Margaret Atwood
The Handmaid's Tale

Freewriting prompts:
- Starving artist stereotypes?
- What defines masculinity?
- The freedom of wealth?

Background:
- Definition of Utopia (Eu + topia = “Good Place”) and Dystopia (Latin-Greek hybrid for “Bad Place”)
- 1980s media attention to STDs/STIs, infertility, and political instability:
  - AIDS was first reported 5 June 1981, was reported by the New York Times in July (as a “Gay” disease), and hit the media full bore in September 1982. By 1984 there were 8000 confirmed cases in the USA and 3700 confirmed deaths. By 1985, Rock Hudson had died of AIDS and Ryan White was barred from school (major media events).
  - Ronald Reagan united the Religiously Conservative Right Wing with the Fiscally Conservative for the first time (typically the religious vote had gone Democrat), which sparked fears in 1984 of the increasing importance of religious faith to political success in the USA. During the early 1980s, the USA entered into numerous military campaigns to stop the spread of Communism in Central and South America.
  - In November 1982, Leonid Brezhnev, who had led the Soviet Union since 1964, died. He was followed quickly by Yuri Andropov, the former KGB chief, and Konstantin Chernenko, both of whom were in poor health during their short rules – Mikhail Gorbachev became leader of the Soviet Union in 1985.
  - Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, who had revolutionized Egyptian-Israeli relations, was assassinated in 1981; Ronald Reagan was shot in 1981; Indira Gandhi was assassinated in
1984; an attempt was made on Margaret Thatcher in 1984; and in 1981 Pope John Paul II was shot.

Consider the use of names in the book:
- Offred – “Offered” and “Of Fred”
- The Commander/Fred – title & godhead
- Serena Joy
- Nick – Nicholas
- Luke – Apostle (also Historian and patron of physicians)

Atwood’s fictional Republic of Gilead arises after a staged (faked) Muslim terrorist attack destroys Congress and assassinates the President of the United States. There are non-fictional reasons for this plot line:
- Note – in reality, Timothy McVeigh’s Oklahoma City Bombing was the largest terrorist act in the USA prior to September 2001. Internal religious terrorism was by far the larger threat at this time and continues to be the largest source of terrorism worldwide.

The Cold War politics of Communism are also present in the book, though obviously a bit confused:
- “From each according to her abilities... to each according to his needs” (pp. 117-146 vs. 14-17), which suggests this is a Right Wing reaction to a failed revolution.
- This parallels Marx’s popularization of the phrase “From each according to his ability, to each according to his need” (1875, Critique of the Gotha Program).
- Atwood is casting gender into the class conflict, perhaps suggesting that gender war has stood behind the grand narrative of class warfare. If we accept all of human history as the history of class warfare, what then of gender? Is class plural, and is this our postmodern problem?

The phrase in the novel, used by the Commander (and explained to the Handmaid, Offred), “Nil Bastardo Carborundum” was actually used (famously) by the R.A.F. during World War II to oppose uniforms and standardization.

Queries:
- For the epigrams, why doesn’t Jonathan Swift fit in the same way? What is Atwood’s “Modest Proposal” in this context, if
Swift’s was to eat the Irish children (the uncomfortable suggestion that makes the inhumanity visible)?

Class II:

- Review of these concepts:
  - Cultural Hegemony (deriving from Gramsci and well established, even lauded and widely popular) by the time Atwood writes *The Handmaid’s Tale* in contrast with Orwell. Use pp. 69, 119, & 174 (85-6, 149-150, 217-218). Go through all three set scenes, then ask what they have in common? What are our “pig balls”? What to we accept piecemeal? Do “unwomen” remind us of our own social stratifications, only not as defamiliarized?
  - Consider the role of religion in American politics today (Billy Graham, faith in the presidential campaign, invocations of religion during speeches, and policy based on religious faith)
  - Recall the American tradition of escaped slave narratives (*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* is probably the best example)

- Major Themes:
  - Dehumanization – pp. 280-1 350 (execution = “it”) & 293 366 (names)
  - Torture – pp. 285-6 356-357 (parallels Orwell’s Room 101)
  - Feminine History – pp. 199 249 (Apollo vs. Luna), Feminine vs. Masculine, Goddess vs. God.
  - Slavery and American Literature tradition – pp. 83, 93 (Mormon?), 201 (103, 115, 251-2)
  - Orwell parallels 82-3 102-3

- Overlapping Themes (cluster these on the board for associative and correlative value):
  - Power – pp. 22, 27, 81, & 90 (28, 34, 99, 112-3)
  - Scopophilia & power/penetration – pp. 28 & 32 (36 & 40)
    - Note Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975 but popularized only in the 1980s – we know Atwood had read it)
  - Gender, Power, & Scopophilia – pp. 63 vs. 72-3 vs. 73-4 (ALL vs. 87-88 … (78 vs. 90 vs. 91, [ALL vs. 109])
  - Ideology as rules and media – pp. 24 & 119 vs. 69 & 82-3 (30-1 &
149-150 VS. 85-6 & 102)

- Think of “substitutive gratifications, powerful intoxicants, and powerful distractions” à la Freud.
  - Talk Student’s through a close analysis of pp. 165-167

- For comparative analysis, look at the following:
  - The Library (scrabble, words/language, & logic) – pp. 166 & 163 vs 167, 165, & 184
  - The function of “pearls” – Start with p. 145 then go through 114 VERSUS p. 45-6 (make-up), & 145 (parallel to 46).
    - Serena Joy parallels the genocidal Nazi’s mistress
    - Does make-up, the daughter, and pearls reemphasize the “offering” role of women to men in a patriarchal economy of power in which both are objects rather than subjects?
    - p. 181 – Nick and corrupted eroticism (she’s like a pearl, etc.). Also, the oyster is an aphrodisiac here, but pearls are already established as evil/genocidal.
    - p. 228 – Offred rejects Aunt Lydia’s notion of “pearl” and becomes “sand” here. But, as sand, she is the irritant that makes a pearl. Therefore, her daughter is a pearl (so what is her daughter’s future? Handmaid or wife?)

- Postface – 299, 301 & 307 (parallel slavery narratives), 303, 304 (Mormon context), 308, 310-11