

The handmaids tale – symbolism



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The theme of conformity and resistance reigns throughout the book “The Handmaids Tale” as it follows the life of Offred in a new and restrictive society named Gilead. However, this theme has the potential to be repetitive and boring if the author is not armed with the right techniques. Margaret Atwood, has these skills in abundance. Her use of symbolism creates an extraordinary depth to the book, keeping the reader engaged and thinking about different and conflicting aspects of the story.

Atwood uses many contradicting symbols such as the role the symbol of mirrors play compared to the symbol of The Eyes and the standout red of the handmaid’s garments. Commonly, the colour red holds plenty of significance and meaning, usually through art, though Margaret Atwood’s creation is no exception. The Handmaid’s of the story wear red habits, the wives wear blue, the aunts wear brown and the commanders and enforcers of the law wear black. While other colours of the clothes can be passed off through simpler meanings, the red of the handmaids symbolises something much deeper. The Handmaids sole purpose is for reproduction, in which the red indicates fertility and childbirth. Juxtaposed against this, the red colour is also used as a marker of sexual sin.

Technically, the handmaids are in fact committing adultery, as the commanders are married men. The wives despise the handmaids for this, calling them sluts when they pass them. The red colour symbolizing the ‘marker of sexual sin’ also alludes to ‘The Scarlet Letter’ (a book surrounding the Puritan ideology) when the adulterous Hester Prynne is forced to wear a red A. This symbolism of the colour red creates depth and another dimension to the book, allowing Margaret Atwood to get her point across without

actually making mention of it. The colour red is bold and does not symbolise the most pleasant of all things, so by using symbolism, Margaret Atwood is able to get her unpleasant message across tactfully, without having to outright say it. The Eyes is another symbol in the book though it is also the name of the secret police in Gilead.

They are there to keep a watch over everything, make sure no one steps out of line, and let everyone know that they are always being watched. In this way, the eye also symbolises the ever watchfulness of Gilead and of God. Gilead and God are one and the same – the Handmaids depart from each other saying “ Under His eye”, ‘ He’ being both the state and God. Offred also speaks of a tattoo she has on her leg “ four digits and an eye”.

This again shows that Gilead is drilling the message into them they are always being watched. It is interesting to note how the contradiction of the ever watchfulness of the eyes however. The handmaids are forced to wear large white wings framing their face and Offred points out that the purpose of them is it “ to keep us from seeing, but also from being seen”. These wings are used to ‘ protect’ the handmaids from the gaze of men – it is one of the small freedoms the government thinks they can provide, however the states ever-watching gaze is more intrusive. This symbol of the eyes helps the reader to further understand the oppressive nature of Gilead, but also their contradictory ideas of the handmaids being never seen, yet always watched by God. Although Offred is always being watched, she is never able to fully look at herself.

This idea of looking and watching is also used with the symbol of mirrors. Offred first refers to mirrors in the first paragraph of the first chapter; “ a revolving ball of mirrors”. This image gives the idea of a disco ball – one with so many small mirrors that Offred can’t properly view herself in – just as she isn’t able to at all in the society of Gilead. In the poem ‘ Marrying the Hangman’, (another of Margaret Atwoods works) it is written, “ to live without mirrors is to live without the self”.

This stands true in Offred’s situation as Gilead takes away all of Offred’s freedoms and attempts to make her completely neutral without the hint of personality. Mirrors are taken out from anywhere that Offred might be and where she may be able to turn the mirrors into sharp weapons. Offred muses that “ as in a nunnery too, there are few mirrors”, juxtaposing her situation to that of a nuns. When Offred does catch a glimpse of herself in the mirror, she doesn’t like the way that she looks – a product of the new totalitarian society – it is not so much her look she doesn’t like, but the product of what she has become under the new Gileadean Regime “... round, convex, a pier-glass, like the eye of a fish and myself in it like a distorted shadow, a parody of something ...”.

Mirrors are supposed to show who we are, our identity, and without them our identity is lost. So through this removal of mirrors, we see the loss in Offreds Identity. By making reference to mirrors and utilising them as a symbol through out the entire book, it subliminally focus’ the readers attention of Offreds emotions and her personality, and how her personality changes throughout the book. The symbols in ‘ The Handmaids Tale’ help to pronounce ideas, create depth within the text and makes the reader aware

of things that they otherwise may have missed. Margaret Atwood skillfully integrates these symbols without obviously drawing the reader's attention away from the main plot of the text.