

Title: The Handmaid's Tale: Overview
Novel, 1985

Author(s): Madonne M. Miner
Canadian Writer (1939 -)

Other Names Used: Atwood, Margaret Eleanor;

Source: *Reference Guide to English Literature*. Ed. D. L. Kirkpatrick. 2nd ed. Chicago: St. James Press, 1991. From *Literature Resource Center*.

Document Type: Work overview, Critical essay

Full Text: COPYRIGHT 1991 St. James Press, COPYRIGHT 2007 Gale, Cengage Learning

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* worries over the plight of women in a society governed by religious fundamentalists committed to bolstering a seriously low birthrate. In this "Republic of Gilead" fertile women serve as handmaids to infertile ones; each month, upon ovulation, the handmaid copulates with her mistress's husband. If conception occurs, the handmaid receives assistance in her labor from other handmaids, and then surrenders the child to her mistress. Having given birth successfully, the handmaid can rest assured that she won't be sent to the Colonies, where "unwomen" clean up toxic dumps and radiation spills.

Most readings of *The Handmaid's Tale* approach the text, quite rightly, as a dystopic novel; reactions focus on its horrific presentation of "theocratic ambitions of the religious right," on its understanding of the sinister implications of an exaggerated cultural feminism, and on its critique of our own gender arrangements. Many of these reactions then posit love as a force subverting Gilead's power. While such reactions make sense, readers also must attend to the novel's statements about love's tendency to follow decidedly conservative narrative forms. Drawing parallels between the handmaid Offred's relationships with the three men in her life—Luke, the Commander, and Nick—the novel subverts love's subversive force.

Not surprisingly, Offred takes pains to differentiate among the three men: Luke as her "real love," husband, and father to her child; the Commander as Gileadean "sugar-daddy"—powerful, distant, in control of her future; Nick as her illicit love, companion in crime. But the text makes a very different argument. All three men merge, and this merging requires us to reassess supposed distinctions among husbands, lovers, and commanders. In looking at Luke and the Commander, we see first that the two share a familiarity with various languages; like so many men of privilege throughout history, Luke and the Commander know the language of the classical curriculum and use this knowledge in a subtle reaffirmation of classical gender roles and inequalities. In addition to an interest in old languages, both Luke and the Commander share a penchant for the ways of the past. Luke spouts "old ideas" about women being incapable of abstract thought and men needing more meat, while the Commander provides Offred with outdated women's magazines, and escorts her to a brothel from the Hefner era.

These characteristics of Luke and the Commander contribute to an overall pattern of relational dynamics between these two men and women in the text. Because of their power, the men may serve as "passports" for women in their lives. After women lose their jobs and bank accounts, Offred turns to Luke as a passport provider. But just as the Commander will fail her in this respect (when he calls her into his study, she hopes to trade on his desire: it "could be a passport"), so too Luke: "He said the passports were foolproof.... Maybe he had a plan, a map of some kind in his head." The passports aren't foolproof, and Offred's language suggests that Luke's "plan" may be self-serving. At least in part, the novel is a story of his betrayal of her, of "love's" betrayal of her.

The Handmaid's Tale provides us with two male characters who mirror one another in personal characteristics and relational dynamics. Offred doesn't draw attention to parallels between the two men,

and might protest against such connections but the text insists upon them. Atwood's novel encourages us to read the future in light of the past, and the past in light of the future; doing so, we cannot exclude male figures from our consideration—no matter how disquieting the results of such consideration. Here, recognition of similarity between Luke and the Commander *is* disquieting; it casts doubt not only upon the narrator's story of Luke's love, but also upon love stories generally.

“But wait,” the romantic reader may object, “there's a third male in this story, and he does credit to the love plot.” Various critics argue that Offred “breaks through to her courageous self” in relationship with Nick, and certainly we may acknowledge that Nick's intervention allows Offred to escape, tape her account, and thereby provide us with the story of her past. But despite these positive features, despite certain differences between Nick and Luke/Fred, the novel continues to represent the love plot as something potentially dangerous to women who entangle themselves therein. *The Handmaid's Tale* conveys these dangers in its representations of the effect on Offred of “being in love” and of the grammar according to which she articulates being in love. When in love with Luke, for example, Offred gives in to him, accepts his direction of her toward passivity; she does precisely the same with Nick, losing interest in Mayday and in the possibility of escape. She comments, “The fact is that I no longer want to leave, escape the border to freedom. I want to be here, with Nick, where I can get at him.” She barely listens to Ofglen, and all political commitment she might be capable of making vanishes in light of her commitment to romance.

Equally worrisome is Offred's reliance upon traditional grammars with which to structure her relationship with this man. For example, Offred first employs the language of Harlequin romances to describe her visit to Luke's room; and when she revises this account, she falls into the language of old movies. Sadly, both “reconstructions” limit the range of activities and options available to male and female characters. Operating within these traditional grammars, Offred can individuate neither herself nor Nick; both fall into roles assigned to them by fairy tales and romances.

Every representation of romance in *The Handmaid's Tale*, including that most positive representation, Nick with Offred, is highly qualified, highly ambivalent. The novel wants to believe in “love” at the same time it expresses powerful reservations about how we typically realize this emotion. Finally, *The Handmaid's Tale* is a story of love's limitations, rather than its latitudes.

Source Citation

Miner, Madonne M. "The Handmaid's Tale: Overview." *Reference Guide to English Literature*. Ed. D. L. Kirkpatrick. 2nd ed. Chicago: St. James Press, 1991. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 27 July 2010.

Document URL

http://go.galegroup.com.ezproxy.middlebury.edu/ps/i.do?&id=GALE%7CH1420000363&v=2.1&u=vol_m58c&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w

Gale Document Number: GALEIH1420000363
