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BLURRING THE LINE BETWEEN FICTION AND REALITY: MARGARET ATWOOD'S USE OF HISTORY IN THE HANDMAID'S TALE

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Abstract

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* redefines speculative fiction by basing its dystopian world on real historical events instead of futuristic technology. This method shows that oppressive systems are not just imagined but have existed in history and reflect in the present.

The society of Gilead in the novel reflects the strict religious rules of 17th-century Puritan New England, where women had limited rights and faced severe punishments for not following societal norms. Atwood also draws from 20th-century totalitarian regimes like Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia. Gilead's use of propaganda, secret police, and public executions mirror these governments' methods of controlling people and information. Additionally, the novel addresses concerns from the feminist movements of the 1970s and 1980s about reproductive rights. The forced childbearing in Gilead is similar to policies in Romania under Nicolae Ceaușescu, where women were required to have children by the government.

By grounding speculative fiction in historical events, Atwood shifts the genre's focus from imagining future technologies to exploring political and social issues. The novel's portrayal of government-controlled reproduction reflects real events like forced sterilizations in the U.S. and Canada, mirroring the Nazi eugenics and Lebensborn programs, and highlighting its relevance to ongoing discussions about personal autonomy. Gilead's combination of church and state resembles past theocracies, showing how religious extremism has been used for political control. The

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"Historical Notes" section at the end critiques the methods by which those in power can rewrite history, connecting to current concerns about censorship and controlling information.

Atwood's use of historical events in her speculative narrative emphasizes that dystopian oppression is not a distant possibility but a recurring issue, reflected in contemporary events. When reality begins to resemble fiction, the "speculative" label weakens. The political revival of *The Handmaid's Tale* after events like Trump's 2016 and 2024 elections shows how speculative fiction can become strangely prophetic.

Keywords: *speculative fiction; historical realism; dystopia; totalitarian societies.*

The act of writing has long been described through metaphors of creation. For male authors, literary production is often imagined in terms of fatherhood, authorship, or divine inspiration—images that distance the creative act from the body. In contrast, feminist writers such as Hélène Cixous have reclaimed the metaphor of writing as birth, insisting that to write is to "write the body" and thereby to give birth to oneself. "Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies" (Cixous 875).

Within this framework, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) can be seen not only as a speculative narrative of patriarchal control but also as a product of an embodied, laborious process of literary "gestation." Atwood has remarked that every event in the novel has a historical precedent; the novel is less an invention than a re-creation, a re-birthing of collective memory into fiction.

Thus, *The Handmaid's Tale* emerges at the intersection of history, politics, and female poetics, embodying both the pain of remembering and the necessity of giving voice. In this sense, the novel exemplifies the feminine metaphor of writing as childbirth: conceived in fragments of historical truth, carried through Atwood's imaginative labor, and finally delivered to the world as a living text, independent of its author yet shaped by the body and mind that produced it.

For Atwood, fiction is not mainly a tool for direct social critique but a way of telling stories that reveal how oppression and power work. By using speculative fiction—which she carefully separates from science fiction—she places her commentary within imagined worlds that still rely on real historical and contemporary events. This approach allows her critique to emerge indirectly, as readers begin to see disturbing parallels between her fictional societies and their own (*In Other Worlds* 6).

In an interview for The Penguin (2019) Atwood reveals the sources she used for creating *The Handmaid's Tale,* as well as the sequel, *The Testaments*. She refers to the terrifying realities drawn from old and recent history. The writer insists that nothing in the books was invented, every law, punishment and practice has a real-world precedent as her reasoning was, first of all, to give credibility and plausibility to the story, in other words, she wanted it to feel disturbingly possible. By basing the opressive laws and cruel rituals in Gilead on things that had already happened, she emphasized that dystopias are not really fantasies, but extensions of real human behaviour. Thus, she challenges traditional notions of speculative fiction by grounding its dystopian world in historical realism rather than futuristic technology or alternate realities. As Atwood explained in an interview, "Speculative fiction encompasses what we could actually do. Sci-fi is that which we're probably not going to see." She further noted that "unlike sci-fi, spec-fi—especially her disastrously scary strain—has a chance of phasing into reality within our lifetime. (Just don't confuse the two, she insists)" ("Margaret Atwood, Speculative Fiction's Apocalyptic Optimist").

Atwood likes "exact labeling", a principle she explained in her *Wired* intrerview, that is, a clear distinction drawing from intertextuality, with Jules Vernes and Orwell, Zamyatin, Huxley and Bradbury as referents, between what is imagined and what is reported to a „what if…" we moved a real–world trend to its extreme. In her view, Verne's extraordinary voyages exemplify speculative fiction because they extrapolate from existing technologies and scientific possibilities, while the works of George Orwell (*Nineteen Eighty-Four,* 1949), Yevgeny Zamyatin (*We,* 1924), Aldous Huxley (*Brave New World,* 1932), and Ray Bradbury (*Fahrenheit 451,* 1953) offer dystopian estimates based on recognizable socio-political realities. Atwood situates *The Handmaid's Tale* within this heritage of cautionary narratives, stressing that her novel "is not science fiction in the sense of Martians or space travel, but speculative fiction in the sense of things that really could happen" (Atwood, *In Other Worlds* 6). The "what if…" framework becomes her investigative approach: Orwell wondered what might follow from totalitarian surveillance, Huxley from genetic manipulation and consumerism, Bradbury from censorship and mass media control. Atwood approaches theocratic authoritarianism and the systematic erasure of women's rights. As she remarks, speculative fiction "uses the methods of science fiction but takes place on Planet Earth", transforming familiar histories and cultural practices into futures that are terrifying precisely because they remain possible ("Margaret Atwood, Speculative Fiction's Apocalyptic Optimist").

As Atwood herself explains, the origins of *The Handmaid's Tale* can be traced back to her childhood reading of Ray Bradbury and John Wyndham, particularly the era of *Fahrenheit 451*. She was later struck by George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, which she found disturbing even in her earliest childhood reading. She also attached great importance to Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* and its vision of "liquidation." Over time, her influences expanded to other writers of the fantastic, including H. G. Wells and Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Ultimately, Atwood noted that "in that area of dystopian totalitarianism turned into fantasy, you can't do without [J. R. R. Tolkien's] Lord of the Rings" (Atwood, PBS News, 2019).

While she considered these fabulous writers a source of inspiration and a means of projecting her work into a certain postmodernist context, Atwood's historical records become the apocaliptyc engines of horror that never fail her vision. A solid foundation for creating the totalitarian society of Gilead can be found in the power structures of the 17th century Puritan New England, led by religious normatives and strict hierarchies. To this, she adds the Salem witch trials and the Inquisition, slavery and the Catholic church cults, as well as Islamic societies that arrange marriages and limit rights for women. In short, any type of hegemony that rules by fear and oppression, whether religious or political, becomes a building block of Atwood's dystopia. As she explained in numerous interviews and essays, In *The Handmaid's Tale* the author is clear about the purpose: "If I was to create an imaginary garden, I wanted all the toads in it to be real. One of my rules was that I would not put any events into the book that had not already happened." (Atwood 11). The infamous witch hunts of Salem, where accusations of female deviance justified persecution, resonate in Gilead's public executions of women accused of being disobedient or impure. Similarly, the Spanish Inquisition's use of spectacle, confession, and punishment echoes in the novel's "Salvagings" and "Prayvaganzas." The transatlantic slave trade provides another crucial precedent: the sexual exploitation and forced breeding of enslaved women in the United States anticipates the institutionalized reproductive servitude of the Handmaids. Atwood also considered Catholic traditions that elevated virginity, motherhood, and obedience as sacred ideals, creating what Luce Irigaray calls "the mother as a sacred object under the masculine law" (*Speculum of the Other Woman* 239-40). Moreover, Atwood acknowledged parallels with certain Middle Eastern regimes that restricted women's public presence and autonomy through arranged marriages and veiling practices.

In the Soviet Union, during its Stalinist era, abortion was outlawed in 1936, when "the happy motherhood" program was created. This program was meant to increase the birthrate and give a refresh to the Soviet nation through forced pregnancies. Although the new law included measures to support motherhood—such as expanded maternity clinics, financial assistance, and maternity leave—many women turned to unsafe abortions, which frequently resulted in illness or death. Mothering a child was no longer considered a private matter but a state duty in service of the newly instated era of collectivism. As contemporary party jurist Aron Soltz declared in Trud in 1937, childbirth was "a great and honorable duty" and "not a private matter but one of great social importance." (Soltz 1). Although often misattributed to Stalin himself, the statement captures the ideological thrust of the time: women's reproductive capacities were framed as national resources, subject to regulation and discipline by the state. In practice, this translated into coercion, surveillance of women's bodies, and a reinforcement of patriarchal control under the guise of socialist betterment.

Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* echoes this historical reality, showing how a theocratic dictatorship similarly transforms reproduction into a political tool. In Gilead, like in Stalinist Russia, the state defines motherhood not as a personal choice but as an enforced obligation tied to national survival. Both systems exploit female bodies for demographic purposes, disguising coercion in discourses about duty, honor, and social necessity. By making use of examples like the 1936 Soviet abortion ban, Atwood roots her dystopia in actual histories of pronatalist control, reminding readers that reproductive oppression is never confined to fiction but is a recurring instrument of authoritarian power.

Similarly, in 1966, dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu in Romania released the decree no. 770 which banned abortion and most forms of contraception, forcing women to produce children in order to boost demographic growth. This forcing into motherhood did not take into consideration any personal or economic aspects or health circumstances. With this decree Ceaușescu set the fundaments of what was to become one of the most oppressive pronatalist regimes in history. There were terrible consequences to it: thousands of women died of wronged abortions, hundreds of children were put in orphanages that eventually turned into extermination camps, where the totalitarian regime sought to dispose of the individuals considered a social burden. As Atwood observed in a 2019 Penguin interview: "The latest sicko Red ruling was announced by cold-blooded Romanian president Nicolas [sic] Ceaușescu, who wants women to have more babies so the country will get richer. It was this policy that filled up the Romanian orphanages, which then became a scandal around the world for their inhumane conditions" ("Margaret Atwood on the Real-Life Events"). Disregarding these outcomes, the dictator committed an atrocious abuse of personal liberties, disguised as law and progress.

Ceaușescu's Romania demonstrates how state control of women's fertility can become a tool of authoritarian power, foreshadowing the dystopian system Margaret Atwood imagines in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Through this decree, which criminalized abortion and contraception, women's bodies were transformed into instruments of demographic policy. They were subjected to state surveillance, monthly gynecological checks, and public shaming if they did not fulfill their "patriotic duty" to reproduce. This kind of grim reality generated the projection in the fiction of Gilead, where women are reduced to their biological capacity to bear children and positioned within rigid hierarchies—Handmaids, Wives, Marthas—defined by reproductive function. Atwood, considering this historical precedent, not only grounds her dystopia in documented reality but also issues a warning about the consequences of turning women's bodies into instruments of state ideology.

Moreover, Nazi politics on reproduction control, *Lebensborn*, a program meant to encourage "Aryan" women to give birth for the state during 1933–1945, also inspired the idea of the handmaids in Gilead. Atwood references this historical example to illustrate how women's reproductive capacities have been systematically appropriated by totalitarian regimes. The *Lebensborn* program, initiated by Heinrich Himmler, sought to increase the birthrate of racially "pure" children by encouraging unmarried women of "desirable" heritage to bear children for SS officers, while simultaneously sterilizing or exterminating those deemed unfit. This biopolitical control resonates in Gilead, where handmaids are reduced to state-controlled wombs, stripped of personal identity and family ties, and forced into ritualized reproduction. In both cases, motherhood is nationalized and instrumentalized: in Nazi Germany to secure racial purity, and in Atwood's dystopia to ensure demographic survival (Holocaust Encyclopedia).

Stalin's Russia, Ceaușescu's Romania, Nazi *Lebensborn*, and Atwood's Gilead all employ motherhood as a form of national service. In Russia childbirth was considered „an honorable duty", in Romania, women were praised as "heroine mothers" expected to fulfill demographic quotas, while in Nazi Germany "racially pure" women were encouraged—or pressured—to produce „pure" children for the state under the *Lebensborn* program. Similarly, in Gilead, Handmaids are ritually celebrated for their pregnancies, paraded as sacred vessels of fertility. Yet in each case, the glorification of motherhood masks the brutality of coercion: women's bodies were nationalized, their agency stripped, and their lives subjected to systemic surveillance and punishment. Just as Ceaușescu's ban on abortion led to widespread maternal deaths and the tragedy of thousands of abandoned children in state orphanages, Nazi reproductive policies separated women and children from families, sacrificing relationships to serve ideology. Atwood refines these historical traumas into her dystopian vision, imagining the devastating consequences of enforced reproduction in a society where women are both indispensable for the survival of the state and poignantly disposable as individuals.

Within Gilead, these systemic forms of oppression are enacted and internalized by individuals such as Aunt Lydia. Her role reflects the dynamics revealed by the Stanford Prison Experiment: ordinary people, placed in positions of authority within an authoritarian system, can adopt and enforce cruelty. Aunt Lydia disciplines the Handmaids, imposes theocratic laws, and perpetuates ideological control, showing that systemic oppression works not only through leaders at the top but also through the complicity of those in middle positions. The compulsory veiling resembles the rules imposed in fundamentalist Muslim regimes, while strict surveillance, and ritualized punishments in Gilead echo historical examples from Ceaușescu's Romania, where women's bodies were controlled through state laws and everyday enforcers, showing how widespread such mechanisms of control can be. Moreover, in their instructional sessions, the Aunts teach the Handmaids to view their reproductive function as a *sacred duty*, a *gift*, and a *privilege*. This sanctified language mirrors the rhetoric employed in the Nazi *Lebensborn* program, which likewise idealized the reproductive role of the "chosen" women as a patriotic and divine mission.

By combining historical precedent, political and religious repression, and the psychological mechanisms of authority exemplified by figures like Aunt Lydia, Atwood constructs Gilead as a dystopia that is both plausible and chilling. The regime's oppression is systemic, yet it functions through the assimilation of ideology by individuals, demonstrating that the subjugation of women is not only enforced by laws and institutions but also maintained, and normalized by the accomplices of the system.

Therefore, by grounding her speculative fiction in the historical realities of regimes like Stalin's, Ceaușescu's and the Nazi's, Atwood emphasizes that the horrors of Gilead are not fantasies but extrapolations from existing practices. The connection between history and fiction intensifies the novel's critique, reminding readers that reproductive control is a political weapon used not in imagined futures, but in recent memory. These diverse sources converge in Gilead, where history's recurrent strategies of domination—religious dogma, surveillance, reproductive control, and fear—merge into a system designed to suppress individuality and maintain patriarchal hegemony.

In the United States, the second–wave feminist movement of the 70s and 80s, which brought some progress in areas such as sports, education, and legal representation, provoked a strong conservative reaction against abortion rights and the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). The amendment initially won support from a majority of states, but—largely due to the efforts of prominent anti-feminist Phyllis Schlafly—it fell short of the 38 states required for ratification. Schlafly's "STOP ERA" campaign ("Stop Taking Our Privileges") claimed that the amendment would dismantle gender-specific legal protections, such as Social Security benefits for dependent wives and exemptions from the military draft. Her success marked a significant setback for the feminist movement, particularly in advancing abortion rights and legal equality in matters of property, divorce, and employment (History.com, "Why the Equal Rights Amendment Was Defeated"). In *The Testaments*, Atwood ironically memorializes this defeat by naming the café where the Aunts meet "Schlafly Café," a reminder of how conservative victories downsize women's progress.

This historical context further highlights *The Handmaid's Tale*, where the undermining of women's rights and the rise of a patriarchal theocracy reflect the very anxieties sparked by Schlafly's movement and the broader conservative backlash. Atwood reasons from these cultural battles to imagine a society where women are not only denied reproductive choice but they are stripped of all legal autonomy, echoing fears that without constitutional protections such as the ERA, hard-won feminist gains could be undone. By reflecting the U.S. political climate of the 1980s, Atwood shows that her dystopia is grounded in real history and warns that religious authoritarianism can grow out of democratic societies themselves.

Furthermore, Atwood revises a vast literature related to oppression of women and forbidden abortion through laws and actions carried by political leaders, cults, and subversive organizations. She does not shy away from approaching Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini's slaughterhouses and prisons after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, where women were forced back into veiling and were taken away all legal rights (Atwood, "Writing Utopia"). Theocratic violence, for Atwood, is not confined to the Middle East; she also points to the Ku Klux Klan's white supremacist terror in the United States as an example of organized, faith-inflected brutality against marginalized groups: „Women of the Klan drew on familial and community ties […] to circulate the Klan's message of racial, religious, and national bigotry […] The Klan's power was devastating precisely because it was so well integrated into the normal everyday life of white Protestants" (Blee 3). Equally significant is the role of American evangelicalism in shaping restrictive gender ideologies, particularly in conservative Protestant regions of the southern United States, where battles over abortion rights, school curricula, and sexual politics intensified during the Reagan era. (Critchlow, ch. 6)

These examples become the scaffolding for *The Handmaid's Tale*, where Atwood synthesizes historical and contemporary forms of religious authoritarianism into the fictional regime of Gilead. The compulsory *burqa* and loss of rights under Khomeini echo in the Handmaids' red uniforms, bonnets and restricted freedoms; the racialized violence of the Ku Klux Klan is mirrored in Gilead's treatment of marginalized groups; and the anxieties of the American evangelicals resonate in the state's strict control over reproduction. By weaving together these disparate yet interconnected histories, Atwood demonstrates that Gilead is not an outlandish fantasy but a speculative dystopia built from real precedents, warning that the subjugation of women is a recurring possibility whenever religion, politics, and power converge.

In the light of current events, with the election and re-election of president Trump, we notice the perpetuation of the same history and historical context. During his administration, federal and state-level policies sought to restrict abortion access, including efforts to impose waiting periods ("Mary Fallin"), limit funding for Planned Parenthood ("Planned Parenthood Funding under Trump"; "Planned Parenthood Title X Funding"), and reinforce the "Mexico City Policy", issued by president Reagan in 1984, rejected by all Democratic presidents, and renewed by Trump ("Trump Uses Executive Power to Reinstate Anti-Abortion Pacts"). According to Politico, "the Department of Health and Human Services did not conduct a study of the rule's economic and health impacts and asked the agency to hold off on releasing the rule until completing the study. HHS did not respond to a request for comment on the rule's approval process", in case of the fund cutting for Planned Parenthood, pointing to the same basic human rights neglect as in the case of Ceaușescu's decree in 1964 ("Planned Parenthood Funding under Trump").

What all these policies have in common is that they weaponize delay (women will get to the point where abortion is impossible), they do not ban abortion outright, they create systemic obstacles, and finally make abortion practically inaccessible. These strategies perfectly reflect Trump's indirect approach to policies in general, by disguising their real impact under the cover of institutional process, funding rules, and judicial appointments.

We find this approach reflected in the way Atwood constructs the oppressive structures of Gilead, where reproductive control is rarely achieved through direct prohibition alone, but rather through a series of legal, financial, and bureaucratic obstacles designed to make access nearly impossible. Though framed as protective or fiscally neutral, these measures operate through a common logic—using delay as a tactic, defunding, and dependency to restrict reproductive autonomy without declaring abortion outright illegal. Atwood uses precisely this historical pattern of subtle yet devastating erosion of rights, showing how a society like Gilead can be created, not in a single moment of authoritarian decree, but through the accumulation of policies that gradually deconstructs reproductive freedom under the guise of moral or political necessity.

While the United States remained a liberal democracy, the rhetoric surrounding these measures often considered motherhood and reproductive choices as moral or civic obligations, echoing the ideological language used in pronatalist regimes like Stalinist Russia. Just as Aron Soltz declared childbirth to be "a great and honorable duty" tied to the social good, the current Trump-era discourse frequently invokes societal or religious responsibility in debates over reproductive policy. In this sense, Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* remains strikingly relevant: it dramatizes how reproductive control can be justified as a collective duty, illustrating that even in modern democratic states, political and cultural pressures can significantly constrain women's reproductive autonomy.

When reality begins to resemble fiction, the "speculative" label weakens. The political resurgence of *The Handmaid's Tale* after events like Trump's 2016 and 2024 elections shows how speculative fiction can become eerily prescient. The increased use of *Handmaid's Tale* iconography in protests (women dressing as Handmaids) demonstrates how fiction influences real-world activism. Protesters who embody the Handmaids visually remind society that these measures are not just technical details, they are part of a long history of controlling women's bodies. In this way, Atwood's fiction has become a political language of resistance, a cultural symbol for the dangers of authoritarianism, and a reminder that the line between past, present, and dystopian future is dangerously thin.

In her stance that *The Handmaid's Tale* should be classified as speculative fiction rather than science fiction, Margaret Atwood remained faithful to her guiding principle: to construct a warning grounded in historical facts. Drawing on newspaper clippings, testimonies, and documentary evidence she collected in the 1980s—now preserved in the University of Toronto archives, as shown in the PBS Interview - Atwood ensured that every element of Gilead had a precedent in real history. This archive also serves to answer the persistent question posed by critics and readers alike: "How did you come up with this stuff?" The response shows her concern that people often take their rights and freedoms for granted until faced with their sudden loss: "Their interests were other. And then, suddenly, bang, a lightbulb goes on, maybe somebody's going to take these rights away. And that may happen in all areas of life, including health care, minimum wage, and including forcing people to have babies" (PBS News, 2017).

By grounding her narrative in historical precedent, Atwood ensured that *The Handmaid's Tale* could not be relegated to the realm of fantasy, but would instead be read as a warning rooted in lived experience. She consciously used examples such as Ceaușescu's Decree 770 in Romania, which criminalized abortion and mobilized women's bodies for demographic expansion; Stalin's 1936 ban on abortion, framed as "happy motherhood," which turned reproduction into a political instrument; and the Nazi Lebensborn program, which sought to engineer a racially "pure" future through state-controlled breeding. Likewise, echoes of Puritan theocracy in early America—where women's moral and reproductive lives were strictly monitored—resurface in Gilead's faith–based arguments for procreation. Even the defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment in the United States foreshadowed how fragile women's legal protections remain, while more recent policies—mandatory waiting periods, defunding of Planned Parenthood, and the reinstatement of the Mexico City Policy—demonstrate how reproductive freedom continues to be eroded through progressive restrictions disguised in moral or bureaucratic language. Atwood's genius lies in weaving these disparate threads into a coherent tapestry that insists dystopia is never born *ex nihilo*: it is built together from ideologies and practices history has already sanctioned. In this light, *The Handmaid's Tale* is not a story about an imagined elsewhere, but a mirror held up to humanity, revealing how easily rights, autonomy, and dignity can be dismantled when power aligns with ideology in the governance of the body.

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BIONOTE

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A NEW MAP FOR LITERARY CRITICISM: GEOCRITICISM AND ITS RESPONSE TO CONTEMPORARY CRISES

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Abstract

Born from both spatial theories in the vein of Foucault and Lefebvre as well as research in a vast diversity of disciplines (geography, cartography, cultural studies, urban studies, sociology, ecology, and more), Geocriticism is interdisciplinary by nature and therefore serves as an example of what other criticism can and should strive for: intellectual interconnectedness. By using geocriticism as a practical model, this paper argues that, ideally applied, theoretical lenses are more than merely an excuse for the perpetuation of academic jargon; they are a necessary response to contemporary concerns. This article examines the emergence of geocriticism, its principles, and a sample of recent scholarship engaging with the theory in a meaningful way.

Keywords: *literary criticism; geocriticism; interdisciplinarity; spatiality; humanities.*

INTRODUCTION

On February 27th, 2023, staff writer Nathan Heller published an article in *The New Yorker,* titled "The End of the English Major," which explores the reasons enrollment in the humanities is in such steep decline. I remember reading and discussing this article with a number of friends, colleagues, and professors at the time. Considering that I *was* an English major, it was obviously extremely

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relevant and not a little distressing. Yet, it was hardly a shocking announcement or the only piece of its kind. The humanities have been in crisis for years now—easily for as long as myself and students of my generation have been alive to worry about them (look at J. H. Plumb's *Crisis in the Humanities,* which was published as early as 1964).

What makes Heller's article stand out is the way in which he presents the issue; rather than pontificating his own opinion, Heller strings together his conversations with various people in academia, both students and professors, those in the humanities and those outside of them. By listening to these voices, Nathan Heller takes the reader through some of the tunes he hears again and again. There are the obvious and less obvious reasons, and then those reasons that probably should be more obvious than they are.

Quoting her parents, "who were low-income and immigrants," one student told Heller that "'You don't go to Harvard for basket weaving'" and emphasized that as a first-generation college student, she herself "always viewed humanities as a passion project" or "hobby-based" (Heller), rather than a field that appealed to practical considerations. But while these students and academics to whom Heller speaks cite the ever-expected issues of career prospects and financial concerns, they also point to some of the less-than-flattering conceptions many outsiders hold about the humanities. As Heller says, "a shift in perception is noticeable" with many claiming that "critical practices have become too specialized," teaching gestures of critique that have little to do with how non-critical readers experience and enjoy literature. Heller further addresses a sentiment gathering particular momentum in literary studies as of late: "Bring back the awe, some say, and the students will follow."

This call to "bring back the awe" is nothing new either. One of the loudest voices among many, Rita Felski, in her book *The Limits of Critique,* advocates for "postcritique." This new approach to literary analysis favors appreciation for aesthetics, reader experience (very much in the vein of Reader-response Theory), and other ways of moving past what Felski refers to as the "hermeneutics of suspicion" (coined by French philosopher Paul Ricoeur). Literary studies have become stuck behind the detective's lens, Felski says, always dredging texts for evidence of hidden meaning.

While Felski herself may not intend for a postcritical movement to be politically divisive, the social undercurrents and outside forces nudging it along are undeniably political. Speak to anyone who complains about the supposed 'negativity' in literary studies, and more often than not, such a complaint will be appended with a comment about political agendas in education. "Can't we just enjoy beautiful literature?" they say, "Why does everything have to be made so political?" But just as most modern critique is inherently political, so is the rising turn against it. Pressures for change do not occur during political equilibrium, but rather when the politics *inside* academia do not align with the politics of the forces in power *outside* academia. There are implications in that call to "bring back the awe" which cannot be ignored. "Bring back" not "find" or "bring forth." *Bring back* the good old days, it seems to say, or even, make literary studies great again.

Of course critique is political (Marxist theory, feminist theory, queer theory, postcolonial theory, ecocriticism. Need I list more?). All theory since the beginning of academic time has formed in response to contemporary concerns. Consider New Criticism's focus on structure and close reading in response to the chaos and senselessness of two world wars, Critical Race Theory's response to the Civil Rights Movement, or even Aristotle's response to Plato's condemnation of poets with *Poetics*. In all these cases and more, scholars have used literary theory as a tool to grapple with the timeliest issues in their generation's consciousness. To deny humanities students today the same opportunity to engage with the world in meaningful ways is to deny the purpose of the humanities themselves. However, it is when those meaningful ways fail to be clear or meaningful to anyone outside of the immediate academic circle that, perhaps, problems emerge.

Reflecting on my own time as an undergraduate and then graduate student, I cannot recall ever hearing a professor or colleague question the use of modern theoretical lenses in the analysis of literature. I think that this may be more of a problem than any theory in and of itself. As students, we learn these paths of study unquestioningly—not, as some may argue, because we are "brainwashed" to do so, but because they seem so obviously necessary. After all, literary criticism has been the governing force behind the formal study of literature to date. Yet, with the turns of ideological tides, the value of these systems must be explicitly justified in how they appeal to more than just the insular world of scholarship and theoretical bubbles. According to Felski, postcritique "presumes a knowledge of critique; it is not a rejection of an intellectual tradition but a working through its limits" (355). Embracing postcritique or not, shouldn't we be doing this anyway?

While Felski's postcritique might speak to the 'disenchantment' voiced by students, it does not address most of the other concerns in Heller's article, concerns which, if we truly wish to save the English major from its prophesied demise, we must address. I argue that rather than turning away from theoretical lenses, scholars of literature (particularly students) should be looking at new forms of critique and how they might serve as a positive example for forward progression. There are new waves of criticism that are especially primed to answer this call, one of which is geocriticism. Optimally applied, literary criticism is a necessary response to contemporary concerns, and Geocriticism offers a unique model for rethinking theoretical approaches.

GEOCRITICISM

A Culmination of the Spatial Turn

When Edward Soja published *Postmodern geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* in 1989, he was just starting to see evidence of what he coined as "the spatial turn":

> As we move closer to the end of the twentieth century, however, Foucault's premonitory observations on the emergence of an 'epoch of space' assume a more reasonable cast. The material and intellectual contexts of modern critical social theory have begun to shift dramatically. In the 1980s, the hoary traditions of a space-blinkered historicism are being challenged with unprecedented explicitness by convergent calls for a far-reaching spatialization of the critical imagination. A distinctively postmodern and critical human geography is taking shape, brashly reasserting the interpretive significance of space in the historically privileged confines of contemporary crititcal thought. (Soja 11)

Now, thirty-six years later, it is safe to say that the 'epoch of space' has in fact become a reality and the critical imagination is thoroughly spatialized. Scholarship is more spatially-conscious than ever, thanks to the theoretical momentum of postmodernism and postcolonialism—not to mention technological innovations in mapping, global visualization, and other geospatial technologies (GPS, GIS, RS). Riding in on this swell, geocriticism arose as a natural and "timely" (Tally, Translator's Preface, ix) coalescence of theory and practices that fell under the umbrella of spatial analysis but were not firmly delineated until French scholar Bertrand Westphal published *La Géocritique: réel, fiction, espace* in 2007. In his book, Westphal proposes a "'spatiological' inventory" for geocritical practices across a multitude of disciplines (7). Officially, geocriticism is young (a baby as most modern criticism goes), but the roots of Westphal's geocriticism trace back to forebears and pioneers of spatial theory—Michel Foucault, Henri Lefebvre, Mikhail Bakhtin, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, David Harvey, et cetera—so it is heartily formed and situated in the geo-literary conversation.

Geocritical Principles

When I was a graduate student of English, no literary theory appealed to me quite so much as geocriticism, which I began to work with and read extensively on at the encouragement of one of my professors. The greatest appeal arises not from the general concepts of spatial or geographic analysis, but from its unique principles, elements, and most especially, its perspective.

As Westphal writes, "most issues of spatial analysis in the field of literature focus on the individual's point of view, which, depending on the genre, is the author's or a fictional character's point of view … an egocentered analysis" (111), but geocriticism claims a drastically different path, favoring "a geocentered approach, which places place at the center of debate" (112). Specifically, geocriticism decenters the individual person and even the individual *text*.

Instead, the *spatial referent* is king. For instance, rather than focus exclusively on Richard Wright's *representation* of Chicago in *Native Son*, a geocritic centers Chicago's South Side itself and analyzes Wright's novel as one representation among many—for example, poetry and music about Chicago, photographs of the South Side, along with historical and current maps. "Thus," says Westphal, "the spatial referent is the basis for the analysis, not the author and his or her work. In a word, one moves from the writer to the place, not the other way around, using complex chronology and diverse points of view" (Westphal 112). Geocriticism acknowledges the constant influence of fictional and non-fictional representation on the real-world referent and of the referent on representation; this *referentiality* is a core principle of the theory (Westphal 6).

From a geocritical point of view, the oscillatory relationship between referent and representation(s) disrupts the traditional hierarchy imposed on "real" and "imagined," thereby making the referent nearly impossible to "really fix or pin down" (Tally, Translator's Preface, xi). Because of this, the feat of analyzing the referent requires both a multifocal and interdisciplinary approach (Westphal 30). Geocriticism opens its own unique forum for scholars from a diversity of disciplines to contribute and interact by "allow[ing] a particular place to serve as the focal point for a variety of critical practices" (Tally, Translator's Preface, ix).

By its own principles, geocriticism does not belong to literary studies alone, but it is an outward-facing form of analysis that places literary studies in a position of collaboration and interaction with other scholarship, giving it an immediate relevance to outside disciplines. While no field of study should seek to defend its existence by ingratiating itself to others, there is an argument to be had for this relevance. If, as Heller's article suggests, students are actively perceiving English studies as "too specialized" and lacking "real world" applications, then interdisciplinarity is certainly a favorable direction for growth, not to mention exciting from a student perspective. As any English major will tell you, literature is valuable and brimming with intellectual potential. Why not share? As Westphal states: "Literature is not a subordinate field, operating in the services of other humanities and social sciences, but literature can certainly help them with their projects" (32). The reverse is also true; geo-literary scholars are already adopting tools and concepts from external disciplines to expand the field of literature in exciting new ways. In her paper "Wounded Cities: Topographies of Self and Nation in Fay Afaf Kanafani's *Nadia, Captive Hope,*" Tunisian scholar Hager Ben Driss merges urban studies with literary analysis of autobiography. Driss adapts anthropological concepts like the "the divided city" and references studies in the Middle East by urban planning professionals (299-300).

Using geocriticism, authors like Al-Khafaji ("Geocriticism: Reading Literature in the Spatial Turn") and Alves and Quieroz ("Studying Urban Space and Literary Representations Using GIS: Lisbon, Portugal, 1852-2009") engage with innovative methods of literary mapping with GIS (Geographic Information Systems) technologies. Where Al-Khafaji chooses to briefly examine the ancient worlds of *Gilgamesh* and *The Odyssey*, Alves and Quieroz conduct a scrupulous geocritical study of Lisbon, Portugal.

REVIEWING THE SCHOLARSHIP: HOW STUDENTS AND SCHOLARS ARE USING GEOCRITICISM

Consider three Ph.D. candidates who embrace geocriticism as a framework for their research, each yielding a unique expression of the theory: one from Greece geocritically analyzes Myrivilis' *The Mermaid Madonna* (*Η Παναγιά η Γοργόνα*) to examine a new geographic understanding of Greekness (Margariti); one from Romania studies the experience of space in Bucharest during the Revolution of 1989 with a geocritical analysis of Cărtărescu's *Orbitor* and Suceavă's *Noaptea cand cineva a murit pentru tine* (Susarenco); and one from the United States explores the active role of transcontinental railspaces by applying geocriticism to Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* and Highsmith's *Strangers on a Train* (Smith). It is one thing to read about and appreciate the critical lens itself, but to truly assess its value, one must analyze it in action. While there is an increasing number of papers utilizing geocriticism as a framework, few have endeavored to analyze those papers and their value to critical conversation. The following section aims to contribute in a small way to such research by examining a sample of scholarship by contemporary academics and students engaging with geocriticism in meaningful ways. The purpose of my analysis is to examine exactly how geocriticism has been utilized in the years following its conception.

Process

I began my analysis by selecting 24 papers authored by scholars and students internationally, which I sourced from various online databases. For each paper, I evaluated and inventoried the following:

- Author disciplines and specializations
- Author nationality
- Academic level at the time of publication (e.g., post-graduate student, university professor)
- Topics
- Purpose
- Geography under analysis

- Application methods of geocriticism
- In-text descriptions of geocriticism as a theoretical framework
- Critical language and terms used throughout the text

Findings

Author demographics

Of the 24 papers, 10 originate from the United States, 3 from Romania, 2 from Egypt, and 1 from each of the following: Czechia, Finland, Germany, Greece, India, Iraq, Italy, Portugal, and Tunisia (see Figure 1). Although I endeavored to find geocritical authors from as many different countries as possible, the sample was still unfortunately skewed with a disproportionate percentage of papers from the United States.

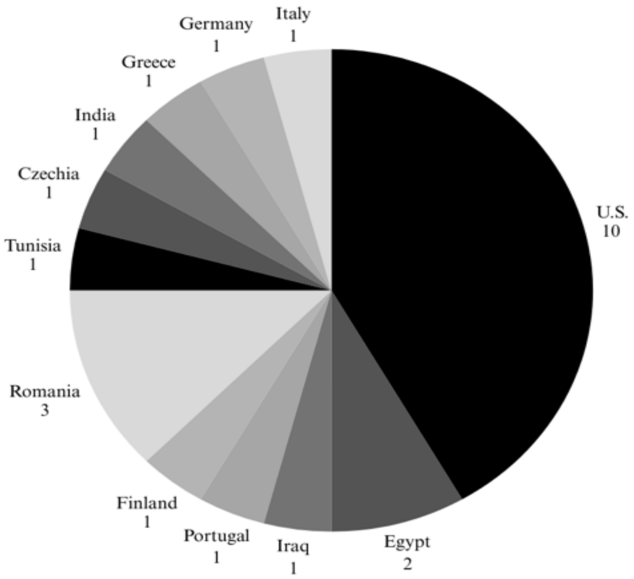

Figure 1. Scholar nationalities

There are several likely reasons for this: (1) I was (for the most part) limited to papers written in English or with English translations, (2) my access to non-American sources was affected by my region and/or my own knowledge of particular digital libraries, and (3) the use and awareness of geocriticism is currently more widely spread in the U.S. than other countries. As I searched for these papers by criticism, topics, and keywords rather than by country, the sample of scholarship does appear to be representative of the wide and diverse international spread of geocriticism.

While this spread has begun to reach students and Ph.D. candidates and their dissertational research, an overwhelming majority of these scholars already hold a degree and university professorship (see Figure 2). Since five out of the 24 papers were written by more than one author, the total number in Figures 1 and 2 is higher than 24. In the case of Vernon and Miller, at the date of their paper's publication, Margaret A. Miller was a postgraduate Ph.D. student while Matthew Vernon was a university professor who already held a Ph.D.

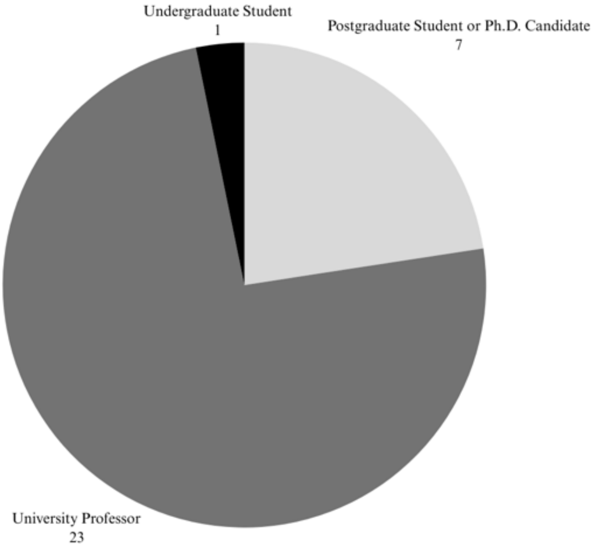

Figure 2. Scholar academic level

With the categorization of author disciplines, it is important to note that many of the authors specialize in multiple disciplines. Additionally, the way that the authors choose to phrase their specialties varies.

For obvious reasons, most fall under some form of literature (see Figure 3). However, a handful of authors originate from other humanities and social sciences disciplines.