

The handmaid's tale critique



he Handmaid's Tale- Fertility of Women Critique In The Handmaid's Tale, Gilead rose to power in large part because no one was making babies any more. Even though baby making is a two-person process, society has shifted all the blame for infertility onto women. " There is no such thing as a sterile man anymore, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that's the law" (Atwood 18). Margaret Atwood's use of certain motifs such as flowers and eggs portray this constant theme of Women's bodies used as only a device to produce offspring.

Atwood does a great job portraying this theme by the political structure of the novel. Gilead's solution to this problem is to separate out the few fertile women left to powerful men and their wives. In order to make this seem legitimate and proper, the government has made people follow Ceremonies and read the Bible before engaging in a very specific kind of sex. In order to make it seem like a baby born to a Handmaid will really belong to the wife, the man and the Handmaid are required to have businesslike, non-erotic sex with the wife present.

The Handmaid lies between the wife's legs while the man has sex with the Handmaid. This arrangement is similar in childbirth, if the household is lucky enough s to get to that point. The wife sits with her legs around the Handmaid as she is giving birth. Despite all these arrangements, nothing is working and not enough babies are being born. Everybody is secretly breaking the rules. We're constantly reminded of the lovelessness and absence of eroticism in this society, as well as the absence of choice and free will.

Throughout the book, the narrator makes references to or compares women to flowers. For example, the Commander and Serena Joy's house is completely explained in floral imagery: there's a "watercolor picture of blue irises" (4) in the narrator's room; the bathroom is "papered in small blue flowers, forget-me-nots" (21); the master bedroom is decorated with "a starry canopy of silver flowers" (46). The first thing the narrator finally works the nerve up to steal is a daffodil from one of Serena Joy's arrangements. Even Jezebel's, where the Commander takes the narrator, is decorated with flowers.

Flowers are also used to disguise things that are ugly or terrifying; the narrator compares the bloody mouth of a hanged man, for example, to the "red of the tulips" in Serena Joy's garden (26). Flowers are often considered symbols of beauty or fertility. In *The Handmaid's Tale* they're given special attention as objects that can bloom and grow at a time when few women can. From a technical standpoint, flowers are also the part of a plant that holds the reproductive organs. They're constant reminders of the fertility that most women lack.

It seems the older Wives are seeking to hang onto their attractiveness and fertility by decorating themselves with flowers and tending gardens: "Many of the Wives have such gardens, it's something for them to order and maintain and care for" (2). Serena Joy takes a bizarre pleasure in mutilating flowers: when the narrator sees her chopping them awkwardly, she wonders, "Was it some kamikaze, committed on the swelling genitalia of the flowers? The fruiting body" (25). Perhaps these are attacks Serena Joy would like to

make on the Handmaid, who can be seen as a flower living in her house. The idea of eggs comes up frequently in the book.

With each mention we're reminded that they're part of a human woman's reproductive cycle, even though usually what the narrator is doing is eating them. She usually has them for breakfast, eating eggs so she can make her own healthy eggs. When, one night, she falls asleep in her closet and terrifies Cora into dropping her breakfast the next morning, it's an egg that falls to the ground and has to be thrown away. One day at breakfast the narrator thinks, " I think that this is what God must look like: an egg... To look at the egg gives me intense pleasure" (12). She adds that she is living " The minimalist life.

Pleasure is an egg. Blessings that can be counted, on the fingers of one hand. But possibly this is how I am expected to react. If I have an egg, what more can I want? " (15). The narrator's attitude toward eggs alludes to what eggs symbolize in Christianity. If the egg can be seen to contain God and pleasure, a whole world, the narrator wonders, perhaps she should not desire anything else. In her next thought, however, she worries that she's been given the egg and these feelings so she won't want anything else. Even philosophical abstraction and meditation has been undermined by Gilead.