

Literary analysis of "the handmaid's tale" essay



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'The Handmaid's Tale' is a feminist novel that highlights the perils of women in a society that has not only dehumanized their status but also made it almost criminal to be a woman. The novel highlights a cruel world where women do not enjoy the freedom of choice. In 'The Handmaid's Tale,' women are painted as objects for male selfish desires and satisfaction.

Using this law, men have withdrawn all the things that would have otherwise made life worth living for women. In the Republic of Gilead, women are not supposed to read, write or even listen to music. These are luxuries only reserved for men. Women are also denied the natural pleasures such as love and romance. They have seen as objects of male enjoyment something that has no human values other than to make men happy. As such, they live in a dystopic world.

The story reads like a fictional autobiography. It is told from the first person point of view. However, this story is not just propaganda to highlight gender issues. This is because of its complex characters, setting, and thematic concerns. The male character is torn between remaining loyal to the faith or breaking the law and engaging in the pure pleasure of love and romance. The reader feels that some of the male characters identify with the suffering of the female character but cannot do anything as they are held ransom by the Faith.

The novel also seamlessly combines the fundamentals of modern religion with ancient totalitarian regimes of leadership, making it a masterpiece. The complexity of the novel and the ideals it propagates makes it more than a

work of fiction because it highlights real issues that affect modern-day societies.

To a keen reader, the setting of the novel is very complicated as it combines ancient, modern and post-modernistic issues in an almost unnoticeable way. Time-wise, the novel is set not so much into the distant future.

Geographically, the story happens in a land where the former United States of America lies after a Christian theocratic regime overthrows it.

The Republic of Gilead, the resultant state, thus lies within the boundaries of the current United States of America. When the United States of America government is overthrown and democracy replaced by ancient Christian theocracy that borrows heavily from the Old Testament, the reader is thrown back in time to when government hid behind religion to establish oppressive regimes.

Still, the novels highlight the use of credit cards, effectively depicting a government desperate to fight pollution and other challenges of the modern world. That a commander rules the country brings the reader into the present day world, a world of absolute dictatorship (Atwood 81). The plight to the handmaids who are engaged to bear children for the commander's wives is symbolic of the biblical Old Testament characters of Rachel and Leah.

This means that the social setting is not only heavily laden with fundamental Christian ideals but also post modernistic social issues such as population control. The complex nature of the setting, therefore, influences the direction of the story in that it helps the author to sufficiently blend historical and futuristic ideal in a way seen as still relevant to the modern world.

The reader can understand the story better upon a closer analysis of the characters. The main character is also the narrator and tells the story from the first person point of view making it more of an autobiography. The narrator, Offred, can be seen as both an objective observer and actor. Telling the story from the first person point of view means that any misinterpretations are avoided. As such, the reader is able to get information that is as close to the fact a first-person interpretation of those facts.

Because the narrator is the emblem of the plight of all women in this society, telling the tale from the first-person point of view makes it easy for the reader to understand what women go through and at the same time, share in their plight. It also helps to make the story real and eliminates the notion that the story is just mere feministic propaganda (Brians para 10).

Offred is best understood from the analysis of her name, the symbolic roles she plays in the novel as the symbol of women suffering. Offred, the protagonist, is kidnapped from her husband and thus separated from her family by this oppressive dynasty. She is brought to the commander's house to bear children for his barren wife. Offred is her patronymic name which can be broken down into two names: of and Fred. This indicates that she is of Fred meaning that she belongs to Fred, the commander.

Offred is seen to change throughout the story from the wife of a peasant to the emblematic figure of women liberation. Her significance is seen through her symbolic birth name June, which in the context of the Republic of Gilead means Mayday, the day the women, will be salvaged from their torment. Her

name June thus becomes symbolic of the résistance that would soon lead to their freedom (Atwood 220).

It is possible to develop an understanding of the character from her description of herself. Despite living in a male-dominated world where the power of women has been dramatically curtailed, Offred still manages to maintain a self-awareness of who she is and confidently identifies herself as a woman without any hint that she belongs to any man.

She describes her physical attributes that are distinctively feminine.

Furthermore, despite living in a world where a woman is just an object of man's desire Offred is able to strictly maintain the definition of herself as purely woman, devoid of any material trappings thus: ' I am thirty-three years old. I have brown hair. I stand five seven without shoes' (Atwood 143).

It is this appreciation of herself as a woman coupled with her symbolic name June which makes Offred the emblematic figure of the resistance to male domination.

Offred is also the insignia of how women suffer sexually. It is through her experiences that the reader comes to know her strengths as a woman, repressed thoughts and aspirations that she poses regarding intimacy. It is through Offred that the reader is able to see the way women, in general, are degraded as mere tools for men's sexual gratification.

Offred describes her sexual experiences from the first person's perspective and sees sex in four ways. For her, the sexual experiences that women in the Republic of Gilead go through cannot be termed as lovemaking, neither can

they be said to be rape as women are not supposed to have right to sex and thus by default should not have the right and the power to refuse.

In this case, it is not even within the power of women to refuse sex. Offred says that her sexual encounters with Fred, her master commander, cannot also be termed as copulation either as this means that two people are involved. In real sense, only the commander is involved as her senses, mind, and emotion are not. In her words, sex is seen as degrading, humiliating as well as an emotionless experience as it is only physical and given upon demand from men thus:

“ 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).

Other than the main character, other characters play significant roles in this story. Even though these characters have individual uniqueness they have been categorized into two main groups: male and female. The male characters are divided into four: The Commander of the Faithful led by Fred, for whom Offred is a handmaid. He is the symbolic male chauvinistic character in the novel.

There are also the Eyes, the men who offer intelligence services to the Republic of Gilead rulership, Angels and Guardians of Faith who are the soldiers who fight to protect the republic as well as the Gender Traitors the
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homosexuals seen as traitors of the Faith and sent to die painfully in the colonies.

The relationships between the main character Offred and the men are master-servant kind of relationship. Through this relationship, the reader is able to see the weaknesses rather than the strengths of men. Although the novel presents men as superior and faultless, it is their ability not to procreate (to be infertile) that exposes their weak side. This proves that the notion of men being superior with absolute power over women is false.

Women are the stronger characters as they are the ones who are able to procreate. Offred, as well as other handmaids, are taken from their lawful marriages to procreate for infertile kings (It is unheard of and illegal to declare men as sterile). The commander is seen as sterile by his wife Serena Joy who arranges for Offred to sleep with her driver to give birth for the commander. This experience also presents women as too willing and ready collaborators.

Women characters are also divided into two main groups: legitimate and illegitimate. The legitimate women are the wives, maids like Offred, Aunts, Martha's and economies. The aunts are seen as stumbling blocks to the freedom of the women. They, like the men, have the luxuries of reading and writing (Atwood 139) and are seen as part of the colony.

In one of the most visible oppositions to the liberation of the woman, the aunts tell Offred to stop 'June-ing' too much: June means mayday liberations (Atwood 220). The handmaids in the house of the commander also give the

story from a biblical perspective in reference to some of the biblical figures who took maids to bear children for them when their wives could not.

The most effective tool for communication is the use of language. The author uses language creatively as a tool for communication. The author uses modern language words and syntax construction, making the novel seem so deceptively easy to read.

Language is used as a very powerful tool for communicating women aspirations for freedom as well as portray the colonial mentality of their men in these societies effectively. The choice of words in describing Offred sexual experiences with the commander shows that the women are emotionally removed from the experience. It also portrays the ability of the woman to communicate their notion about sex, which is far from what men see it be.

The author chooses words like copulations, rape, fucking and making love to describe Offred's perspectives of sex. These words also portray the author as having a modernistic approach to sex not just as an act of procreation but as a way to express love. Through the tone of language the reader can see that a woman does not see sex as just an act but an expression of love, something devoid in this society (Atwood 94). The authors choice of words like ' unbabies' reflect the fears that do exist amongst the women of this society.

The author's use of dialogue is also as effective as the choice of words. Various dialogues have different effects. However, the most common outcome of the use of dialogues portrays women's emotional connection regardless of their individual character. Offred's prayer said in monologue

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reflects her fears as a woman, her loss self and of life, and her desire to gain it back (Atwood 286).

Although the treacherous Ofglen is the opposite of Offred in character, their dialogue portrays them as sharing in the suffering that all women go through (Atwood 285). Furthermore, the telephone conversation that Moira and Offred have prepares the readers for what might occur the woman after the fall of the United States of America. It is also an indication that the woman had a premonition of what was to befall her after the establishment of the Republic of Gilead (Atwood 174).

' The Handmaid's Tale' is a story told about the future and the problems that might occur in the world due to technological advancement. As such it is not necessarily a piece of science fiction but speculative fiction, a narration of probable things that might happen in future. It also deviates from the mere feminist propagandist genres as it has a complicated setting, characters, and themes.

Even though the novel is an exaggeration, it portrays the fact that women are still oppressed in the modern world. As such the tale is not far fetched as even the male, a reader is able to identify with the oppressed women in the novel as well as in real life.

Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. New York: Anchor Books, 1986. Print.

Brians, Paul. " Study Guide to Margaret Atwood: *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986)." 1995. Web.

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There are quite a few literary devices used in *The Handmaid's Tale*. The most prominent are metaphors and humor. Plus, the author implemented alliterations, literary allusions, and simile.

The Handmaid's Tale is about a totalitarian state, known as Gilead, that has overthrown the United States government. The novel explores themes of repressed women in a patriarchal society and how they are trying to resist to gain independence.

The Handmaid's Tale is told by a first-person narrator named Offred. The reader follows the current timeline in the present tense, while the flashbacks and background history are told in the past tense.

The Handmaid's Tale takes place in a fundamentalist Christian theocracy which is based on Puritanism. It's taken from the 17th-century America. The authoritative world that heavily relies on religion resembles the political climate of the country at the end of the 20th century.