

Fabric Symbolism and Functional Textiles as Cultural Expression in Postmodern Literature

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ABSTRACT The concept of functionality has become increasingly important in contemporary textile engineering, where material performance is closely associated with applications ranging from wearable systems to intelligent sensing and electromagnetic shielding. Beyond physical properties, however, the functional attributes assigned to textile materials also shape their social and cultural significance. From this perspective, the present study investigates how functional textiles operate as active mechanisms of cultural expression in postmodern literature through a material-oriented analytical framework. Using *The Handmaid's Tale* and *White Noise* as representative case studies, the research examines two distinct models of textile functionality: socially prescribed uniforms that regulate identity through color coding and commodified fabrics that construct simulated consumer identities. Rather than treating textiles as passive symbols, the analysis demonstrates that their cultural influence emerges from the specific functions they are designed or expected to perform within institutional and social systems. The comparison further reveals that material performance, visual coding, and contextual use jointly determine the interpretive power of textiles, linking physical function with ideological operation. By emphasizing the relationship between designed functionality and semantic expression, this work extends the understanding of functional textiles beyond conventional engineering definitions and provides an interdisciplinary perspective that may inform future studies of advanced textile systems, including smart fabrics and performance-oriented material design.

INDEX TERMS functional textiles, material functionality, smart fabrics, textile semiotics, performance-oriented design

I. INTRODUCTION

THE relationship between literature and material culture has long been fertile ground for critical inquiry, with textiles frequently serving as potent symbols of identity, social status, and narrative cohesion [1-3]. From Penelope's shroud in the *Odyssey* to the scarlet letter embroidered on Hester Prynne's dress, fabrics have been imbued with profound and stable meanings [4,5]. However, the advent of postmodernism in the midtwentieth century marked a significant departure from these traditional symbolic economies. Characterized by skepticism toward grand narratives and a fascination with surface, postmodernism challenges the very notion of stable meaning [6,7]. In this context, the symbolic function of objects becomes inherently unstable [8-10]. Within postmodern theory, particularly in the work of Jean Baudrillard, a central debate concerns the role of materiality in a world saturated by signs and simulations [11]. Does the physical reality of an object retain any significance, or is it entirely subsumed by its "sign-value"? This paper intervenes in this debate by focusing on the concept of functionality.

We argue that the designed or codified function of a textile serves as a crucial anchor for its meaning, even within a hyperreal context. By analyzing how a fabric performs—whether to discipline a body or simulate an identity—we challenge the notion of a completely unmoored sign. Our findings suggest that the material "work" of an object remains a primary and analyzable source of its cultural power, thus confirming and extending the critical importance of materiality in postmodern analysis. While existing scholarship has explored the metaphorical dimensions of fabric in literature, such as the "social fabric" or the "thread of a story," a specific gap remains in understanding how the functionality of textiles is leveraged in postmodern narratives to articulate the cultural conditions of late capitalism, technological anxiety, and the fragmentation of the self.

In materials science, "functional textiles" typically refer to materials designed to achieve specific physical properties, such as water resistance or thermal conductivity. However, this study extends the definition to include social and cultural functions. In the context of literary and material

cultural analysis, the most important “function” of an object is often the social work it is designed or encoded to perform within its specific social system. Accordingly, this article defines “functional textiles” as materials whose primary performance goals—whether through engineering design or social assignment—are to regulate social relations, reinforce identity, or alleviate cultural anxiety. This expanded definition enables us to move beyond mere symbolic interpretation and analyze how these textiles operate as active technologies within their respective social systems. Thus, whether the focus is “social control” in Gilead or “simulated identity” in *White Noise*, these are not merely symbolic but constitute the core “functions” that these textiles are designed to achieve and can be systematically analyzed. This “intended use” can be understood through two distinct but often overlapping modalities: designed function and socially ascribed function. Designed function refers to performance outcomes achieved through material engineering and technological innovation, such as the waterproofing of a GORE-TEX jacket or the breathability of athletic wear. In contrast, socially ascribed function refers to performance outcomes dictated by cultural codes, social hierarchies, or ideological systems, wherein a material’s meaning and purpose are imposed by a community or authority. For example, the red fabric of a Handmaid’s dress is not technologically unique, but it is socially codified to perform the function of biopolitical control. This study explores how postmodern narratives engage with both types of functionality, often revealing the complex interplay between them. In a postmodern world saturated with technology, consumer goods, and systems of control, these functional materials become powerful signifiers of the forces shaping human experience. This study moves beyond a general discussion of clothing as symbol to a focused investigation of how the engineered or socially assigned function of a fabric becomes the very source of its symbolic power. By examining the cultural work these textiles perform, we can gain a more precise understanding of how postmodern literature diagnoses the anxieties of its era.

To achieve this, the paper conducts a rigorous comparative analysis of two seminal postmodern novels: Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) and Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* (1985). Published in the same year, these texts offer distinct yet convergent perspectives on the role of functional materials. As a landmark of feminist dystopian fiction, Atwood’s novel is primarily concerned with themes of theocratic oppression and bodily autonomy; this paper demonstrates how the functionality of textiles is a key mechanism through which that oppression is materially enforced. DeLillo’s work, a canonical critique of late capitalism, explores environmental anxiety and consumer identity; our analysis uses its textiles as a lens to examine these core postmodern concerns. Through an in-depth analysis of the operation of functional textiles within their respective narratives, this paper demonstrates that in postmodern literature, fabric is not merely a passive backdrop but an active

agent that constructs, mediates, and critiques the cultural landscape.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The analysis of functional textiles in postmodern literature requires a theoretical framework that integrates literary criticism with theories of postmodern culture and materiality. The works of Jean Baudrillard, Fredric Jameson, and Michel Foucault are particularly salient in establishing the critical lens for this investigation. Jean Baudrillard’s concepts of the “simulacrum” and “hyperreality” are central to understanding the cultural logic of postmodernity. Baudrillard asserts that in a media- and consumer-saturated society, signs and symbols become detached from their original referents, circulating in a self-referential system that constitutes a “hyperreality” more real than reality itself [9,11]. Objects are valued not for their use or intrinsic worth, but for their sign-value within this system. This is directly applicable to the functional textiles in a novel such as *White Noise*, where a brand-name running shoe or an academic gown is less an article of apparel than a signifier of a desired lifestyle, status, or intellectual identity. The “function” of these textiles thus expands from the purely practical to the semiotic; they function to affirm one’s place within the hyperreal order. As Baudrillard posits in *Simulacra and Simulation*, this is a world of “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality.” The textiles in DeLillo’s world are such models, endlessly reproduced and consumed, creating a surface-level identity that masks a deeper void.

Fredric Jameson’s analysis of “late capitalism” provides an economic and cultural context for this phenomenon. In *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Jameson describes postmodern culture as characterized by a “waning of affect,” a preference for surface over depth, and a pervasive commodification that penetrates all aspects of life [12]. The culture of postmodernity is one in which everything, including identity, becomes a product to be purchased. Functional textiles, as mass-produced goods, exemplify this logic. Their engineered properties—breathability, durability, specific textures—become selling points that are integrated into the commodity fetish [12]. In *White Noise*, the characters’ engagement with fabrics and clothing through the act of shopping is a primary ritual. Their identities are assembled from these purchases, reflecting what Jameson identifies as the fragmented, depthless subjectivity of the postmodern individual.

Conversely, Michel Foucault’s theories on power, knowledge, and the body offer a framework for analyzing the role of textiles as instruments of control, as seen in *The Handmaid’s Tale* [13,14]. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault details how modern institutions exert power over individuals through disciplinary technologies that regulate the body in space and time. This concept of “biopower”—the administration and regulation of human life at both the population and individual levels—is starkly materialized in the functional uniforms of Gilead [13,15]. The Handmaids’ red

dressess, the Wives' blue gowns, and the Marthas' dull green outfits are not merely symbolic of their social roles; they constitute a functional technology of discipline. They render bodies docile, visible, and categorized, enforcing a rigid social hierarchy and restricting movement and expression. The fabric itself becomes a "political technology of the body," physically and psychologically enforcing the state's ideology. The functionality of the uniform—to identify and constrain—is the mechanism of its power. While this framework is most overtly applicable to Gilead's state control, Foucault's theories also illuminate the subtle forms of social regulation and self-discipline inherent in the consumer rituals depicted in *White Noise*.

By synthesizing these theoretical perspectives, this study approaches functional textiles not as static symbols but as dynamic objects operating within complex systems of meaning-making, consumerism, and power. This framework enables a scientific and reliable analysis, grounding the literary interpretation in established cultural and social theory and providing the necessary rigor to evaluate the cultural expressions embedded in these material objects. While this framework assigns specific theories to each case for analytical clarity, the realities presented in the novels are more nuanced. The ensuing analysis focuses on the dominant mode of functionality in each text, but the discussion further explores the subtle interplay and theoretical crossover between these seemingly distinct systems of control and commodification.

ANALYSIS I: BIO-POLITICAL FUNCTIONALITY IN THE HANDMAID'S TALE

In Margaret Atwood's dystopian Republic of Gilead, functional textiles serve as the primary technology for the implementation and maintenance of a totalitarian, theocratic state. Clothing is not a matter of personal choice or aesthetic expression but a state-issued uniform whose power derives from a socially ascribed functionality that is explicitly biopolitical. The regime's power is made manifest through a color-coded system of dress that categorizes women according to their reproductive utility, thereby transforming fabric into an instrument of social control, bodily discipline, and psychological subjugation.

The most potent example of this functional textile is the Handmaid's uniform, which the narrator, Offred, describes in meticulous detail. The uniform consists of a long red dress, red shoes, red gloves, and a stark white coif, or "wings," that restrict peripheral vision. The primary function of this attire is to erase individuality and signify the wearer's singular purpose: procreation. Offred states, "Everything except the wings around my face is red: the color of blood, which defines us." The choice of red is deliberately functional; it is not merely symbolic of passion or sin, but is a direct reference to menstrual blood and the biological capacity for childbirth. The fabric functions as a constant, wearable reminder of the Handmaid's biological role, reducing her identity to her viable womb. The uniformity

of the dress, identical for all Handmaids, ensures they are interchangeable parts in the state's reproductive machinery. This functional aspect strips them of personal history and identity, transforming them into walking symbols of state ideology.

The materiality and design of the uniform further enhance its disciplinary function. The dress is modest and shapeless, designed to conceal the woman's form and desexualize her in any context outside the state-sanctioned Ceremony. It is a functional garment for a body that is no longer her own but rather a "national resource." The white "wings" are perhaps the most overtly functional component. Offred explains their purpose: "They are to keep us from seeing, but also from being seen." This dual function is crucial. By limiting the Handmaid's vision, the wings isolate her from her surroundings, fostering a sense of paranoia and preventing solidarity with other women. By obscuring her face from others, they complete the process of erasing her identity, making her anonymous and generic. This piece of shaped and starched white cotton functions as a set of blinders, a physical manifestation of the mental conditioning imposed by the regime. It is a textile technology designed to control perception and enforce social atomization.

The broader textile system in Gilead reinforces this rigid social stratification. The Wives of the Commanders wear powder blue, a color connoting purity and serenity, befitting their status as the barren but socially superior matriarchs. The Marthas, domestic servants, wear a "dull green," a practical, unassuming color for their laboring role. The Econowives, wives of lower-ranking men, wear dresses of colored stripes, a functional solution signifying their multiple roles as wife, servant, and potential child-bearer, embodying a "thrifty" combination of the other castes' colors. This codified system leaves no room for ambiguity. A person's place in the social hierarchy is immediately legible from the color and cut of their fabric. This textile-based codification functions as a constant, silent reiteration of the regime's power. It is a visual language that every citizen is forced to read and obey, making the social fabric of Gilead a literal, state-controlled textile. Here, the textiles culturally express an absolute order, rationalizing and managing human life through systematic apparel. The fabric does not merely represent this order; it actively produces and enforces it.

ANALYSIS II: COMMODIFIED FUNCTIONALITY IN WHITE NOISE

Don DeLillo's *White Noise* presents a different, yet equally potent, vision of how functional textiles express cultural conditions. In the novel's hyperreal, late-capitalist American setting, textiles function not as tools of an oppressive state, but as commodities that mediate the characters' relationship with a world saturated by media, consumerism, and a pervasive fear of death. The functionality of fabrics is tied to their sign-value in a consumer culture that promises identity, security, and transcendence through material acquisition.

The protagonist, Jack Gladney, a professor of Hitler studies, is deeply conscious of the functional role of his professional attire. He reflects on his academic robes and dark glasses as essential components of his public persona: “I am the false character that follows the name around.” The gown and glasses are not merely symbolic of his profession; they are functional props that help him project an aura of authority and mystique, concealing his insecurities, including his inability to speak German. The fabric of the gown functions to create a larger-than-life image, a simulacrum of an intellectual heavyweight that both Jack and his audience willingly accept. This illustrates a key postmodern theme: the surface, the image, the fabric, becomes more real and more important than the substance underneath.

This logic extends to the broader consumer landscape of the novel. The act of shopping is portrayed as a central spiritual and existential activity. In the supermarket, a space DeLillo renders as a modern-day cathedral, the characters find comfort and a sense of belonging among the endless rows of products. Their lives are interwoven with branded, functional materials. The characters’ relationship with these materials is built on a central irony. Their running shoes are not merely for exercise; they are signifiers of a “healthy, proactive lifestyle” intended to ward off the fear of death. Yet, the act of running itself is a literal but futile attempt to outrun the very existential dread that permeates their consumer world. The functional textile, in this case, becomes a tool in a desperate ritual to deny an anxiety that the industrial-consumer system—which produces both the shoe and the novel’s “airborne toxic event”—continuously generates. Jack observes his colleague Murray Jay Siskind’s attachment to corduroy, speculating that “he’d associated this sturdy fabric with higher learning.” The functionality of corduroy—its durability and traditional association with academia—is consumed by Murray as a sign of intellectual belonging. The fabric functions to provide a narrative for the self, one that is purchased off the rack.

The novel also explores the failure of this commodified functionality in the face of authentic crisis. This contradictory logic collapses entirely during the “airborne toxic event.” The characters’ specialized outdoor gear and weatherproof jackets—textiles whose designed function is to shield them from natural elements—are rendered absurdly impotent against an amorphous, technological threat. DeLillo satirically exposes this as a form of magical thinking; the very system of production that provides these “protective” commodities is the source of the uncontrollable danger, revealing the consumer’s faith in functional textiles as a fragile and illogical defense. The cloud, a byproduct of the very consumer-industrial complex that produces their goods, cannot be shielded by GORE-TEX or nylon. This highlights the central anxiety of the novel: the “white noise” of technology, media, and death that hums beneath the surface of consumer life. These functional textiles therefore embody a profound cultural irony. They are products of a technological society that function to create a buffer of

comfort and identity, yet they are ultimately useless against the existential dread that this same society produces. The fabrics promise control and safety but deliver only a fragile, temporary simulation of it, reinforcing the characters’ alienation and helplessness.

III. DISCUSSION

The analyses of *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *White Noise* provide a material-focused entry point into each novel’s renowned thematic concerns. As visualized in the analytical path of Figure 1, while each text is primarily examined through a distinct theoretical lens—Foucauldian discipline and Baudrillardian consumerism, respectively—the discussion further explores the subtle interplay between these frameworks. By examining their functional textiles, we can better understand their respective critiques of contemporary culture—from Atwood’s feminist examination of state power to DeLillo’s satirical take on consumerism and environmental dread. These two cases demonstrate distinctly different models regarding the mechanism of power, the function of textiles, and the impact on individual identity, as detailed for comparison in Table 1. While both novels deploy fabric as a central element of their social commentary, they explore different mechanisms of power and identity formation. Atwood’s novel illustrates a top-down, state-imposed system built entirely on socially ascribed function, where common textiles are codified as tools of a disciplinary regime. DeLillo’s work, conversely, examines a consumer-driven landscape where designed function (e.g., the technical properties of a fabric) and socially ascribed function (e.g., brand status) are intricately linked, allowing individuals to construct an identity from the marketplace of signs. The comparison of these two approaches provides a nuanced understanding of the cultural expression of functional textiles in the postmodern imagination.

TABLE 1. Comparative Analysis of Functional Textiles in “The Handmaid’s Tale” and “White Noise”

Cultural Context	Totalitarian Theocracy	Late-Capitalist Consumer Society
Mechanism of Power	Top-down state enforcement and discipline	Bottom-up consumer-driven desire
Primary Function of Textiles	Socially Ascribed (Biopolitical): To discipline, categorize, and control the body through a codified color system.	Designed & Socially Ascribed (Commodified): To provide physical comfort (designed) while conveying sign-value and constructing a simulated identity (ascribed).
Effect on Individual Identity	Erasure and uniformization of identity	Simulation and fragmentation of identity
Core Cultural Expression	Oppressive, absolute social order; individual subjugation	Simulated, ironic surface; masking of existential anxiety
Key Theoretical Lens	Foucault	Baudrillard, Jameson

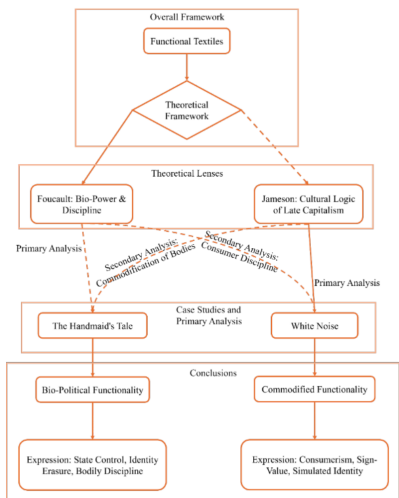


FIGURE 1. Theoretical Framework and Analytical Path Diagram of the Research

In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the functionality of fabric is absolute and legible. A red dress unequivocally signifies a Handmaid. This system reflects a Foucauldian model of power in which control is exercised by making bodies visible, classified, and subject to constant surveillance. This system cultivates an expression of oppressive order and the complete subjugation of the individual. The textile is a technology of biopower, reducing complex human beings to their biological function. The novel serves as a cautionary tale about how easily material objects—in this case, clothing—can be co-opted by ideological systems to enforce conformity and strip away human dignity. The horror of Gilead lies not only in its violent punishments but in the mundane, everyday reality of its material culture, where a simple piece of colored cloth becomes a cage.

In contrast, *White Noise* explores a more insidious form of control, one rooted in the seductive logic of consumer capitalism as theorized by Baudrillard and Jameson. The functionality of textiles is not to oppress but to entice. Fabrics promise to enhance the self, to provide a sense of belonging, and to ward off existential fear. The cultural expression is one of simulation and profound irony. Identity is not erased by the state but is willingly, and futilely, constructed from a pre-packaged assortment of commodified signs that promise escape from the very anxieties they help to produce. The characters in DeLillo’s world are

not physically imprisoned by their clothes, but they are psychologically bound to the endless cycle of consumption these clothes represent. The failure of these functional objects to provide genuine meaning or protection against death reveals the hollowness at the core of this hyperreal existence. The novel suggests that in a world saturated with signs, the function of a textile is less about its material properties and more about the narrative it sells—a narrative that ultimately proves as toxic and ephemeral as the airborne event itself.

A more sophisticated analysis reveals, however, that these theoretical frameworks are not mutually exclusive. Although Gilead’s power operates primarily through state discipline, it paradoxically co-opts the logic of commodification by treating fertile bodies as a state-owned resource. The Handmaids’ uniforms, though instruments of state control, are also mass-produced and distributed, functioning as a kind of state-enforced “brand.” In this system, fertile female bodies are the ultimate commodity—a national resource—and the red dress is the functional packaging that signifies their value and utility within the state’s reproductive economy. Conversely, the consumer society of *White Noise* is not without its own forms of Foucauldian discipline. The relentless pressure to shop, to curate an identity through brands, and to participate in the rituals of the supermarket acts as a powerful form of social regulation—a form of “consumer discipline”—that shapes behavior and desire just as effectively as an overt state apparatus.

Synthesizing these findings, it is evident that the focus on functionality marks a significant evolution in the literary representation of textiles. In postmodernism, the meaning of a fabric is not discovered through deciphering a hidden symbolic code, but through analyzing the work it performs within its socio-cultural system. For Atwood, that work is disciplinary and political. For DeLillo, that work is commodified and semiotic. In both cases, the textile is not a passive object but an active participant in the construction of reality. This shift reflects a broader postmodern concern with systems, structures, and surfaces over individual psychology and hidden depths. The cultural expression is not located in the textile, but is produced by its function. This analytical approach, bridging material science and literary criticism, provides a robust method for interpreting the complex relationship between objects, individuals, and power in contemporary literature and culture.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study has argued that functional textiles in postmodernist literature serve as a critical site for the expression and critique of cultural conditions. By moving beyond traditional symbolic interpretations and focusing on the designated purposes of fabrics within the narrative worlds of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, this paper has demonstrated how materiality becomes a primary medium for social commentary. The research has established two key modes through which this occurs: the biopolitical functionality of textiles as instruments of state control and the commodified functionality of textiles as signifiers in a hyperreal consumer culture.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the analysis of the color-coded, state-issued uniforms reveals a system in which fabric operates as a technology of discipline, enforcing social stratification and reducing individuals to their biological roles. In *White Noise*, the examination of branded apparel and synthetic materials shows how textiles function within a late-capitalist economy to provide a simulated, yet ultimately fragile, sense of identity and security against postmodern existential anxieties. The juxtaposition of these two novels underscores the versatility of functional textiles as a literary device capable of dissecting diverse forms of power and cultural logic.

The findings confirm the central thesis that in these postmodern texts, the symbolic power of a fabric is inseparable from its intended or perceived function, revealing a complex interplay of both state-enforced discipline and subtle commodification across different cultural landscapes. Cultural meaning is not an abstract quality but is generated through the material and social work that the textile performs. This investigation contributes to the fields of literary and textile studies by providing a precise analytical framework for understanding material culture in postmodern narratives. The scientific and rational approach, grounded in established theories of postmodernism, offers a reliable methodology for future research. Future studies can extend this functional analysis framework to new materials and literary contexts. For instance, this framework is particularly suitable for exploring "smart textiles," whose embedded technology represents a new frontier in biopolitical control and commercialized identity. Furthermore, applying this analysis to the expanding genre of "climate science fiction" (cli-fi) literature can reveal how functional clothing is imagined as a medium for regulating survival and social order in a future shaped by environmental crises. These research approaches will ensure that the study of material culture remains crucial to understanding our complex and technologically saturated world.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Ying Liu designed, collected and analyzed the data, and drafted the manuscript. Ying Liu conducted the study, critically revised the manuscript for important intellectual content, and gave final approval of the version to be pub-

lished. Ying Liu participated fully in the work, take public responsibility for appropriate portions of the content, and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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AVAILABILITY OF DATA AND MATERIALS

The datasets used and/or analysed during the current study were available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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