

Depiction of the power of patriarchal language in Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale*

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The English language has changed over time, especially since the colonial era. However, its roots in a male dominated society has not changed; the real meanings and origins of words are now taken for granted. Margaret Atwood shows in her novel that language promotes power. Gender, superiors or race, possesses language through the restriction of literature and control of conversation expand their position of power. In the novel Atwood uses sentence structure and word choice to show the foundation of the society of Gilead and how it was built on gender inequality based on the English language. She subtly incorporates the theme of language throughout the whole story to show not only the effect it has over society but how its limitations affect Offred's sanity.

The leaders in the novel use language to subjugate and separate themselves from the handmaids so they can preserve their own power. For the handmaids a sense of identity is taken and this gives off a feeling of ownership to the theocratic government. The Aunts of Gilead prove that anyone in a higher position, not only men, can use language to reinforce their power. Offred explains, " We are here to define. We must suffer her adjectives" (Atwood, 114). We - the handmaids, are hers - the Aunt's. The handmaids belong to the Aunts. Being defined by others causes the handmaids to " suffer". So, by depicting the handmaids with certain adjectives the aunts are contributing to the pick of dialogue that expresses their social status in which the handmaids have to participate. The leaders use words to keep their status while at the same time are maintaining the compliment people in their place.

The patriarchal English language permits women to get used to make domination. Offred passes on what she's learned from her husband, "Fraternize means to behave like a brother. Luke told me that. He said there was no corresponding word that meant to behave like a sister. Sororities, it would have to be, he said. From the Latin" (Atwood, 11) It makes sense that her husband would tell her that. She doesn't need a dictionary because her wise husband has enlightened her with the information that she needed. Men hold the power, leaving or creating whatever definition they want. Luke expressed that there was no corresponding word for women, but he can invent other words as an expert in language. Before Gilead women were ready to have information filtered through men in an accepted social structure because of male control and their domination of language.

There are situations in which women could not describe because of lack of words which correlates to the handmaids being unable to speak beyond rehearsed greetings. "'Blessed be the fruit', ' May the Lord open', ' The war is going well I hear', ' Praise be', ' We've been sent good weather', ' Which I receive with joy'" (Atwood 19) In both systems, Gilead and before, language is a machine that takes the power away from females. As the " Historical Notes" state, a new government always takes something from the previous one, so Atwood is saying that the American society that boasts freedom and equality might just be a natural disaster or nuclear tragedy away from Gilead. This novel shows us, through subtle word choices wrapped in shocking events, that current American social structure has more in common with the drastic situations of Gilead than readers would care to notice.

The people who are in power but mostly the men carry the information and are in charge for sharing it with the women. Offred says, " It was Luke who told me about mayday, though. For pilots whose planes had been hit, and ships - was it ships too? - at sea. Maybe it was S O S for ships. I wish I could look it up" (Atwood, 44). Again, like with the definition and origins of " mayday" or " fraternize," Luke acts as the teacher/mentor/information provider. Adding " though" at the end of a generally factual sentence adds doubt and makes it more like a confession. Offred sounds like she is beginning to subconsciously question the seemingly equal relationship she used to have with men. Questioning Luke's reliability is reinforced when Offred's memory fails and she questions what information was correct. In the end of this passage, like in the end of American culture as she knew it, she wished to see the original source Luke used - she desired the power to know for herself. If she had known the information beforehand, without Luke having to tell her, Offred would not have had as much trouble remembering it. Now, in the extreme version of her world, Offred wants and needs the power she willingly relinquished to her husband in the past, but of course it is too late.

The handmaid's tale shows that dictatorship can be made by creating a state of fear once language controls are in place. Based on the book manipulating language to control masses of people is very effective. Men are defined by their rank in the military and women are defined by their roles as a wife, a Martha, or a handmaid. They are stripped of their names and replaced with the name of the man of household. Atwood used language demonstrate the power the leaders have over the women in the novel.

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