

Love and death: the complexity of emotion in gileadean society



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There are countless disparities between the society of Gilead and 1980s America. In *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood, the citizens of this dystopian totalitarian state have unconventional reactions to life, death, sex, and violence. When we are first introduced to Offred, our protagonist describes for us her current setting. She is in a gymnasium of sorts but has a unique emotional reaction to her surroundings. " We yearned for the future..." says Offred (3). " It was in the air; and it was still in the air, an afterthought, as we tried to sleep..." (4) This first glimpse into Gilead is extremely revealing in regards to how our society has changed. Something so simple as a university gymnasium has become so sentimental, a palimpsest of what was once Cambridge, Massachusetts in the wonderful nation that no longer is. One major aspect of Gileadean society that differs greatly from ours is the way the citizens view life and death. In Gilead, public executions are commonplace, and seeing the dead on display is something Handmaids experience daily. " It's the bags over their heads that are the worst, worse than the faces themselves would be" Offred thinks as she sees dead men hanging from what they call the Wall (32). " The heads are zeros... What I feel towards them is blankness. What I feel is that I must not feel." (32-33) This could be contrasted to our society where viewing the dead is something seldom seen beyond the world of television and movies. If you were out running daily errands like Offred and saw this, the last thing you would feel would be nothingness. It would be shocking and terrifying to us today but the theocratic dictatorship of *The Handmaid's Tale* has desensitized its citizens to the macabre. The Handmaids' views on death are also twisted to mean something else to the living. Suicide has been completely eradicated by the Marthas. They have removed any tool that

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could be used to orchestrate a suicide; be it glass, rope, or even a hook. There are no knives and nowhere to jump so the Handmaids are doomed to live. Offred develops delusions of grandeur in regards to death; in the end, death can be considered a success if she cannot conceive a child. This attitude is revealed when Offred reminisces about an old library with a mural painted on the walls. Victory is on one side of the inner doorway, leading them on, and death is on the other... The men on the side of Death are still alive. They're going to heaven. Death is a beautiful woman with wings and one breast almost bare; or is that Victory? I can't remember (166). This shows Offred's corruption by society because in the past, when the mural was painted, of course the woman depicted was Victory. Offred also personifies the Gileadean convulsion of ideas regarding sex and violence. For her, sex is a job, her only meaning for existence. The Handmaids are glorified concubines and if they do not conceive a child quickly enough, they are deemed "Unwomen" and exiled to the colonies. The concept of being an "Unwoman" is introduced to the Handmaids by Aunt Lydia who indoctrinates them with a fear of promiscuity and sexuality. The aunts would sit the new Handmaids down and force them to watch violent pornography, trying to make them realize the error of their past lives. This A Clockwork Orange-esque scene speaks volumes to the lengths The Sons of Jacob went through to brainwash women and create in them new beliefs regarding their own sexuality. These ideas become apparent when Offred is put in a sexually charged situation with her commander. After one of their scandalous games of Scrabble, he asks her for something new. "I want you to kiss me," he says (139). Offred physically reacts to the situation like any other girl with a crush would; she leans in and awkwardly satisfies the demanding man, though her

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thoughts stray from the traditional feelings of attraction. I think about how I could approach the Commander, to kiss him, here alone, and take off his jacket, as if to allow or invite something further, some approach to true love, and put my arms around him and slip the lever out from the sleeve and drive the sharp end into him suddenly, between his ribs. I think about the blood coming out of him, hot as soup, sexual, over my hands (139-140). Though she admits these feelings were an afterthought, they still perfectly illustrate the conditioning Offred went through before assuming her role as a Handmaid. She can no longer feel a purely sexual urge towards anyone; not even a man she has sworn to procreate with, a man who makes her feel free, a man she may love. She now feels sex and violence go hand in hand; it can end with death, and a gruesome one at that. These major aspects of society that are so contradictory to reality portray Atwood's concerns for our political and social future. The views the members of Gileadean society adopt concerning life, death, sex, and violence are very contrary. Margaret Atwood did a phenomenal job creating a futuristic society that has made Americans cringe and yearn for change, especially for women.