

Title: Overview of *The Handmaid's Tale*

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[Perkins is an Assistant Professor of English at Prince George's Community College in Maryland and has written numerous critical articles for essay collections, journals, and educational publishers. In the following essay, she explores the complex interplay of dominance, submission, and rebellion in *The Handmaid's Tale* through a focus on the main character's struggle for survival.]

Critics read Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* as a cautionary story of oppression against women as well as a critique of radical feminism. Some who focus on Offred, the narrator and main character, criticize her passivity in the face of rigid limitations on her individual freedom: Gayle Green in her article, "Choice of Evils," published in *The Women's Review of Books* insists, "Offred is no hero." Barbara Ehrenreich in her *New Republic* article, "Feminism's Phantoms," finds her to be "a sappy stand-in for [1984's] Winston Smith. Even her friend Moira characterizes her as "a wimp." Yet, although Offred cannot be considered a more obvious traditional hero like Moira, an examination of her more subtle rebellion against the oppressive totalitarian regime which governs her life illustrates the indefatigable nature of the human spirit.

The Republic of Gilead is a typical totalitarian society in that it promotes terror tactics while enforcing its rigid dogmas. Amin Malak in "Margaret Atwood's 'The Handmaid's Tale' and the Dystopian Tradition," notes that Gilead "prescribes a pattern of life based on frugality, conformity, censorship, corruption, [and] fear." The novel also illuminates the intricate politics of power: leaders define acceptable roles for subordinates (in this case, the women), who are said to be unable to perform more valued functions (reasoning and governing skills). As a result subordinates often find it difficult to believe in their own ability.

Subordinates are encouraged to develop childlike characteristics—submissiveness, docility, dependency—that are pleasing to the dominant group. This group then legitimizes the unequal relationship and incorporates it into society's guiding concepts. In Gilead's power structure women are subservient to men because they are considered not as capable as men. This system involves the marginalization of women, illustrating Simone de Beauvoir's point in *The Second Sex* that a man defines a woman not as autonomous but only as relative to him. He is the Subject and she is the Other. Women in Gilead must concentrate on basic survival and so avoid direct, honest reactions to this marginalization and the terror tactics of those in power. Sometimes the women disguise their actions, appearing to accommodate the demands of this oppressive system, while subtly rebelling.

Throughout the novel, Offred proves her consistent efforts not only to survive, but also to maintain her individuality. When she begins her story with a flashback to her time at the Rachel and Leah Center, she illustrates the politics of power that characterize the novel. She notes the Aunts guarding them with electric cattle prods and leather belts, restricting their movement and interaction with each other. The Handmaids-in-training seem on the surface to submit to this treatment. At night, however, under the threat of severe beatings, they struggle to maintain contact with each other through silent communications in the dark.

Offred also risks physical harm when she steals a few minutes during bathroom breaks to speak to Moira. During these breaks the two women reminisce about past lives and voice their fears and disgust over their present reality. Offred notes, "there is something powerful in the whispering of obscenities, about those in power. There's something delightful about it, something naughty, secretive, forbidden, thrilling. . . . It deflates them, reduces them to the common denominator where they can be dealt with."

As Offred's thoughts turn to the teenagers who must have once populated the former gymnasium, she commits a more personal act of rebellion. The citizens of the new Republic are repeatedly warned to forget the past or to view it with contempt. Yet, throughout her narrative, Offred continually flashes back to her life before the formation of Gilead, especially with her husband Luke and their daughter. These recollections of the freedom and happiness she used to have in her friendship with Moira, in her work, and in her life with family help her to maintain crucial ties to her past life and thus to a sense of identity.

Even under the strict regulations of the Commander's home, Offred finds ways to assert her individuality as she breaks rules. In the Commander's study she heroically reads forbidden books and magazines and begins to assert her own personality in her relationship with him. One of her most courageous actions occurs when she tells the Commander that she would like to know "what's going on"—everything from what the scribbled message "Nolite te bastardes carborundorum" means to specific details about the inner workings of the Republic. When she wants to talk to the Commander instead of read, she breaks two rules: asking for "dangerous" information and forming a relationship with him. Both activities are against the law and thus acts of subversion.

Sometimes she openly disagrees with him, as when he tries to justify the dogmas of the new regime: "We've given women more than we've taken away. This way the all get a man, are protected and can fulfill their biological destinies in peace." Offred insists they overlooked love, a crucial element in the male/female relationship. Her more subtle acts of rebellion include hoarding butter from her meals to rub on her face, and saving a match that she considers using to burn down the house. Often during her nights alone in her room she tries to come to terms with what has happened to her and to decide what she can do in order to survive physically and mentally.

Her walks with Ofglen present a more overt juxtaposition of oppression, submission, and rebellion. Every day the pair observe the consequences of rebellion as they walk through machine gun guarded checkpoints, where suspected terrorists have been shot, and past the prison wall, where bodies of "war criminals" hang. When Ofglen identifies herself as part of the underground and elicits Offred's help, they both risk their lives. This fact becomes painfully apparent one day as they observe the secret police attack and whisk away a man walking in front of them. Even with this reminder that her survival depends on submission, Offred continues to gain forbidden information and will soon begin a relationship that will place her in more danger.

At first glance her relationship with Nick appears to be evidence of her desire to withdraw from the harsh realities of her world. She communicates less with Ofglen and claims little interest in discovering new information for her during nights with the Commander. Yet Offred knowingly places her life in real danger each time she meets Nick in his apartment.

Her physical relationship with Nick is also an act of subversion. In Gilead her body determines her function. As Offred notes, in her service as a Handmaid her body is no longer "an implement for the accomplishment of [her] will." Aunt Lydia has urged them at the Center to renounce themselves and become non-persons, to be "impenetrable" and therefore pure breeding machines.

Offred regains some individual power when she takes back her body and offers it to Nick, willingly. Their sexual union and growing affection for each other prove that she has allowed her self to be "penetrated" both literally and figuratively. Although she feels ashamed when she admits to herself that she no longer wants to leave the Commander's home when she suspects she is pregnant, her desire to maintain her relationship with Nick and their child is another form of rebellion.

Atwood juxtaposes the actions of other female characters with those of Offred in order to highlight her sensibility and her courage. Offred appears to be not as strong as Moira or her mother, who was a radical

feminist before the new Republic took over. She admits she feels like "a wimp" when compared to her friend Moira who continually tries to escape the confines of the Republic. Yet Moira suffers greatly for her attempts; she is beaten severely and is sent to Jezebel's, where she will have "three or four good years" before she is sent "to the boneyard."

Offred insists that she wants "gallantry from [Moira], swashbuckling heroism, single-handed combat. Something I lack." Yet Offred survives, unlike the "Incorrigibles" like Moira who are given two choices: a few years as either a prostitute at Jezebel's or a worker in the Colonies cleaning up toxic waste dumps and then death. Offred's mother, another more traditional hero, was sent to the Colonies. Before the new Republic took over, she had staged demonstrations against oppressive treatment of women and rallies to "Take Back the Night" from male predators. Yet Offred has "taken back the night" in her own personal way during her nightly meetings with Nick. Offred's heroism is more subtle, but no less dangerous, and it helps keep her alive.

Atwood also juxtaposes Offred's behavior with that of the pregnant Handmaid, Janine who "testifies" about her gang rape and subsequent abortion, and, spurred on by jeering women, admits full responsibility for these actions, thus setting a "good example" for the others. Janine gives in completely to the Republic and its dogma and as a result often slips into a trance-like state and loses all sense of reality and her own identity.

Throughout *The Handmaid's Tale* Atwood traces her heroine's efforts to cope, endure, and survive her nightmare world. Offred's account of her life in Gilead presents a fascinating portrait of the politics of power and the strength of the individual will in its struggle to preserve a sense of self.

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