

Handmaid's tale essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

One of the main ideas in the novel *The Handmaid's Tale* written by Margaret Atwood, is relationships and their importance as there is lack of intimacy and human contact which are both controlled and prohibited in Gilead. We can see that in this totalitarian society, all relationships are controlled strictly and monitored and there are boundaries which you must not cross. In this society, even sex is controlled. As a handmaid, you are obliged to have sex with your Commander at fixed times and this sexual event is named 'the Ceremony'.

The relationship between Offred and the three men in her life: the Commander, his chauffeur Nick and her husband Luke, are important to this theme of importance of relationships as these relationships are all very different from one another and we see the different ways in which they are important to Offred and what role they play in Offred's life. Offred is the protagonist in this novel and she is present in a society in which all relationships are strictly controlled and monitored, and where all human contact beyond that within a marriage, is forbidden. The society acts upon a fundamentalist view and has a distorted view of Christianity. Offred demonstrates just how basic and important a human need such as being touched, is. "I hunger to commit the act of touch," says Offred. In this society, simple things such as the act of touch and love within a relationship have been banned.

These are small things that Offred regrets not taking for granted in the past. "How much we took things for granted" says Offred. Offred is a handmaid and their role in Gilead is simply just to procreate for their hosts who are

powerful but childless couples. " We are two-legged wombs" says Offred. Even sex is regulated in this society, it isn't a matter of choice or recreation.

Offred as a handmaid, is made to have sex during certain times and the sexual act is called ' the Ceremony'. In Gilead, pleasure is frivolous and unnecessary. You simply procreate to make babies. Kissing is forbidden as it is too much of an emotional attachment.

Sex for Offred is something disgusting which she is forced to do in order to not be sent to the colonies. Sex in this society is simply for procreation and has no other purpose. All of the relationships Offred has/had are significant but especially those with the three men in her life, the Commander, his chauffeur Nick and her former husband Luke. Offred's relationship with the Commander is both complicated and causes a lot of problems. Offred is a Handmaid to him and his wife Serena Joy and they basically own her, hence her name shows this; it is a patronymic that clearly establishes ownership.

The relationship between Offred and the Commander is a strictly regulated one where Offred is supposed to have contact with him only during ' the Ceremony", which is a grotesque threesome in which the Commander keeps trying to impregnate Offred who lies between Serena Joy's thighs. Which of us is it worst for? Her or Me" says Offred. In one way, the Commander is Offred's " husband", since in Gilead this is a legally approved/forced relationship, but in another sense she is also the third person in the triangle of the Commander, his wife and herself who is like a mistress which is ironic. But the Commander is not satisfied with the official arrangement.

Even though he follows the regime that introduced this system, he breaks the rules and summons Offred to his study in the evenings. The Commander is a fatherly figure for Offred. "I feel like a child summoned to the principal's office" says Offred which shows paternalism symbolism. The Commander forms a special relationship with Offred as they share a love of words so when he summons her, Offred unreluctantly plays scrabble with him. In return for her company, the Commander gives Offred things that aren't available to her such as hand lotion, magazines, human contact and knowledge.

Because words have been banned from this society, scrabble has become something erotic for Offred, like sex was in the past. " Now of course it's something different. Now it's forbidden, for us. Now it's indecent...Now it's desirable...It's as if he's offered me drugs" says Offred. Emotions and everything that went with the normal life of the past have become eroticized because now they're forbidden. Sex and actions of intimacy have become mechanical acts.

In this society, what used to be nothing has become indecent, erotic and secret. And what used to be erotic has been deduced to nothing. Offred uses the words " voluptuous, glossy, luxury, candies and peppermint" to describe the scrabble counters. She involves all her senses to describe them as she is mesmerised by them.

She is able to create words with them, which she craves. The Commander's behaviour illustrates two significant ideas explored in the novel. The first is by considering himself before his own laws that he should be following, he

demonstrates the corruption that is so often a part of totalitarian regimes. He also emphasises that all people, even the powerful, need human contact and interaction. They miss simple things like scrabble and having real relationships as well.

They are human and crave affection too. I want you to kiss me...As you meant it" says the Commander. Offred likes the special relationship she has with the Commander as it gives her something to do and occupies space in her life. She is fooling herself but it makes her feel like more than just a womb. " To him I'm not longer merely a usable body. To him I am not merely empty.

" says Offred. However she's also two-minded towards the relationship. She is a survivor, reluctant to do anything that might risk her life or break the law but she also feels she has no choice but to obey his orders, " like an attentive pet". She is conscious of the risk: " For him, I must remember I am only a whim" says Offred. The Commander makes her dress in a costume to go with him to Jezebel's, a brothel, where she is shown as his possession, and expected to show " real" affection. Offred is aware of the complexity of the situation, " Maybe none of this is about control.

Maybe it isn't really about who can own whom, who can do what to whom and get away with it. Maybe it's about who can do what to whom and be forgiven for it. Never tell me it amounts to the same thing" says Offred. Offred's relationship with Nick is more of a fantasy romance. They have chemistry between them from the first time she sees him polishing the car and notices him.

Then Nick makes his presence felt literally. “ He’s so close that the tip of his boot is touching my foot... I feel my shoe soften, blood flows into it, it grows warm, it becomes a skin.

.. ” says Offred. Their first meeting was arranged by Serena Joy, who hoped that Nick would succeed where the Commander had failed in getting Offred pregnant. Serena Joy treats Offred as a child, saying that if Offred sleeps with Nick and gets pregnant, she will treat her and give her a picture of her daughter. But then the relationship continues, as Offred risks her life to meet Nick for sex.

Her craving for human contact overcomes her need to survive. “ I did not do it for him, but for myself entirely...I did not feel munificent, but thankful, each time he would let me in” and “ In order to do this I became reckless, I took stupid chances. After being with the commander I would go upstairs in the usual way, but then I would go along the hall...Then I would knock softly, a beggar’s knock” says Offred. Nick and Offred have a real relationship, with real feelings involved.

Trust me” says Nick. Nick does kiss Offred. “ He puts his hand on my arm, pulls me against him, his mouth on mine, what else comes from such denial? ” says Offred. Offred feels she is doing something wrong and feels guilt every time. Offred remembers the two-year affair she and Luke had before he divorced his wife.

An affair that her best friend Moira has disapproved of. She and Luke were married and happy but after the revolution, when all women were fired and had their bank balances transferred to their husbands, she became aware of

a change in their relationship. He's enjoying this," she thinks, of Luke's feeling towards the economic power he had been given over her by the Government. " Maybe he even likes it. We are not each other's any more. Instead, I am his" says Offred.

She is too afraid to speak up about her financial dependence and then it becomes too late. We see the interaction between the sexes and how men and women are treated in this society through these three relationships Offred has with men. Although neither the Commander nor Luke seem to do much, Nick is different through his selfless action of rescuing Offred from arrest at the end, possibly at the cost of his own life. Although the novel shows us a feminist nightmare, a society where women have no identity and are defined and controlled by their fertility, Nick's relationship with Offred also shows us that men too are repressed and controlled in this society. It's said that Nick " hasn't been issued a woman.

.. He doesn't rate". Nick is a hero for helping Offred. Offred needs him to be there for her when she is lonely and craves human contact, living in this society where it is repressed.

She needs the Commander to give her something to do, occupy space in her life and to play scrabble with, which is erotic and forbidden. If the Commander is her " husband" and Nick her " lover", Luke, her husband in " the time before", filled both roles. He was there for her in the past but is also a parallel with the Commander in that they are both in positions of power over Offred. We see the importance of these relationships to the theme of importance of relationships as they show that lack of intimacy and human

contact in Gilead is causing people to crave affection and need someone to be there for them in order for them to carry on living.