Title: Choice of Evils
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Publication Details: The Women's Review of Books 3.10 (July 1986): p14.
Source: *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Sharon K. Hall. Vol. 44. Detroit: Gale Research, 1987. From *Literature Resource Center*.
Document Type: Book review

[*Greene, an American professor, editor, and critic, is coeditor of* The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare *(1980) and* Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism *(1985). In the following excerpt Greene contrasts* The **Handmaid**'s **Tale**, *with its implied critique of radical feminism, with the more doctrinaire feminist fantasies of Marge Piercy, Doris Lessing, and others*.]

Considering how many feminist writers have been turning to science fiction lately, it is not surprising to find Margaret Atwood 's [sixth novel]. . . set in the future. But whereas Doris Lessing, Marge Piercy, Joanna Russ and Ursula K. Le Guin use science fiction to explore utopian societies. ***The Handmaid's Tale*** is a cautionary **tale**, the Republic of Gilead a dystopia in the tradition of *1984* and *Brave New World*.

The Handmaid's Tale offers a horrific vision of things to come based on an extrapolation from things as they are. In this "future history," Cambridge, Massachusetts is the center of the Republic of Gilead, a Christian fundamentalist theocracy. Threatened by a drastically declining birth rate, Gilead has institutionalized control of the female population "for breeding purposes." Atwood's narrator Offred is a **handmaid**: "We aren't concubines, geisha girls, courtesans. On the contrary . . . There is supposed to be nothing entertaining about us . . . We are two-legged wombs, that's all: sexual vessels, ambulatory chalices." Handmaids are given three opportunities to produce a healthy baby, three two-year duties with a "Commander of the Faithful" whose name they take (Offred's Commander is Fred). Sterility can only be her fault, since "there is no such thing as a sterile man . . . there are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that's the law." Failure will get her sent to the dreaded "Colonies," where she will be put to work cleaning up toxic wastes. Offred is down to her last chance.

Gilead justifies its polygamy on the basis of Old Testament precedent and "nature" (which "demands variety, for men . . . [as] part of the procreational strategy"), for, like all social orders, this one claims its practices as "natural"; "All we've done is to return things to Nature's norm." . . .

The power of Atwood 's **tale** is in its gradual unfolding, and this second-hand account of it gives no sense of the novel's complex structure or of its delicate interplay of wit and horror. Because of Offred's lowly position in her society's hierarchy, she does not see the total picture, and we share her bewilderment and disorientation. We experience what she calls her "reduced circumstances," a circumscribed environment in which "a chair, a table, a lamp" are the world. We feel the weight of the scarlet nun's habit which is her official garb, the way it restricts movement and vision. We participate in her changed sense of her body which, no longer "an implement for the accomplishment of [her] will," becomes something which "determines" her, something "congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear." We experience her changed sense of time, "blank time," "unfilled time," time measured by the arrival of "the daily egg" on the breakfast tray and "the inevitable egg" of the monthly cycle—time as a medium to be "endured . . . heavy as fried food or thick fog." Much of this world is familiar—the house, the garden, the block, the shops, the university wall that borders Offred's neighborhood. Yet the ordinary is repeatedly defamiliarized: hooded bodies hang on the wall of what once was the Harvard Yard. "Context is all," Offred says more than once.

As Offred learns more, so do we; together we gradually piece together a picture of this society. We discover its social practices: the Birth ceremony, a communal event in which all classes of women participate in orgiastic celebration of female physicality; "Prayvaganzas" (Women's Prayvaganzas are for group weddings . . . men's are for military victories . . . the things we are supposed to rejoice in the most"); "Salvagings" (public executions); "Particicution" (in which the women are given the opportunity to tear a male limb from limb). Once a month, in "the Ceremony," the Commander tries to inseminate the **Handmaid** as she lies between the legs of his wife. These public, communal scenes alternate with private scenes, where the narrator, alone with herself in chapters called "Night," wonders what it all means.

Offred is no hero. She is more like a "good German" than a freedom fighter, unlike her friend Moira, a rebel and lesbian separatist whose courage she does not share but does need to believe in: "I don't want her to be like me. Give in, go along, save her skin. . . . I want gallantry from her, swashbuckling, heroism, single-handed combat. Something I lack." Offred identifies herself with the many people who, in "the time before," tried to survive by "lying low," who "lived by ignoring.":

> Ignoring isn't the same as ignorance, you have to work at it ... there were stories in the newspapers ... but they were about other women ... How awful, we would say, and they were, but they were awful without being believable ... We were the people who were not in the papers. We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of print. It gave us more freedom. We lived in the gaps between the stories.

But Gilead, like Nazi Germany, has been brought into existence by just such "ignoring."

Offred is contrasted not only with Moira, but also with her mother, a feminist who was active in "Take Back the Night" protests, in rallies against pornography and for abortion, and who used to harangue her daughter for being "a backlash": "you young people don't appreciate things . . . You don't know what we had to go through, just to get where you are . . . how many women's lives, how many women's *bodies*, the tanks had to roll over." Offred, in short, grew up as a postfeminist. But the thoughtful reader takes the mother's feminism more seriously than the condescending daughter: "history will absolve me," says the older woman, and in ***The Handmaid's Tale*** it does.

But the feminism of the novel is not simple, for feminism too is a target of Atwood's satire. Gilead pretends to foster a "women's culture" in which women live and work together, sharing traditional female activities. After participating in the birth ceremony, the narrator thinks, "Mother . . . Wherever you may be . . . You wanted a women's culture. Well, now there is one. It isn't what you meant, but it exists." Of course Gilead is not really a women's culture, for "there's no doubt who holds the real power." But there is a spooky resemblance between the pornography burning that Offred's mother took part in and the book-burnings carried out by the right; there is a suggestion that feminist sentimentalization of women's bodies and "women's work" produces new forms of old stereotypes. The narrator criticizes Moira's separatism: "if Moira thought she could create Utopia by shutting herself in a women-only enclave she was sadly mistaken. Men were not just going to go away . . . You couldn't just ignore them," and in fact Moira's kind of ignoring has effects as disastrous as the narrator's. Atwood offers a cruel refutation of separatism when she has Moira find her separatist utopia with a vengeance at "Jezebel's," an officially-sanctioned nightclub-brothel where unassimilable females, professional women and lesbians end up—"butch paradise," as Moira calls it. The parody carries the warning that feminists must not lose sight of the larger issues. Gilead has happened partly because of the *failure* of feminism to effect social change.

As in *1984* and *Brave New World*, the authoritarian society of the future makes us long for the world of the present; and this is the aspect of ***The Handmaid's Tale*** that will spark argument and disagreement among feminists. The restrictions of Gilead make today's "rules" seem like freedom: "I remember the rules . . . Don't open your door to a stranger . . . Don't go to a laundromat, by yourself, at night," and in one of her many nostalgic "attacks of the past," the narrator goes on to "think about laundromats. What I wore to them . . . what I put in them. I think about having such control." As bad as our society is, when compared to the repressions of a totalitarian regime it is "free," for "freedom, like everything else, is relative." Laundromats represent freedom, as do short dresses, high heels, make-up—"When I think: I used to dress like that. That was freedom."

But to reject Gilead seems to leave us no alternative but to endorse the old system—our system. The Commander compares it unfavorably with his brave new world: "We've given (women) more than we've taken away. Don't you remember the singles' bars, the indignity of high school blind dates? The meat market. Don't you remember the terrible gap between the ones who could get a man easily and the ones who couldn't? . . . Think of the human misery . . . What did we overlook?" "Love," Offred answers, "falling in love"; and it is tempting to hear Atwood's voice in this reply, for a world that forbids any personal relationships, friendships or alliances makes even our own look good.

Yet Atwood 's voice echoes in the Commander's rejoinder too—"oh yes, he said, I've read the magazines, that's what they were pushing, wasn't it?" Offred herself thinks about "falling in love" in a way that appears to corroborate the Commander's scepticism: "It was the central thing; it was the way you understood yourself . . . *God is love*, they once said, but we reversed that, and love, like heaven, was always just around the corner. The more difficult it was to love the particular man beside us, the more we believed in love . . . . It's strange to remember how we used to think, as if everything were available to us, as if there were no contingencies, no boundaries, as if we were free to shape and reshape the ever-expanding perimeters of our lives." *As if we were free*: if we are free, why do our ideas of ourselves, the way we define and redefine ourselves, return so insistently to the well-worn ruts of "falling in love"? Why hasn't freedom allowed us to imagine more various shapes for our lives?

Was (is) our freedom real or is it a sham? The narrator recalls women in films: "women on their own, making up their minds . . . They seemed to be able to choose. We seemed to be able to choose, then." Looking at images of women in an old copy of *Vogue*, Offred sees in their "candid eyes" "no quailing, no clinging . . . Pirates, these women." She thinks about those magazines: "What was in them was promise. They dealt in transformations; they suggested an endless series of possibilities . . . They suggested rejuvenation, pain overcome and transcended, endless love. The real promise was immortality." But isn't this promise a media hype

that makes women the more miserable for continually failing at what they are told they have the "freedom" to do? Offred says "I want everything back, the way it was," but does Atwood?

I think, finally, that she does. Despite her reservations, Atwood implies that our society is preferable not only to Gilead, but to any planned society that can be imagined. Even feminist utopias have their horrors, and, as the Commander says, "Better never means better for everyone. It always means worse, for some." "Consider the alternatives," says another defender of the new order; "You see what things used to be like"; and Atwood seems to concur that these are "the alternatives"—a "free society," with all its perils, risks and abuses, or a planned society, which may entail worse. But, in the words which conclude her earlier novel, ***Surfacing***, "there ought to be other choices." Indeed, there have to be other choices, for the alternatives allowed us by a complex industrial world are not likely to be a "free" or a "planned" society, but a choice of how society will be planned and who will do the planning.

Atwood anticipates the criticism she knew this **tale** would incur when she has the **Handmaid** say, "I wish this story were different . . . I wish it showed me in a better light." I too wish for a "different story," not in the sense that I require a more heroic protagonist, for I think ***The Handmaid's Tale*** offers something more important than a story of swashbuckling heroism by demonstrating that there is no safety in "ignoring" and that the greatest danger is in the illusion that there is. But what I do miss is some suggestion of an ideal, some sense of a better way of organizing society that will enable us to become other than we are. As one of the characters points out, "There is more than one kind of freedom . . . Freedom to and freedom from." Though Atwood questions how much freedom our society allows us, she still implies that our "freedom to" is preferable to the new order's "freedom from." But isn't there yet another kind of "freedom to" that she is not seeing—a freedom to do or be in ways that are qualitatively different from anything we who have been conditioned by this society, with its impoverished notion of possibility, can yet imagine?

Perhaps I am unfairly asking Atwood to be the utopian she is not; and I must admit to finding this novel more interesting than the more "politically correct," straightforward feminist utopias precisely because it does not offer easy solutions. Finally, perhaps, this is the **tale**'s greatest value—its power to disturb.

Source Citation
Greene, Gayle. "Choice of Evils." *The Women's Review of Books* 3.10 (July 1986): 14. Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Sharon K. Hall. Vol. 44. Detroit: Gale Research, 1987. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 27 July 2010.

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Gale Document Number: GALE|H1100000086