

The many forms and effects of imprisonment as presented by the handmaid's tale an...



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Prison, in its most basic interpretation, is an institution or building made for individuals who broke the law and committed crime. It serves as a punishment or penalty by isolating them from the rest of the “ free” world and confining them within the space that the structure provides. However, the term imprisonment can extend beyond simple physical walls, fences, or jail cells. The feeling of imprisonment can take and manifest in countless forms and its effects may also apply to individuals other than criminals. In fact, these are issues that some, if not most people face in a daily basis. In J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* and Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, both authors use their respective characters in order to illustrate these. In Rowling’s book, she uses Sirius Black, Remus Lupin, and Peter Pettigrew to show that people are and can be imprisoned in many ways, whereas Atwood uses the Handmaids particularly Offred, the Wives, the Commanders to do the exact same thing. On the other hand, the very distinct settings of “ Hogwarts” and the “ Republic of Gilead” along with the unique plots that each novel gives help depict the effects of imprisonment both to the mind and the body. As a result of the similar function of the characters and the differences between the settings and plots, J. K. Rowling and Margaret Atwood are able to prove that imprisonment takes place beyond buildings and its effects can affect a wide variety of people.

In *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, Sirius Black portrays a man who is convicted of crimes he did not commit. As is explained in the novel, “...the magical community lives in fear of a massacre like that of twelve years ago, when Black murdered thirteen people with a single curse” (Rowling 34). Not only did this false accusation, along with many others, destroy Black’s

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reputation with the general populace, but also with his closest friends and godson, Harry. Although Sirius was eventually able to show the truth to the people that mattered most to him, he is still seen as a vicious criminal by everyone else. Here, a prison is clearly portrayed – one made out of and established by lies. It is precisely this that forces Black into hiding. In addition to Sirius, another character who experiences a kind of confinement within the text is Remus Lupin. Lupin tells Harry, “ This time tomorrow, the owls will start arriving from parents – they will not want a werewolf teaching their children” (Rowling 309). This particular excerpt depicts Lupin as a man trapped by his flawed identity and the prejudice of society. Being a werewolf in the magical world is similar to being an outcast. So, when Lupin’s secret is leaked to the public, not even his standing as one of the best teachers to have ever taught in Hogwarts could save him. Lastly, Peter Pettigrew – the real culprit behind the crimes Sirius Black is convicted of – proves that a person can also be imprisoned by the truth. Despite not being placed in an actual prison unlike Black, Pettigrew was forced to assume the form of a rat for 12 years. He confined and degraded himself for the sake of escaping the authorities and saving his own life.

With regards to Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, imprisonment is much more evident. After one of the ceremonies that Offred performs with her Commander and his Wife, she asks herself, “ Which of us is it worse for, her [Wife] or me?” (Atwood 109). The significance of this quote is that it exhibits the fact that Offred, her Commander, and the Commander’s Wife all share a common lack of choice. They have no choice but to perform the ceremony as it is required by the law – the same law that turned their

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country into one big penitentiary. This denial of the right to choose is what creates a prison for these characters. There is no freedom as it is not an option of theirs. Additionally, as the story progresses, Offred's relationship with her Commander eventually begins to complicate. As she feels the risks and dangers of such a situation, she states, " My presence here is illegal. It is forbidden for us [Handmaids] to be alone with Commanders. We are for breeding purposes...We are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (Atwood 157). This quote emphasizes the same point by telling the audience that everyone in the republic has their own respective roles - hers being a simple means of reproduction. Their life and lifestyle revolve around these roles and so they are bound to it whether they would like to be or not. They are all imprisoned by the duties that have been placed upon each and every one of them. Just as the characters of Rowling's Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban were forced to do things that they did not want to, the same predicament falls upon those of Atwood's in The Handmaid's Tale.

While both novels may share similarities regarding their use of characters, it is undeniable that the settings with which each story takes place in cannot be any more different than the other. The events within Rowling's novel all take place in the " Wizarding" world where magic is involved in everything. From flying broomsticks in the wizarding sport called " Quidditch" to magical and enchanted sweets, it is as if the setting can be a character of its own as it possesses a great number of positive traits and light-hearted features.

However, it is also within this mainly cheerful world that the author J. K.

Rowling inserts some dull and very contrasting parts which, in turn, create <https://assignbuster.com/the-many-forms-and-effects-of-imprisonment-as-presented-by-the-handmaids-tale-and-harry-potter-and-the-prisoner-of-azkaban/>

distinctions that help highlight what the prison-like places are from those that are not. For example, whenever Harry spoke about the Dursleys' home, he would always do so with some special loathing. In a conversation between Harry and Sirius where Harry is asked if he would like to live with his godfather and move homes, Harry could not hold his excitement. He says, "Of course I want to leave the Dursleys! Have you got a house? When can I move in?" (Rowling 278). The desire to leave that Harry expresses here is the same desire that a prisoner would most likely show if asked whether he or she would like to be freed from prison. Here, an effect of imprisonment that is clearly being portrayed is impatience and the sense of an increased longing for liberation. Another example of deliberate distinction within the world is wherever the "dementors" are placed in particularly Azkaban. During another conversation, Lupin tells Harry exactly what dementors are. He says, "Dementors are among the foulest creatures that walk this earth. They infest the darkest, filthiest places, they glory in decay and despair, they drain peace, hope, and happiness out of the air around them" (Rowling 140). Azkaban is the maximum-security prison within the wizarding world and with the fact that it is where most dementors reside; the author is clearly providing a very strong statement about the effects that imprisonment causes some individuals. Imprisonment can result in despair and endless other negative emotions.

In comparison with Rowling's wizarding world where certain places are made utterly distinct to deliberately stand out among the rest of the lively world, Atwood, on the other hand, turns her Republic of Gilead into the prison. She does not use contrasting places as the whole world that she created is the <https://assignbuster.com/the-many-forms-and-effects-of-imprisonment-as-presented-by-the-handmaids-tale-and-harry-potter-and-the-prisoner-of-azkaban/>

penitentiary itself. It deprives most, if not everyone in the novel of their basic rights and liberties. This is a world where people dress based on their roles, jobs, and function and where all recreational activities are either prohibited completely or hugely frowned upon. As they were on their way home from shopping for food, Offred and her partner at the time, Ofglen, meet foreigners visiting Gilead. Offred is overwhelmed by the sight. The novel writes, " Ofglen stops beside me and I know that she too cannot take her eyes off these women. We are fascinated, but also repelled. They seem undressed... Then I think: I used to dress like that. That was freedom" (Atwood 32). This quote is significant as it not only reinforces the fact that even luxuries as minor as fashion are taken from the characters, but also it gives the audience an illustration of yet another effect that imprisonment can cause. Imprisonment can change a person's perspective from the norm. This is especially true for prisoners who have been sentenced for very long years. A person who has remained in jail for even as long as a decade is guaranteed to have a very different view of the world once he finally gets out because during that period of time, that same person is unaware of the happenings outside of his cell. The conditions he will face outside compared to those of the inside will greatly differ and consequently put him in shock. This is precisely what occurred when Offred and Ofglen interacted with people outside the Republic of Gilead for the first time in quite a while. Also, within this much harsher prison called Gilead, violence is magnified and very present in it. Again, during Offred and Ofglen's trip home from the market, they decide to pass by the wall. Offred describes the sight they see, " Beside the main gateway there are six more bodies hanging, by the necks...We're

supposed to look: that is what they are for, hanging on the Wall...they are meant to scare” (Atwood 36). As these bodies are used by authorities to instill fear upon the rest of the people of Gilead, one realizes that this is also another effect of imprisonment.

In Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban, the dementors are responsible for filling people especially prisoners with negative emotions that drive most of them insane in Azkaban, whereas it is the brutal actions that the authorities of Gilead commit that does the exact same thing in The Handmaid’s Tale. While the dementors are only a small “ evil” part of the vast wizarding world, the brutal actions within Gilead, however, is present everywhere in the republic. These contrasting settings are what help audiences perceive the many effects of imprisonment that both novels attempt to deliver and convey. Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban’s plot tells a journey of redemption and freedom. The story greatly revolves around Harry finding out the truth about his godfather Sirius Black and what really took place twelve years in the past when his parents were murdered. Throughout the most of the novel, even the truth about Harry’s relationship Black is concealed from him by others. This creates a type of prison that holds him back from reaching the right to the truth. Once he eventually figures this out, a surge of emotions well up inside him. Anger and rage comes out. This gives another statement towards what unjust imprisonment can cause to those who are innocent and undeserving of such a situation. However, the fact that he did eventually find out the honest answers to his questions, two major problems are solved. Sirius Black is able to clarify his name and reputation toward his loved one, Harry and Harry, in turn, is able

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to break out of the prison that was barricading him from the truth. Both situations lead to a positive outcome which clearly conveys that for some who are imprisoned, there is hope. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the plot revolves around the conditions within the prison which is the Republic of Gilead. The fear that the place instills upon its people leads them to question their every move. In turn, this gives a factual statement among actual prisons in the real world. Danger is very imminent in physical prisons. For some, if not most, actions and the people they choose to side with in these places can often lead to matters of life and death. So, prisoners often have to gamble and take caution with the choices they make just as how Offred does in Margaret Atwood's novel. This is very evident in the quote, " Why am I frightened? I've crossed no boundaries, I've given no trust, takes no risk, all is safe. It's the choice that terrifies me. A way out, salvation" (Atwood 69).

The similar use of characters combined with the very distinct settings and contrasting plots all contribute toward the delivery of the issues that come with imprisonment. They are able to give various examples and ways of imprisonment and show the novels' readers the various consequences and effects that come with it. With their help, one realizes that imprisonment truly does extend beyond the walls of penitentiaries and that its victims can also be people who are innocent and not just criminals.