

The politics of writing in the handmaid's tale



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In Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred describes her life as a concubine in a dystopic and patriarchal world, where fertile women are forced to provide children to their corresponding commanders. Most notably, women are not permitted to read or write in the Republic of Gilead, the faction inhabiting the formerly north eastern United States. Readers commonly accept Offred's story as a warning against conservatism and Christian principles, enacted to an extreme. This basic interpretation fails to take into account the politics behind communication in the form of the recorded word. Writing and reading were strictly activities reserved for privileged men. Contrarily, women were not allowed to read or write because these pursuits were viewed as a means of power and a path towards awareness and understanding. If we neglect how reading and writing specifically are identified as masculine and correlated to the patriarchy in *The Handmaid's Tale*, we will fail to understand the magnitude of the political aspects of writing, which can be used to oppress certain societal groups, as was the case in Offred's recounting. These political aspects mainly include women's role in the history of writing. Atwood includes countless examples of sexist or patriarchal scenarios in her book. The most prevalent is the fact that women are prohibited from reading or writing in attempt to communicate unlawful ideas or express outlawed emotion. In the Republic of Gilead, reading was solely connected to masculinity, and used to subjugate women to the overall cause of bearing children, usually against their wishes. In this essay, I will analyze the politics of writing in *The Handmaid's Tale* through Winner's *Do Artifacts Have Politics*, and then compare this relationship to the Feminist movement in writing using several subsequent articles.

According to Winner, technology is classified as “ all of modern practical artifice, smaller or larger pieces or systems of hardware of a specific kind” (123.) Through this definition, Winner would not directly label the development of writing as an artifact, but he might describe the intrinsic properties of writing itself as an artifact that possesses politics because it “ can embody specific forms of power and authority” (121). Because writing retains this aspect of power and authority, in that it can be used to control or convince, I would argue that the development of writing may be categorized as a technology because it exhibits features of an organized, large-scale system, and thus, writing will be treated as an artifact to Winner’s definition.

In his thesis, Winner argues that two types of governance, or politics, exist to manage different types of technologies. Technologies that “ demand that it be controlled by a centralized, rigidly hierarchical chain of command” (131) are ineffective if controlled by a democratic institution because this type of artifice requires a consolidated figure capable of making decisions unencumbered by long wait times. The other type of technology that Winner discusses is one that is “ man-centered, relatively weak, but resourceful and durable” (121). These technologies are considered to be democratic; they are organized by many people and require input from multiple sources. So, to finally answer Winner’s question, artifacts do have politics. Under an analysis of the relationship between masculinity and writing in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, this association would be considered authoritative by Winner’s argument because the women were prohibited from obtaining written forms of communication. These rules were either enforced by the Aunts, the numerous types of different soldiers, or by the commander.

Women were banned from reading or writing in order to empower the male population of the colony, to keep control of the handmaids in order for them to perform their child bearing tasks, and to maintain order of the diabolic republic. Offred confirms these claims when she states that “ writing is in any case forbidden” (Atwood 39).

The author provides many cases in her work where reading and writing have been outlawed or replaced for women. For example, all forms of currency have been replaced with tokens with an illustrated representation of a single object. Store names have also been replaced by illustrations signifying what service the shop provides. Handmaids don't have access to writing utensils or paper. Most strikingly, the women don't have access to the locked-up Bible, but instead, they are presented with an audio version, which Offred “ knew they made that up, she knew it was wrong, and they left things out” (89). Even the Bible was locked up because the women were placed under the men's control, signifying this relationship between the politics between manhood with writing. All of these instances are example to the politics behind writing, in that writing was used to control what the women thought, and to change their perceptions about the new world order. Also, these instances are relevant to the central claim because they all strengthen the relationship that reading and writing are masculine centered activities aimed to oppress the women in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Quite frequently, Offred would think of the meaning of words as a means to distract herself from the terrible world in which she found herself. This activity was almost meditative for her; it provided a sense of temporary freedom in her thoughts and a way to escape her surroundings. During one

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of these occasions, when she was sitting in her chair, she would “ think about the word chair. It can mean the leader of a meeting. It can also mean a mode of execution. It is the first syllable in charity. It is the French word for flesh” (110). Even though Offred was not allowed to read in Gilead, she still embraces the words “ to comfort herself” (110). words and the many different meanings awaken memories of her previous life and distract her from a world where the politics of writing are connected to patriarchy. Up to this point, I have established a relationship between masculinity and writing in *The Handmaid's Tale* and analyzed it through Winner's *Do Artifacts Have Politics*. To continue the argument, I will now pivot and analyze gender and language in *The Handmaid's Tale* through Winner's article, and how they are furthermore related to masculinity. Similarly to how writing has unmistakable politics according to Winner's argument, language may also have politics because it retains a similar aspect of power and authority that also has the ability to control or convince.

Through Offred, Atwood displays the capability of language and of being aware of innuendos, which she relies on heavily throughout the book. When the Commander allows Offred to use a pen, she inscribes her strengthening phrase: “ *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*” (186). Offred remembers what ability to write feels like, stating “ The pen between my fingers is sensuous, alive almost, I can feel its power, the power of the words it contains. Pen is Envy” (186). This scenario is similar to Helene Cixous' argument in *The Laugh of the Medusa*, where Cixous argues that women may only free herself from the grasp of phallogentrism through writing. When Offred writes for the first time under the rule of Gilead, she begins to feel the “ power” it brings to

her, to ultimately reach a state of enlightenment. In their essay, Hendricks and Oliver discuss the power of words and the effect that the author has of these words. Applying Cixous' argument to theirs in that women live in a phallogocentric world, and also including the psychoanalytic bit where women suffer from jealousy of the male sex organ, Hendricks and Oliver would rather argue that women instead experience the lust for the ability to communicate through written language as the real desirable power, as was the case for Offred, instead of suffering from Cixous' idea of 'penis envy'. Cixous' argument for the psychoanalytic fails in *The Handmaid's Tale* because Offred instead focuses on words rather than male genitalia. Thus, Hendricks and Oliver's argument would be more applicable because of this focus on the politics behind the words. In her article, Jacqueline Rhodes argues that feministic composition, or feministic descriptions, shapes the feministic expressive thought. Basically, her argument is that the feministic vocabulary shapes the feminist's thought. This applies to *The Handmaid's Tale* in that Offred exhibits many examples when her vocabulary, or more specifically the words she chooses to analyze and relate to different schemas, forms part of her thoughts. For example, when Offred states "This is what she says, whispers more or less... I've filled it out for her as much as I can... I've tried to make it sound as much like her as I can. It's a way of keeping her alive" (243) she is using her vocabulary to create a non-physical portrayal of Moira, which can only exist in Offred's thoughts. Thus, I have displayed the politics behind the words and language of Offred.

The identification of a relationship between masculinity and written communication in *The Handmaid's Tale* conveys the idea that writing can be

viewed as a technology, a technology that is extremely male dominated in Margaret Atwood's story. How would Margaret Atwood react to this argument? She would most likely agree because of the feministic ideologies presented in her book, and which are also present in her other works. The issues presented in Atwood's fictional work thirty-one years ago are still pertinent today. One could easily argue that the history of writing has been mainly male dominated since it's advent. By recognizing this fact, society may begin to broaden its scope, and to recognize more feministic works in the general public.