

The significance of identity in the opening chapters of 'the handmaids tale'



Whilst identity in the modern day setting is seen as a fundamental right, in the seemingly dystopian society of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, identity is robbed by the government to create a subservient society. As is common with totalitarian regimes, people are divided and oppressed to preserve the strict social hierarchy, yet those in power seem to neglect the basic fact that no regime can destroy essential humanity and the need to express individualism.

Atwood explores the theme of a forfeit of personal identity to show the reader the significance of these constraints. Through the handmaid's patronymic names, they no longer belong to themselves, but rather are the possessions of their Commanders: "Of-Fred", for example. The replacement of the handmaid's name once they move to a new posting after three failed attempts at bearing children show how easily names are changed in Gilead, a branding of the woman which amplifies the notion she has little to no control over who she is, and just like her name she can be substituted.

Atwood implies that names are used to instate fear in people when Offred says: "She may be a true believer, a handmaid in more than name." These phrases imply that having this mentality is dangerous, and only serves to increase the mistrust between women, who are meant to be united by their gender. Instead, these "true believers" are complicit with their given identities and so accept the life created for them. This concept is expanded on in the maternalistic names of the 'Aunts', who connote ideas of love and care but rather are there to indoctrinate the handmaids with the Puritan-like views of the Gileadian regime. The juxtaposition of their titles to their roles shows how their identities discourage the relationship between women in

this misogynistic organisation, and by giving women authority over other women, a divide is maintained. A feminist critic may argue, however, that the dichotomy between the titles given to the women (Aunt, Commander's Wife) and the men (Commander, Guardian), is a way of enforcing 'traditional' gender roles upon society, creating further barriers. These women exploit others to consolidate their own power.

By giving all the handmaids specific uniforms, and by allocating different sections of society various colours, individuality is eradicated, reinforcing social status. The "ankle-length" skirt, the "red gloves" and "red shoes", the colour of the clothing itself becoming a parody of sacrifice and fertility. Furthermore, the overpowering, vibrant red could also symbolise the blood in death as well as in life, as is seen with the men hanging on the Wall, with "heads of snowmen [...] the blood which has seeped through making "another mouth, a small red one." The dehumanisation of these men emphasises that in Gilead, there is no identity even in death; you are stripped of your humanity whether you are alive or not. The Marthas, on the other hand, wear a dress of a "dull green, like a surgeon's gown of the time before". Unlike the handmaid's dress, the Marthas are made less desirable by a colour which denotes service instead of passion. The irony of the "wings" worn by the handmaids is bittersweet: wings are a symbol of freedom, and yet here they are used to restrict the access the handmaids have to the outside world. This inability to choose what you wear and instead have a prescribed uniform minimises personal identity, reinforcing the social hierarchy and so reducing the risk of subverting the government. This factor is important as it suggests that just by dressing factions of society in certain

clothes, and by removing this form of expression, an entire nation can be controlled.

To the narrator, her mind and body are two separate entities, which do not exclusively determine her identity. Before the Ceremony, Offred must “compose [her]self. [Her] self is a thing she must now compose”. The repeated reference to the version of herself as a ‘thing’ demonstrates the internal struggle she is having, separating who she was in her past from the role she has to play today. The final sentence of this chapter: “What I must present is a made thing, not something born” is significant as it shows she believes this new identity has been forced upon her, it isn’t natural to her as she wasn’t born with it. Her ability to distinguish between who she was then and who she is being made to act like tells the reader that she is aware of the detrimental consequence of losing one’s identity completely.

In conclusion, the theme of identity, or rather the loss of identity, in *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a significant, recurring theme which is used by the government of Gilead to control its society. Nevertheless, those individuals with an inherently strong will and an inability to forget who they were, will strive to retain some aspects of their identity.