

The handmaid's tale by margaret atwood overview essay sample

War



The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood is based on the anxieties of the 1980's impending nuclear war and the issues of gender and reproduction. Atwood portrays a dystopian society based in a republic called Gilead, which is run by a theocratic and misogynist dictatorship. The society distorts the hierarchy of its citizens from the modern world, to one that characterizes males as the ruling class, who oversee women in servant roles.

Most of the women population of Gilead is infertile, while the women that still have the ability of child-bearing, live under sexual degradation as handmaids in the households of the Commanders that act as the ruling class. By using a feminist and Marxist viewpoint to analyze the novel, it magnifies the power that women have over themselves and others regardless of their suppression and to further the agenda of men. Due to economic factors, the Gileadean society is divided up into explicit social classes. The society thrives off the social division of labor and the suppression of women.

The social hierarchy is formed through the Commanders, the Guardians, and the Angels of the male-dominated society. While the Handmaids, the Aunts, and the Commander's wives structure the class of the feminine world. The class structure of Gilead can also be seen through the ranking of the characters. The commander's guardian Nick, would be considered upper class but not in the same realm as the commander. " He lives here, in the household, over the garage. Low status: he hasn't been issued a women, not even one. " (18) Nick resides in the same dwelling as the commander, yet still doesn't hold the same authority.

In contrast, the commander and his wife Serena Joy live lavishly with carpets and artwork in their house. " Late Victorian, the house is, a family house, built for a large rich family. " (9) The house interior indicates the material basis of the commander's power. The ability for women to follow the patriarchal and religious structure determines the value of labor among Gilead. " Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth. " (88) Women have the ability to control the marketplace through the supply and demand of their offspring. Women are placed higher in the pecking-order but not directly themselves, but by men taking away every luxury.

" There's no longer any hand lotion or face cream, not for us. "(96) From resorting to butter to replace lotion, to the matches and cigarettes they are not allowed to have. Women subvert oppression despite who places it upon them. From a feminist standpoint, the social caste of women would be seen as suppressed, while a Marxist standpoint would see the handmaids as unpaid sex workers. With the purpose of procreation, Offred the protagonist of the story was expected to engage in sexual intercourse with the Commander, while Serena Joy sat nearby.

Serena Joy acquired the position of authority and would be considered a strong feminist role model, until the reader establishes that she uses her power for self-serving purposes. To control her work force, Serena changes Offred's perception of her through several actions. " Then she takes the cigarette she's been fiddling with and, a little awkwardly, presses it into my hand, closing my fingers around it. " (206) In reality Serena Joy has more

power than the commander. Offred's position could be viewed as a sex worker, without income paid for her services.

From a Marxist viewpoint seeing the handmaids as legal sex workers, who are sanctioned by the Gilead government is a good thing. The workers have more control than they think, but due to the capitalist controlling the market, they therefore control the workers. " It's difficult for me to believe I have power over him, of any sort, but I do; although it's of an equivocal kind. "

(210) Offred would realize her true power in society and overcome oppression, if she grasped the value of her labor to produce offspring. "... both of us are supposed to be invisible, both of us are functionaries." (232)

To establish value in the dystopian society, women would have to recognize their labor power such as Serena Joy does. Although, the handmaids get housing for their duties, some feminists would find oversight and earnings that come with legalization as good thing. " Well, some of them are real pros. Working girls. " (237) On the other hand, feminists would be against women selling their bodies for an occupation. Feminists would also be against Moria's role in society, since she accepted it over being in a work camp, but even more approving of Offred's role since it was not her choice.

The Marxist viewpoint would scold Offred for not asking for financial payment, but commend the Commander for showing Offred there is more room for development within the work place by taking her to a sex club. " If anyone asks you, say you're an evening rental. " (233) While the patriarchy live under the impression that they are the capitalist of the Gilead society, by

looking at the novel with a Marxist and feminist viewpoint we can see the power of women regardless of their suppression.