmodernism” in 1987, and then further developed in her 1988 book *A Poetics of Postmodernism*. She applies this notion to texts which are both self-reflexive and claiming to be historical. In other words they are fiction claiming to be history, which blatantly leads to the conclusion of them being a fiction. She also states that historiographic metafiction is “a communal project focused on text, producer, receiver, and historical and social context” (1993: 115). Historiographic metafiction is overtly concerned with its reception, and often deliberately falsifies certain parts of history in order to assimilate the events into the story. There are two most common types of narration in historiographic metafiction: multiple points of view, and an overtly controlling narrator (Hutcheon, 2004: 117). Characters are not proper types, they are usually marginalized individuals, “peripheral figures of fictional history” (2004: 114). This thesis will explore the possibility of *The Handmaid's Tale* being historiographic metafiction, and will also try to prove that some features of this concept can be applied to other two novels.

Postmodern fiction also poses new questions about reference. It stopped asking about real objects in the past, and instead asks “[...] to which discursive context could this language belong? To which prior textualizations must we refer?” (Hutcheon, 2004: 119). Referents of history are presumed to be real, whereas those of metahistory are not. However, the history is known only through its textualized remains, which are never to be taken as pure truth. Also, in the case of these three novels, “history” is presented through the eyes of unreliable narrators, thus bringing the notion of truthfulness and reality into question. Possible reasons behind each of the three questionable historical references will be given, so that similarities and differences between the novels can be summed up at the end of the thesis.

3. ATWOOD'S NOVELS

3.1. *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*

The Handmaid's Tale is a story of a rather ordinary, educated, middle-class woman who is framed by, but (presumably) escapes from a near-future dystopian misogynist society of Republic of Gilead, formed within the borders of the former United States of America. The text consists of two parts: a story told by the Handmaid, and a fictional lecture by Professor Pieixoto named "Historical Notes" at the end of the book, which is a comment on the story and its origin. In the story, Handmaids were women whose only function was to bear children to husbands of women who could not have a child of their own due to sterility, which was in itself caused by environmental disasters and pollution. Those men were called Commanders, and the Handmaids were awarded names which signified to whom they belonged. The naming system signifies their position in the Republic. All of them have generic names and are interchangeable – when one of them dies or is killed, she is merely replaced by another, who then inherits the name. All women who were not high-class Wives (class names are capitalized in the text), Widows, or lower-class Econowives were sorted into four groups: Handmaids (with viable ovaries), post-menopausal or unmarried sterile women called Aunts (whose job was indoctrination of the Handmaids), servant-class Marthas, and Unwomen, who refused to belong to either of these groups so they were sent to the toxic waste Colonies (which is in itself a death sentence since these Colonies were places of extreme environmental conditions due to pollution).

The heroine of the story is named Offred, while her real name is unknown. She is both „of Fred“ (Commander's possession) and „offered“ as a kind of fertility sacrifice in a sterile household. She was once a librarian with a husband and a daughter, but following a series of

catastrophic national events, she is separated from her family and sent to the training centre, where she is educated by Aunts to become a Handmaid. The training centre is the place for creating women who will submit to their Commander's will and participate in furthering the goals of Gileadean society. The new regime took away women's rights, reducing the women to mere utilities and turning them into baby-makers.

Offred narrates her story during her third assignment as a Handmaid, adding flashbacks of her life before Gilead. Through her narration, the reader gets an insight into the structure of Gileadean society as well as into daily life of classes presented in the novel. The Handmaids have assignments such as grocery shopping, which they must perform in pairs. Offred is usually sent with a fellow Handmaid named Ofglen, who she later finds out is a member of a secret resistance movement. However, the main role of Handmaids consists of participating in „Ceremonies“, obligatory sexual intercourse with Commanders, under the watchful eye of Wives. It is crucial for them to bear a child as soon as possible, and a healthy one as well – pollution led to many genetic mutations in newborns, who were killed if born deformed. Since almost no medical interventions were allowed, women had no way of knowing whether their child was healthy or will need to be killed in the end. This being her third assignment, Offred was under a lot of pressure to do her job.

Eventually, she finds herself in a situation where Commander presents to her a possibility of an illegal relationship, providing her with fashion magazines and cosmetic products, which she has not had for a long time. They secretly meet in his study, where she is allowed to read (an act prohibited for women by the new regime). Soon Offred is reminded by Commander's Wife that she is not yet pregnant, and the Wife suggests that she sleep with the chauffeur Nick in order to bear a child. Offred does precisely that, but also secretly continues the affair. In the course of the novel, the old Ofglen is replaced by a new one, and Offred finds out that the previous one hanged herself because she saw the authorities coming for her.

Eventually, Commander's Wife finds out about the secret affair between her husband and Offred, and calls the authorities. The story ending is left unclear. A van comes to pick Offred up, but Nick the chauffeur is one of the men taking her away. He whispers to her that they are not authorities but a part of resistance movement, and she is led away. Nothing more is known of her fate.

However, this is not the ending of the novel. The metafictional epilogue, Historical Notes, makes the reader perceive that as far as the Notes are concerned, the first part represents a "history" (which may or may not have happened that way). As Linda Hutcheon explains in her book, postmodern fiction suggests that "to re-write or re-present the past in fiction and in history is to open it up to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological" (2004: 110). The Notes, transcribed from cassettes by Professor Pieixoto and presented to the academic audience on a symposium in the year of 2195, imply that the Gilead regime was eventually overthrown, followed by a more democratic society. Playing upon the truths and lies of historical record of Gileadean times, Offred's story is thus presented to the audience, who have a limited access to information about their history. The found narrative makes them rethink their past, providing a basis for debate.

Offred is a marginalized character, an underprivileged part of the system. She is also an overtly controlling narrator and a round character, prone to change and development. She is three-dimensional, dynamic, and believable, which immediately separates her from the rest of the characters described. Her narration is experiential, a reflection of thoughts and perspectives rather than an objective and historical report, and provides enough room for comparison with Hutcheon's view of historiographic metafiction in terms of a „double awareness of both fictiveness and a basis in the 'real'" (2004: 107). She is self-conscious about the way she narrates, and is not a reliable narrator, emphasizing that her tale is a retelling: „This is a reconstruction. All of it is a reconstruction.“ (Handmaid's Tale, 144).

Also, she uses present tense in her story, denying the idea of historicity: she is not using the present tense to emphasize the immediacy of events because she is not narrating them at the time they were happening. The interchangeability of history and metahistory within her story is what gives it the status of metafiction – Offred herself goes on and off from claiming reliability to establishing fictiveness of her narrating.

The readers see Gilead as the narrator sees it, and interpret it as she interprets it, thus having to trust her about everything that happened. However, that trust is continually undermined by narrator's admissions about how she has changed her story: “I made that up. It didn't happen that way. Here is what happened.” (*Handmaid's Tale*, 273). The different time period settings are perceived by Pieixoto's audience as being closely linked to their own time. This is why they have no problem with “believing” the story – or at least finding it credible enough – just as Pieixoto establishes his own belief: “tape like this, however, is very difficult to fake convincingly, and we were assured by the experts who examined them that the physical objects themselves are genuine.” (*Handmaid's Tale*, 315).

However, the narrator's openness and admission of changing the story from time to time leaves the question of reference unanswered. She is her own reference point, thus being responsible for history-metahistory ratio:

It's impossible to say a thing exactly the way it was, because what you say can never be exact, you always have to leave something out, there are too many parts, sides, crosscurrents, nuances; too many gestures, which could mean this or that, too many shapes which can never be fully described, too many flavours, in the air or on the tongue, half-colours, too many. (*Handmaid's Tale*, 144)

The fact that her narration cannot be trusted leads to questioning everything, and this is presumably the purpose of narrator's unreliability. Doubting the truthfulness of the story goes well with the system described in it, which is full of secrecy and covertness. Also, Historical Notes are discontinuous and disjunctive; inviting the readers to question rather than accept the authenticity of what they have just read in the first part (Offred's story). These factors discourage suspension of disbelief and invite an active interrogation of the text.

Accordingly, the setting in the novel is symbolic, contributing to the mood of oppression and claustrophobia: "The air got too full, once, of chemicals, rays, radiation, the water swarmed with toxic molecules, all of that takes years to clean up, and meanwhile they creep into your body, camp out in your fatty cells." (Handmaid's Tale, 122). There are very few descriptions of Gilead, but all of them are brief, with emphasis on comparison with past times. The past (pre-Gileadean time) is described as normal and meaningful:

It's strange, now, to think about having a job. *Job*. It's a funny word. It's a job for a man. ... All those women having jobs: hard to imagine, now, but thousands of them had jobs, millions. It was considered the normal thing. Now it's like remembering the paper money, when they still had that. (Handmaid's Tale, 182, emphasis in the original)

Opposed to that, everything in the narrative contributes to the mood of depression, from descriptions of government prohibitions and sanctions to class hierarchy and prescribed wardrobe.

As far as the plot is concerned, the narrative systematically goes from present to past and vice versa. The narrator adds flashbacks intermittently and of her own accord, meaning

that often there is no reason for a flashback other than a trivial one: “I’m too tired to go on with this story. I’m too tired to think about where I am. Here is a different story, a better one. This is the story of what happened to Moira.” (*Handmaid’s Tale*, 138). Everything is filtered through Offred and she decides what to share and at what time – there is only one point of view (hers) and it is a mixture of perceptual and conceptual. Everything is seen through her eyes only, but most of the time it is colored by attitudes and ideologies (hers or the system’s, it is impossible to distinguish precisely because she is quite influenced by the system). Some events she skips over and chooses to narrate only the ones that are presumably more relevant for the story. This leads to another important characteristic of the plot, ellipsis: “the discourse halts, though time continues to pass in the story” (Chatman, 70). Offred does not narrate all the events sequentially, she jumps from memory to memory. For example, the narrative mentions she usually visits the Commander two or three nights a week (162), followed by descriptions of the three nights (163-167), but with no account of the rest of those three days. The narration follows this pattern, presenting a series of events separated by ellipses that the reader must fill in or at least wonder whether something is being glossed over.

3.2. *CAT'S EYE*

Cat's Eye is a novel about Elaine Risley, a painter, who is also a protagonist and a narrator of the story. She returns to her hometown of Toronto for a retrospective exhibition of her art, and while there, reflects on her childhood years. The title of the novel is connected with one important memory of Elaine's – a marble, which she valued as a child and played with, and which later became an important motif in her paintings. The narrative follows Elaine from the childhood and teenage years to adulthood as an art student and a feminist painter.

The novel is written mostly in flashbacks and starts with a memory of Cordelia, Elaine's childhood friend. Being a child whose parents were constantly on the road (her father was an entomologist), Elaine did not have many friends. But when her father takes a position as university professor, she meets two girls, Carol and Grace, and befriends them. However, after one of the road trips, she discovers that there is a new girl in their group. Cordelia soon becomes dominant and starts to bully Elaine. With constant criticism and bullying, Elaine becomes insecure and anxious, but does not complain because she values the friendship too much.

The situation escalates one winter when she is abandoned by all three of them to freeze in the snow. Elaine erases all memory of this event and is again friends with Cordelia in high school. However, the situation changes. Elaine is now the one who enjoys mocking Cordelia, and they swap places completely. But at every glimpse of the hurtful childhood memory, Elaine distances herself and slowly they grow apart. Elaine pursues art and enrolls in night classes at art college, which launches her career as a painter. She has an affair with her art teacher but due to unexpected pregnancy, she marries one of her fellow students. Their marriage suffers because neither of them is ready or willing to take on the burden of

responsible adulthood, so Elaine tries to kill herself. Saved by her husband, she falls into an even deeper depression, and eventually leaves him, taking their daughter with her to Vancouver. Her career blossoms, and later, she marries again and has a second child.

However, she constantly thinks about Cordelia and obsessively wonders what happened to her. Mentally, she is split between her childhood self and her adult self, so when she returns to Toronto for the art show, she keeps expecting Cordelia to appear from nowhere. She saw Cordelia for the last time as a mental patient in a sanatorium, which made it blatantly obvious that Cordelia's life is spiralling downwards (whereas Elaine is slowly ascending through her art). However, meeting her again is everything Elaine is capable of thinking about. In the end, the retrospective exhibition accomplishes two things: it makes her remember and it allows her to begin to solidify her fragmented identity. Fragments of childhood memories are slowly coming into place through observing her own paintings. Gradually, she puts Cordelia in the past, where she belongs. Similar to *The Handmaid's Tale*, this is not the ending of the novel. The final chapter allows Elaine to reminisce about her friendship with Cordelia and the future she will never share with her: "This is what I miss, Cordelia: not something that's gone, but something that will never happen. Two old women giggling over their tea." (Cat's Eye, 498).

The narrator of the story is Elaine, and her narrative voice is constantly shifting between addressed and unaddressed – the first voice is social, engaged in a telling, and the second voice, narrating the past, is almost toneless, expressing mere facts. However, this serves a purpose of uncovering repressed memories and resolving childhood traumas. Chinmoy Banerjee remarks on Elaine's memories:

Unlike the conventional flashback, it is not a series of analepses motivated by the local needs of a dominant narrative. Rather, it is structurally motivated as an extraordinary

event, the recognition of a childhood persecution that Elaine had not been able to face earlier. (515)

The flashbacks abound in ellipses. Parts of Elaine's story are omitted: time continues to pass, but the narration stops. She jumps from a seven-page summary of grade ten ("After the summer I'm in Grade Ten. Although I'm still shorter, still younger, I have grown", 268) straight to next year ("Now I'm in Grade Eleven, and as tall as many other girls, which is not very tall", 276), and a few pages later she skips two years of narrative time ("Time passes and we are older, we are the oldest, we are in Grade Thirteen", 291). In-between those events there are dialogues with Cordelia or mere descriptions of nature. Much of the time passed is not accounted for in the narrative and parts are glossed over: it was a traumatic time for Elaine and she does not voice all the details of it.

Elaine is an unreliable narrator, as Molly Hite states:

In *Cat's Eye*, as in many other Atwood novels, the main source of ... imbalance is the limited first-person narrator, who is unreliable inasmuch as she cannot see enough – either of her own motivations and desires and the forces conditioning them, or of the consequences of certain of her choices. (153)

Hite concludes her article with the same notion that maybe not everything that the narrator states to be true is in fact true:

The oxymoron of 'autobiographical fiction' in *Cat's Eye* finally authorizes not a transgressive glimpse into some pre-existing private realm of the 'real', but a reminder

that the 'self' of self-representation is always seer as well as seen, and that both seer and seen are implicated in the social construction of how one looks. (155)

Parts of Elaine's story are clearly glossed over, not only from lack of memory. There is a similar relationship between history and metahistory, just like in *The Handmaid's Tale* – Elaine's story pretends to be autobiographical but new memories arise along the way, changing the course of the narrative. This is why *Cat's Eye* can also be considered a form of historiographical metafiction. The narrative is overtly self-conscious and claims historicity. However, Elaine proves to be unreliable in the way she narrates things, being uncertain about how events happened – “that's where I heard the voice”, immediately followed by: “There was no voice.” (*Cat's Eye*, 494). Therefore, the reader is left doubting the truthfulness of Elaine's accounts of the past. She is her own reference point and this casts a shadow over her claim of historicity.

As far as the setting goes, the novel is set up in extreme environment, not so much physical but mental. Going back to Liddell's classification of settings, the fourth type, countries of the mind, seems to be the most appropriate. The story consists mostly of flashbacks, i.e. memories, but Elaine also reflects on present-day events more than she merely narrates them. Flashbacks show the victimization and bullying among little girls, and present-day narration shows how the past influences Elaine's life, making her think all the time about it. This is followed by the conclusion that she is a protagonist of the story she narrates, which makes her an autodiegetic narrator.

Plot-wise, flashbacks serve a precise purpose (unlike some of the flashbacks in *The Handmaid's Tale*). The events described in those parts of the novel are pieces of a puzzle representing Elaine's childhood. What she needs to do is discover the parts that are missing or were glossed over in order to put the pieces of herself back together:

When I'm with Ben I eat at regular times because he does, I eat regular things, but when I'm alone I indulge in junk food and scavenging, my old, singular ways. It's bad for me, but I need to remember what bad for me is like. (Cat's Eye, 209)

She is a round character – according to Chatman, round characters are capable of change, and this change is what the reader follows throughout the novel. She repeatedly discovers new layers of memory, and comes to terms with them, thus experiencing a change in her personality. Her point of view is both perceptual and conceptual, perceptual referring to the parts of the story set up in the present time, whereas conceptual refers to parts of her history which she tries to put back in order.

3.3 THE ROBBER BRIDE

The Robber Bride is a story of three women – Charis, Roz, and Toni – who are tricked in their friendship by Zenia, an acquaintance from their university days. Tony is a college military historian/professor, Charis is a hippie, and Roz is a business woman running a magazine. The present time of the story takes a week, and is framed by meetings between the three protagonists at a restaurant called *Toxique*. At the beginning of the story, the three women are dining at the restaurant and see Zenia, whom they thought to be dead (or even murdered). This leads to them reflecting on the ways Zenia infiltrated each of their lives and destroyed them. These *Toxique* sections alternate the protagonists' points of view.

Playing the part of a friend and confidante, Zenia encourages the three women to fall in her web of deceit, costing each of them their love interest. Roz offered Zenia a job when she heard she was a successful freelance writer. Zenia does make a success of Roz's business, but she also seduces Roz's husband Mitch and leads to his suicide. Tony had been friends with Zenia and her boyfriend West back in college. However, Zenia left, which led to Tony and West becoming a couple. Years later, Zenia returned and seduced West (now Tony's husband) again. Charis meets Zenia at the yoga centre where she was teaching. Zenia tells her she is ill and is going to die soon. Overcome with pity and care, Charis invites her to stay at her house, which she shares with her husband Billy. When Charis finds out she is pregnant, Zenia leaves with Billy, leaving Charis alone and betrayed. Thus, all three women experience the same fate. Throughout the story, the reader finds out that all three women visited Zenia in her hotel room just before she died (or was murdered) and were even considered suspects. However, nothing more is known of it, leaving the question of Zenia's death open.

The primary source for the novel's plot, theme, and characterization was a tale „The Robber Bridegroom“ by the Brothers Grimm (Potts, 284). In the original version, a girl plans to marry a man who is actually a murderer, killing his brides after marrying them. A wise old woman warns her and the girl rescues herself. Atwood reversed the gender roles, making Zenia the predator who metaphorically devours her male victims after seducing them. However, she is seen only as a shadow she casts over protagonists' lives, not as a full separate character. In flashbacks, she tells them different stories about her childhood and history, and in the end nothing is known about her for certain: “When you alter yourself, the alterations become the truth.” (The Robber Bride, 102). In all the stories about her past, she is an outsider. Tony thinks Zenia is a White Russian. Charis believes her to be a Romani and Roz thought she was a German Jew. Tony's husband eventually states that Zenia confided in him to be a Greek immigrant raised in Canada. This evident isolation from community which is present in all versions of her history is what makes everyone sympathize with her, making her job easier.

Whereas two previous novels had only one narrative point of view, *The Robber Bride* has three different characters' viewpoints, three constructions of the “same” past events. As was mentioned before in this thesis, it is important to distinguish between narrative voice and point of view, and these two features need not be lodged in the same person (Chatman, 153). However, in this novel there are three narrators and three points of view, meaning each narrator has its (her) own point of view. Each narrator communicates her history through her own voice/perspective. More specifically, they are looking back at their own earlier perceptions of Zenia, but “that looking back is a conception, no longer a perception” (Chatman, 155). From the present standpoint, they are aware of Zenia's deeds and no longer perceive her as harmless. Their concept of Zenia is now colored by her betrayal. Since everything is happening retrospectively in protagonists' minds and each of them is narrating

their personal story, they can be named autodiegetic narrators. Furthermore, the setting can be classified as Liddell's fourth type, "countries of the mind". It has a profound influence on the mood of the narrative and is responsible for a mysterious atmosphere in the novel.

As with the other two novels, the narrators are unreliable, and have a similar way of overtly pointing it out:

Where to start is the problem, because nothing begins when it begins and nothing's over when it's over, and everything needs a preface: a preface, a postscript, a chart of simultaneous events. History is a construct... Any point of entry is possible and all choices are arbitrary. (The Robber Bride, 5)

The narrators explore their fractured identities in order to overcome the trauma, but this quest leads to an unreliable story, "drifting from mouth to mouth and changing as it goes" (Robber Bride, 461). The narrative is composed mostly of flashbacks, but many events are omitted through ellipsis. Each of the narrators is telling her own story, supposedly remembering it the way it happened but it is not a reliable account since their narration is colored by ambiguous feelings: Tony wants "to participate in [Zenja's] daring, her contempt for almost everything, her rapacity and lawlessness" (208); Roz "would like to be Zenja" (443); and Charis experiences "being Zenja" (300). However, they also want her dead: "Each has gone alone that day to Zenja's hotel room, and each has 'killed' Zenja. That is, Tony went to Zenja armed with a weapon and a plan for murder, Charis enacted a murder on the spot, and Roz entertained multiple fantasies of killing Zenja." (Wyatt, 58). Eventually, Zenja dies, but nowhere is it mentioned for certain whether she was murdered and by whom. Therefore, it is possible that the protagonists are hiding something in their narration in order not to incriminate themselves (or the other two women, for that matter).

The relationship between history and metahistory is similar to definition of historiographic metafiction. It is not always clear which is which, starting from the very beginning – Zenia was considered dead by the protagonists and yet they are not certain if it just might be her that they saw in the restaurant. Their accounts of individual experiences with Zenia are overtly self-conscious. She is never the subject of narration, and exists only in the stories of others: “no subjectivity, no inner world, confronts the reader directly.” (Wyatt, 41). Therefore, the reader should believe everything he reads about Zenia through unreliable, colored, accounts of protagonists because he has no reference points outside of their narration. Yet, even though they claim historicity, parts of the narrative are prone to questioning.

Also, an important feature of historiographic metafiction is existence of multiple points of view. In this case, all three narrators (three points of view) assimilate the events of their past in order to fit them into a mutual story. They have similar experiences with Zenia – almost identical – therefore their accounts are given in a similar manner. Describing the same events, but from different points of view, leads to a question of reference point. Their reference points are themselves and the other two women. Since all of them are unreliable narrators, the question of fact and fiction is left unresolved.

4. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE NOVELS

The Handmaid's Tale, *Cat's Eye*, and *The Robber Bride* exhibit a variety of similar features. Their structural elements are similar, and the structural basis of narratives is the same in all three novels. What makes them different is the surface structure – characters' traits, physical places, and all “material” features which a story consists of. The narrators are similar in all three of the novels:

They display an 'armour' against affect and a distaste for the culture within which they exist; they isolate and estrange familiar features of mass culture, especially language, by their critical glance; and they tend in their utterance toward a condensation and finality often achieved through a trope. (Banerjee, 514)

The narrators are marginalized characters, either so by the society or by themselves. They are female, first-person, autodiegetic and monologic narrators, constructing a personal experience through a relationship between history and metahistory. Atwood's predominant interests are characters' reconstructions of the past in the light of the present and understanding of the past's effect on their present selves. However, while in *The Handmaid's Tale* the narrator speaks equally about the past and the present, in *Cat's Eye* and *The Robber Bride* these two voices differ. When narrating the past, the narrator's tone changes to being less colored, showing that the topic is difficult to discuss, which points the reader to better perceive the fact that one of the main assignments of this narration is to resolve problems of the past in order to live in a better present. Also, *Cat's Eye* and *The Robber Bride* feature repressed memories and traumas in the past, whereas trauma in *The Handmaid's Tale* resides mainly in the present.

Furthermore, the reason for lack of such a difference between narrating the past and the present in *The Handmaid's Tale* may be the setting – a claustrophobic and oppressive system leaves very little room for any kind of emotions, so it is possible that the narrator does not know how to express them. She mentions several times that the past times were better, but her account is colorless – it is almost the same as when she describes the worst times of the Gilead Republic. There is almost no dialogic storytelling in the novels – it may seem so at first, since all three narratives wish to convey a message of sorts, but further analysis reveals that the narrators clearly seek to put their lives back in order through self-reflection. Therefore, they speak mostly to themselves in a monologue, contemplating their lives and actions as well as past traumas. They are autodiegetic and overt narrators – noticeably present inside the story.

Character-wise, all protagonists are round characters, prone to development and change. This is largely due to their quest for identity and repressed or fragmented memories. Chatman describes this type of characters: “What gives the modern fictional character the particular kind of illusion acceptable to modern taste is precisely the heterogeneity or even scatter in his personality.” (112). They are complex, layered, and subject to revisions. Not having a clear direction at all times makes them memorable in terms of being almost like real people. They seem familiar, which leads to them being more than mere abstractions. All of the protagonists are trying to overcome traumas from the past and reconstitute themselves as individuals. Offred wishes to be heard as a human being instead of being only a silenced part of the system, Elaine is trying to get rid of childhood experiences which haunt her, and Roz, Charis and Tony share a common enemy, which strengthens their friendship. All of them are very complex and capable of surprising the reader: a great example is the way that *The Robber Bride* protagonists become suspects involving Zenia’s death.

Also, all three of the novels can be termed historiographic metafiction – a fiction which includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative identity. Unreliable narrators question themselves on issues of history and present time, and fiction and reality. Fragmented memories are observed through flashbacks and parts are often glossed over for purposes of the “quest” for one's own identity. Offred, Elaine, Tony, Charis, and Roz use the notion of memory in order to connect past and present and construct versions of experience they can live with. It is an interaction between history and reality, which enables repetition with revision, and this is precisely why narrators' unreliability is not evident at first. The reader feels he must search for clues in the text because at first sight, the three narratives read mostly as autobiographies and mere remembrances. However, after a closer look, pieces of information about narrator's own will are quite easily uncovered: “I made that up. It didn't happen that way.” (*Handmaid's Tale*, 273). Rabinowitz explains:

The narrative audience believes the narrator is a real, existing historian. But it does not automatically assume that he is an accurate historian any more than in reading a work of history we automatically assume the author to be accurate and truthful. (134)

Going through the narrative, the reader is more and more convinced that parts of the story are missing and are stacked together according to narrator's free will. It is not only the lack of memory. The protagonists must demythologize and demystify the events of their lives in order to integrate present and former identities. They do so step-by-step, and the final products should be bare memories and history just as it had happened. Each of the narrators has her own goal: Offred wants her story to be told for educational purposes, Elaine needs to demythologize Cordelia in order to overcome childhood traumas, and Roz, Charis, and Tony

are all fighting the same demon from the past, Zenia. Their goals are to be achieved through narration.

What Molly Hite states can be applied to all three novels. They share a common topic and it is about

loss and the impossibility of ever recovering what has been lost; about the extraordinary waste of human subjects, especially female subjects, in a society that defines personhood by radically separating people from each other and assigning them fixed places in a hierarchy; about surviving, aging, and coming to terms in such a society; and about the ultimate futility of blame and the correlative necessity for comprehensive vision. (151)

The goal of the narration as described is to fight the abovementioned circumstances. The narratives are structured the way they are not only to deceive the audience, but to deceive the very narrators as well. Their quest for identity and fight against trauma are what connects them. What separates them is only the surface structure – names, places, details.

5. CONCLUSION

Baring the narratives to their most important structural elements shows that the novels are composed following a similar template, thus proving that structure is a very important part of the narrative, and that the deeper structure can be similar whereas surface structure is what makes the narratives different. Atwood's narratives are nonlinear and similarity of structural and thematic elements can easily be discerned through close reading. Atwood employs a type of re-storytelling – revising and transforming the histories of her protagonists in order to reconstruct narratives and identities. Unreliable narrators and questionable references about their personal history are what keeps the reader constantly aware that pieces of a puzzle are missing.

After analyzing most important structural features of the novels – characters/protagonists/narrators, point of view, setting, and plot – it can be concluded that they possess similar traits: at least one unreliable narrator whose point of view is directly represented in the narration, setting which directly influences the narrative, and plot consisting of flashbacks and ellipses. Flashbacks serve a purpose of identity reconstruction, but it is through existence of omitted parts (and parts that are clearly glossed over) that the reader notices the problematic relationship between reality and fiction, or present and history. The narrators are protagonists of the story, and they (sometimes deliberately) omit certain information. Their narration employs rather overt exclamations of fictiveness of certain parts, but also claims historicity, which is why Linda Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction was incorporated into this analysis. The novels are preoccupied with self-reflexivity and, simultaneously, claims to historical accuracy.

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7. ABSTRACT

Analysis of three novels by Margaret Atwood (*The Handmaid's Tale*, *Cat's Eye* and *The Robberbride*) utilises notions of structuralism and Linda Hutcheon's historiographical metafiction in order to establish whether these three works can be connected on a deeper level. The novels follow a similar structural template, having a female first-person unreliable narrator(s) coming to terms with her (their) history through fragmented memories. *The Robber Bride* is the only one of the three which has multiple points of view. The relationship between fact and fiction along with the novels' overt claims of historicity provide a basis for asking questions about omitted parts of the narrative. The narrators provide the information according to their own will, under the cover of claiming the presence of traumas and repressed memories. They are homodiegetic (present inside the story; moreover, protagonists) and overt (letting their presence and free will be known). Setting is an essential part of the narratives, contributing to the mood and atmosphere of the story. All three of the narratives take place mostly inside protagonists' minds. Self-reflexivity is an important feature of the narrators, who in numerous occasions admit they are deliberately changing the story or leaving parts out. Also, a presence of tone change when narrating the past signifies a sort of artificiality. *The Handmaid's Tale* seems to be an exception; however, it is a narrative of oppression and secrecy and therefore it may be more difficult to claim the reasons for the same narrative tone throughout the novel. The novel's protagonists are round characters, prone to change, which occurs multiple times during the narrative. They uncover layers of memory and of themselves, and avoid simplification. The reader must be quick to adapt to changes in order to properly follow the narrative.

Keywords: structuralist, historiographical metafiction, unreliable narrator, homodiegetic narrator, point of view