

The Construction of a Literary Classic *The Handmaid's Tale* Within the Field of Power

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Abstract

Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, published 35 years ago, unexpectedly hits the Bestseller list in 2017 and is recognized as a literary classic. To investigate how the novel is constructed to be the classic, this thesis applies Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of field and capital, as well as his conclusion that the literary field is actually contained within and dominated by the field of power which camouflages itself with symbolic capital to illustrate that the classicalization of the novel is not only dependent on the artistic features of the work itself, but also a joint result of political capital and economic capital.

Key words: *The Handmaid's Tale*; Literary classic; Field; Capital

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1. INTRODUCTION

After being published for 32 years, Margaret Atwood's Booker-shortlisted work *The Handmaid's Tale* unexpectedly hit the Amazon Bestseller lists as the "latest" work of classic dystopian fiction in 2017 (Mayer "Margaret Atwood"), which prompted the novel to be reprinted in China. Correspondingly, the relevant studies on the book proliferate both at home and abroad—the database of Cnki indicates that, the average amount of essays on the book produced per year leveled off at around

7 before 2017, while it has soured to 30 over the past 4 years; analogously, the database of ScienceDirect indicates that almost a third of essays which were written ever since the book came out in 1985 have been issued after 2017. And more remarkably, its sequel *The Testaments* was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2019 even before the physical book was able to be officially published and finally won it. The sales volume of *The Testaments* is as phenomenal as its prequel, which can be inferred from the fact that in the first week of its publication, the book soared into the UK Official Top 50 number one spot, with 103,177 print copies sold out, marking Atwood's first ever overall UK number one (Chatto & Windus, "Margaret Atwood").

All this proves that *The Handmaid's Tale* stands the test of time to reach its success. The Classic, as identified by T. S. Eliot and J. M. Coetzee in the twentieth-century lectures called "What Is a Classic?", is a work "read long after it was written...which survives critical questioning, and it in fact defines itself by that surviving" (Mukherjee, 1028), or put it in Harold Bloom's words, it should be characterized by the "strangeness or a mode of originality that either cannot be assimilated, or that so assimilates us that we cease to see it as strange" (Bloom 3). *The Handmaid's Tale*, still being the focus of literary criticism regardless of the huge span of time it experienced, can be recognized as a classic, the position further consecrated by The Man Booker Prize which was awarded to its sequel.

The novels newly achieved popularity as well as status to be the classic provokes discussions about the underlying factors which contribute to its success. A huge amount of scholars investigate the interaction between *The Handmaid's Tale* and the current social environment, which is considered to be indispensable for the vitality of the novel. They point out that *The Handmaid's Tale* emerged as the popular culture symbol of the new AntiTrump/Pence feminist resistance, since feminists linked the series' fictionalized dystopian society to the

very real onslaught of women's reproductive rights in policymaking (Marghithu & Johnson, 2018; Howell, 2019; Zhang, 2019). Other scholars highlight the vital role the TV adaptation plays in popularizing the novel, as audiovisual media are more affective than prose literature, thus more likely to be received by the audience, which draws people's renewed attention to the original work (Koistinen & Samola, 2017; Wu, 2019; Zhang, 2018). However, it should be noted that they focus merely on one single aspect to analyse the factors facilitating the classicalization of the novel instead of applying a systemic theory to go further to combine the possible factors together, which renders further studies necessary. To fill the gap and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon and its underlying causes, the present thesis is going to employ the most important concepts put forward by Pierre Bourdieu to explain the unexpected popularity of *The Handmaid's Tale*.

The thesis intends to apply the concepts of "field" and "capital" put forward by Pierre Bourdieu and his ideas of the relationship between the literary field and other fields, especially the field of power, to find causes for the popularity or classicalization of *The Handmaid's Tale* after its 32-year publication. It will first inspect what makes the classic come into being, and then examine how the field of power, which is comprised of political and economic capitals, exercises in the literary field and cooperates with it to create a literary classic through endowing it with symbolic capital. To reach the goal, the thesis will analyze the political intention lurking beneath the popularization of the novel by probing into the parallelism between the plot and the present situation of American women, as well as the contribution of the TV adaptation's audience ratings to the success of the novel's sequel *The Testaments*, which is marked by the fact that it won the Man Booker Prize and soared into the UK number one on the bestseller book lists within a very short time after its publication.

2. THE PRODUCTION OF LITERARY CLASSICS

According to the Chinese scholar Tong Qinbing, the process of literary classicalization should be theorized into two categories, one is essentialism, and the other is constructivism (1775) (Tong & Tao, 2012). The so-called essentialist classicalization defines literary classics through the interior, namely, the aesthetic and moral values, of literary works, which wait to be activated by readers' responses. In contrast, the constructivist classicalization emphasizes the exterior, in other words, the influence of social context on the construction of literary classics. As one of the most influential representatives of the school of essentialist classicalization, Harold Bloom dubs the academic-journalistic network "the school of resentment", which constitutes feminists,

Afrocentrists, marxists, Foucault inspired new historicists, or deconstructors (4) who wish to abandon all aesthetic and most intellectual standards and overthrow the Canon in order to advance their supposed programs for social change (20). In his view, the classic should be a combination of figurative language, originality, cognitive power, knowledge and exuberance of diction (29), and "the individual self is the only method and the whole standard for apprehending aesthetic value" (23). However, as pointed by Tong, Bloom and his school fail to restore to some kind of universal and objective criteria for literary classics, instead, they turn to the subjectivity of personal comprehension (1816), and even ignore the immortality of the classics from which readers are able to explore new meanings under different social backgrounds, thus leave room for the school of constructivist classicalization to develop their theories. Among the constructivists who highlight the part social environment plays in the mechanism of classical production, the French scholar Pierre Bourdieu provides a systematic and comprehensive theoretical framework built with his key concepts—capital and field.

"In analytic terms, a field may be defined as a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions. These positions are objectively defined by their present and potential situation in the structure of the distribution of species of power (or capital)...as well as by their objective relation to other positions (domination, subordination, etc.)" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, p.97). The construction of the field is the prerequisite for the construction of the social trajectory, which means that society is comprised of various fields, such as the fields of politics, economics, literature and education etc., however, these fields only possess relative autonomy, as their existence is structured in line with the relations of domination, that is, every kind of field is actually situated in the network of power, which is embodied by capitals. According to Bourdieu, "depending on the field in which it functions, capital can present itself in three fundamental guises: as economic capital...as cultural capital...and as social capital" in which the most easily convertible and transmissible form of capital is the economic one, which can be inherited directly or converted to other forms of capital (243). Moreover, he puts forward the concept of "symbolic capital" which is realized through "accumulating the capital of honour and prestige" by virtue of "the credit and the capital of trust" (118) as a necessity to arm other fields to combat for their autonomy. For example, in the literary field, symbolic capital is accumulated over the course of time by the action of successive generations, and it is in the name of this collective capital that cultural producers feel the right and the duty to ignore the demands or requirements of temporal powers (221). However, the paradox is that symbolic capital is also to be understood as "economic

or political capital that is disavowed, mis-recognized and thereby recognized, hence legitimate” (Bourdieu and Nice, 261), which indicates that the field of power composed of economic and political capitals actually exert its influence on other fields through disguising these two capitals as symbolic capital, thus leading other fields to “mis-recognize” their autonomy.

As for a literary work, it not only needs to obey the laws of functioning and transformation which constitutes the internal structure of the literary field as required by its relative autonomy, but also mirror the social and political demands of the time in order to be accepted widely or even consecrated as a classic, considering that the literary field is “contained within the field of power” (Bourdieu, 37). As identified by Bourdieu, “it is a question of understanding works of art as a manifestation of the field as a whole, in which all the powers of the field, and all the determinisms inherent in its structure and functioning are concentrated” (37), therefore, understanding a work within the field of power is a must for readers.

Considering that a literary work is both defined by the literary field and the field of power, it is inevitable to analyze the construction of a literary classic through inspecting how the field of power exercises in the literary field to endow the work with symbolic capital. The *Handmaid's Tale*, a work published 35 years ago, yet a classic constructed in recent years, accumulates abundant symbolic capital and further prompts the success of its sequel, which is proved by the fact that the novel was awarded the Man Booker Prize and hit the bestseller list in a fairly short time after its publication. To understand why and how the novel is constructed to be a classic, the thesis aims to focus on two forms of capital, namely, the political as well as economic capital within the field of power and the role they play in consecrating a novel as the classic by relating the plot of the novel with the current social background of America. In this way, the above-mentioned concepts will be of great help for the present study.

3. THE CLASSICALIZATION OF THE HANDMAID'S TALE WITHIN THE FIELD OF POWER

3.1 The role political capital plays in the classicalization of the novel

The Handmaid's Tale, published in 1985, was shortlisted for the Booker Prize, however, as Atwood recalls in an interview that when the novel first came out it was viewed as being far-fetched. “The English said, jolly good yarn,” and then forgot the novel; “the Americans said, how long have we got?” while they weren't too worried about it (Mayer, “Margaret Atwood”). Unexpectedly, after its publication over 30 years, the story is suddenly relevant

for many readers, which is a bit of a surprise for Atwood herself. And the sales record of Amazon witnesses this big change: since president Donald Trump has been sworn in as the 45th president of the United States, the sales of *The Handmaid's Tale* were up by 200%, which makes the book sit at the 10th position on Amazon's Best Seller in Books list (ibid). The report of the Washington Post makes it clear that the political background under which the novel gains in popularity is Alabama's new ultra-conservative abortion law which is greatly encouraged by Donald Trump's decision to sign an executive order to prohibit abortions, namely, “the Mexico City Policy”, even though he later retracted, and a recent spate of sexual harassment allegations against an American television journalist and an New York Governor (Chasmar, “Elisabeth Moss”). For readers, they read the similarities between Trump's America and the dystopian society depicted by Margaret Atwood, in which women are no more than breeding machines or “two-legged wombs” used by a theocratic regime named Gilead to increase the population, thus they comment that the U.S. is becoming more “Gilead-like” (John Bowden, “Handmaid's Tale”). In a word, the novel is contained within the field of power which is dominated by political capital, and its popularity is impossible without the construction of the corresponding political environment. To get a better understanding of how the political capital serves to consecrate the novel, it is vital to detect the parallelism between the implication of the novel and the political background in which the classic is constructed.

As mentioned above, the ultra-conservative abortion law enacted by the American government raises readers' attention to *The Handmaid's Tale*, whose plot is similar to what happens in the real world. However, as the literary field is dominated by the field of power, investigating the political intention hiding behind the plot will be beneficial to our understanding of the exercise of the political capital to construct a literary classic. That is to say, if the political implications of the novel can serve the political purpose of the society, it will possess enough political capital that makes it possible for the novel to be endowed with symbolic capital by the field of power, and thus to be constructed as the classic.

Before the Republic of Gilead was founded by a group of Christian fundamentalists, the society was in a state of extreme disorder: causal sex was popular, murder and rape took place everywhere, and birthrates plummeted to respond to the seriously polluted environment caused by industrial production. In order to boost the birthrate, the regime created an instant pool of “breeding machines” by the simple tactic of outlawing all second marriages, non-martial liaison and abortion, arresting the female partners and assigning them to give birth to children for the upper echelons (Atwood 158). Women are defined by their reproductive capabilities, and those unable to give birth to children are labeled as “Unwoman” who will be sent to

the Colonies—places composed of portable populations used mainly as expendable toxic cleanup squads (Atwood 160) and die slowly, which means that reproduction is no longer a private affair or personal choice, instead, it is upgraded to be a matter of national importance. Moreover, women are taken as the instrument of rule, which can be inferred from the fact that men in lower stratum will be allowed to marry and allotted a handmaid as reward if they are able to do their duty, thus the stability of society can be guaranteed. To sum up, female bodies are subjected to political rule and become “battlefields where anxieties relating to wider power structures are written on female flesh” (Davies 58). Body, for Michel Foucault, is a political site over which various powers inscribe meanings. By tackling the problem of “birthrate, longevity, public health, housing and migration”, the regime can achieve the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations, which marks the beginning of an era of “biopower” (140). As sex is responsible for the problem of population, it interrelates closely with power. Correspondingly, the Gileadean regime exposes sex in the public sphere, interfering in this intimate act by sublimating it into a divine and solemn ceremony in which women are going to fulfill their great obligations, that is, they will be impregnated. What happens in the ceremony has nothing to do with passion or love or sexual desire, and arousal is no longer thought necessary, instead, it would only be a symptom of frivolity. Through converting reproduction into a public issue and institutionalizing sex, the ruling classes deprive women of any control over their own bodies, thus further solidify their political power. To justify their domination over female bodies, rulers instil the doctrines of Bible chose or even rewrote by them intentionally into women with the help of the educational institutions. In this way, biopower is able to access the body, as it is dispersed throughout society and will be internalized by subjects (43).

Analogously, women’s bodies are battlefields of political power game for two parties in the United States. Except for Alabama, seven Republican-led states such as Arkansas, Kentucky and Mississippi have enacted a ban on all or most abortions, which means that those who seek out and receive abortions could be fully prosecuted, or even face the death penalty (Knaggs, “Reflections”), while the Democratic-led states like Illinois and Nevada have been constantly promoting legislation to protect women’s right to control their bodies. This controversy between two parties concerning the issue of abortion has always been a crucial “bargaining chip” for them to woo electoral support from the related groups, such as Catholics and feminists etc., ever since the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision, which allows the state to regulate or ban abortion in the second and third trimesters (Milligan, “2020 Candidates”). Social and religious conservatives who believe in the existence of an immortal soul constitute antiabortion side,

accordingly, since Trump took office, the southern states founded with a distinctive cultural religious system as their basis have made efforts to restrict abortion, catering to conservative Catholics. Considering that the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has declared abortion to be the “preeminent” issue for Catholics (Donohue, “Big Gap”), we cannot deny that Donald Trump takes pro-life position which is consistent with the teachings of the Catholic Church is to win the backing of Catholic voters. Even though antiabortion groups and the laws they make are sugared with reasons like “respect for life” or “respect for human rights”, the political intention lurking beneath their declaration is not supposed to be ignored. On the other hand, pro-abortion rights side is composed of more liberal and democratic voters who consider the right to birth control and access to safe, legal abortion options as part of one’s ability to plan pregnancies and families on one’s own terms (Brown, “The Handmaid”). Trump’s former decision to sign executive order to reinstate Mexico City policy and lawmakers’ attempts to roll back reproductive rights provoke backlash from the pro-choice groups and drive them to ask literature for help. The female image in the novel becomes a symbol for feminists to remind the society of its Gilead-like symptoms, which can be seen from relevant social movements, for example, protestors in Dublin donned the red cloak and white bonnet synonymous with the handmaids in the novel to protest against Irish abortion laws outside government buildings in Ireland (Mulraney, “Irish pro-choice”). The parallelism between the plot’s political indication and the political intention of the antiabortion groups provides the novel with the political capital which is later mediated by the symbolic capital, namely, prestige, given by the related political movements, and the sudden surge in sales of the novel can be explained, as the symbolic capital always guarantees economic profits (Bourdieu and Nice, 261). Correspondingly, the popularity of and discourse surrounding *The Handmaid’s Tale* bring the hit Hulu television adaptation into existence, and in turn, the TV series further the acceptance of the novel. In Bourdieu’s words, the political capital of the book is transformed into the symbolic capital—the novel’s extensive popularity among readers, which goes forward to accumulate more symbolic capital from its TV adaptation, and then gives birth to the economic capital—its rising sales volume.

To sum up, it is the similarities between the intentions underneath the policy of Gilead—to solidify the regime with women’s bodies as their instrument—and that of American government—to win the electoral voters through taking control of women’s womb, and the reasons they use to whitewash such intentions—life should be treated with awe, that render the novel as well as the TV adaptation valuable for readers and audiences, as the novel serves their political appeal well. Therefore, it can be said that the political implications of the novel employed by

the social groups to fulfill their political needs are actually its political capital, which paves the way for the novel to be constructed into a classic.

3.2 The Role Economic Capital Plays in the Classicization of the Novel

The economic capital is another important component of the field of power which conduces to the construction of the literary classic. The TV adaptation of the novel whose success is owing to the political capital of the novel—the political implications conforming to the political appeal of the social groups—features in the top ten most popular digital original TV shows based on audience ratings, and has won the Primetime Emmy Awards for outstanding drama and other 54 nominations for various global awards since it aired in 2017. The huge success of the TV series conversely facilitates the sales of the novel, as admitted by Atwood herself, “thanks in part to the success of Hulu’s award-winning adaptation of the book”, the novel is able to be on top of the Amazon Bestseller lists (Trombetta, “Amazon’s Most-Read Book”). Bourdieu points out that everyone is fixated on ratings, and in editorial rooms, publishing houses or similar venues, a “rating mindset” reigns. In other words, people think in terms of market success, and “the market is accepted more and more as a legitimate means of legitimation”, which reflects in the recent institution, “the best-seller list”(On Television). Therefore, it can be said that the economic success of the novel legitimates its position as a classic.

The circle shaped within the field of power presents here: the political capital given by the current political environment to the novel transforms into symbolic capital, or more specifically, its accumulated fame, and then spurs the production of economic capital, which can be inferred from the phenomenal sales volume, as well as more symbolic capital, which expresses itself in the hit TV adaptation, and consequently produces increased economic capital, that is, high audience ratings. The political capital is constantly converted into symbolic capital which secures the economic capital produced by the field of power, during which the novel is constructed to be a classic. The literary and artistic field are overwhelmed by the field of power, as the value of the book is measured by indices like book sales, viewership, or honors etc.

The great impact exerted by economic capital on the literary field is not only reflected in the fundamental role it plays in constructing the literary classic, but in the responses of the writer as well as the literary awards to such influence. The writers and artists, as identified by Bourdieu, “became subject to the ordinary laws prevailing in the field of power, and more generally in the economic field” (Bourdieu 38). Atwood is drawn into the economic field, which can be inferred from the fact that she involves herself in contributing to the audience ratings of the TV series by serving as a consulting

producer on Hulu’s adaptation and playing a cameo role in the drama. As a “literary icon”, Atwood bestows her fame, or her symbolic capital, upon the TV show to convert it into high viewership, hence the production of more economic capital. However, as demonstrated earlier that, the credit of Atwood as well as her work is constructed by the political capital, therefore, the author is still one node in the field of power. What’s more, the influence of the economic capital on the writer manifests itself most prominently in that Atwood wrote the sequel to *The Handmaid’s Tale*, namely, *The Testaments*, in 2019, which is due in large part to the expectation of readers and audiences. And Atwood seems already to be prepared to adapt her latest novel for the screen, as readers perceive that “the novel is perfectly suitable for the adaptation, especially the last few chapters. They are born to reach the dramatic effects of TV series” (Nguyen, “Why Margaret”). The literary field in which the novel situated merges into the field of power, or even serves to the economic capital. *The Handmaid’s Tale* showrunner Bruce Miller looks forward to working with Atwood again, as they are in close contact, “working together so that their separate projects would not contradict one another” (Bradley, “Margaret Atwood”). In this way, the alliance between the literary field and the field of power is achieved, and the sequel becomes the product of the field of power to a large extent. It is the great symbolic capital which is converted from the political capital the novel enjoys that provides the publishers like Indigo with enough confidence to project that its sequel would be the top fiction title of 2019 even before it was published (Nguyen, “Why Margaret”).

The domination of the field of power over the literary field extends to literary awards, the institution possessing the most symbolic capitals which is supposed to be the embodiment of the literary field’s autonomy. As one of the most prestigious literary awards in the English-speaking world, it seems that the Man Booker prize takes hold of plentiful symbolic capital which enables it to govern literary field, however, it should be noted that the symbolic capital enjoyed by the award is not originated totally from the artistic or aesthetic features of literary works themselves, instead, it is also converted from economic capitals. *The Testaments* won the Man Booker Prize 2019 just a few months after it was published with another novel, and it is the second time for the Booker to recognize two authors as winners concurrently since it was founded in 1968. According to the chairman of the Booker judges Peter Florence, even though the committee told them quite firmly that the rules state the prize can only have one winner, they reach a consensus which is to flout the rules and divide that year’s prize to celebrate two winners (Katz “Booker Prize”). As for the reasons why the judges insist on such decision, the economic factor cannot be ignored, especially considering that the Man Group ended their sponsorship of the prize in 2019,

leaving it in search of a new sponsor, and awarding the prize to a bestseller is the potential way to attract a good sponsor because of the convertibility between symbolic capital and economic capital. It can be said that the very heart of the Booker Prize is exchanges of capital, where the economic capital of the sponsor is exchanged for the symbolic capital of the sponsored (Norris), but the case of *The Testaments* tends to merge the sponsor with the sponsored, the economic capital with the symbolic capital, during which power relations are perceived “in a form which renders them legitimate in the eyes of the beholder” (Bourdieu and Passeron xiii), that is, power exercises secretly in the literary field under the disguise of the symbolic capital, resulting in the further subjection of the literary field to the field of power.

To conclude, the high audience ratings of the TV adaptation—the economic capital—helps to consecrate the novel by converting into the fame of the novel—the symbolic capital. Besides, the influence of the economic capital imposed on the literary field is also reflected in the fact that the author is drawn to be the playwright of the TV series and encouraged to write the sequel, to which the Booker Prize is driven to be awarded. Therefore, it can be said that the novel is largely constructed to be the classic by the economic capital.

4. CONCLUSION

The classicalization of *The Handmaid's Tale* is not only dependent on the artistic features of the work itself, but also a joint result of political capital and economic capital. The parallelism between the political implications behind the plot and the current American social background endows the book with enough political capital to be constructed as the classic. Also, the high audience ratings—economic capital—of the TV adaptation largely entices the author Margaret Atwood into working with the showrunner and writing the novel's sequel to produce more economic as well as symbolic capital, and further drives the Booker Prize to award the prize to the novel. Under such conditions, the literary field which includes the work, the author and the award is dominated by the field of power composed of political and economic capitals, which exercises in its secret way under the disguise of symbolic capital.

However, even though the literary field is contained within the field of power, and consequently, the literary classic is constructed by the political and economic capitals, we cannot deny the positive impacts they bring to the literature, as they help to popularize more good works which present the spirit of the times. Moreover, symbolic capital cannot only be interpreted as a method for the field of power to dominate other fields, but also a tool for them to cooperate with it, as it is the joint efforts of various fields that create the progress of the times.

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