

Narrative techniques as exploration of society in the handmaid's tale



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In Margaret Atwood's 'The Handmaid's Tale', a range of narrative techniques are used to reveal the severity of life in Gilead, a dystopia foreshadowing the corrupt future of American society under a fundamentalist Christian regime. Published in 1986 whereby the 'Religious Right' had gained influence, there were fears of the reversal of women's equality and the degeneration back to submissiveness in the future. Atwood's narrator Offred acts as a vessel, both for bearing a child for the high-society Wives in Gilead and as a window to many of its aspects of life.

Atwood's use of language with biblical connotations is paramount in revealing the puritanical belief upon which Gilead was founded. The reader gets an immediate sense of the distortion of religion in Gilead in Chapter One with the reference to 'the Angels' who 'were objects of fear to us'. The unsettling juxtaposition of a symbol of protection with 'fear' suggests that religion has been distorted to make the people of Gilead believe that their devotion to God ensures their survival in the repressive state where infidels are obliterated. Atwood makes use of religious diction to reveal the need for religious conformity when distorting the biblical reference to 'The Sermon on the Mount' when said, 'Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the Meek, Blessed are the Silent'. The latter has been added by the Gilead officials to make sure the handmaid's are seen and not heard- they have only one role. This archaic view is not typically associated with modern western society but is akin to that of hundreds of years ago where women were expected to fulfill their duties to their home and husbands alone. This idea of women's respective duties can be seen in 'A Godly Forme of Householde Gouernment' by John Dod and Robert Cleaver in 1614 who wrote that a wife

should 'Talk with few' and 'Boast of Silence'[1]. Atwood's emphasis on distorting religion can be largely attributed to the fear in 1980's America of the drift from secularism. Ronald Reagan gained presidency in 1980 and was a strong advocate of the Church and frequently referenced his faith in politics. The Cold War was seen as a battle between the Good Christians of America and the Atheist Communists of the USSR. In one of his speeches, Reagan said, 'If we ever forget that we are One Nation under God, then we will be a nation gone under', a view similarly shared by Thatcher in Britain.

Atwood's use of 'silence' and subservience in the novel are mirrored by the structure which is consciously guarded. The novel is split into two parts- 'Night' and 'Day' whereby the style of narrative changes to reflect Offred's level of freedom. In the day, Offred cannot freely express her thoughts on the repressive regime, reflected by Atwood's use of language that abides by the laws of Gilead such as 'Blessed be the fruit' and 'May the Lord Open'(pg. 29). However, at night, the language appears more lyrical when said 'The night is mine, my own time, to do with as I will, as long as I am quiet' (pg. 47). Arguably, her thoughts at night are the only thing she has complete control over and so she relishes in them. Through the self-conscious narration whereby Atwood deliberately withholds some information, the reader is given a sense of Offred's power when said, 'I would like to believe this is a story I'm telling...If it's a story I'm telling, then I have control over the ending...It isn't a story I'm telling'(pg. 49). The reader in turn cannot easily follow Offred's train of thought, which we later learn in the historical notes is due the fact that her story is in fact a series of tapes.

Atwood uses shifts in time to convey Offred's sense of feeling which leaves the reader disorientated and left to piece together some information. The first flashback occurs in Chapter Three where Offred briefly references to Luke. The flashbacks act as an outlet for Offred to think freely about her previous life as a wife and mother, before it was taken from her. In saying this, Offred does not idealize her past, but by remembering it briefly escapes her present- 'we thought we had such problems' (pg. 61). However, Atwood's use of shifts in time add a greater significance to the narrative in the Historical Notes on page 311. Taking place in 2195, Professor Pieixoto lectures students on the early Gileadian society and through a satirical and light tone reveals Atwood's message about the ease at which societies are quick to see themselves as superior to the ones before. The approach to this lecture is analytical and contrasts to the dark tone of Offred's suffering, to which the reader sympathizes with. The light tone is conveyed by Atwood when said on page 312, 'I expect none of us wants to miss lunch, as happened yesterday. (Laughter). The reader gains a sense of the insensitivity in the lecture towards Offred and Gilead- which in turn makes the reader aware of the importance of the issues such as sexism and religious extremism.

Apart from exercising power over the reader, the disjointed structure of the narrative reveals Offred's uncertain and traumatized state of mind as her thoughts run wild in a life she is restricted in. The narrative becomes suspicious in Chapter Seven when said, 'A story is like a letter. Dear You, I'll say. Just you, without a name. Attaching a name attaches you to the world of fact, which is riskier, more hazardous'. The emphasis on the importance of

the ' name' reveals the impersonal element of Gilead whereby everybody in society, from the Commanders, to the Wives and the Martha's fulfill a role. Atwood deliberately alludes her use of impersonal labels to Chaucer, whose characters in ' The Canterbury Tales' have titles representing their roles in society. In doing so, Atwood has adopted archaic traditional values which abolish individuality. Offred heightens this idea by saying ' we are for breeding purposes: we aren't concubines, geisha girls, concubines...we are two legged wombs, that's all, sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices'. From listing the various submissive roles women have had in the past in different societies reveals Atwood's dark message that the role of the handmaid is not dissimilar to that of roles in past society. This idea can be summarized in saying, " Science fiction has monsters and spaceships; speculative fiction could really happen." [2] Mankind has and always will objectify women, perhaps to lesser degrees to that of Gilead, but at its core the belief is the same.

Atwood's use of nameless handmaids and their unsettling comparison to ' two legged wombs' reveal the feminist nature of her writing and her envisioning the possibility of an anti-woman future. The severity of restrictions in Gilead and the unsettling nature of ' the ceremony' are understood by the reader through Atwood's use of dark imagery. Atwood takes a fairly ordinary image and distorts it. Due to her role in society and ' the ceremony' in which Offred is impregnated by the Commander in the presence of his wife, her outlook on life and its daily occurrences is shown by Atwood's use of dark imagery. In chapter Six, the ' white fluffy clouds' are likened to ' headless sheep' (pg 40), Offred's outlook on life is conditioned by

submissive role in Gilead. Other language likening woman to animals is demonstrated throughout the novel, again to emphasize their exploitation. On page 58, Atwood describes the preparation of chicken for supper and parallels this with Offred's ' Bath Day'- she too has to be prepared alike for her consumption in The Ceremony.

In conclusion, Atwood effectively uses different narrative technique in ' The Handmaid's Tale' when exploring the dangers of religious extremism and the submissive role of women in society. Her use of shifts in time successfully highlight how these themes are ever prevalent in society and will continue to manifest themselves while man sees himself superior over women.

[1] Reynolds, M. Noakes, J, Margarat Atwood- the essential guide pg 64

[2] Potts, Robert (2003-04-26). " Light in the wilderness". The Guardian. Retrieved 2013-05-30.