

The power of language in the handmaid's tale

[Linguistics](#), [Language](#)



Language is an extraordinarily dynamic element of our society and culture. It is the backbone of our community and is used daily as a form of communication to our associates and acquaintances. However, in Margaret Atwood's novel "The Handmaid's Tale" we get a glimpse into a society which has distorted and restricted language in an extreme manner. Throughout the book, Atwood illustrates that language facilitates power, with the ruling regime monopolizing language, through censorship, to solidify their stronghold. Using word choice and sentence structure to uncover the structure of Gilead society as being built upon foundations of gender inequality typically found in the language of modern American culture.

Margaret Eleanor Atwood was born in Ontario, Canada in 1939 and by the age of six years old she was writing poems, plays, and began her first novel. Her parents encouraged her to use her intelligence and to get an education. However, when Atwood decided she wanted to become a writer there was little encouragement, as writing was considered a man's career. This, however, did not stop Atwood from doing what she loved and using her works to make sarcastic jabs at society. In 1984, while living in West Berlin, Germany, Atwood began her venture into the idea of a utopian turned dystopian society, originally called "Offred".

During her trips behind the Iron Curtain, Atwood explains her feelings of uneasiness. "I experienced the wariness, the feeling of being spied on, the silences, the changes of subject, the oblique ways in which people might convey information, and these had influence on what I was writing." The Handmaid's Tale is a reflection of the Women's Rights movement of the late

1970's and early 1980's, with respect to how women were controlled through social customs and gender identity.

The Handmaid's Tale tells the story of the society of Gilead, which is formed after a severe drop in population and fertility issues due to environmental damage and toxic waste. A select few who are unhappy with the way the government is being run decide to make a change. After a violent overthrow of the existing government and the assassination of the president and congress, the Republic of Gilead was formed. Using the Puritan type belief system as their base, the ruling regime sets to reconstruct their environment ultimately creating a totalitarian society. The use of language to control the people's thoughts and actions is prevalent. The new laws of Gilead are justified by using quotes from the Bible.

In Genesis 30: 1-3, Rachel asks Jacob to have intercourse with their slave to have a child since Rachel cannot have one herself. The handmaids were used in Gilead to repopulate society since many of the women had become infertile due to radiation poisoning. The bible passage is used to defend this idea and to encourage the use of the handmaids for the good of the society. The government and religion are very closely intertwined, so much so it is almost impossible to tell where one stops and the other begins. The practice of referring to the police as the Guardians of Faith and naming all the stores so they allude to biblical stories fortifies the idea that all the changes are being done to benefit their society.

The commanders are fully aware that it is their own interests they are fulfilling and not the interests of the whole society, especially the women.

The commander says to Offred, " Better never means better for everyone, he says. It always means worse for some" (222). This statement solidifies the fact that the commander is aware of that the manipulations being used in his struggle for power. The use of Bible verses and biblical language such as " praise be" and " under his eye" are a constant reminder that Gilead was formed with religion in mind but with twisting the words to their own advantage.

All written language is considered unsafe and against the beliefs of Gilead. Books and magazines and free press are systematically destroyed. Women are not allowed to read or write and not allowed to express their ideas or gain objective knowledge. By taking away these resources women were completely unable to demonstrate or create their own thoughts and perspectives. " It's strange to remember how we used to think... as if we were free to shape and reshape forever the ever-expanding perimeter of our lives" (227). From this passage it is made clear that the male population and the leaders of Gilead have all the power regarding how the citizens live. The handmaids were also stripped of their names given at birth. Taking on a name composed of the man's first name and the prefix " of", as in belonging to, had a large contribution to the loss of their identity.

New words or neologisms were also invented. Words such as handmaid, martha, and econo-wife were introduced to accommodate the new social structure. The use of these words and the incorporation of them into daily life helped to solidify their meaning in the new existence. This perpetuated the separation among the women into certain classes where no previous

class delineation had existed. These terms strictly defining their new roles they were expected to fill. Atwood also uses vividly descriptive uniforms or required clothing to accentuate the presence of these class barriers. The use of the handmaid's uniforms to alienate and immediately identify them as being breeding objects or state-owned wombs. " It makes them nun-like, ostensibly pure, chaste, and virginal, and it aids in their effacement, actively disempowering them" (Coad).

The Offred and the other handmaid's have also found subtle ways to resist their male dominated existence. By using oral speech in a way to communicate and share knowledge amongst themselves. Although the women of Gilead may have had to be slightly more creative in their methods of delivery, they too relied upon language to regain their own voices. Language is their weapon as much as it is for the men. The obsession for words is used to essentially create their own reality. Atwood repeats this idea many times throughout the book to emphasize the fact that we are reading and getting a glimpse into Offred's reality. It may not have happened exactly how we have read but it happened like this in Offred's mind. This is made clear in her story when Offred reconstructs events in two completely different stories of events.

The written word is also touched upon. Offred repeatedly goes back to the writing on the closet wall. Almost using this as a shrine to her former life. A life where she could see and read the written word. A link to the previous handmaid, someone much like herself. A message of hope in the idea that she may be gone but not completely non-existent. The scrabble game is also

an important piece of the language struggle between Offred and the commander. A game in which you use knowledge and the use of language to gain more points and beat your opponent. While the commander may have used the game as a tool of power over the handmaid, Offred relished the chance to spell out each word and fantasize about how she would have used these words previously. How she had taken for granted the words and letters contained on her wooden letter holder.

The book itself is comprised of the voice recording of Offred telling her story. Ultimately regaining her voice to speak out against the leadership of the Gilead. By the choice of the voice recording we can conclude that it was compiled after her escape. By the narration of her story Offred brings her own subjective perspective into the world and makes it part of reality.

Historically, language is dominated by masculine words and managed by male leaders, which grants men the privilege of maintaining dominant role in the oppression of women. With her clever puns and unraveling of words and their definitions, Atwood demonstrates the ease with which the power of language is often overlooked. She reveals that a closer look would expose the danger in ignoring this power and how easily social control and weave its way into every aspect of our lives.

Atwood compares similar words to reveal the massive impact subtleties can have. By claiming ignorance of the oppression found in language, women could release themselves of responsibility, but ignoring the submissive ideas that came with the acceptance of their language led women into the powerless roles of Gilead. Offred asked herself about her pre-Gileadean life. "

Is that how we lived then? But we lived as usual. Everyone does, most of the time. Whatever is going on is as usual. Even this is as usual, now. We live as usual, by ignoring. Ignoring isn't the same as ignorance, you have to work at it" (Atwood 56)