

The handmaids tale research paper example

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In *The Handmaid's Tale*, there are many different social groups within Gilead, all of which have varying degrees of power. The Commanders of the Faithful are the ruling class of Gilead, and are allowed a Wife and a Handmaid, among others. It is their solemn duty to procreate in order to continue the ruling class, and they reached that level of power because of their responsibility to maintain the power structure of Gilead. The Angels are the officers in the Gilead military; they are given the most honorable duty of fighting in wars with the intent of protecting and expanding the borders of Gilead. Given their honorable duty, they are allowed to get married. The book provides a great deal of dystopian science-fiction subtext, the world providing a platform for Atwood to showcase the terrible nature of sexual and gender politics in our own world by showing a place where these ideas are brought full circle (Miner, 1991). In particular, the essence of the individual is explored in great detail, as the women in the novel attempt to deal with the segregating and dehumanizing circumstances of the dystopian society in which they live.

The individual's rights in *The Handmaid's Tale* are shown to be strictly regulated and limited by the rules and castes of this society. The theocratic world of Gilead is one in which love is shown to be an inherently conservative force used to oppress women (Miner 149). Wives are the highest social class permitted to women, and that is reached when they marry a Commander of the Faithful. Handmaids are the assistants of Wives, and are intended to bear their children for them. Whenever fertile women have broken the law, they are reassigned and reeducated to become Handmaids; they are not as important as Wives, and are essentially used to bear children so that Wives

do not sacrifice their figure. Aunts are older women who have not married; their duties are primarily to discipline other women, as well as act as midwives to those who are having children. As they have not been married and have passed their fertile age, they are no longer of use except as menial servants. These kinds of rules are implied by Atwood to be ingredients of a dystopian universe, with the government repressing freedoms and suppressing the idea of sex in order to maintain control over its populace (Malak 9).

One of the essential ingredients of a dystopia is its suppression of individual rights. In the case of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Gilead is a totalitarian government that subjugates women in various ways and limits their freedoms, preventing them from having agency in any way. From birth, the women of Gilead are assigned roles, typically revolving around the alleged superiority of men over women. To that end, most women's roles are service-related, as they are firmly placed in positions of caretaking or family-raising, with little to no social advancement. The strict groupings of these individuals by gender plays into the book's ideas of the danger of the loss of individuality, as women are visually and politically segregated and unable to make their own choices about what they want to do. Women are either Handmaids, Wives, Aunts or dead; there is no in between. They are even robbed of their names: " My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden. I tell myself it doesn't matter, your name is like your telephone number, useful only to others; but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter" (Atwood 99).

The world of *The Handmaid's Tale* can be likened to another near-future

dystopian novel, *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley. In both works, reproductive rights become a major issue, with the Handmaid Class and the permanent population cap of 2 billion being important background details for the novel. Also, class distinctions becoming distinct, concrete castes is a feature present in both novels - the Alphas, like the ruling class of *Handmaid's Tale*, are concretely placed above the Betas or lower classes in prominence and importance; in fact, physical deformities are forced on Betas and lower classes to suppress them physically as well as mentally. One distinction is the approach to sex; while Huxley's *Brave New World* welcomes recreational sex, but abstinence except for procreation is present in *The Handmaid's Tale*. " My red skirt is hitched up to my waist, though no higher. Below it the Commander is fucking. What he is fucking is the lower part of my body. I do not say making love, because this is not what he's doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and only one is involved. Nor does rape cover it: nothing is going on here that I haven't signed up for" (Atwood 94). This is another way to remove the individuality and sexual agency of women, as they are not allowed to express their sexuality except when it suits the whims of men.

Women are not the only people in Gilead who are oppressed; ethnic groups are also given strict hierarchical groupings from which they cannot escape. African-Americans are called the Children of Ham, and are forced to relocate to " National Homelands" located in the Midwest; like women, they are undesirables whom no one knows what to do with, and so they are physically segregated from the rest. Jews receive similar treatment; they are called Sons of Jacob, and are forced to either relocate to Israel or convert to

Christianity if they want to stay in Gilead. To that end, their individuality is stripped even further, as they are forced to conform to societal norms or face execution.

Individuality is suppressed in many, many ways throughout the novel; many women are forbidden from using their actual names, even speaking them aloud. This leads to secretive attempts to assert their own identities in spite of these orders: “ We learned to lip-read, our heads flat on the beds, turned sideways, watching each other's mouths. In this way we exchanged names from bed to bed: Alma. Janine. Dolores. Moira. June” (Atwood 10). Even names are subsumed in favor of the all-encompassing whole, and so people must find secret ways to maintain their individuality. There is a huge disconnect between people and their names in Gilead, which leads to rote replacing of each other as Handmaids because their names don't matter: “ This woman has been my partner for two weeks. I don't know what happened to the one before. On a certain day she simply wasn't there anymore, and this one was there in her place” (Atwood 27).

In this society, people's own identities are separated from each other as much as possible, as steps are taken to keep people at a distance; besides the suppression of names, even faces as indicators of identity are obscured: “ When I'm naked I lie down on the examining table, on the sheet of chilly crackling disposable paper. I pull the second sheet, the cloth one, up over my body. At neck level there's another sheet, suspended from the ceiling. It intersects me so the doctor will never see my face. He deals with a torso only” (Atwood 71). Because the reader is taking in this world through the main character's perspective, the reader is placed into the shoes of someone

who loses their individuality and understands the fatalism and victimization that comes from being so worn down and robbed of agency (Dopp, 1994). In *The Handmaid's Tale*, a future dystopia is created that completely obscures and removes identity and individuality for the sake of serving a greater, unequal whole. The Christian theocracy that is established in the film attempts to obscure individual wants and need through removal of individual identity and placement of people into distinct groups. These groups are hierarchical in nature, strictly segregated by societal norms and gender/racial identification, so as to limit their agency in favor of the rampant control of white men. The characters in the book experience widespread discrimination and misery as the joys of being who they are get taken from them, and they are placed into societal roles they cannot escape from. The simple pleasure of being yourself is the thing that Offred wants most in the world, but the way Gilead works prevents her from achieving this.

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