

# The handmaid's tale vs the blithedale romance: literary comparison

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## **The Blithedale Romance and The Handmaid's Tale Comparison**

Characterization serves as one of the most prevalent techniques that authors utilize in order to make their works to seem compelling and enthralling to audiences. By fashioning images of characters through their speech or actions, readers tend to perceive their personalities as believable and life-like, thus motivating them to continue reading. While Margaret Atwood in the novel *The Handmaid's Tale* and Nathaniel Hawthorne in *The Blithedale Romance* both characterize their protagonists with reserved personalities, their reasoning behind this choice varies. Atwood's portrayal serves to depict Offred's true, rebellious nature; by contrast, Hawthorne attempts to capture Coverdale's desire for individuality.

Throughout their novels *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Blithedale Romance*, both Atwood and Hawthorne seldom portray the emotions of their protagonists, Offred and Coverdale respectively, in order to contribute to the depiction of their private, introverted nature. In regards to Offred, the author demonstrates that the protagonist frequently internalizes any emotions of her past or present. When training for the handmaid position, many of the handmaids, such as Janine, readily communicated the emotional happenings of their past; yet the protagonist never conveys a single detail about her traumatic escape attempt or the loss of her family. Additionally, Offred never openly expresses her hope of escaping from Gilead and reuniting with the loved ones of her past; unlike the other handmaids, such as Moira and Ofglen who often converse on this topic. Unbeknownst to those around her, Offred

embodies a strong sense of hope that one day she will receive a spontaneous message from her husband Luke,

“ Any day now there may be a message from him. It will come in the most unexpected way, from the least likely person, someone I never would have suspected... The message will say that I must have patience: sooner or later he will get me out, we will find her, wherever they’ve put her. She’ll remember us and we will be all three of us together (Atwood 106).

Similar to Offred, Hawthorne’s protagonist Coverdale embodies a shy, detached personality in an attempt to conceal his true emotions from others. Throughout the entire novel, Coverdale never reveals his love for his fellow Blithedale member Priscilla, indicating that he seems uncomfortable with the idea of sharing personal sentiments with other individuals. Not only do the characters remain unaware of the protagonist’s genuine feelings, the readers stay uninformed until the final sentences of the book as Coverdale reflects on his time after Blithedale and confesses his secret, “ The reader, therefore, since I have disclosed so much, is entitled to this one word more. As I write it, he will charitably suppose me to blush, and turn away my face:— I—I myself—was in love—with—PRISCILLA!” (Hawthorne). Coverdale’s confession serves as justification for the peculiar actions he performs throughout the novel while trying to conceal his feelings from others. Overall, authors Atwood and Hawthorne demonstrate the introverted personalities of their protagonists Offred and Coverdale by refraining from displaying their true emotions throughout the novel.

Nevertheless, Margaret Atwood portrays the protagonist of her novel *The Handmaid's Tale* as a reserved character in an effort to disguise Offred's rebellious nature from everyone except the readers. By keeping all of her insubordinate thoughts to herself, the protagonist demonstrates the impression of an obedient citizen of Gilead. For instance, when Ofglen and Offred engage in their forbidden conversation about the presence of God, Ofglen seems stunned that the protagonist responds to her illegal statement, "I thought you were a true believer," Ofglen says... "You were always so stinking pious" (169). In actuality, Offred's thoughts prove her defiant personality as she always dwells on her past, which directly violates the rules of the society. During her training, the aunts preached that reminiscing about the past went against the laws of Gilead since their current lives should only circle around one task: repopulation. Unbeknownst to those around her, Offred frequently breaks this rule whenever she finds a quiet moment to think or reflect such as during her bath before the Ceremony. The protagonist recalls the horrifying moment of the foiling of her family's escape attempt and how the enemy drags her daughter away right in front of her, "She's too young, it's too late, we come apart, my arms are held, and the edges go dark and nothing is left but a little window, ... I can see, small but very clear, I can see her, going away from me, through the trees which are already turning, red and yellow, holding out her arms to me, being carried away" (75).

Instead of focusing on her responsibilities during the Ceremony, Offred contravenes the rules by concentrating on various moments of her life

before Gilead. Moreover, when Serena Joy grants Offred permission to enjoy a cigarette and possess a match, rather than enjoy the cigarette, the protagonist contemplates how the match could aid her in an escape attempt from the house and possibly Gilead itself, “ I don’t need to smoke this cigarette. ... I could burn the house down. Such a fine thought...” (209). All in all, Atwood purposely depicts Offred with a quiet, reserved personality in order to only exhibit her insubordinate nature to the readers through her thoughts.

On the other hand, within the novel *The Blithedale Romance*, Nathaniel Hawthorne depicts his protagonist with a detached personality in an attempt to express Coverdale’s desire for individuality. In a typical day at Blithedale, inhabitants spend a majority of the time with their assigned group; the men work outside while the women labor inside. Sleeping seems like the only time that the people of the community ever receive any true alone time. Yet, every once in a while, members can take a day off for some much needed relaxation. When given the opportunity, Coverdale prefers to spend his time off the beaten path, just to ensure that no one interrupts his peace and quiet,

“ Not long after the preceding incident, in order to get the ache of too constant labor out of my bones, and to relieve my spirit of the irksomeness of a settled routine, I took a holiday. It was my purpose to spend it, all alone, from breakfast-time till twilight, in the deepest wood-seclusion that lay anywhere around us... Unless renewed by a yet farther withdrawal towards

the inner circle of self-communion, I lost the better part of my individuality” (Hawthorne).

The private nature of Coverdale contributes to his longing for individuality as he does not typically spend such an extended amount of time with other people. Furthermore, the protagonist embodies such a strong sense of distinctiveness that he emanates the impression that he holds little interest in Blithedale and its values. The community promotes a sense of closeness to its inhabitants. Throughout the novel, most of the residents spend time with the social circles they form as seen with Hollingsworth, Zenobia, and Priscilla. Conversely, Coverdale enjoys spending time without the company of others in order to engage in his old world habits of writing poetry,

“ It was an admirable place to make verses, tuning the rhythm to the breezy symphony that so often stirred among the vine-leaves; or to meditate an essay for the Dial, in which the many tongues of Nature whispered mysteries, and seemed to ask only a little stronger puff of wind, to speak out the solution of its riddle. Being so pervious to air-currents, it was just the nook, too, for the enjoyment of a cigar. This hermitage was my one exclusive possession, while I counted myself a brother of the socialists” (Hawthorne).

Giving up old world possessions stands as one of founding principles of Blithedale in order to create a firm sense of community. These old habits promote selfishness and as Coverdale participates in them it endorses the idea that he still feels strong attachments to the old life and not Blithedale. In the end, in order to convey Coverdale’s gravitation towards individuality, Hawthorne characterizes him with a fervently private disposition.

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Overall, in the novels *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Blithedale Romance*, Atwood and Hawthorne choose to portray their protagonists with an introverted and private personality. Yet, the reasoning behind this choice serves entirely different purposes in the characterization of Offred and Coverdale. Atwood utilizes a quiet nature for Offred in order to conceal her actual recalcitrant feelings towards Gilead and reveal them to only the readers. On the other hand, Hawthorne applies the personality to Coverdale in an attempt to depict his gravitation towards individuality and his weak interest in the community of Blithedale.