

## **MEANS OF CREATING A DYSTOPIA IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S THE HANDMAID'S TALE**

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*Abstract: "The Handmaid's Tale" is a feminist anti-theocratic dystopia, in the tradition of George Orwell's "1984" and Aldous Huxley's "Brave New World". It imagines the problems resulting from a severe decline in fertility caused by toxic spills, and how a possible new dictatorial republic sited in the United States would solve them, by enslaving women to reproductive social roles and denying them all rights and freedom, forbidding reading and writing, making Handmaids of the fertile women, and Wives or Marthas (servants) of the infertile ones. There would follow a regime of fear and terror, where no one, either subject, or leader, could be happy and have normal relationships with his/her fellow humans. The social roles, like the minds of the pawn-like characters, would be oversimplified and warped. Those who would not obey the theocratic rules, where religion and state coincide, would be sent to the colonies or killed. There is no other solution to find freedom to live according to one's own will power than to flee out of the state. Margaret Atwood's outlook on such a society is bleak, offering no hope or solution, and setting it in time and space very close to our contemporary states, as a possible threat.*

*Key words: Handmaid, dystopia, theocracy, sexual slavery, fertility*

What impresses and shocks the reader when he discovers the world of Gilead is the simplicity of the psychological structure of the characters, and the simplicity of their relationships. The women of the story, illiterate Handmaids or servants, have been reduced to very simple and clear social roles. Not being allowed to have jobs or financial property, they are defined by everybody, including themselves, as bodies around wombs (which are either fertile and thus obliged to procreate babies for the state, or sterile and thus obliged to be either Wives or Marthas i.e. cooks and servants). Thus, their only mission on this Earth is to make babies, and if they cannot do that, to help or assist their sisters who can. If they cannot or won't comply to these roles, they become Unwomen, that is they are sent to the colonies to have a terrible end there. After some toxic spills have drastically reduced the number of fertile women in Gilead, Handmaids' fertility has become a "national resource" (Ch.. 12), because they ensure the future generation of Gileadeans, the survival of the species. Even if a woman is reduced to a womb, her very definition as one speaks high of her vital importance for the whole society. Feminism could not have a more brilliant advocate than Atwood in this logic. Female bodies are political instruments.

We are containers; it's only the inside of our bodies that are important. The outside can become hard and wrinkled, for all they care. (Ch. 17)

I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will ... Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I'm a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping. (Ch . 13)

Literacy is forbidden, therefore books and magazines have been burnt, university buildings have been turned into places of public executions, the Handmaids are sent to shopping with graphic tokens depicting their merchandise instead of shopping lists. Their vocabulary and conversations have become oversimplified and ritualistic, and, as a result, the relationships between them have become abnormally simple and warped, turning them into subhuman creatures, not allowed to and incapable of friendship or other complex feelings.

Instead, they live under fear and reciprocal suspicion, under the Eyes (i.e. the secret police controlling everyone).

It's also a story I'm telling, in my head, as I go along. Tell, rather than write, because I have nothing to write with and writing is in any case forbidden. But if it's a story, even in my head, I must be telling it to someone. You don't tell a story only to yourself. There's always someone else. (Ch. 7)

However, Offred seems to have been a cultured young woman, a college student, before the advent of the Gilead dictatorship. Her friendship with Moira the rebel, as well as her taste for the magazines that her revolutionary feminist mother burns, prove it. When the Commander takes her one evening to spend illicit time together, what impresses her in his room is his vast library, she probably longs to read books from it. Anyway, when he challenges her to play scrabble with him she appears to be far from illiterate, contributing words such as "zygote", "larynx", "valance", "prolix", "quandary". All of these are words that a simple unschooled girl would not understand or use. They may also play a symbolic role, as a zygote is a fecundated egg, a larynx is the organ of speech (and Handmaids are not allowed to speak), a valance is a piece of cloth that hides the top of a curtain (just as the wings hide a Handmaid's face) prolix is a long and complicated, long-winded expression (just as she struggles not to express her true feelings), a quandary is a difficult dilemma (and Offred is permanently in a dilemma, in uncertainty about what attitude to adopt and what path of life she should take to find freedom and her former family). Thus, the lexis she uses in the game telltales her inner life, besides her culture.

Her scrabble words, so rare and complex, are in sharp contrast with the oversimplified speech patterns the Handmaids are obliged to use on a daily basis.

"Under His Eye," she says. The right farewell. "Under His Eye," I reply, and she gives a little nod.(Ch. 8)

The quote above is an allusion to the Big Brother in George Orwell's dystopian novel *1984* whose motto is "Big Brother is watching you." There are prescribed greetings for personal encounters. Failing to deliver the correct one can cost one's freedom. As a matter of fact, there is no real communication between the Handmaids throughout the novel, either because they are not allowed to communicate, by being obliged to use a patterned speech, or because they are afraid of one another for being possible spies that may report on the other's words. We aren't allowed to go there except in twos. This is supposed to be for our protection, though the notion is absurd: we are well protected already. The truth is that she is my spy, as I am hers. (Ch. 4)

Offred's "white wings" (Ch. 2) limit the others' sight of her, and also her own seeing them. Puritan wings are a means of half-blindness on both directions. However, she permanently feels watched and controlled, which threatens her. She is obsessed with eyes. The "blind plaster eye" on her bedroom ceiling and the "fisheye" mirror on the stairs (Ch. 17) scare her.. The secret police are called the "Eyes," with a winged eye as their emblem, which is visible everywhere and is the symbol of the permanent watchfulness of both God and the dictatorial state. In Gilead's theocratic republic, the eye of God and of the state are considered to be synonymous notions.. Offred considers these eyes males and compares them to penises, she calls the Commander's penis a "stalked slug's eye" (Ch. 15)

The only woman who clearly states that men's looking at women is a type of violence is Aunt Lydia .

To be seen -to be seen -is to be' -her voice trembled -'penetrated.' (Ch. 5).

They used to have dolls, for little girls, that would talk if you pulled a string at the back; I thought I was sounding like that, voice of a monotone, voice of a doll. (Ch. 2)

This dark dystopia seems to be set in a heterotopia of dolls or dummies dressed in specifically coloured habits: red, or green, or blue. Indeed, women seem to behave like

differently coloured pawns on the giant chessboard of Gilead. None of them is happy, they are all kept in a terror state, but are told by the Aunts (their educators and guardians) to be content with their current position, because something much bleaker, even lethal, may happen to them if they try to disobey.

Now it's like remembering the paper money, when they still had that ... Pieces of paper, thickish, greasy to the touch, green-coloured, with pictures on each side, some old man in a wig and on the other side a pyramid with an eye above it. It said *In God We Trust*. (Ch 27)

The quotation above alludes to the \$1 bill, featuring President George Washington on one side, the Great Seal of the United States of America (a pyramid with the Eye of Providence, as the all-seeing eye of God) on the other side, and the motto of the United States. It also states that paper bank notes are a feature of the past in the Republic of Gilead. Indeed, the handmaids give the shops tokens with images of foods and get those foods without paying with money. On the other hand, these pictorial tokens, on which written names are forbidden, since the Handmaids must remain illiterate, are an opportunity to create ironic images of the Gileadean society. The names of the shops are painted, not written, and they are "All Flesh" (alluding to the Biblical "way of all flesh"), "Loaves and Fishes" (alluding to Christ's miracle at the Galilee wedding party), "Milk and Honey" (alluding to the Promised Land, "a land flowing with milk and honey" in the Old Testament.). Language is the instrument of theocracy, a means of political power. Religious terms are used for political purposes. Language is a tool of power. Gilead's vocabulary warps reality in order to serve the needs of the elite. Having made jobs illegal for women, Gilead has titles. Whereas men are defined by military ranks, women are defined by gender roles as Wives, Handmaids, or Marthas. Stripping them of individual names and assigning them initial letters and numbers contained in tattoos stripes them of their individuality. Feminists and deformed babies are considered subhuman, called by the terms "Unwomen" and "Unbabies."

Gilead is a theocracy i.e. there is no separation between state and religion, therefore, its official lexis is rich in religious terminology and biblical references. Servants are called "Marthas", referring to a character in the New Testament; the police are "Guardians of the Faith"; soldiers are "Angels"; and the Commanders are officially "Commanders of the Faithful." The automobiles have biblical names: Behemoth, Whirlwind, and Chariot. Using religious terminology to describe ranks, and businesses whitewashes politics in religious language and provides a reminder that the founders insist that they act on the authority of the Bible. Politics and religion tend to converge, since the slogan "God is a National Resource" predominates in Gilead.

Special terms name the rituals of Gilead: "Prayvaganzas," (i.e. weddings and parties celebrating military victories) "Salvagings," (i.e. killings by either groups of males or females) and "Particutions." (i.e. public executions). As a dystopian novel, the book explores the perversion of language ("Newspeak" in George Orwell's *1984* is an example). The patterned speech, full of Biblical terms and allusions leads to a patterned thought, an oversimplification of the psychical functions of the characters and of the theocratic social structure, which looks, indeed, like the rules of a boardgame, played by means of human pawns, designated by specific names and habit colours, having become sheer dummies, emptied of a natural life and carrying uniforms.

"Resettlement of the Children of Ham is continuing on schedule," says the reassuring pink face, back on the screen. "Three thousand have arrived this week in National Homeland One, with another two thousand in transit." How are they transporting that many people at once? Trains, buses? We are not shown any pictures of this. National Homeland One is in North Dakota." (Ch. 7)

This is an allusion to Ham, cursed by his father Noah in the Old Testament. Ham's children were viewed as black-skinned, offering justification for racism and the enslavement of Africans. Gilead is racially resettling African-Americans away from the rest of society. "Sons of Jacob" is a phrase referring to Jews.

The novel is the expression of a sense of fear and of paranoia. Nobody in Gilead is happy, everyone is lonely and friendless, suspicious of their peers of being the instruments of the Eyes. The Handmaids are obliged to go shopping in pairs not to socialise and form friendships, but to spy and report on one another. Their daily shopping routes include passing by the Harvard wall, which was formerly the site of a famous university, and has come to be the site of executed so-called enemies of the current power, hung on the wall. Details link Gilead's goal of controlling women's reproductive function with the political goals of the 20th century U.S. religion and religious rights. Gilead hangs doctors who have performed abortions. These men, we've been told, are like war criminals. It's no excuse that what they did was legal at the time: their crimes are retroactive. They have committed atrocities and must be made into examples, for the rest. Though this is hardly needed. No woman in her right mind, these days, would seek to prevent a birth, should she be so lucky as to conceive. (Ch. 4)

Babies are of such a vital importance for Gilead, that men who practice abortions are executed by hanging and exposed publicly on the wall of the former Harvard university, like war criminals.

When one Ofglen disappears by suicide when in danger of being caught and punished by the Eyes for her Mayday activity, another Ofglen immediately replaces her, one who does not know or want to confess about the former Ofglen's destiny.

Now that she's the carrier of life, she is closer to death, and needs special security. Jealousy could get her, it's happened before. All children are wanted now, but not by everyone. (Ch. 4)

When Ofwarren (former Janine) is pregnant, she vainly walks her pregnancy in town, to be envied by the other Handmaids. But when she gives birth to a deformed child, it becomes an Unbaby and she an Unwoman. The baby dies a few weeks later, and Janine is assigned to another family, to a new Commander. If she does not manage to give birth to a healthy baby, she will be sent to the Colonies, as an Unwoman, to labour till she dies there. A Handmaid's lot is quite clear: she must give birth to healthy children, otherwise she is condemned to a terrible life in the Colonies, or worse, to death. Love, family life and sex are none a pleasure or a source of happiness. They become duties, pushed to their extreme, for the state, they are simply a means of procreation.

Everything except the wings around my face is red: the color of blood, which defines us. The skirt is ankle-length, full, gathered to a flat yoke that extends over the breasts, the sleeves are full. The white wings too are prescribed issue; they are to keep us from seeing, but also from being seen. (Ch. 2)

Here we come to the significance of the all-red uniform. Is it the symbol of fecundity (by recalling blood, i.e. menstruation and birth)? Or is it the symbol of victims, by recalling the tale of the Little Red Riding Hood? Or is it the symbol of adultery, by recalling the Scarlet Letter of Hester Prynne in Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel on a Puritan theme? The novel does not specify which reading should be given to the red habits of the Handmaids, and if bigamy should be interpreted as debauchment or as a sacrifice for the survival of the nation and of the human species. The Handmaids commit adultery with their Commanders, who are married. The Handmaids' red habits, thus, also symbolize the ambiguous sinfulness of their position.

Wives, on the other hand, are dressed in green, the complementary colour of red. They give green light to their husbands' monthly sex with the Handmaids, because they have no other choice. Aunt Lydia speaks of their unhappiness, jealousy, the source of their hatred to the Handmaids. "Serena Joy" is an ironical name for the character. She is neither serene nor joyful.

What makes this traditional Wife and former gospel singer less unhappy than Offred? She takes a painful part in her husband's sex sessions, holding Offred's hands during the sexual act, what could be more debasing than that? And when she learns that her husband is infertile, she finds an illicit fertile lover for her Handmaid in the person of the driver Nick, who may work either as a member of the Eyes, or as a member of the Mayday resistance, or both. Serena Joy hates Offred and blackmails her with the photo of the latter's daughter, about whose life she knows things that she refuses to communicate to the Handmaid. She is cruel and selfish and the author considers that such women are the glue that binds the Gileadean society.

It's the usual story, the usual stories. God to Adam, God to Noah. *Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth.* Then comes the moldy old Rachel and Leah stuff we had drummed into us at the Center. *Give me children, or else I die. Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb? Behold my maid Bilhah. She shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her.* And so on and so forth. (Ch. 15)

The wives, who call the Handmaids sluts, feel the pain of this sanctioned adultery.

"It's not the husbands you have to watch out for", said Aunt Lydia, "it's the Wives. You should always try to imagine what they must be feeling. Of course they will resent you... Try to pity them. Forgive them, for they know not what they do." (Ch. 7)

Aunt Lydia says, as if quoting Christ:

"Forgive them, for they know not what they do"-quoting Jesus on the cross. She then adds, "You must realize that they are defeated women," because they have been unable to bear children (Ch. 8).

Unlike her feminist revolutionary mother or her revolted friend Moira, Offred is complacent. She is not a woman that leads her life, but is led by the happenings of her life, is submissive and malleable. She obeys her mother, she admires but does not follow her friend Moira, she obeys the Commander and the Commander's Wife, she makes sex to the Commander, to Nick, because she is asked to, she does not take part in the Mayday subversive actions of Ofglen because she is afraid to, finally she leaves with the Eyes' car either for freedom or for the Colonies, or for death, because Nick asks her to. She never takes the initiative to do something about herself. Her only form of resistance is to keep secret her real former name from the reader.

My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden. I tell myself it doesn't matter, your name is like your telephone number, useful only to others; but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter. I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I'll come back to dig up, one day. I think of the name as buried. This name has an aura around it, like an amulet, some charm that's survived from an unimaginably distant past. (Ch. 17)

She is a survivor, not a woman of action. The "of" particle in her name becomes her very well. Having sex with the Commander or with Nick is for her a matter of submission, of doing her duty to the state.

I remember Queen Victoria's advice to her daughter: *Close your eyes and think of England.* But this is not England. (Ch. 16)

The kind of love she shared with her husband Luke is prohibited in Gilead, and Offred's memories of Luke contrast with the patterned passionless male-female relations in the new society. However, Offred recalls that Luke was not very different from the men in the current Gilead, as he did not show any sympathy for her when she lost her job and her bank account. He doesn't mind this [...] We're not each other's anymore. Instead, I am his (Ch. 28).

Offred's deep love for her daughter, born of a genuine love, contrasts with the feelingless society of Gilead, in which husbands and wives do not share affection, and children are status symbols to be taken from the biological mothers to pass into the custody of Wives

and Commanders. She remembers her first flight to the Canadian border, with Luke and their daughter, when they were unfortunately caught and separated, some five years before.

It was like being in an elevator cut loose at the top. Falling, falling, and not knowing when you will hit.(Ch. 30)

The Commander, the head of the household where Offred is a Handmaid, initiates a relationship with Offred, secretly playing scrabble with her in his study at night. He seems a decent, well-meaning man. She does not hate him, she even develops a certain degree of sympathy and understanding for him.

He was not a monster, to her. Probably he had some endearing trait: he whistled, offkey, in the shower, he had a yen for truffles, he called his dog Liebchen and made it sit up for little pieces of raw steak. How easy it is to invent a humanity, for anyone at all. What an available temptation.” (Ch. 24)

In this quotation Offred recalls a documentary film that she watched about the mistress of a Nazi death camp guard. The reader knows that the Commander puts Offred at risk, as the previous Handmaid hanged herself when her visits to the Commander were discovered by Serena Joy.

Offred’s tattoo, which all Handmaids have with different numbers, depersonalizes her but at the same time circumscribes her identity, serving to indicate that she is nothing but the property of the Gilead state, “a supposed guarantee that I will never be able to fade, finally, into another landscape.” (Ch. 17)

No matter where she goes, she is trackable, like a package with a chip. A tattoo links Offred and other handmaids to the Nazis and their prisoners at concentration camps, suggesting that Gilead is similar to Nazi Germany.

The Commander secretly takes Offred to a club called Jezebel’s, where the Commanders mingle with prostitutes, and the two have sex there, this time without a religious Ceremony preceding it, and fairly closer to normal love-making. Malleable Offred makes up, dresses in another, more revealing habit than her usual red one and fakes orgasm to give her Commander pleasure. However, the next day, jealous Serena Joy discovers a lipstick stain on Offred’s habit and accuses her of being like “the whore of Babylon”.

At Jezebel’s, she meets Moira, now a prostitute. In their private discussion, she is shocked to discover a totally changed, broken Moira, no longer the rebel girl, whom the system has crushed.

In this androcratic republic, men are always right, and all the evils happen because women can be wrong. When a collective rape happened to teenage Janine, it is considered that it was her fault, not the group of men’s crime.

“But *whose* fault was it?” Aunt Helena says, holding up one plump finger. “*Her* fault, *her* fault, *her* fault,” we chant in unison. “*Who* led them on?” Aunt Helena beams, pleased with us. “*She* did. *She* did. *She* did. Why did God allow such a terrible thing to happen? Teach her a *lesson*. Teach her a *lesson*. Teach her a *lesson*.” (Ch. 5)

The Aunts are not only accomplices to the regime’s crimes: they are some of the novel’s main perpetrators, responsible for psychological abuse. Offred’s complicity is ambiguous. She fears the regime, does not believe in its rules, but she does not rebel. Instead, she accepts her role without complaint. Even in her own mind she refuses to call the Ceremony “rape,” because “nothing is going on here that I haven’t signed up for” (Ch. 16). Her choices make us wonder where passivity confounds with complicity.

The motif of Sexual Violence and Rape is present throughout the novel. The multitude of cases of pornography and rape in the pre-Gilead society may justify the new order. The Commanders and the Aunts repeatedly claim that the Handmaids are better treated now than in the past, and they enjoy respect and safety from violence. However, the central action of the book the Ceremony, is institutionalised rape, compelling Handmaids to have sex with the

Commanders. Sexual violence also exists at the Jezebel's club, where the Commanders' elite use prostitutes. On the other hand, the punishment for rape is extreme, death penalty, in a scene where Handmaids kill a supposed rapist (actually a member of Mayday) with their bare hands. Although *The Handmaid's Tale* offers a feminist critique of the reactionary attitudes toward women, Atwood occasionally draws similarities between reactionary and feminist ideologies. Both currents pretend to protect women from sexual violence, and are willing to restrict free speech in order to accomplish their goal. Offred remembers a scene in which her mother and other feminists burn magazines, thus banning expressions of sexuality. Gilead uses the feminist rhetoric of female "sisterhood". These points of similarity suggest the dark side of feminism. In spite of Atwood's criticism of the feminist left, her actual target is the religious right. The scene of Offred and Ofglen meeting Japanese tourists demonstrates several points. Offred is so assimilated to Gilead culture that she initially reacts to the Japanese women's clothing and makeup with a sense of repulsion at their overt sexuality (knee-long dresses and red lipstick shock her). Second, the reader can see the Handmaids through some outsiders' eyes. The tourists view them as the surreal spectacle of Gilead, not as independent humans. This scene also informs the reader that Gilead still maintains ties with modern nations; such duality emphasizes the republic's hypocrisy.

Certain symbols can be identified as relating to Cambridge, Massachusetts and Boston, cities of an intolerant Puritan region in the seventeenth century America. Atwood reminds that when Offred and Ofglen visit the former church, now turned into a museum.

The former Harvard University buildings have been turned into a detention site run by the Eyes, into a detention centre run by the Eyes, Gilead's secret police and on its external wall dissidents hang, executed by the secret police. Salvagings (i.e. mass executions) take place in Harvard Yard, on the steps of the library. Thus, Harvard symbolizes the inverted world of Gilead, the pursuit of knowledge and truth has become oppression and the denial of every principle of free speech and thought.

Offred describes the Red Center as a palimpsest, i.e. a new document written over an older one, and replacing it. The whole Gilead is actually a palimpsest, replacing former Cambridge, and former America as a whole. However, remnant traces of the previous world sometimes surface to draw the reader's attention to hidden realities and infuse the new society. The book has a double ending. Serena has found out about Offred's night with the Commander at Jezebel's, and she sends her to her room and threatens punishment. Waiting there, Offred sees a black van from the Eyes coming. Nick comes to tell her that the Eyes are actually Mayday members coming to save her. Offred leaves with them, although the Commander makes objections, and she is now on her way either to prison or to freedom - neither she nor the reader knows which. Nor does Professor Pieixoto, when delivering his 2195 lecture on the former Gilead and Offred's story found on a cassette in Maine, know what really happened to the fugitive Offred after her flight.

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