A Palette of Unconventional Symbolism: Color Imagery in Three Margaret Atwood Novels

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A PALETTE OF UNCONVENTIONAL SYMBOLISM:
COLOR IMAGERY IN THREE MARGARET ATWOOD NOVELS

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by
Shannon Martin
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A PALETTE OF UNCONVENTIONAL SYMBOLISM:
COLOR IMAGERY IN THREE MARGARET ATWOOD NOVELS

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A PALETTE OF UNCONVENTIONAL SYMBOLISM:
COLOR IMAGERY IN THREE MARGARET ATWOOD NOVELS

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In this thesis, the writer examines the color imagery in three Margaret Atwood novels: Surfacing, Cat’s Eye, and The Handmaid’s Tale. Atwood uses color in unconventional ways by forcing colors to symbolize the opposite of their common meanings, by allowing colors to represent simultaneously two opposing ideas, and by disregarding traditional color meanings by creating her own unique associations. Atwood's color imagery supports her thematic concerns in that through her themes—as with her use of color—she challenges the reader's expectations by throwing into question many conventional ideas about progress, religion, and the sex-gender system.

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Introduction

Literary critics often generalize that women writers are more aware of color than are male writers. These critics point out that women frequently use color as a descriptive technique and that women record various nuances of color--that is, rather than simply describing an object as "green," they will note the exact shade of green: mint green, leaf green, lime green, forest green, chartreuse, teal, as green as an unripe tomato, etc. If this myth was true, Margaret Atwood would prove an exception, for although Atwood uses color imagery often in her writing, she seldom offers elaborate descriptions of her colors. More importantly, she dismisses conventional assumptions about color and often creates her own meanings for the colors she uses, establishing colors as complex symbols. Perhaps because Atwood does not fit easily into the stereotype about women writers and their use of color, her color imagery is virtually ignored by critics. Nonetheless, because she shatters myths about women writers, Atwood's color imagery deserves critical analysis.

Atwood throws into question conventional color meaning in a number of ways. First, she forces many colors to represent the opposite of their usual association. She further complicates this use of color by allowing a number of colors simultaneously to represent two opposing ideas. Also, she often chooses to focus on the more negative
connotations of colors. Finally, she many times corrupts
the traditional meanings of colors by assigning them her own
unique associations.

This challenging of conventional color use is directly
related to Atwood’s thematic concerns. As with her color
imagery, Atwood strives to defy the reader’s expectations.
In Surfacing, for example, Atwood seeks to destroy the
assumption that technology and progress have led to a better
world. To carry out this idea, Atwood establishes a
conflict between the natural world of rural Canada and the
technological influence of the United States; the color
imagery in this novel is devoted to this conflict. In this
novel, Atwood often creates a paradoxical color imagery by
allowing a color simultaneously to represent both nature and
technology. She also employs several colors to symbolize
only one side of the conflict (either nature or technology).
However, again Atwood shatters assumptions by using these
colors ironically; for example, an "earth" color is often
used to represent technology. In Cat’s Eye, she forces the
reader to relinquish commonly held beliefs about friendship
and the behavior of women and girls. Here she creates
paradoxical color imagery to symbolize the paradox of little
children as cruel tormentors. Furthermore, the dark world
of the novel’s main character results in Atwood’s focus on
the negative aspects of various colors. Atwood’s primary
thematic concern in The Handmaid’s Tale is with religion.
Although this emphasis on religion would seem to be positive, Atwood challenges the reader to consider religion as potentially extreme and dangerous. She uses her color symbols to support this theme, often pointing out the futility and dangerousness of the characters' beliefs by giving colors an ironic slant, thereby inverting traditional meanings. To expose the negative aspects of the characters' world, at other times Atwood concentrates only on the negative connotations of colors.

In these novels, Atwood compels the reader to reject many preconceived notions. She is, as Nathalie Cooke has noted, "forc[ing] us to explore our assumptions as readers" (164). Color symbolism plays an important role in this exploration.
Chapter One

Atwood’s early novel Surfacing involves a woman’s return to her home in the Canadian wilderness after many years in the United States. Although the protagonist comes home with several companions to find her missing father, she finds much more. This unnamed character begins to question contemporary ideas of love, marriage, and friendship, as well as to reconcile her feelings about a past abortion. However, Atwood’s major thematic concern in this novel is the Surfacer’s struggle to understand the American-inspired technology that is increasingly destroying her homeland’s wilderness tradition. Much of Atwood’s color symbolism is devoted to this theme. In many instances, Atwood chooses colors to represent either nature or technology; however, a number of colors represent both sides simultaneously, creating a paradoxical use of color. Atwood also breaks from traditional concepts of color by focusing at times on the more negative aspects of certain colors or by creating her own interpretations.

Atwood begins her use of color symbolism in the first sentence of the novel: "I can’t believe I’m back on this road again, twisting along past the lake where the white birches are dying, the disease is spreading up from the
south," says Atwood’s protagonist (3). Valerie Augier views the death of these trees as the "symbol of America’s intrusion on nature and man" (13). The white birches appear a few pages later when the Surfacer and her companions arrive at her father’s cabin. Preparing to light the stove, the Surfacer notes the "few pieces of white birch" in a box and remarks that "the disease hasn’t yet hit this part of the country" (37). However, the Surfacer soon discovers that she is mistaken. The urbanization of Canada does in fact extend to her "part of the country," as a man from Michigan attempts to buy her cabin in order to develop what he calls "a kind of retreat lodge" (110). Although he assures her that the natural surroundings will not be altered in any way, he concedes that he will in fact "install a power generator . . . and a septic tank" (110). These are exactly the kinds of technological advances the Surfacer fears, and she immediately rejects his offer.

When the Surfacer sets out to find the Indian drawings her father discovered, she again encounters the white birches. Through his maps, she learns that one of the drawings is located on White Birch Lake. However, when she arrives at the designated spot, there is no drawing. An article her father has notes that "the sites of the paintings are the abodes of powerful or protective spirits" (120). White Birch Lake is in fact the site of a powerful spirit; however, it is neither Indian or protective.
Rather, it is the power company that has flooded the land in this area in order to further development. This flooding has destroyed many of the white birches along the original lake site. Thus, it is logical that no Indian drawings are found in the area of White Birch Lake: as one critic points out, "[T]hat which is 'Indian' is definitely not part of the modern world" (Geudon 92).

Thus, in keeping with traditional Western assumptions about the color white—that it is a color of purity and innocence—Atwood establishes white as a color of simplicity and nature destroyed. However, she envisions the world that is replacing the Surfacer's once natural environment as also being distinguished by the color white. In the technological world white bathrooms replace white birches. Growing up in rural Canada, the Surfacer is unaccustomed to modern, indoor bathrooms. She finds them almost frightening:

That was what used to bother me about the cities, the white zero-mouthed toilets in their clean tiled cubicles. Flush toilets and vacuum cleaners, they roared and made things vanish, at that time I was afraid there was a machine that could make people vanish like that too, go nowhere, like a camera that could steal not only your soul but your body also. Levers and buttons, triggers, the machines sent them up as
roots set up flowers; tiny circles and oblongs,
logic become visible, you couldn't tell
in advance what would happen if you pressed
them. (Atwood 138)

She describes city bathrooms as "hard and white" (80),
and by the end of the novel, she discovers that she views
her traveling companions in much the same way. They, too,
are the products of a technological culture, and she refers
to them as almost mechanized creatures: "Their real skins
above the collars are white and plucked . . . . They are
evolving, they are halfway to machine" (220). Valerie
Augier similarly notes that in the novel "mankind [is]
turning to robot . . . is digging its own grave" (13).

Atwood continues this theme by giving the Surfacer's
friend Anna white pants. When the Surfacer and her friends
first arrive in her homeland, Anna is wearing a pair of
white bellbottoms, which "have a smear on them already,"
despite the Surfacer's warning to "wear jeans or something."
Anna says that "she looks fat in [jeans]" and thus insists
on wearing her white pants (7). As the novel progresses,
Anna is overly concerned with her appearance. Thus, Anna--
with her white pants--comes to represent the ways of the
urbanized, unnatural world. In fact, the Surfacer refers to
these white pants as part of Anna's "urban costume" (195).

Atwood's treatment of white is quite unusual. While
she adheres to the more positive Western assumptions about
the color—that it is a symbol of purity and innocence—she also relies on the more negative aspects of the color, associating it with sterility and death. Thus, Atwood establishes a paradoxical use of color; by doing so, she forces the reader to read carefully, not to take any of her color symbolism for granted and to eschew any straightforward "natural" connection between a sign (symbol) and its signifier, thus undermining received truths.

Atwood uses blue in much the same way that she uses white in that it is a color of both the destruction of nature as well as the technology that replaces it. One of the most striking examples of urban destruction in the novel is the blue heron that is "hanging upside down by a thin blue rope tied round its feet and looped over a tree branch" (135). It is a senseless death, and one that the Surfacer seeks to understand:

Why had they strung it up like a lynch victim, why didn't they just throw it away like the trash? To prove they could do it, they had the power to kill. Otherwise it was valueless; beautiful from a distance but it couldn't be tamed or cooked or trained to talk, the only relation they could have to a thing like that was to destroy it . . . . It must have been the Americans. (137)

The Surfacer's explanation of the heron's death parallels the destruction of her homeland by capitalism and
technology. Barbara Hill Rigney sees the heron as a "trophy of power" (100), and Marie-Francoise Guedon believes that the heron symbolizes the "fundamental opposition between nature and the technologically aggressive 'Americans'" (101). In this way, the blue heron is a symbol of Canada and its destruction.

The sight of the dead heron has a great impact on the Surfacer; after discovering its mangled body she is unable to fish anymore, believing that she—like the killers of the heron—is committing murder. Instead, she resorts to eating from the earth and institutes a ranking system among the foods she consumes. By designating blue foods as the third best, the Surfacer could be making a connection between these foods and the blue heron. To the Surfacer, the killing of animals—whether for food, sport, or simple cruelty—is unnecessary and unforgivable. By eating only blue foods that are not killed, the Surfacer may feel that she is setting herself apart from the killers of the heron; while they killed for fun, the Surfacer refuses to kill even for food.

Atwood reverses the association between blue and nature by using the color to indicate the type of urbanization that is responsible for such destruction. A good example of this corruption is the rise of the tourist industry in this once unspoiled land. The Surfacer notes this influx of tourism when she discovers that many of the houses are not like the
ones she remembers here; they are summer cottages, "freshly built square bungalows like city ones" (Atwood 10). The houses--painted with baby blue trim--have "spread like measles" (30). The connection the Surfacer makes between tourism and disease is unmistakable.

Evans, who takes the Surfacer and her friends to her father's cabin, contributes to the tourism problem. By virtue of being an American, Evans is already suspect in the Surfacer's eyes. The fact that he has come to Canada to exploit the rural environment for profit no doubt further lowers her opinion of him. Atwood accentuates this point by making Evans the owner of a motel called the Blue Moon Cabins.

However, Americans are not solely responsible for the urbanization of rural Canada; many Canadians welcome such technology and consumerism, and Atwood's use of blue points to this fact. A good example of this type of Canadian is the Surfacer's old friend, Madame. Although Madame represents the ways of an older, more rustic Canada, she has evidently succumbed to technology in many areas of her life. As the Surfacer discovers, she has a new electric stove--over which hangs a blue ceramic Madonna figurine. The sight of the stove upsets the Surfacer, and upon seeing it, she "felt betrayed, [Madame] should have remained loyal to her wood range" (17). The Canadian church, too, had become a victim of urban influence. As a child, the Surfacer
attended Sunday school at a city church where the teacher, an adolescent girl who wears a "blue pancake-sized hat," talks not about Christian ideas but about her "admirers and their cars" (60).

Atwood continues to create paradoxical color symbolism with the color red; it—like white and blue—is at once a symbol of the fleeting rural world and the technological cause of its destruction. Significant is the red that Indians used in their paintings. As pointed out by a researcher the Surfacer’s father consults, Indians regarded red as a sacred color; therefore, it is fitting that a map displays with a red X the location of one of these drawings. However, after searching the spot, the Surfacer finds not drawings, but the corpse of her father, who had drowned in an area that has been flooded by a power company attempting to develop the land. Thus, death has invaded a sacred Indian site; this juxtaposition parallels the technology that is destroying rural Canada.

Like the Indians, the Surfacer seems to view the color red as sacred, and she tries to maintain its spiritual meaning in the technological world by asking her boss for red paint to use in her book illustrations. However, her city-reared boss insists that she use yellow instead; therefore, her Golden Phoenix "has to be yellow and the fire can only be yellow, too" (58). Furthermore, because she has no red, she "lose[s] orange and purple also" (58). This
lack of red makes her illustrations appear unnatural, and, on a symbolic level, shows that the Surfacer is unable to preserve any of the sacredness of the natural world in a modern environment. The Surfacer makes one last attempt to retain the mystical nature that red represents to her. In her hierarchy of foods, red ones lead the list: "Red foods, heart color, they are the best kind, they are sacred" (213). By consuming these red foods, the Surfacer hopes to make herself sacred—to stave off the technology that is closing in around her.

The Surfacer's mother—who epitomizes oneness with nature—has this same belief in the color red: her garden was filled almost exclusively with red flowers. The Surfacer remembers "scarlet runners up one side of the fence" and "blossoms . . . redder than anything else in the garden" (38). However, after the death of her mother, the garden has been "rearranged" (38) and the Surfacer does not note the presence of any red flowers. This rearrangement is a metaphor for the destructive changes her homeland is undergoing—changes that were not as pronounced when her mother had her red flower garden.

Red is also a powerful color of urbanization, and Atwood shows red in this negative light the moment the Surfacer and her cronies arrive in the rural Canadian town. Here, they are greeted by three stuffed moose atop a gas station, one of which is "holding a red parasol in one hoof"
(11). The Surfacer notes that "like the washrooms they're here to attract customers" (10). Thus, the consumerism of the urban world—assisted by the color red—has made its way to rural areas.

When the Surfacer remembers her early days at school—when, for the first time, she interacted with other, more urbanized peers—she recalls her initiation into urban conformity, which Atwood represents with the rhyme the Surfacer finds written thirty-five times on the blackboard: "On the crest of the hill for all to see/God planted a Scarlet Maple Tree" (58). In the Surfacer's mind, the repetition of this phrase denotes the cookie-cutter approach her school takes towards education. Thus, it is this phrase that she equates with her observation that "[i]n school you had to do what the rest were doing" (58).

Red also denotes more obvious forms of technological destruction, namely modern warfare. The Surfacer finds a scrapbook filled with her brother's childhood drawings, which include "explosions in red" and a planet with "seven red moons." In these picture there are "soldiers dismembering in the air, planes and tanks" as well as "flamethrowers, trumpet-shaped pistols, ray guns" (104-05). Such technologically-inspired death and destruction are not consistent with the rural way of life, which only advocates killing for food.
A negative facet of the color is also evident in regards to the developers who have come to the Surfacer's rural Canadian world. As she watches a group of men chopping down trees, she notes "a post driven into the ground, numbers on it in fresh red paint" (133).

Thus, Atwood uses white, blue, and red to symbolize exactly the same thing—nature and the technology that is destroying it. In this way, Atwood shows that a color not only can have multiple meanings but also that one meaning can be signified by multiple symbols. Also significant is the fact that white, blue, and red are the colors of the American flag.

Gray is another color that has both positive and negative associations. As does the color blue, gray represents rural Canada's recent interest in tourism—a trend the Surfacer finds distasteful. Returning to her childhood home, the Surfacer is astonished to find a motel: "Suddenly there's a thing that isn't supposed to be here. MOTEL ... The building like any other cheap motel, long gray stucco" (13). Atwood's use of gray in this way is consistent with many associations between the color and urbanization. According to Helen Varley, gray is "the first and last color of the man-made environment—massive, mechanical, and metallic" (178). This use of gray is also seen in the man who is interested in developing the
Surfacer's land into a retreat lodge: he has "trimmed gray hair" (Atwood 109).

Furthermore, Atwood associates gray with the Surfacer's abortion, an act that the Surfacer later comes to view as unnatural. As children, the Surfacer and her brother tear apart their least favorite doll; its stuffing is "gray and fluffy like the insides of mattresses" (153). This doll—and the "killing" of it—"foreshadows her cooperation in the abortion" (Rigney 99).

The positive attributes that Atwood gives the color are tied to the Surfacer's mother and her oneness with nature, which is ironic in that gray, as indicated earlier, is indicative of a man-made, unnatural environment. Nevertheless, Shannon Hengen asserts that it is from her mother that the Surfacer learns not only the "awe of nature" but also Canada's vulnerability to outside, technological threats (61). Her mother, who always wears a gray leather jacket, exhibits an amazing power over the animals in the woods around the cabin. The Surfacer remembers how she once frightened a bear:

That was the picture I kept, my mother seen from the back, arms upraised as though she was flying, and the bear terrified. When she told the story later she said she'd been scared to death but I couldn't believe that, she had been so positive,
assured, as if she knew a foolproof, magic formula: gesture and word. She was wearing her leather jacket. (91)

Her mother feeds the jays that congregate near the cabin sunflower seeds that she keeps in the pockets of her jacket. Again, she seems to exert a mystical force over the animal world; the birds seem unafraid of her. When the Surfacer sees what appears to be the ghost of her mother, she notes that one jay "perches on her wrist, another on her shoulder" (217).

Like gray, brown represents both positive and negative—the rural world and the urban world. Atwood uses a brown blanket to symbolize nature, a fitting choice in that brown is often regarded as a natural color. Helen Varley points out that it is "the first and last word in natural colors, encompassing nearly all shades of earth and wood" (194). This blanket first appears in connection with the Surfacer's mother, who, upon becoming ill, "would lie unmoving, covered with a brown plaid blanket" (Atwood 35). Of course, the Surfacer's mother has a strong connection with the natural world. This blanket returns in the latter part of the novel when the Surfacer seeks to make herself a part of nature. She covers herself in the blanket, which she calls "brown plaid camouflage" (219). In this way, the blanket represents "the search for security"—a common meaning of brown (Kuppers 12).
But brown is also a color of technology and urban life. Thus, the protective brown blanket of the country is replaced by a brown industrial coating in the city. As the Surfacer notes, "In the city, with the exhaust-pipe fumes and the damp heat, the burnt-rubber smell of the subway, the brown grease... congeals on your skin if you walk around outside" (Atwood 82). Such a use of the color perverts its original meaning as a color of nature.

Pink is one of many colors that is consistent in its symbolism—that is, Atwood does not assign to it paradoxical meanings. Although Helen Varley claims that pink "suggests tip-top condition and high spirits" and that "no one really has a bad word for pink" (186), Atwood chooses to disregard convention, giving pink a negative connotation by making it a color of the unnatural. The color is most often associated with Anna and becomes a symbol of her urbanized way of life. Interestingly, Anna herself—through sunburns and cosmetics—is actually pink. Anna's pink make-up is something she treasures, but the Surfacer finds her dependence on it unnecessary and frivolous. She feels that women in such a rural setting need not wear make-up because there is no one there to impress. But there is in fact someone here that Anna has a need to impress—her husband, David. Thus, her make-up comes to represent mainstream culture's emphasis on appearance. In fact, one critic sees Anna as the epitome of
the "shallow and vulgar American who is obsessed by her looks and attached to her material comfort" (Augier 12).

While the Surfacer undergoes a transformation from an unnatural to a natural state, Anna undergoes an experience that reaffirms her place in the technological world. Appropriately, the Surfacer's transformation comes with a dive into the lake, while Anna's experience comes through her pink make-up. As the Surfacer watches, Anna "unswivels a pink stick and dots her cheeks and blends them, changing her shape, performing the only magic left to her" (Atwood 197). The Surfacer equates this action with Anna's urbanization: "The machine is gradual, it takes a little of you at a time, it leaves the shell" (198). George Woodcock has observed that Anna "has hardly more depth than the transforming makeup she applies to her pallid features every morning" (50). Thus, Atwood confirms that Anna and the Surfacer are direct opposites—one the product of nature, one the product of technology.

Ironically, Anna appears to be in a more natural state when she is wearing the layer of pink make-up. The Surfacer notes that without it, Anna's "face is curiously battered, a worn doll's (Atwood 46). When Anna forgets her make-up on the camping trip, her real face appears "dried and slightly shriveled" (148). As the Surfacer notes, Anna's "artificial face is the natural one" (46); because she has come to rely on the mask, Anna's natural self has deteriorated.
Anna's skin is sunburnt throughout the novel. Again, this pink coloring of the skin symbolizes Anna's relationship with the technological world. In nature, the sun gives life; it warms the earth and brings about photosynthesis. However, to Anna, the sun is much like her make-up—it colors her body, giving her a society-inspired beauty while concealing her natural skin. In essence, Anna is turning pink—that is, she is becoming totally submersed in an artificial, appearance-conscious way of life. First her face is pink, and then this color spreads to the rest of her body via her sunburn, which is achieved by corrupting the sun's life-giving power.

Atwood uses purple in much the same way. Although the ancient Greeks considered purple dress "a decoration for highly placed individuals of state as well as a sign of person and political productivity" (Brusatin 32), Helen Varley cites purple as a color of "power corrupted" (218). Atwood uses this color to identify those corrupted by technological power and thus alienated from nature. For example, Anna's purple shirt serves as half of her "urban costume." Even more significant is the fact that purple is associated with the little girls at city birthday parties. The Surfacer hated these parties and equates the "pew-purple velvet dresses" of the party-goers with city customs such as meaningless games and "Oooo[ing] over the gifts" (Atwood 80). Such social mannerisms are foreign and frightening to
the young Surfacer, whose rural upbringing did not emphasize such unnecessary behavior. In much the same way as she uses pink to color Anna, Atwood makes the connection between urban society and the color purple more pronounced by coloring the bodies of the Surfacer's urban dwelling companions. This association is seen when David, Anna, and Joe are eating blueberry pie; the Surfacer notes that "they had purple mouths" (103).

Purple is also linked to a significant event in the Surfacer's life—the abortion; a purple runner lines the hallway of the house where the abortion is performed. The Surfacer's upbringing prohibited such an act: "Killing was wrong, we had been told that: only enemies and food could be killed" (153). Thus, Atwood establishes purple as a color of unnatural death.

Like pink and purple, orange also symbolizes the urban preoccupation with outward appearances, as well as consumerism, which are of little importance in the Surfacer's rural culture. Ironically, orange, as Helen Varley explains, "is an earth color." She goes on to say that orange "has a domestic quality, redolent of the comforts of the hearth" (194). A good example of Atwood's use of the color is the Surfacer's brother's fascination with a city waitress's orange stockings. He is so entranced by them that he "got under the table and slid his hands up and down the waitress's legs" (Atwood 3). The reason for
his actions is simple: as the Surfacer notes, the stockings were something "he'd never seen . . . before" because their "mother didn't wear them" (3-4).

We later discover why their mother didn't wear a flashy color like orange. As a teenager, the Surfacer is drawn to socially defined beauty and experiments with make-up. However, as she smears on orange lipstick, her mother tells her such attention to appearance is futile in their rural community where "there's no one to look at you" (46). Her mother is implying here that those places where appearance is considered important are places where the values of the natural world have been corrupted. But the young Surfacer is just as intrigued by fashion as her female counterparts in the city. As a child, she "believed in glamour" and draws pictures of fashion-modelish women who wear make-up and jewelry--and orange strapless tops. The adult Surfacer sees this kind of preoccupation in Anna. Again, Atwood chooses to use the color orange to represent this fixation. In this case, Anna's bathing suit is orange. Significantly, Anna never swims in her bathing suit; she only wears it for sunbathing.

Consumerism is another technological creation that is symbolized by the color orange. While attending Sunday school in the city, the Surfacer notes that a chalkboard in the classroom has the words "Kickapoo Joy Juice" written on it in orange chalk. Seemingly, a church would be free from
consumerism, but with an advertisement blatantly evident in a Sunday school classroom, the Surfacer's father may be correct when he tells her that city churches are filled with "distortions" (60).

Yellow is also a consistent color symbol; however, it represents not urbanization, but the power of nature. Atwood's use of yellow is ironic in that yellow is not usually viewed as a powerful color. Instead, it is often seen as either a cheery, playful color, or as an indication of sickness (the yellow skin caused by jaundice) or age (the yellowing of paper, for instance). However, the Surfacer notes that on her food scale yellow foods are the second best because green foods (which are also good) are "mixed from blue and yellow" (213). Yellow foods also appear on the food hierarchy because they recall her childhood theory that beans that had turned yellow from staying on the vine too long were mystical: "I knew that if I could get some of them and keep them for myself I would be all-powerful" (38). The adult Surfacer hopes that eating these yellow foods will give her a measure of power over the destructive forces of technology.

Yellow is also associated with the Surfacer's father. When she sees the image of him after his death, she notes his "yellow eyes, wolf's eyes, depthless but lambent as the eyes of animals seen at night in the car headlights. Reflectors." It is through her father's eyes that the
Surfacer comes to see just how much damage technology has caused the natural world. Looking into his eyes, the Surfacer discovers that her father blames himself for this destruction as well and that he pleads for an end to this urban expansion:

He has realized he was an intruder; the cabin, the fences, the fires and paths were violations... he wants it ended, the borders abolished, he wants the forest to flow back into the places his mind cleared: reparation. (223)

Kate Fullbrook finds this encounter between father and daughter the catalyst in her "return to sanity" (181). Despite Atwood's often ironic use of color, green retains its usual meaning of fertility, vitality, and growth. Whereas other color meanings can be easily transformed or corrupted, green remains the one fixed color symbol in the novel. By assigning the color its traditional meaning, Atwood shows that not only the color but also its referent (nature) is constant—that it is the one stable truth. From the Surfacer's hands that are "green with weed blood" (90) after working in the garden to the "energy of decay turning to growth, green fire" (200), Atwood makes continual connections between the color and nature. The Surfacer makes this connection as well, citing green foods on her ranking system of the "best" foods. The color is also prominent at the point of the Surfacer's rebirth. Upon
diving into the lake, she notes the "pale green" that surrounds her (166), and after her rebirth, the Surfacer actually sees herself as green. She likens herself to the trees in the forest. She discovers that she has "green webs of . . . flesh" and notes that "the trees are like this too" (216). Atwood’s use of green here is fitting since green is often associated with spring and rebirth (Varley 26).

The green canoe that appears throughout the novel is a significant symbol, and its power is evident at the site of the Surfacer’s rebirth: "The green canoe was far above me, sunlight radiating around it, a beacon, safety" (Atwood 167). It is also in this canoe that she finally comes to terms with the abortion she had convinced herself had not happened. While fishing with the others in the canoe, the Surfacer comes to a realization:

I couldn’t [fish] anymore, I had no right to. We didn’t need it, our proper food was tin cans. We were committing this act, violation, for sport or amusement or pleasure, recreation they called it, these were no longer the right reasons. (141)

She immediately frees their bait. Her description of the fishing trip greatly resembles her memories of the abortion:

It [the unborn child] was hiding in me as if in a burrow and instead of granting it sanctuary I let them catch it. I could have said No but I didn’t; that made me one of them too, a killer. (169-70)
By allowing the bait (green frogs) to escape—and therefore preventing any fish from being caught—the Surfacer is rectifying her past mistake. George Woodcock sees these frogs as a symbol of the embryo (41-42), and thus, by setting the frogs free, the Surfacer is beginning to come to terms with the child she aborted. The green canoe marks another important occurrence in the Surfacer's life as well. After being visited by the ghosts of her dead parents, she not only is at last able to deal with their deaths but she also gains strength from their connection to the natural world. Having concluded their purpose, her parents return to their world via the green canoe.

In *Surfacing* Atwood challenges the belief that progress and technology have brought about positive changes in the world. She insists that there is a dark side to these triumphs, and that these advancements are slowly destroying the natural world and its values. For example, she suggests that modern conveniences—such as indoor plumbing—have created a means by which people can simply discard anything undesirable without thinking of the consequences. This convenient form of disposal is closely related to modern abortions, which she sees as a grim aspect of medical advancement. Atwood also questions the benefit of modern educational reform by noting its emphasis on conformity. Through telecommunication and faster travel, technology has seemed to make the world a smaller place. However, Atwood
finds the results (increased tourism and land development) unsettling in that they are exploiting the natural world. Atwood uses color imagery to help illustrate this struggle between two very different worlds. Her colors capture the various nuances of this conflict and provide a roadmap of symbols that help guide the reader through the novel.
Chapter Two

In *Cat's Eye*—as in *Surfacing*—Atwood challenges the reader's assumptions about color imagery and relates her use of color to her thematic concerns. In this novel, she seeks to cast doubt on the commonly held belief that children are more innocent than adults, that adults are more mature than children, and that women are less aggressive and more compassionate than men. Through the characters of Elaine and her childhood tormentors, Cordelia, Grace, and Carol, Atwood forces the reader to view children in a new and frightening light. She exposes in them seemingly adult actions and behavior, such as power struggles, self-mutilation, and suicidal thoughts. She also offers an uncustomary look at adults, presenting Mrs. Smeath as a participant in and an instigator of the cruelty among the girls. The fact that female characters are capable of such torment and aggression is contradictory to the common belief that women are the gentler and more passive sex. Atwood's color symbols support these themes. For example, because she is exposing a dark aspect of childhood friendship, Atwood often focuses on the negative connotations of colors. Furthermore, the paradox of the children exhibiting adult
behavior is underscored by Atwood's often paradoxical use of color.

As mentioned in Chapter One, white can connote innocence and purity on the one hand and death and sterility on the other. In this novel, which subverts notions of innocence, Atwood chooses to explore only the dark aspects of this color. Examples of white as a color of death are numerous. Minor instances of the color being used in this way include the white African cockroaches at Elaine's father's lab that are "so poisonous that their keeper has to gas them to make them unconscious every time he opens the cage" (38). Other examples are the alcohol her father uses to kill his insect specimens, which "smells like white enamel basins" (24), and the flush toilets that Elaine finds disarming as a child: they appear to her "white and alarming, where things vanish in an instant" (25).

These instances of death foreshadow another kind of death for Elaine—the loss of her childhood and destruction of her individuality through her friends' continual torment and insistence on conformity. White Gift Sunday, an occasion when families bring food for the poor to church, provides an excellent example of the use of white in this way. Elaine notes that although the event is held to benefit the poor (and therefore should give her a positive feeling), she cannot help feeling that something is wrong:
The idea of white gifts bothers me: such hard gifts, made uniform, bleached of their identity and colors. They look dead. Inside those blank, sinister bundles of tissue paper piled up at the front of the church there could be anything. (131-32)

Elaine no doubt identifies with these packages. By forcing her to conform to what they consider to be proper behavior, Elaine's "friends" are attempting to transform her into a kind of white gift—a package stripped of its identity.

Although her childhood chore of rinsing the wash would seem to be free of any negativity, Elaine nevertheless makes connections between the conformity being forced on her and the white washing machine. As she washes, she notes that "a whole person could go through the wringer and come out flat, neat, completed, like a flower pressed in a book" (130). Such a description brings to mind mass production, which yields identical items over and over. Elaine feels powerless against the girls and considers self-mutilation as a way to cope with the abuse. She contemplates placing her hand into the wringer of the white washing machine:

I think about what would happen to my hand if it did get caught: blood and flesh squeezing up my arm like a traveling bulge, the hand coming out the other side flat as a glove, white as paper.
This would hurt a lot at first, I know that. But there's something compelling about it. (130).

As she did with Anna in *Surfacing*, Atwood again uses color in connection with people; here, white is associated with Mrs. Smeath, the chief instigator in Elaine's abuse. Elaine describes her face as "white and strangely luminous . . . like a phosphorescent mushroom" (62). Furthermore, Mrs. Smeath's rubber plant functions as a symbol of its owner. The plant is quite old and requires much care and attention, and Elaine says, "Mrs. Smeath's bad heart is like that" (60). She also points out that the plant "has to be wiped off leaf by leaf with milk" (60). Again, the connection between white (the milk) and Mrs. Smeath (the plant) is made. Also noteworthy is the Smeaths' house, which is adorned with "two thick round white pillars" (55). It is fitting, then, that Elaine's hatred of Mrs. Smeath is linked to the color white; Elaine describes the hatred as "a fleshy weed in my chest, white-stemmed and fat" (193).

Because Mrs. Smeath views Elaine as a "heathen" (192), taking her to church is a large part of her conformity scheme, and appropriately white is used to describe several aspects of Elaine's church experience. For example, Elaine notes her church clothes include "white ribbed stockings that attach with garters onto my stiff white cotton waist" and are "even itchier than the brown ones I wear to school" (101). At the church, Elaine notes both a vase of white
flowers and stained glass windows, one of which depicts Christ in white, and another a woman with "a white kerchief partly covering her face" (102). In her Sunday School class, Elaine watches a film that features a white knight. She notes that "the skin of this knight is very white" (103). Ironically, one frame of the film shows this white knight and the words to a song; "I would be strong, for there is much to suffer/I would be brave, for there is much to dare" (104). Elaine—a victim of a bizarre plan to reform her—no doubt identifies with these words.

Many of the motifs related to the color white resurface in Elaine's paintings. For example, she paints a white wringer washing machine and describes it as "suffused with anxiety" (357). She later paints Mrs. Smeath: "She floats up without warning, like a dead fish . . . first her white, sparsely haired legs without ankles" (358). Another painting of Mrs. Smeath encompasses the conformity she forced upon Elaine and is appropriately called White Gift. In the first panel of this painting, Mrs. Smeath is "wrapped up in white tissue paper like a can of Spam or a mummy" (372).

Although in Surfacing green retains its usual associations with fertility, life, and growth, this is not the case in Cat's Eye. In this novel, Atwood perverts these traditional meanings by relating the color to the growth that is denied Elaine by her childhood tormentors. Rather
than allowing her to develop her individualism, her so-called friends attempt to coerce her into conforming to their own codes of behavior and thought. Elaine's childhood home of Toronto symbolizes this unnatural growth. The city's past--like Elaine's--has been corrupted; its once simple, distinctive nature is gone, replaced by buildings and trends that conform to those of other metropolitan areas. Elaine detests these changes and notes that a new shopping center is a poor substitute for the store of her youth: "Now there's a huge building in its place, what they call a shopping complex, as if shopping were a psychic disease. It's glassy and be-tiled, green as an iceberg" (117). A store called "Simpsons" once sold "bargain clothes and wrenches" but now is "all very world-class" (159); Elaine feels a sense of "inertia" as she sits at the store's espresso counter, which is "either fake or real dark-green marble" (159). A retro-forties diner is another cause of anxiety for Elaine. She notes the "soda fountain countertop, with stools along it topped in acid lime-green" (385) and considers modern innovations such as the "Elvis Presley zucchini mold" (386).

When Elaine tries to remember her childhood, the only image she can recall is "a thicket of dark-green leaves" belonging to the poisonous nightshade plants that grow in the ravine near her childhood home (113). This plant symbolizes Elaine's torment during her school years and
represents the girls' attempts to undermine her own individual growth. Thus, Elaine realizes that this memory is "infused with grief" (114). The color is also apparent when, as a child, Elaine discovers the lone mint green bootie that her mother was knitting for a child who is miscarried. Much like Elaine's, this baby's childhood is lost.

In the same way that she uses white to symbolize Mrs. Smeath, Atwood uses green to characterize Cordelia, one of Elaine's most vicious abusers. Cordelia has greenish eyes that are "opaque and glinting as metal" (4), and green is a prominent color in her family's home. For example, there is an "apple-green" sofa (75) and "greenish paintings of flowers, of lawns, of bottles and vases" (77). Cordelia's mother painted these pictures, and once appears with a "smudge of apple-green on her cheek" (124). Returning to her childhood home of Toronto for the retrospective of her work, Elaine is reminded of Cordelia and still associates the color green with her. Not having seen her in years, Elaine speculates about what Cordelia may look like now, and creates the following scene:

She drops the bath towel, which is green, a muted sea-green to match her eyes, looks over her shoulder, sees in the mirror the dog's-neck folds of skin above the waist, the buttocks drooping like wattles, and, turning, the dried fern of
hair. I think of her in sweatsuit, sea-green as well. (6-7)

Elaine continually imagines what would happen if she and Cordelia were reunited in a chance meeting. As she tries on clothes in a department store dressing room, Elaine discovers the hand of a would-be thief snatching her wallet. She notes that the "fingernails are painted Day-Glo green" and thinks "Damn you, Cordelia! (46-47). Of course, the hand does not belong to her childhood antagonist, but the connection between the green nails and Cordelia is unmistakable. At the retrospective Elaine again envisions a meeting between herself and Cordelia: "Cordelia will walk toward me through the opening crowd, a woman of wavering age, dressed in Irish tweed of a muted green" (434). Finally, when Elaine returns to her old neighborhood, she imagines that she sees Cordelia, who is wearing "green wool knee socks" (443). Elaine's only painting of Cordelia features her, fittingly, "in a room, alone; a room with walls of pastel green" (243).

To a lesser extent, green is also symbolic of Mrs. Smeath. She is often equated with her rubber plant, evident in many of Elaine's paintings of Mrs. Smeath. For example, in a painting called Rubber Tree: The Ascension, Mrs. Smeath is "reclining on her maroon velvet sofa, rising to Heaven, which is full of rubber plants" (90). In another painting, "the rubber tree plant rises behind her like a
fan" (358). Elaine's contempt for Mrs. Smeath's attempts to change her is also defined by the color green: "It's like a fleshy weed in my chest . . . like a burdock, with its rank leaves and little green burrs" (193).

The abuse Elaine suffers manifests itself in the color green. Elaine is fascinated by the green luna moth, but her brother warns her never to touch one "or the dust will come off its wings, and then it can't fly" (154). Vulnerable like the moth, Elaine has been impaired by her abusers and can no longer function as she once did.

In Surfacing, Atwood uses several colors paradoxically; she continues this type of color imagery in Cat's Eye with her use of three colors--black, blue, and red. The protagonist's attempts to overcome the torment of her childhood friends is represented by black. Traumatized by this endless abuse, Elaine seeks to escape. Since she cannot physically remove herself from the girls, her desire to escape manifests itself in other ways--usually in conjunction with the color black. The connection between escapism and black is seen in Elaine's handwriting: "the letters are no longer round and beautiful, but spidery, frantic, and disfigured with blots of black rusty ink where I've pressed down too hard on the steel nib" (135). Here, Elaine seems to be trying to blot out the page with black, hiding her usual handwriting with black ink. A drawing she makes at school also shows Elaine's preoccupation with
wanting to escape. Although the picture begins as a sketch of Elaine's room, with her in her bed, she feels compelled to black out the entire page:

My hand holding the black crayon presses down, harder and harder, until the picture is almost entirely black, until only a faint shadow of my bed and my head on the pillow remain to be seen. (174)

Elaine no doubt wishes simply to "blend in" with her surroundings— to fade into the black. This fading is even more evident in the fainting spells Elaine begins having. She views fainting as "a way out of places you want to leave, but can't" (183). Elaine describes the experience in terms of the color black. When she first begins to faint, "[t]here's black around the edges of my eyes and it closes in" (183). Sometimes she is outside of her body, watching herself faint from above; however, "sometimes there's just black" (185).

Although the use of black in these instances indicates Elaine's self-obliteration, the color ultimately becomes a positive one for Elaine when she does finally escape the cruelty of her childhood friends and regains the power she lost to them. Elaine's strength is restored when she falls through the frozen creek. Here, rather than a drowning image, we are faced with one of baptism and rebirth. Atwood employs the color black to describe this important event:
Elaine's "head is filling with black sawdust; little specks of the darkness are getting through [her] eyes. It's as if the snowflakes are black" (202). In this scene, Elaine is "saved" by someone she perceives to be the Virgin Mary. Although it is described only as "dark" (203), the Virgin Mary's cloak is probably black. As Elaine explains after the incident, the only Virgin Mary that "ever seemed real" was "dressed not in the usual blue or white or gold, but in black" (212). Shannon Hengen notes that Elaine's vision of the Virgin Mary "signals the start of Elaine's escape from Cordelia's power to harm her" (109).

Later, in her adult years, Elaine is at last able to form healthy, normal friendships. In her first year of college, she rejects more feminine and colorful clothes in favor of "what the boys wear . . . black turtlenecks and jeans" (Atwood 294). She calls such clothing an "allegiance" with her new friends, who dress in black to represent their nonconformity. Years later, Elaine elects to wear a black dress to her retrospective. She imagines seeing Cordelia there and feels gratified that her (Elaine's) individual spirit finally conquered Cordelia's attempts to reform her: "She'll walk in through the door and I will turn, wearing black as a painter should, looking successful, holding a glass of only moderately bad wine. I won't spill a drop" (21). Elaine compares the black dress
to the clothing of Dracula and nuns—both of which are figures of power.

Blue is also a paradoxical color symbol. On the one hand, blue symbolizes Elaine's fear and distrust of women, both of which are direct results of the sadistic treatment she endures from her childhood girlfriends and Mrs. Smeath. A good example of Atwood's use of blue to represent this fear is Miss Lumley, Elaine's grade school teacher. She is rumored to wear blue bloomers, which are "dark, mysterious, repulsive" and create an aura that "colors the air in which she moves. It makes her more terrifying; but she is terrifying in any case" (82). Elaine says that she is "not afraid of snakes or worms but [she] is afraid of these bloomers" (85). To her, they represent the female gender, which Elaine regards as frightening. As a teenager, Elaine has to wear similar blue bloomers for her gym class. She dislikes having to put them on in front of the other girls, who cause her to feel uncomfortable and inadequate—just as the female figures of her childhood did. As an adult, Elaine paints a pair of blue bloomers. It is Mrs. Smeath, not Miss Lumley or her classmates, who wears them, though. Because Mrs. Smeath encouraged Elaine's girlfriends to torment her and deeply damaged Elaine's perception of women, it is fitting that she should be the one wearing the bloomers, which "are an intense indigo blue . . . that appears to radiate a dark and stifling light" (242).
Two blue hats represent Elaine's loss of power to her childhood friends. The first hat is one she wears the first time she attends church with the Smeaths. Mrs. Smeath—appalled that Elaine would consider going to church without a hat—says, "We don't go into our church with our heads uncovered" (101). She gives Elaine one of Grace's hats—a blue one. Here, Mrs. Smeath begins her plan to correct what she perceives as Elaine's evil ways. The second blue hat is Elaine's. Cordelia tosses this hat into the ravine and orders Elaine to retrieve it. In attempting to do so, Elaine falls through the ice-covered creek and nearly dies. Elaine regards the hat with contempt: "Cordelia is right, it's a stupid hat. I look at it and feel resentment, because this stupid-looking hat is mine, and deserving of ridicule. I don't want to wear it ever again" (201).

But blue is also a symbol of Elaine's recapturing power over her life. When Elaine nearly dies in the ravine, blue is not only a color of power lost, but also the color of power regained. As Elaine lies freezing, she notes that the snow looks blue and that "all around [her] are blue arches, blue caves, pure and silent" (201). She feels at peace and "[n]othing hurts any more" (202). Afterwards, she takes a new attitude towards Cordelia: "I see that I don't have to do what she says . . . . I can do what I like . . . . I am free" (207).
One of the most compelling and significant symbols in the novel is Elaine's cat's eye marble. Elaine feels the marble—which is blue—has a mystical power: It is the eye of "something that isn't known but exists anyway" (67). She carries the cat's eye in her purse until she begins attending church with the Smeaths: I "take my blue cat's eye marble out of my red plastic purse and leave it in my bureau drawer" (101). This action marks the beginning of her battle against her friends and Mrs. Smeath. After enduring much torment from them, Elaine finds her cat's eye and begins carrying it with her again. She explains the power of the cat's eye:

I keep my cat's eye in my pocket, where I can hold on to it. It rests in my hand, valuable as a jewel, looking out through bone and cloth with its impartial glaze. With the help of its power I retreat back into my eyes. (166)

The blue cat's eye allows Elaine to see her friends as "puppets . . . small and clear. I could see them or not, at will" (166). Elaine is unable to dismiss her peers in this way unless she is carrying the marble. She says that Cordelia is unaware of the cat's eye: "She doesn't know what power this cat's eye has, to protect me" (151).

The cat's eye is also a source of power for Elaine when she gets older. She finds the marble just before entering high school and puts it back in the red purse (217).
Afterward, Elaine no longer allows herself to be victimized by Cordelia. In fact—to a great extent—Elaine has control over Cordelia. As an adult, Elaine comes across the cat's eye again: "I look into it, and see my life entire" (420). It is at this point that Elaine is able to start piecing together memories from her past and to deal with the abuse she underwent.

Like blue, red represents both positive and negative power, both Elaine’s tormentors and her triumph over them. Fittingly, red is associated with the Smeaths, who are a source of great agony for Elaine. Not only does Grace Smeath wear "a red sweater pebbled with little balls of wool," but she also lives in a "shoebox-shaped red brick house" (55). Mrs. Smeath is often characterized by the color red. She has "big hands, knuckly and red from the wash" (61). Elaine also views her bad heart in terms of the color red: "It would be red, but with a reddish-black patch on it, like rot in an apple or a bruise" (61). Even Mrs. Smeath's sister has "knuckly red hands" (101).

Considering Elaine's tormented childhood, it is not surprising that when she tries to remember what it was like, she can only recall the poisonous nightshade plants and their "clusters of red berries" (113). It is these red berries that, as a child, she contemplates eating so that she can "becom[e] invisible" (166) and thus escape the abuse of her friends.
Elaine finds comfort and strength in the Virgin Mary, whom she imagines having a heart that is "bright red, rounded, with a dark light around it" (197). After Elaine falls into the ravine, she thinks that she sees the Virgin Mary: "Inside her half-open cloak there's a glimpse of red. It's her heart" (203). Critic J. Brooks Bouson calls the heart a symbol of the Virgin's "warm, nurturing touch" and contrasts her bright red, luminous heart with the dark red, almost black heart of Mrs. Smeath. Bouson refers to the Virgin as "the good mother," whereas Mrs. Smeath is viewed as "the bad mother" (172). The Virgin gives Elaine strength; after her ordeal in the ravine, Elaine can finally resume control over her life and power over her classmates. Elaine equates the Virgin Mary's heart with her red purse, which she regards as a source of power. Because she also considers her cat's eye marble as powerful, it is fitting that she often places it inside the purse, thereby combining two powerful objects. Thus, black, blue, and red retain their usual associations when others have power over Elaine, but these meanings are reversed when Elaine gains power over her tormentors and her life.

Because the protagonist of *Cat's Eye* is a painter, Atwood's emphasis on color imagery is quite appropriate--Elaine no doubt associates her internal feelings and external surroundings with color. However, in this novel Atwood again undermines traditional color symbolism. By
focusing on the negative connotations of certain colors, creating paradoxical uses of various other colors, and dismissing conventional associations of still others, Atwood is able to underscore the unexpected, unconventional cruelty of Elaine's childhood relationship with Mrs. Smeath, Cordelia, Grace, and Carol and the arbitrariness of conventional signification.
Chapter Three

Atwood's dystopian novel The Handmaid's Tale examines a future society plagued by sterility. In an attempt to produce children, a new regime overturns the government and assumes power. This regime renames the country Gilead and completely redesigns the society, creating new hierarchies, laws, and morals based on Biblical interpretation. Women thought capable of giving birth are called "Handmaids" and are placed in the homes of women who are past childbearing age. The hope is that their husbands will impregnate the younger women. In this rigidly structured society, the functions of its citizens are denoted by the colors they wear. With such obvious color imagery in the novel, it is not surprising that Atwood creates a system of color symbols. However, as she does in the two previous novels, she deviates from traditional ideas about these colors.

Red emerges as the most prominent color in the novel. Because she is a Handmaid, Offred, Atwood's protagonist, is required to wear only red clothing. She notes that red is the color chosen for the Handmaids because it is "the color of blood" (11)—that is, the color of menstrual blood, which signifies child-bearing ability, a Handmaid's most vital commodity. This color carries over into virtually every
aspect of the Handmaids' lives. They are educated at the Rachel and Leah Center, which the Handmaids call the "Red Center . . . because there was so much red" (125). They are driven in red cars to gynecologists' offices with red screens and ride in red Birthmobiles with red carpet and red curtains to the sites where other Handmaids are giving birth.

Although Offred says that she "never looked good in red, it's not my color" (11), she nevertheless finds herself being permeated by it. The red that covers her outer body seems to be seeping into her inner self:

I am a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red with its translucent wrapping. Inside it is a space, huge as the sky at night and dark and curved like that, though black-red rather than black . . . I listen to my heart, wave upon wave, salty and red. (95-96)

Later, she is overtaken by laughter and fears that she will somehow explode in "[r]ed all over the cupboard" (190). Thus, despite her best intentions, Offred is beginning to conform to her society's definition of her.

Furthermore, she begins noting various connections between the red person she has become and the reds around her, specifically the red tulips in Serena Joy's flower garden. As Madonna Miner points out, Offred comes to see
the flowers as merely "fruited bod[ies]" that are "subject to the breeding policy of their gardener." Offred sees herself in these tulips. Like them, she is valued only for her reproductive ability; she is a "fruited body" as well (152).

Offred recalls the red of the tulips when she sees a hanged man on public display. She notices the bright red blood on the bag over his head and notes that the blood is in the same spot where the man's mouth is. But the blood "makes another mouth, a small red one . . . A child's idea of a smile" (Atwood 43). She seems transfixed by this red mouth:

I look at the one red smile. The red of the smile is the same as the red of the tulips in Serena Joy's garden, towards the base of the flowers where they are beginning to heal. The red is the same but there is no connection. The tulips are not tulips of blood, the red smiles are not flowers, neither thing makes a comment on the other. (44)

Despite the fact that Offred dismisses any connection between the red of the tulips and the red of the blood, Madame Miner asserts that there is such a connection and that it is one that "pulls in Offred herself; in her red outfit, an outfit signifying both her fertility and her oppression, she is like a blood-red smile, like a flowering
plant" (152)—that is, the red-clad Offred—like the murdered man and the tulips—has no control over her life. All of their fates are determined by others. The fact that these red-colored people and objects are suppressed is ironic in that red is usually regarded as a powerful color.

Also ironic is the choice of red as the color of the Handmaids' attire. The founders of Gilead chose red because it is the color of menstrual blood, but it is also a hot, passionate color often associated with "sexual exhibition, temptation, exploration" (Brusatin 22). As Helen Varley points out, the color is also often used to designate unscrupulous sexual practices, as in a "scarlet woman" and the "red-light district" (186). In this sense, red as the color of the Handmaids is mockingly ironic.

Although red is the color most often examined by Handmaid critics, it is by no means the only significant color. Atwood gives several other colors a symbolic function in the novel. One of the most interesting of these is blue, designated as the color for the attire of the Commanders' wives. Since "[b]lue among Christians is most often associated with the Virgin Mary" (Birren 7), this association is ironic, for although the wives will (perhaps) have children without ever having sex, here the "immaculate conception" will take place through the exploitation of the Handmaids, in compensation for the wives' sterility.
Constant reminders of the blue-clad wives surround Offred: her bathroom is "papered in small blue flowers . . . with curtains to match" (Atwood 81). Fittingly, these flowers are forget-me-nots. Moreover, "[t]here's a blue bath mat [and] a blue fake-fur cover on the toilet seat" (81). The egg cup placed before her each morning is trimmed with a blue stripe, perhaps a reminder of Offred's own egg—the one that the Commander tries to impregnate each month. Even more telling is the cushion on Offred's window seat. It is adorned with a needlepoint design that includes the word "faith." Aside from her Scrabble games with the Commander, this word is the only one that Offred ever has the opportunity to read, and appropriately so, for faith is exactly what Offred must have—faith that she will carry out her duty as a Handmaid and become pregnant. It is not surprising then that the word is stitched in "faded blue" thread (75).

But the blue-stitched "faith" is also Offred's faith that her husband and daughter are still alive and that she will be allowed to reunite with them someday. Thus, Atwood ascribes two meanings to blue. For example, the Wifely blue is often mocked by other characters; Moira—unwilling to accept the structure of the Gileadean society—first arrives at the Red Center wearing a blue sweatshirt and blue jeans. It is as if she is duplicating the blue of the Wives in a corrupt, rebellious form, a throwback to the pre-Gilead days
when women were free to do as they please and wear whatever they wished.

Jezebel's, the sex-themed club that Offred visits with the Commander, provides the most significant instance of defilement of the Wives' blue. Offred wears Serena Joy's blue cloak to the club so that she may "get through the checkpoints" (301). Thus, she is pretending to be a Wife and violating a sacred societal division. Once at the club, Offred meets a woman "who's wearing a baby-blue laced-up Merry Widow" (315). This one detail is quite symbolic. The fact that her outfit is "baby-blue" is significant in that not only is this the blue of the Wives, but it is also obviously the blue of babies, which are the ultimate goal of the Commander-Wife-Handmaid relationship. That the Wife's blue is used as the color of lingerie—which was ordered destroyed by the government—is an obvious perversion of the Wives' pseudo-virginity. In these instances, Atwood is perhaps also making a telling association between the Wives' blue gowns and the term "Blue Gown," which Helen Varley notes is "an expression for a harlot, stemming from the dress prostitutes were obliged to wear in the house of correction" (212).

Red and blue combine to make purple, another important color in this novel. Interestingly, in a Christian context, purple is symbolic of Christ's resurrection and is often worn in sacred ceremonies (Varley 220). However, despite
(or perhaps because of) the novel's Christian overtones, Atwood chooses to make purple a color of illicit sexuality. For example, the color comes to represent homosexuality, forbidden because it does not result in procreation, the purpose of Gileadean society. Offred notes that the two bodies hanging on the "Wall," on which those executed by the government are displayed, have "purple placards hung around their necks," which denote the crime of "Gender Treachery" (Atwood 57). This color is also associated with Offred's friend Moira, who is a lesbian. In a daydream about their college days, Offred remembers her wearing purple overalls. Later, when Moira is brought to the Red Center, she has "a bruise on her left cheek, turning purple" (91).

In addition, purple is evident in a film Offred sees while at the Red Center. The film is a documentary of a women's rally where pro-choice banners are prevalent. Offred sees her mother in the film; she is wearing a "green and mauve plaid shirt" and "[h]er hair is tucked into a mauve kerchief" (153). In Gilead, the idea of reproductive freedom is taboo. Sex is for the purpose of producing children, and abortion is therefore illegal.

Purple is most obvious at Jezebel's, the club where Commanders indulge in illicit sexual activities. Offred's commander gives her purple-hued lipstick and a mauve-colored negligee adorned with purple sequins to wear to the club. Before entering the building, Offred notes, "He slips around
my wrist a tag, purple, on an elastic band" (303). The tag is very similar to the purple cards that identify executed homosexuals; however, in this case, it is used to show that a woman is "an evening rental" for sex (303).

Purple is an obvious color inside the club as well. The Aunt Offred sees at Jezebel’s is "wearing a purple caftan" (313) although the Aunts normally wear khaki gowns. The usual, acceptable color has been replaced for this occasion by the color of forbidden sex. When Offred discovers Moira, she tells Offred to meet her in the bathroom. When Offred asks the purple-clad Aunt for admittance, she is given "an oblong of purple cardboard from a stack" (313). This card acts as a key, allowing her into the bathroom as well as giving her the opportunity to see Moira again. Once inside, Offred is surrounded by deviations from Gilead’s strict sexual mores. Here, Moira explains that she is now more or less a prostitute for Commanders and that the other women in the bathroom are, too. Moira calls Jezebel’s "butch paradise" because female homosexuality is encouraged by the Commanders: "women on women sort of turns them on" (324). Normally, such activities would be forbidden in Gilead.

Dorothy Jones also sees purple as a color of hope in the novel. She points out that the two combining colors in purple (red and blue) are symbolic of a merging of the Handmaid and the Wife: "Anything which modifies the sharp
divisions forced on women offers some hope of subverting the system, no matter how brief or intangible." She notes the red and blue stained glass fanlight through which sunlight casts a purple shadow and regards Offred's stepping into it as symbolic of this hope (40). It is notable that the shadow from the fanlight creates "flowers of light" on Offred's hands (Atwood 65). These purple "flowers" are much like the real ones in Serena's garden:

light mauve, and the darker ones, velvet and purple . . . indigo shadow . . . so female in shape it was a surprise they'd not long since been rooted out. There is something subversive about this garden of Serena's, a sense of buried things bursting upwards, wordlessly, into the light, as if to point, to say: Whatever is silenced will clamor to be heard, though silently. (196)

Thus, purple symbolizes a degree of hope for Offred and the other Handmaids; like the purple flowers, they will not give up believing that someday their sexuality will not be the property of others. Atwood's choice of purple for this function is appropriate in that purple is often viewed as a color of power (Varley 218).

Green is a color that is often associated with sexuality because it embodies the ideas of growth and fertility in the plant kingdom. However, Atwood chooses to
make it a color of asexuality in this novel, thus emphasizing the sterility of this society. The color operates on three very different levels. First of all, she chooses it as the color of the gowns worn by the Marthas, the Commanders' household servants. They are for the most part asexual. For example, Rita, one of the Marthas in Offred's house, does not approve of the Handmaids' function and tells another Martha that "she wouldn't debase herself like that" (13). It is fitting then that such nonsexual women would wear "dull green, like a surgeon's gown of the time before" (12). After all, these gowns would have been sterile. The soldier-like Guardians of Faith wear green as well. Like the Marthas, they are essentially asexual. Offred points out that "they're either stupid or older or disabled or very young" (27)--groups which are virtually chaste.

Green is also seen at the Red Center, the place where the Handmaids are educated about the function of their sexuality in society, specifically that their bodies now belong to others. Here, there is a "green-painted plaster ceiling" (62), a "green blackboard" (92) and a "greenish" window (118). The Handmaids are asexual in that they are denied true sexuality. Finally, green is in evidence at Jezebel's. Offred notes that one of the prostitutes here is wearing green and that there is a "lime-green bamboo-shoot print" on the sofa and chairs (314). Many forms of
forbidden sex, such as prostitution and homosexuality, are permitted here—none of which result in procreation.

Just as Atwood throws into question the accepted associations of the color green, she also toys with common assumptions about the color white (purity, virginity, and innocence). Because white's usual associations are Biblical in nature, we can assume that Gilead intended these same meanings. However, once again Atwood chooses instead to subvert conventional significance and to focus on the more negative connotations of the color—death and sterility.

The most obvious connection between white and death is at Salvagings, where criminals are hung, and at the "Wall," where the executed are displayed. In both cases, the victims wear white cloth bags on their heads. But a more subtle connection emerges in Offred's room:

Above, on the white ceiling, a relief ornament in the shape of a wreath, and in the center of it a blank space, plastered over, like the place in a face where the eye has been taken out. There must have been a chandelier, once. They've removed anything you could tie a rope to. (9) Offred believes that the Handmaid before her hanged herself from this chandelier. Thus, another death by hanging is associated with this color.

White is more often associated with sterility in the novel. Although the aim of the Commander-Wife-Handmaid
triad is to produce children, it is never achieved. Atwood uses the color white to represent this infertility as seen during the "Ceremony," at which the Commander tries to impregnate Offred. Here, the three participants lie on Serena Joy's bed, which has a "large white canopy" and rests atop white carpet (120). In addition, Offred notes that the Commander has a "white, tufted raw body" (123).

Atwood continues this use of the color at the Birth Day celebration. There, a table is covered with a white cloth, and both the Wife and the Handmaid giving birth wear white gowns rather than the usual blue and red ones. Although a child is in fact born, it is discovered later that to be a "shredder" (278) and is thus destroyed. Hence, a lack of new life continues to afflict Gilead.

Although Offred's sole purpose is to produce children, her room is characterized by Atwood's color of sterility. In this room, there is a white ceiling, a white table, and white sheets on the bed. Over the window hang white curtains, which Offred describes as "gauze bandages" (125) and "drowned white hair" (139), both of which suggest sterility and death. While in this room, Offred begins to associate herself with the color white. She says that she feels "white, flat, thin" (110) and that she is "dry and white" (132). Later, in her white nightgown, she leans into the blowing, white curtains and says that she "must look
like a cocoon, a spook, face enshrouded like this, only the outlines visible, of nose, bandaged mouth, blind eyes . . . . It's like being in a cloud" (221). Again, there is an association between white and sterility: she is an empty shell, barren inside.

White also comes to represent the perversity of marriage the founders of Gilead have fostered. The Handmaids' role is to perform the traditional wifely duty of producing children. It is not surprising, then, that they wear "white wings" around their faces, which Offred explains are "to keep us from seeing, but also from being seen" (11). The wings are much like the veil a bride wears. White also is evident when the Commander takes Offred to a room at Jezebel's in order to have sex with her. White curtains, a white bathroom, and a white light make up the decor of the room. Because the club was at one time a hotel, Atwood is obviously mocking the traditional wedding night. And again, there are subtle overtones of sterility involved in this imitation--the Commander and Offred will not produce any children together.

Pink is the final color symbol in the novel. Atwood uses this traditionally feminine color to represent feminine products of the past--ones that have been banned by the government of Gilead. When Offred sees a group of Japanese tourists, she notes that one of them has "toenails painted pink." The sight causes Offred to reminisce about the days
when women wore nail polish, panty hose, and high heels. She says that "the smell of nail polish has made [her] hungry" for the past (39).

In her longing for the past, Offred begins to associate details from the present with products that no longer exist. For example, she ponders the name "Serena Joy" and concludes that it sounds "like something you'd put on your hair, in the other time, the time before to straighten it. *Serena Joy* it would say on the bottle, with a woman's head in cut-paper silhouette on a pink oval background" (60). She later recalls Aunt Lydia at the Red Center and compares her to "God on a cloud of Pink Pearl face powder" (62). When the Commander concludes a reading from the Bible, Offred notes that the sound the book makes when it closes is like "*papier poudre*, pink and powdery, from the time before, you'd get it in booklets for taking the shine off your nose, in those stores that sold candles and soap in the shapes of things" (116). As she passes a store that once sold lingerie, she remembers the pink boxes inside that contained "colored pantyhose, brassieres with lace, silk scarves" and notes that there is "something lost" (216). What is lost is her past, when women were at least partly in control of their femininity and sexuality and thus could choose to enhance them through clothing and cosmetics. By making these bittersweet associations, Offred is able to somehow hold on to a world that no longer exists.
Her trip to Jezebel's provides her with the opportunity to have a more direct encounter with the past. Here, she wears a negligee embellished with pink feathers and sees a woman who wears a "short pink bed jacket" (311). Of course, such clothing has been banned in Gilead. The bathroom—where she is permitted a rare visit with Moira, her best friend from the past—is "gently lit in pinkish tones" and contains a "row of toilet cubicles, also pink" (313-14).

All of these instances allow Offred a degree of power over her current situation. She vigorously holds onto memories of a time when she was free. Thus, she has not succumbed to the propaganda or brainwashing of her present society. The fact that Atwood uses a soft, unassuming color like pink to represent this power may seem inappropriate, but as we have seen before, Atwood enjoys breaking traditional assumptions about color imagery.

As in the previous novels, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood again smashes common ideas about what certain colors represent. Here, she twists the meanings of colors like green and blue, to the point of corrupting their traditional associations. She also forces colors like pink and purple to function in ways that are nearly opposite of their usual connotations. Likewise, she gives a color such as red an ironic slant so that its function in the novel subverts the characters' intended meanings. Finally, as she has done many times before, Atwood focuses on only the negative
aspects of certain colors, as is the case with her use of white in this novel. By altering the expectations of what particular colors represent, Atwood forces the reader to question stereotypes and standards. In this novel, she challenges the notion that religious dedication leads to better moral values. Atwood shows that certain interpretations of Biblical teachings can promote extreme sexual promiscuity and discrimination—distinctly un-Christian ideas.
Conclusion

Margaret Atwood points out that "the writer’s relation with words is like the painter’s with paint. There are a limited numbers of colors" (qtd. in Richards 12). Atwood has chosen to combat these limitations by creating additional meanings for these colors, and novels like Surfacing, Cat’s Eye, and The Handmaid’s Tale establish Atwood as a writer intent on shattering traditional views of not only color but also of many received truths. By doing so, Atwood proves she is not content merely to present her readers with a narrative that reproduces a familiar cultural "reality." Rather, she seeks to challenge her readers by requiring them to question the status quo, to disconnect signs (colors) from their conventional meanings, to consider new possibilities, and to form new associations. By taking a seemingly insignificant detail like color and transforming it into a major network of unexpected symbols, Atwood not only adds depth and originality to her narratives but also calls into question many ideas that readers may take for granted. In these three novels, Atwood not only forces readers to consider new color connotations but also insists that they explore deep-rooted assumptions about progress, technology, friendship, religious values, and the sex-gender system.
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