

# How does atwood present women in the handmaid's tale essay sample



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Atwood presents women as intelligent, submissive, rebellious, ignorant and powerful. The narrator of the story, Offred is desperate to escape her life however she is fearful of the consequences of any rebellion, and ultimately submits to her fate. Offred is an intelligent, educated woman, and Atwood's lexical choice demonstrates Offred's understanding of words: " Larynx. I spell. Valance. Quince. Zygote. " Her intelligence is highly frustrating, as her stream of conscious thoughts is suppressed and internalised.

If she was stupid and ignorant, she would find it easier to come to terms with her situation, however her crystal clear memories and vivid imagination provide an alternative reality that is painful to conceive: " I would like to believe this is a story I'm telling. " Atwood writes about a past world that all readers can relate to, a world that Offred took for granted: " I had a paper due next day. What was it? Psychology, English, Economics. We studied things like that then.

On the floor of the room there were books, open face down, this way and that, extravagantly. " Atwood presents Offred's intelligence and her appreciation of words and language as a way of expressing herself and remaining true to her past. Atwood's presentation of a future where women's only function is as vessel for childbirth has a deeper poignancy considering over the past 50 years women have been fighting for freedom, equality, and to be considered on an equal intellectual level as men.

It seems that Atwood believes this equality is incredibly fragile and easily breakable, and if, for some reason procreation becomes a desperate necessity for society rather than an individual's emotional decision, it would

be justified that woman should relinquish other roles and responsibilities for the “ good of mankind. ” Atwood also presents women as submissive and subservient, unable or unwilling to change their situations.

Gilead is a society constructed by men, and Offred and her fellow handmaids are stripped of all personal possessions, taken away from their families, and their identities destroyed. The handmaids are categorized, given numbers and turned into disposable commodities, their only unique identity being a name defined by the men who control them. However, whilst Offred deplors the situation she is in, she often remains passive, just as she did when the regime first came into power, choosing to wait and see the outcome instead of acting against it: ““ We lived as usual by ignoring.

Ignoring isn't the same as ignorance, you have to work at it” Atwood presents Offred as always being slightly uncomfortable with her mother's activism: “ I turned away from her, sulking, towards the ducks, but the fire drew me back. ” Section IV is called the Waiting Room, and Offred seems to spend most of her time waiting for others, as Atwood writes: “ I'm waiting, in my room, which right now is a waiting room. ” This is exactly what Offred's mother would have riled against by burning porn magazines; women becoming passive sexual goods, objectified for male gratification.

By having the protagonist being an angry but actively submissive character, Atwood is warning us about doing nothing in the face of inequality, however Offred gradually gains the confidence to use her womanliness and sexuality to get some power and control in her life. Atwood uses the character of Moira to demonstrate the rebellious, brave and radical side of feminism, and she

contrasts against Offred and the other handmaid's passivity. Offred obviously adores Moira, describing her with a great energy and vitality for life: " Moira, breezing into my room, dropping her denim jacket on the floor.

Got any cigs, she said. " Atwood presents Moira as always getting what she wants, a highly intelligent individual who is in control of her life.

Remembering Moira gives Offred hope and gives her the strength to survive:

" Moira was our fantasy. We hugged her to us, she was with us in secret, a giggle; she was lava beneath the crust of daily life. In light of Moira, Aunts were less fearsome and more absurd. " Moira is the only one Atwood ascribes with her real name, demonstrating her refusal to submit and to be defined by the men that govern her.

However after her escape Offred discovers Moira in a brothel, her radical spirit seems to be broken and lost as she chose sexually serving men over a life in the colonies. It seems that Atwood is showing how a dictating regime will eventually crush even the most resilient person: " I'd like to say she blew up Jezebel's, with 50 commanders inside it. I'd like her to end with something that would befit her. But as far as I know that didn't happen. " It seems that whenever Offred showed outward weakness or cowardice, she always thought of Moira as her hope that somebody is fighting, but now even Moira has given up.

However Offred herself does occasionally show signs of rebellion, such as her relationships with Ofglen and Nick. However her feelings of closeness to Nick lead her to believe that her situation is bearable, and she stops talking to Ofglen about the Mayday movement, therefore continuing to give up her

freedom and remain submissive. Her only true act of rebellion is her enquiries about the disappearance of Ofglen, as she says: “ I’ve only known her since May. Around the first of May I think it was. What they used to call May Day.

This is incredibly reckless behaviour, and Offred regrets it straight away, realising that to be a rebel you cannot be fearful of the outcome: “ I know this can’t be right but I think it anyway. Everything they taught at the Red Centre, everything I’ve resisted, comes flooding in. I don’t want pain. ” Offred realises that she is a coward; she will never have the strength and determination that Moira has, and ultimately resigns herself to the Gileadean regime. The women of Gilead are also portrayed as ignorant, mindless individuals who genuinely believe that the authority of men and the regime is the right way to live.

Serena Joy and Aunt Lydia are two women who actively preached the benefits of the regime. Serena Joy was an activist opposed to the woman’s right’s movement, arguing that woman should stay at home and care for their husbands. However having achieved what she argued for, Serena Joy has become a mean, bitter and unhappy women, with little purpose in her life, apart for sewing and caring for he garden: “ Many of the wives have such gardens, it’s something for them to order and maintain and care for.

It seems that without having a child to care for, the infertile high ranked woman seek fulfilment in nurturing the natural world. Atwood demonstrates with Serena how the dystopian society cannot make even the richest and highest ranked woman happy. It demonstrates how Serena Joy has to

internalise her unhappiness, therefore intensifying it, and taking out her frustration of Offred. Serena cruelly manipulates Offred with the fact that she knows where her child is, showing no compassion or understanding for her situation.

Atwood shows that despite the male dominance of Gilead, it is the ignorant and senseless way in which women control and oppress other women that keeps the society running the way it does. Atwood presents Aunt Lydia as another ignorant woman, unequivocally devoted to the Gileadean regime; however she has been given power, making her much more dangerous than the passive Serena Joy. Aunt Lydia's job is to propagate the teachings of Gilead, effectively brainwashing the handmaids to submit to their roles.

Aunt Lydia is one of the few women in the Gileadean Regime given any sort of authority over others, and she obviously relishes the role: " Her voice is pious, condescending, the voice of those whose duty it is to tell us unpleasant things for our own good. " Aunt Lydia preaches ignorance as a tool to controlling others, as she tells Offred: " what you don't know won't tempt you. " Atwood is demonstrating a fundamental aspect of a totalitarian regime: that knowledge is power. She is warning us that if we do not seek knowledge we will remain the proletariat; controlled by the powerful.

Aunt Lydia holds great significance in Offred's life, her influence and control clearly evident whenever Offred is faced with an ethical decision: " I know better than to say Yes. Modesty is invisibility, said Aunt Lydia. " Offred's constant recollections demonstrate how Aunt Lydia repeated these mantras until they were embedded into the Handmaid's conscience. Offred

wholeheartedly resents Aunt Lydia, and Atwood uses her cruel, phrases to demonstrate to the reader the profound hypocrisy of the regime: “ We want you to be valued Girls.

She is rich in pauses, which she savours in her mouth. Think of yourselves as pearls. ” Atwood uses Aunt Lydia as a perpetrator of dystopian society- where how things are thought to be, and how things actually are, are vastly and immeasurably disconnected. However Aunt Lydia’s denial and power create a character as misogynistic as the men that rule Gilead, showing that if woman continue to judge, control and subjugate each other, they will never join together and be powerful enough to put an end to the regime.