

**BODYSCAPE, SOUNDSCAPE AND SMELLSCAPE: LANDSCAPE IMAGERY IN  
THE HANDMAID'S TALE**

**CORPO-PAISAGEM, PAISAGEM SONORA E PAISAGEM OLFATIVA: IMAGINÁRIO  
DA PAISAGEM EM THE HANDMAID'S TALE**

**CORPOPAISAJE, PAISAJE SONORO Y PAISAJE OLFATIVO: IMAGINARIO DEL  
PAISAJE EN THE HANDMAID'S TALE**



Xia YUAN<sup>1</sup>  
e-mail: njlilyyuan@126.com



Yuan XU<sup>2</sup>  
e-mail: 18913717838@163.com

**How to reference this paper:**

YUAN, Xia; XU, Yuan. Bodyscape, soundscape and smellscape: landscape imagery in The Handmaid's Tale. **Rev. de Letras**, Araraquara, v. 64, n. 00, e025017, 2025. e-ISSN: 1981-7886.



| **Submitted:** 16/08/2025  
| **Revisions required:** 22/08/2025  
| **Approved:** 12/10/2025  
| **Published:** 28/12/2025

---

**Editor:** Prof. Dr. Claudia Fernanda de Campos Mauro

---

<sup>1</sup> School of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Nanjing Normal University, Nanjing, China.

<sup>2</sup> School of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Nanjing Normal University, Nanjing, China.

---

**ABSTRACT:** Margaret Atwood, one of the most influential writers in contemporary world literature, demonstrates a keen interest in exploring politics and power in her works. She notes that her *The Handmaid's Tale* is a study of power. From the perspective of landscape theory, this paper focuses on the novel's micro landscapes—specifically bodyscape, soundscape, and smellscape—to elucidate the relationship between these landscapes and power through the method of close reading. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood constructs distinctive sensuous and metaphorical landscapes, framing them as political forms—a type of “cultural practice”: the body, as a visual landscape, serves as the site of Gilead's power operations; sound constitutes a hegemonic landscape through its spatial domination; and smell, functioning as an emotional trigger, simultaneously embodies an oppressive dimension.

**KEYWORDS:** Margaret Atwood. *The Handmaid's Tale*. Landscape. Bodyscape. Smellscape.

**RESUMO:** Margaret Atwood, uma das escritoras mais influentes da literatura mundial contemporânea, demonstra profundo interesse pela exploração da política e do poder em suas obras. A autora afirma que *The Handmaid's Tale* constitui um estudo sobre o poder. A partir da perspectiva da teoria da paisagem, este artigo concentra-se nas micropaisagens do romance — especificamente bodyscape, soundscape e smellscape — a fim de elucidar a relação entre essas paisagens e o poder por meio do método da leitura atenta (close reading). Em *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood constrói paisagens sensoriais e metafóricas singulares, configurando-as como formas políticas — um tipo de “prática cultural”: o corpo, como paisagem visual, torna-se o espaço de operação do poder de Gilead; o som constitui uma paisagem hegemônica por meio de sua dominação espacial; e o olfato, funcionando como gatilho emocional, incorpora simultaneamente uma dimensão opressiva.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Margaret Atwood. *The Handmaid's Tale*. Paisagem. Bodyscape. Smellscape.

**RESUMEN:** Margaret Atwood, una de las escritoras más influyentes de la literatura mundial contemporánea, demuestra un marcado interés por la exploración de la política y el poder en sus obras. La autora señala que *The Handmaid's Tale* constituye un estudio sobre el poder. Desde la perspectiva de la teoría del paisaje, este artículo se centra en los micropaisajes de la novela —específicamente bodyscape, soundscape y smellscape— con el fin de dilucidar la relación entre estos paisajes y el poder mediante el método de la lectura atenta (close reading). En *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood construye paisajes sensoriales y metafóricos distintivos, configurándolos como formas políticas —un tipo de “práctica cultural”: el cuerpo, como paisaje visual, se convierte en el espacio de operación del poder de Gilead; el sonido constituye un paisaje hegemónico a través de su dominación espacial; y el olfato, al funcionar como detonante emocional, encarna simultáneamente una dimensión opresiva.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Margaret Atwood. *The Handmaid's Tale*. Paisaje. Bodyscape. Smellscape.

---

## Introduction

Since its publication in 1985, *The Handmaid's Tale* has remained a research hotspot across literary studies, sociology, religious studies, and political science. The novel has been labeled a “gold mine” (Hewitt, 1996, p. 113) for pedagogy and hermeneutics due to its capacity to launch productive discussion. Existing research on *The Handmaid's Tale* primarily focuses on feminism and ecofeminism, dystopia, political power, religious thoughts, narrative strategies, and cross-media adaptations. However, scant attention has been paid to the novel's landscape imagery, of which landscape theory offers a new lens for the more in-depth analysis. Adopting landscape theory as its critical framework, this paper centers on the micro landscapes represented in *The Handmaid's Tale*, such as bodyscape, soundscape, and smellscape, to examine the relationship between these landscapes and power through close reading. Atwood has long shown a keen interest in exploring politics and power; as she remarks in an interview, “politics really has to do with how people order their societies, to whom power is ascribed, who is considered to have power” (Somacarrera, 2006, p. 44). She further clarifies that *The Handmaid's Tale* is “a study of power, and how it operates and how it deforms or shapes the people who are living within that kind of regime” (Rothstein, 1986, p. 11). This article argues that Atwood constructs in *The Handmaid's Tale* distinctive sensuous and metaphorical landscapes, which can be viewed as political forms—a kind of “cultural practice” (Mitchell, 1994, p. 1).

## Literature review of *The Handmaid's Tale*

Up to now, scholarship on *The Handmaid's Tale* has exhibited the characteristics of cross-discipline and diversification. In recent years, the vigorous development of feminist movements in Europe and America, alongside cross-media adaptations of the novel—particularly the widely discussed 2017 television series—has further drawn academic attention to Atwood's novel. As for the previous studies on *The Handmaid's Tale*, research perspectives mainly include feminism and ecofeminism, dystopia, political power, religious thoughts, narrative strategies, as well as cross-media adaptations. The majority of these critical studies adopt a feminist lens. For instance, Zhang Dongmei and Fu Jun (2008) hold that both women and nature are victimized in Atwood's dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. Leigh Kellmann Kolb (2019) argues that the novel is “rightfully considered a feminist classic—a dystopia that shows a too-familiar near-future where in the Republic of Gilead totalitarian Christian patriarchal rule

has overthrown the American government” (p.44). Amanda Howell (2019) analyzes the cross-media adaptations of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, observing that “illicit and contested communications by women are an ongoing narrative trope” (p. 222) in the television series. Besides, religious interpretations of the novel have also flourished. *Religion in The Handmaid’s Tale: A Brief Guide* (2019) illuminates religious references and allusions in Atwood’s novel and makes clear that “Atwood uses scriptural references to indict various forms of chauvinism, misogyny, and toxic masculinity, traditions that persistently misread the Bible in defense of their own self-serving stance” (Tennant, 2019, p. viii). To date, there has been scarce research on landscape imagery in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, given the novel’s numerous depictions of landscapes, encompassing natural, political, and religious ones, among others. From the innovative perspective of landscape theory, this study specifically explores the micro landscapes within the text of *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

### **A brief overview of landscape theory**

The conceptual development of “landscape” has gone through three main phases. Initially rooted in visual art, the term was “originally and centrally constituted as a genre of painting associated with a new way of seeing” (Mitchell, 1994, p. 7). It was used in painting and art criticism in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and later adopted by physical geography in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Due to the “spatial turn,” landscape was regarded as a form of “cultural practice” in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. As its concept progressively develops, landscape has gradually been applied to the fields such as literature, aesthetics, architecture, sociology, and anthropology and has become a hotspot in interdisciplinary research. Contemporary landscape studies examine its intersections with politics, power, gender, identity, sexual desire, the body, and more.

In literary studies, *Landscape and Power* (1994), edited by W. J. T. Mitchell, reshapes the direction of landscape studies by transforming “landscape” from a static noun to a dynamic verb. This shift prompts people to consider landscape “not as an object to be seen or a text to be read, but as a process by which social and subjective identities are formed” (p. 1). The book examines not merely what landscape is, but what it does—how it “works as a cultural practice” (p. 1). Mitchell argues that landscape functions as an instrument of cultural power that plays a dual role: “it naturalizes a cultural and social construction, representing an artificial world as if it were simply given and inevitable, and it also makes that representation operational by interpellating its beholder in...determinate relation to its givenness as sight and site” (p. 2). In

this sense, landscape becomes a dynamic medium of exchange and a site of visual appropriation.

What's more, Canadian geographer J. Douglas Porteous's *Landscapes of the Mind: Worlds of Sense and Metaphor* (1990) expands the sensuous and metaphorical dimensions of landscape, which is often regarded as a visual metaphor. The author transcends the visual to explore other sensory and existential perceptions and conceptualizes landscape in two dimensions. He distinguishes between "sensuous worlds" (including smellscape and soundscape) and "landscapes of metaphor" (encompassing bodyscape, inscape, homescape, escape, childscape, and deathscape). These paired metaphorical landscapes of the mind reflect "emotive, almost mystical" (p. 8) bonds that develop between humans and landscape. As an important text in contemporary humanistic geography, Porteous's work not only sheds new light on how the human body is understood as a kind of landscape but also offers innovative approaches to the perception and interpretation of non-visual landscape. His insights are particularly valuable for literary research. Focused on micro landscapes, the present study draws on terms from *Landscapes of the Mind*—particularly bodyscape, soundscape, and smellscape—and employs other landscape theories to investigate the relationship between landscapes and power in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

### **Landscape imagery in *The Handmaid's Tale***

#### *Bodyscape: body as visual landscape*

Landscape initially originates through the medium of vision, as human perception engages with the natural world through the visual sense. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the body, as a visual landscape, functions as the site upon which Gilead inscribes its authority. As Porteous (1990) notes, the body is a "personal landscape to enhance" (p. 71), and in Gilead, such enhancement takes the form of tattooing. Offred, the protagonist of Atwood's novel, confronts her bodily inscription when she bathes and faces her naked form. At that moment, she cannot turn a blind eye to the small tattoo marking her status as a Handmaid: "four digits and an eye... It's supposed to guarantee that I will never be able to fade, finally, into another landscape. I am too important, too scarce, for that I am a national resource" (Atwood, 2016, p. 101). Historically, tattoos were generally used on slaves and criminals to identify them. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, after being arrested, Quakers are branded with "a large dark mark" (Atwood, 2016, p. 129) on their foreheads as identifiers of their status as criminals. As Lauren A. Rule (2018) puts it, a tattoo is

a kind of “inscription” and a “figurative shackle” (p. 627-628), serving both identificatory and constraining functions. According to Gayatri Spivak (1989), “there is no such thing as an uncoded body” (p. 12); the body is in various ways marked by “codes” that stand in for wider cultural and political forces acting upon it. In this light, body and body politic are inextricable. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the state apparatus demonstrates the subordination of the body and its methods of controlling the human body by tattooing visible physical marks on people’s bodies. Consequently, Offred is reduced to an encoded “national resource,” trapped in Gilead’s oppressive landscape.

Gilead employs diverse forms to discipline its populace, including body punishment. In the novel, corpses are often hung on the former walls of Harvard University, and they are visible to all passersby, serving as instruments of deterrence. Atwood’s chilling description amplifies their deterrent effect: “it’s the bags over the heads that are the worst, worse than the faces themselves would be. It makes the men look like dolls on which faces have not yet been painted; like scarecrows, which in a way is what they are, since they are meant to scare” (Atwood, 2016, p. 52). The macabre display of corpses terrorizes the living into conformity. The regime’s disciplinary apparatus extends with particular brutality to women who resist its control. Offred’s friend Moira endures severe physical torture after her attempted escape and subsequent recapture. Aunts torture her feet with “steel cables, frayed at the ends” (Atwood, 2016, p. 143), rendering them unrecognizable as human limbs. They do not care what Handmaids’ feet and hands will become, even if the damage is permanent, revealing their instrumentalist view of the female body. For Gilead, what matters is the Handmaids’ wombs because they are state-owned resources. The physical punishment of rule-breaking Handmaids acts as a warning to others, deterring the rest from getting out of line. As Rule (2008) observes, “the novel’s barrage of images of bodies contained, disfigured, and violated continuously reminds the reader about the potential risks the body faces in the body politic” (p. 645). In the novel, both the corpses displayed on former Harvard’s walls and the punished bodies of Handmaids serve as tools of discipline. Through stark visual effects, Gilead transforms these bodies into landscapes and uses deterrents to suppress escape and resistance, ultimately compelling the populace to willingly serve its regime.

Moreover, in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, every individual is required to dress in strict accordance with regulations, with no room for the slightest transgression. Clothing is closely intertwined with the body. In the view of Cynthia G. Kuhn (2005), as an extension of the skin, clothing constitutes “the second skin” and “makes the body visible to culture” (p. 38). The word

“visible” in this statement transforms human clothing into a landscape. As a means of presenting visual imagery, clothing is not merely an adornment to the body but also an identity marker, conveying cultural symbols of individual identity as well as those of one’s country, nation, and religion. When discussing *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Atwood (1999) highlights the significance of dress in dystopian narratives, noting that “utopias and dystopias both take a lot of pleasure in describing costume. What is worn and what is forbidden? What cannot be worn, who can wear what and under what circumstances?” (p. 18) In the novel, the dress code is highly restrictive, with no tolerance for deviation: Commanders wear black, Wives blue, Aunts brown, Handmaids red, and Marthas green. One’s social role is immediately discernible from their clothing. In the introduction to the 2017 edition of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Atwood explains her choice of dress colors:

The modesty costumes worn by the women of Gilead are derived from Western religious iconography—the Wives wear the blue of purity, from the Virgin Mary, the Handmaids wear red, from the blood of parturition, but also from Mary Magdalene. Also, red is easier to see if you happen to be fleeing. The wives of men lower in the social scale are called Econowives, and wear stripes (Atwood, 2017, p. XVII).

In fact, the red robes worn by Handmaids are a hybrid of 17th-century Puritan women’s attire, Catholic nuns’ habits, and traditional Islamic clothing. Such fusion reflects Atwood’s critique of how patriarchal regimes across time and cultures use religiously mandated clothing to control females. Historically, such coercion is documented: for instance, after the 1979 Iranian revolution, the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran comes into power and forces women to wear veils or headscarves. Its mandatory laws empower police and paramilitary to harass, assault, and imprison women who defy the dress code.

The regulation of clothing, far from being trivial, allows those in power to control the human body. In Porteous’s (1990) opinion, “clothes...are manipulated to accentuate some surficial features and to hide others” (p. 71). In other words, clothing is a manipulable form of bodyscape. Regarding Gilead’s costume imagery, Michael Green (1999) points out that it offers “a radical compartmentalizing of the same determined roles and functions that define and delimit the lives of women in North America: shopping, cooking, cleaning, childbirth, household administration, sexual service” (p. 110). In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Offred, as a Handmaid, is required to wear red shoes and red gloves. “Everything except the wings around my [her] face is red: the color of blood, which defines us [them]” (Atwood, 2016, p. 11).

Moreover, “the white wings too are prescribed issue” (Atwood, 2016, p. 11). Red, the most

vivid among all colors, exerts the strongest emotional impacts, symbolizing passion and fertility, while white represents purity and innocence. When combined, these contrasting hues form a strikingly distinctive visual landscape that brings powerful visual impacts to the viewers. The ruling class employs this color combination to imply that Handmaids must sacrifice themselves for a higher purpose, which is bearing offspring for the state. Meanwhile, these highly conspicuous colors facilitate the control of Handmaids should they have any abnormal behavior, such as fleeing. Thus, Handmaids in the novel are both visible and invisible landscapes: they are visible by virtue of their reproductive capacity, yet their value as human beings is effaced within Gilead's oppressive social structure—or rather, within its political system.

### **Soundscape: Hegemonic landscape caused by sound**

The artistic concept of “soundscape” was first proposed by R. Murray Schafer, a Canadian ecologist and composer, in his seminal work *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (1977, republished in 1994). This monograph has become a foundational text in landscape studies. It defines “soundscape” as an acoustic environment in the sense of acoustic ecology. *The Soundscape* emphasizes, on the one hand, the interactive relationship between the listener, the environment, and sound, and on the other hand, the perception of social and cultural information. Chinese scholars have also illuminated “soundscape,” noting that it “can be understood as a socio-cultural event that interprets, and it explains the way people interact with their environment in a specific era through sound” (Zhang; Shan, 2020, p. 96). Hence, these researchers elucidate the relationship between sound and the environment.

The soundscape in *The Handmaid's Tale* reflects Gilead's oppressive social environment at that time. After seizing power through bloody means, Gilead establishes a totalitarian state, implements the unification of state and church, and enforces a military dictatorship. In such a dystopian world, there is almost no laughter or joy. “It's quiet in this area, there isn't a lot of traffic” (Atwood, 2016, p. 90); “there is the same absence of people, the same air of being asleep” (Atwood, 2016, p. 37). As Offred observes, the keynote of this world is “the days and days of silence” (Atwood, 2016, p. 190). “Silence” thus constitutes the daily soundscape of Gilead, shaping every aspect of people's everyday lives.

As a musical term, “keynote” refers to “the note that identifies the key or tonality of a particular composition” (Schafer, 1994, p. 9). In acoustic ecology, “keynote sounds do not have

to be listened to consciously; they are overheard but cannot be overlooked, for keynote sounds become listening habits in spite of themselves” (Schafer, 1994, p. 9). Though they do not require conscious listening, keynote sounds are omnipresent, leaving a profound imprint on listeners and may even shape the behavior or lifestyle of a society. In the novel, Handmaids go out “in silence” (Atwood, 2016, p. 41, 344, 436) and mostly remain “taciturn” (Atwood, 2016, p. 434). At times, black vans with the winged eye pass by in the streets. Despite being “more silent than the other cars” (Atwood, 2016, p. 35), these vans keep people under surveillance and thus evoke an oppressive sense of fear.

However, the keynote of “silence” alone is insufficient to underscore Gilead’s terrorism policy and brutal regime. As Garret Keizer (2010) asserts, “it is possible to silence the oppressed but not to oppress them silently. Subjugation must always make a sound” (p. 176). Fu Xiuyan (2015) also states in “On Soundscape” that “in fact, sound is not only a by-product of oppression but also an instrument of oppression in itself” (p. 63). Schafer puts forward another concept, namely “signal,” in *The Soundscape*. He explains that

signals are foreground sounds and they are listened to consciously...some of those signals which must be listened to because they constitute acoustic warning devices: bells, whistles, horns and sirens. Sound signals may often be organized into quite elaborate codes permitting messages of considerable complexity to be transmitted to those who can interpret them (1994, p. 10).

In summary, a “signal” is a sound with specific meaning. It usually stimulates an immediate response and “stirs...emotions or thoughts beyond its mechanical sensations or signaling function” (Schafer, 1994, p. 169). Furthermore, sound carries strong symbolic significance, and the signals employed by a particular community can even reflect the characteristics of its social system.

In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, multiple sound signals are used as tools of oppression in Gilead. The first is the bell. In the country, time is measured by bells, which remind Handmaids to get up, eat, and sleep; summon people to the Ceremony, and mark the start or end of Salvagings (public executions). In this way, the bell erases autonomy over one’s own schedule. Besides, the ringing of a bell often presages disaster. As an illustration, Offred thinks, “worse is coming then” (Atwood, 2016, p. 450) upon hearing the toll of the bell in the hall.

The second sound signal in the novel is the whistle. Tasked with training Handmaids, Aunts use whistles at their disposal to deliver instructions, aiming to make Handmaids submit to the existing power structure. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, during a “Participation ceremony”—a very chaotic event where Handmaids collectively participate in the execution of a rapist—

Aunt Lydia relies on her whistle to give orders: “You know the rules for a Particution... You will wait until I blow the whistle. After that, what you do is up to you, until I blow the whistle again” (Atwood, 2016, p. 426-427). Her possession of the whistle equates to the possession of power. The author deliberately employs a description reminiscent of the close-up shots in films, breaking down Aunt Lydia’s actions—she “waits a moment,” “gives a little smile,” and then “raises her whistle to her lips” (Atwood, 2016, p. 428)—to emphasize her relish in the power to give instructions.

Siren is the third type of sound signal depicted in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Its blare indicates the occurrence of significant events like childbirth or arrests. Unlike the rhythmic predictability of bells or the targeted commands of whistles, a siren is characterized by its unpredictability and urgency. In the novel, while eating, Offred hears the siren from far to near, and the sound fills her with intense terror. “The siren goes on and on. That used to be the sound of death, for ambulances or fires. Possibly it will be the sound of death today also” (Atwood, 2016, p. 172). Much like the fatal songs of the Sirens in Greek mythology, the siren in *The Handmaid’s Tale* symbolizes mortal danger to people—the danger transmitted through its shrill sound and linked to death.

The fourth kind of sound signal is the prayers of “Soul Scrolls.” In Gilead, specialized stores selling these prayers are ubiquitous, and they can be found at every corner in both urban and suburban areas. In these stores, rows of printers recite prayers in “toneless metallic voices” (Atwood, 2016, p. 257), so passers-by outside can hear “a murmur, a hum, like a devout crowd, on its knees” (Atwood, 2016, p. 257). These omnipresent Soul Scrolls, which open in every city center, serve as instruments of Gilead’s ideological rule. As a theocratic regime, Gilead’s ideology is sustained by the word of God. Ordering and listening to these prayers are regarded as manifestations of loyalty and piety to the regime. In this way, Soul Scrolls carry out Gilead’s oppressive policy through a distinctive kind of sound, configuring sound as a medium of indoctrination.

The above sound signals find their unifying logic in Schafer’s (1994) notion of “sound imperialism” (p. 77), which reflects the spatial significance of sound as well as the connection between sound and power:

When sound power is sufficient to create a large acoustic profile, we may speak of it, too, as imperialistic. For instance, a man with a loud-speaker is more imperialistic than one without because he can dominate more acoustic space. A man with a shovel is not imperialistic, but a man with a jackhammer

is because he has the power to interrupt and dominate other acoustic activities in the vicinity. (Schafer, 1994, p.77).

According to the above analysis, bells, whistles, sirens, and the prayers of “Soul Scrolls” in *The Handmaid’s Tale* all function as symbols of power. Through manipulating sound to dominate acoustic space, they collectively form Gilead’s hegemonic soundscapes.

### **Smellscape: smell as emotional trigger**

Smell refers to the perception of odors by the nasal cavity, relying on the nasal cavity to capture airborne odor molecules to identify the surrounding environment. Unlike taste, which depends on direct contact between the tongue and an object, smell is spatially diffusive and can perceive an odor source without physical contact. There is an overlap between the two senses; for example, when the tongue tastes a certain food, its odor may spread from the oral cavity to the nasal cavity. In English-Chinese translation, “smell” and “taste” are often both rendered as the Chinese word “味道” (weidao). Yet conceptually, they remain distinct. “Smellscape,” more precisely, refers to an odor landscape, which is associated with the sense of smell. As early as 1985, J. Douglas Porteous published the article “Smellscape” in *Progress in Human Geography*, where he coined the term “smellscape” to emphasize the spatial distribution of odors and integrate olfactory experiences into the research framework of environmental perception.

In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the word “smell” appears as many as 67 times (excluding the odors transmitted to the nasal cavity from the oral cavity), as illustrated in the Chart below:

**Chart 1** – Variations of the word

The scene where “smell” appears	The number of times “smell” appears	The function of smell
Body	24	trigger associations and memories, induce physiological responses (e.g., nausea)
Indoor environment	23	reflect the oppression of the environment, generate associations and memories
Objects (cosmetics, cleaning supplies, etc.)	10	trigger associations and memories
Outdoor environment	8	reflect the oppression of the environment, generate associations and memories
Other circumstances (cry, envy, etc.)	2	symbolize

Source: Atwood, 2016.

From the above list, the scene where the word “smell” occurs most frequently is the body (i.e., the smell of the body), further confirming the significance of bodyscape, which has been discussed earlier in this article. Next is the indoor environment. However, if indoor and outdoor environments are combined under the term “spatial environment,” the number of times “smell” appears in spatial environments becomes the most, indicating smell’s “character of place” (Porteous, 1990, p. 26). In *Landscapes of the Mind*, the author notes that “smellscape, moreover, cannot be considered apart from the other senses [...] In combination with vision and tactility, smell and the other apparently ‘non-spatial’ senses provide considerable enrichment of our sense of space and the character of place” (1990, p. 26). He further argues that “continents, countries, regions, neighborhoods (especially ‘ethnic’ ones), and houses have their particular smellscape” (1990, p. 31). This insight resonates in literary works, and thus Porteous cites an interesting literary phenomenon: many Western writers often use the smell of boiled cabbage to evoke the daily life of totalitarian regimes. For instance, in George Orwell’s *1984* (1949), the smell of boiled cabbage lingers in the corridors and canteens. Additionally, this smell appears in numerous prison novels. Its recurrent presence amplifies the hopelessness and “self-imprisonment of lonely people” (Porteous, 1990, p. 31) in boarding houses.

Furthermore, as shown in the above table, smellscape in both indoor and outdoor environments in *The Handmaid’s Tale* serve shared functions: both of them reflect the oppression of the environment and trigger associations and memories. However, indoor smellscape (23 occurrences) far outnumber outdoor ones (8 occurrences), primarily because Handmaids are confined indoors for most of their time—either in Commanders’ houses or at

the Red Centre—going outside only occasionally for shopping, having medical examinations, or attending Salvagings or Particutions. Offred resides in the Commander’s house, but her actual activity space is restricted to her unlocked bedroom. To prevent Handmaids from taking extreme actions (like committing suicide or harming others), their bedroom window is shatterproof and can be opened only a crack, resulting in stagnant and stale air inside. On ordinary days at home, Offred is always exposed to “the stale air, smelling of furniture polish” (Atwood, 2016, p. 441) and “the smell of stale perfume” (Atwood, 2016, p. 125), which make her feel sick. These scents are byproducts of restriction, and their staleness mirrors the lack of freedom of Handmaids.

By emphasizing the smellscape of the Ceremony venue, Atwood highlights Offred’s loathing for the fertilization Ceremony, one of the most important events in Gilead. On that day, all the people of the household must gather in the sitting room to witness this collective ceremony, where what should be private intimacy between a man and a woman is transformed into legally sanctioned “rape” under public gaze. Consequently, Offred is filled with disgust and fear both before and after the Ceremony. Prior to the Ceremony, “the room smells of lemon oil, heavy cloth, fading daffodils, the leftover smells of cooking that have made their way from the kitchen or the dining room, and of Serena Joy’s perfume: Lily of the Valley... It makes me feel slightly ill” (Atwood, 2016, p. 123). Notably, the scent of “Lily of the Valley” carries rich symbolic meaning. With a long cultural history, this flower was regarded by ancient Greeks and Romans as having religious significance and symbolizing fertility. The smell of Lily of the Valley is closely linked to the Ceremony, which turns fertility into a form of enslavement of women. Olfactory perception is inescapable, as humans cannot survive without breathing. Unpleasant smells permeate every corner of the indoor space, leading Offred to feel very depressed. These oppressive smellscape prompt the character to think of her state of imprisonment, restricted freedom, and deprived rights, thereby triggering her physiological nausea.

Additionally, the chart reveals that apart from some words with symbolic meanings (such as “smell of cry” and “smell of envy”), all other contexts where “smell” appears share a common function: triggering associations and memories. This aligns with “the madeleine moment” in Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time (À la recherche du temps perdu)*, where the smell of Madeleines, a type of cake, makes the adult narrator vividly recall his childhood residence. In Proust’s view, no sense is more effective than smell in evoking people’s memories. Later scientific experiments have confirmed such a “Proustian hypothesis of odor

memory.” Graham Greene also writes in *Journey Without Maps: A Travel Book* (1965) that smell is more powerful than sound or even vision in arousing memories. Examples of smells evoking memories abound in *The Handmaid’s Tale*:

First of all, the smells of the body. Before being assigned to various Commanders’ households, Handmaids must receive instruction from Aunts at the Red Centre. The novel’s opening describes the scene there: “we [Handmaids] slept in what had once been the gymnasium...and I [Offred] thought I could smell, faintly like an afterimage, the pungent scent of sweat, shot through with the sweet taint of chewing gum and perfume from the watching girls” (Atwood, 2016, p. 3). Being in this former high school gymnasium, Offred associates the “faint afterimage” of the scent of sweat and perfume with the scenes of people living more freely in the past years. In contrast, the Commander smells of “mothballs” (Atwood, 2016, p. 148-360), which is an odor of control. This scent reminds Offred of Gilead’s power: it is not a natural fragrance but a tool of domination, reflecting Gilead’s oppressive structure. Through olfactory discourse, Atwood’s novel exposes olfactory oppression as well as odor’s relationship to power.

Secondly, indoor smellscape. Take the scene of Marthas making bread in the Commanders’ kitchen as an example: “the kitchen smells of yeast, a nostalgic smell. It reminds me of other kitchens, kitchens that were mine. It smells of mothers; although my own mother did not make bread. It smells of me, in former times, when I was a mother” (Atwood, 2016, p. 74). Bread is the most common food in Western countries, where people eat it almost every day, and most women can bake it. Unfortunately, in Gilead, Handmaids are deprived of the basic right to make bread. The smell of baking bread in the kitchen reminds Offred of her mother’s scent, her former kitchen, and her smell of the past. Such memory threatens Gilead’s erasure of her past. The Handmaid thinks the smell of the kitchen is “treacherous” (Atwood, 2016, p. 74) and that she should shut it out.

Thirdly, smellscape of objects (such as cosmetics and cleaning products). On one occasion, while walking on the road, Offred encounters a group of Japanese tourists visiting Gilead. One of the female tourists has pink nail polish on her toes, which sets Offred’s thoughts wandering. She remembers the smell of nail polish, “the way it wrinkled if you put the second coat on too soon, the satiny brushing of sheer pantyhose against the skin, the way the toes felt, pushed towards the opening in the shoe by the whole weight of the body” (Atwood, 2016, p. 47). The smell of nail polish “made me [her] hungry” (Atwood, 2016, p. 47)—not for food, but for the freedom to adorn, to choose, and to live beyond reproductive utility.

Lastly, outdoor smellscape. In the novel, every time Offred goes out, she cannot help but perceive “the smell of earth” (Atwood, 2016, p. 170) and “the smell of wet grass” (Atwood, 2016, p. 198). These smells remind her of the garden she once had, the tactile sensation of the plump shapes of bulbs, and the dry rustle of seeds through her fingers... Such olfactory imagination reflects Offred’s nostalgia and yearning for freedom.

In summary, smellescape can act as emotional triggers, arousing associated memories and sensations. Under Gilead’s high-pressure policies, everyone is kept under close surveillance. People have no freedom to express their feelings or emotions, and all are forced to restrain their desires. Once-familiar smells become a luxury in Gilead. Thus, when abruptly going into people’s nasal cavity at some moment, these smells instantly activate their neural signals. The smells of sweat, perfume, chewing gum, baking powder, nail polish, earth, and grass all possess a special evocative power, triggering the Handmaid’s long-repressed emotions and memories.

## Conclusion

Landscape, as Karl Marx (1975) characterizes it, is a “social hieroglyph” (p. 74)—a symbol of the social relations it conceals. Inextricably intertwined with power, landscape is “part of a process in which hierarchies are reproduced and challenged” (Winchester *et al.*, 2003, p. 5). In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the visual bodyscape functions as the site where Gilead’s power is enacted; sound constitutes a hegemonic landscape through spatial domination; and smell serves dual roles as both an emotional trigger and an instrument of oppression. Atwood critically constructs Gilead’s social and political ecology through metaphorical landscapes (bodyscape) and sensuous worlds (soundscape and smellescape), thereby revealing how social power inscribes itself spatially to articulate its political intentions. Power operates like air: omnipresent and permeating every corner of Gilead and every dimension of social relations. The micro landscapes represented in *The Handmaid’s Tale* reflect Atwood’s profound reflections on and critique of power politics, thus endowing the work with strong cautionary significance.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:** This work is supported in part by the key project of China’s National Social Science Foundation “A Study on the Discourse Construction of English-Canadian Literary Criticism” under grant No. 24AWW010, which is gratefully acknowledged. In addition, the authors wish to thank Professor Ding Linpeng of Peking University for his

discussion with us on the topic of landscape imaginary in *The Handmaid's Tale*, especially for his brilliant suggestions on the part of smellscape.

.

## REFERENCES

- ATWOOD, M. **The Handmaid's Tale**. London: Vintage Classics, 2016.
- ATWOOD, M. **The Handmaid's Tale**. London: Vintage Classics, 2017.
- ATWOOD, M. The Handmaid's Tale: a feminist dystopia? *In: DVORAK, M. (eds.). Lire Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale*. Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 1999, p.17-30.
- DONGMEI, Z.; FU, X. Y. On soundscape. **Foreign Literature Studies**, Wuhan, n. 5, p. 59-69, 2015.
- GREEN, M. Body/language in The Handmaid's Tale: reading notes. *In: DVORAK, M. (ed.). Lire Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale*. Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 1999, p. 101-112.
- HEWITT, P. Understanding contemporary American culture through The Handmaid's Tale: a sociology class. *In: WILSON, S. R., et al. (eds.). Approaches to Teaching Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale and Other Works*. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1996, p.109-113.
- HOWELL, A. Breaking silence, bearing witness, and voicing defiance: the resistant female voice in the transmedia storyworld of The Handmaid's Tale. **Continuum**, v. 32, n. 2, p. 216-229, 2019.
- KEIZER, G. **The Unwanted Sound of Everything We Want: A Book About Noise**. New York: PublicAffairs, 2010.
- KOLB, L. K. Gestational totalitarianism. *In: ROBISON-GREENE, R. (ed.). The Handmaid's Tale and Philosophy: A Womb of One's Own*. Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company, 2019.
- KUHN, C. G. **Self-Fashioning in Margaret Atwood's Fiction**. New York: Peter Lang, 2005.
- MARX, K. **Capital**. New York: International, 1975.
- MITCHELL, W. J. T. (ed.). **Landscape and Power**. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- PORTEOUS, J. D. **Landscapes of the Mind: Worlds of Sense and Metaphor**. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990.
- ROTHSTEIN, M. No balm for Atwood in Gilead. **New York Times**, p. 11, 17 Feb. 1986.
- RULE, L. Not fading into another landscape: specters of American empire in Margaret Atwood's fiction. **Modern Fiction Studies**, Baltimore, v. 54, n. 4, p. 627-653, 2008.
- SCHAFER, R. M. **The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World**. Rochester, Vermont: Destiny Books, 1994.

SOMACARRERA, P. Power politics: power and identity. *In*: HOWELLS, C. A. (ed.). **The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood**. Cambridge: The Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 43-57.

SPIVAK, G. *In*: BARR, L. An interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. **Blast Unlimited**, Summer 1989.

TENNANT, C. **Religion in The Handmaid's Tale: A Brief Guide**. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019.

WINCHESTER, H. P. M. *et al.* **Landscapes: Ways of Imagining the World**. London: Routledge, 2003.

ZHANG, D. X.; SHAN, Y. The sound of the earth: the research status and trend of soundscape in contemporary China. **China Book Review**, Shenyang, n. 10, p. 96-100, 2020.

### ***CRediT Author Statement***

---

- Acknowledgements:** None.
  - Funding:** None.
  - Conflicts of interest:** None.
  - Ethical approval:** This work was not submitted to an ethics committee.
  - Data and material availability:** None.
  - Authors' contributions:** The authors are responsible for the entire article.
- 

**Processing and editing: Editora Ibero-Americana de Educação**  
Proofreading, formatting, standardization and translation

