
The Handmaid's Tale: Is It a Feminist Novel

In the world of literature, it is all about your reputation.

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, an Orwellian romp into the near future led by a female protagonist, received both the kiss of death and the gift of notoriety when it was labeled a "feminist dystopia." Similar to when a celebrity "tweets" a comment that is remotely debatable, the conversation among literary critics erupted following this instance of labeling. However, the situation surrounding Atwood's novel was slightly different from celebrity Twitter fodder because the author never actually labeled her book a feminist dystopia; others did it for her. In fact, Atwood has tended to resist the label others have given her work. When pressed about her own beliefs, she admitted that she is a feminist if the definition of feminism is a "belief in the rights of women... [as] equal human beings" adding that if "practical, hardline, anti-male feminists took over and became the government" she would "resist them."

Nevertheless, critics continue to debate over whether or not *The Handmaid's Tale* is a feminist text. Of course, it is difficult to debate this topic objectively because, like Atwood, individuals have their own definitions of feminism ranging from Atwood's perspective to definitions that necessitate solely blaming men for the oppression of women.

Luckily, some literary critics consider variables other than a maliciousness supposedly inherent in men to explain the gender relations present in this text. The existing critical conversation surrounding this novel has done a fine job of recognizing the relevance of the enhanced capitalism of the 1980s to the text. Karen Magro affirms the relationship between "unbridled capitalism" and gender, claiming that Margaret Atwood herself found the "gains" women had made in the later half of the twentieth century "precarious," presumably because of the disenfranchisement of women in the midst of increased materialism and commodification (Magro 118). Likewise, Shirley Neuman posits that Atwood's speculations are derived from the "early 1980s reactions to the successes of the women's movement as well as the intersections of these reactions with some of the...excesses of the period" (Neuman 859). Though both of these critics mention the role of capitalism in regards to female oppression both in and outside of the novel, it is Kristen M. Billy who focuses on the ways in which capitalism in the form of gendered commodification functions in *The Handmaid's Tale*, particularly the commodification of procreation. Still, even Billy portrays this behavior as a biological imperative of the male sex. Other critics, such as Barbara Ehrenreich, take a different approach, viewing the novel as a backlash against radical feminism, exemplified through the role that heteronormative romance plays as the "only truly subversive force" in Gileadean society (Ehrenreich 34).

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While I do not think that this novel engages in an “anti-male” agenda like *Billy*, I am unable to ignore the presence of certain men at the center of Gileadean systems of oppression, particularly wealthy men who control the means of production. Moreover, I intend to combine the wisdom of these critics in order to demonstrate how capitalism and love are interconnected in this text. Initially, I plan to briefly establish the realistic origins of this text that stem from 1980s economic ideology and evince Atwood’s negativity toward these ideals through textual evidence. Then, my intention is to demonstrate the relationship between capitalism and gender. Finally, I will posit love as Atwood’s response to the gendered problems derived from capitalism. Ultimately, I aim to prove that this novel portrays Reagan era capitalism and materialism as the patriarchal force that transforms men into oppressors, leading to the eventual subjugation of the female sex. Nevertheless, Atwood champions men as individuals when she evinces heteronormative love as Gilead’s rarest and most important resource.

Atwood herself claimed that there is “nothing in the book that hasn't already happened” and that “all the things described in the book, people have already done to one another” (Magro 118). Perhaps that is why this text seems so familiar to the reader, as if leaving echoes of a nightmare they may have already had. In order to understand Gilead we must first understand the societal parameters that made Gilead a reality. For the purposes of this novel and this essay, it is important to remember the socio-economic environment that existed while Atwood was writing, conditions that are then exaggerated in Offred’s descriptions of pre-Gileadean America. Atwood’s discourse often reveals an aversion to Reaganomics and the materialistic mentality of the 1980s. This perspective on the era is affirmed by economist and journalist Jim Collins who recalls the “Wall Street” culture of this decade, that celebrated “the twin propositions that ‘greed is good’ and that ‘more is better’” (Collins 1).

Initially, Gilead subjugates its citizens by class in addition to gender. The commanders, for example, are wealthy men who hold the highest rank in society. They also seem to flaunt their wealth and Atwood’s diction reveals that she does not approve of this practice. When Offred is describing the Commander’s “very expensive” car, she claims that it is “much better than the chunky, practical Behemoth,” and elaborates on its black color when she likens it to “the color of prestige or a hearse, and long and sleek” (Atwood 20). Though Offred’s description is sincere, Atwood’s intentions are slightly different. First, labeling the fancy car as “much better” than the practical option has a sarcastic connotation that connotes the author’s negativity toward materialism. In addition, comparing the car to a “hearse” equates this material luxury with death. Furthermore, Atwood uses economic language while describing facets of life that seemingly do not hold material value. For instance, Offred labels sanity as a “valuable possession” (Atwood 109). This quote further emphasises my claim that this novel is about commodification in its most extreme form because Offred’s tendency to view the intangible concept of sanity in economic terms shows how saturated the society is with capitalist ideology. Offred agrees, speculating that Gileadean society is not about “control” but about “who can

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own whom,” using the concept of ownership, which typically is applied to items instead of people, to affirm the connection between interpersonal relationships and economy (Atwood 135).

Still, how does this negative focus on capitalism relate to gender?

First, we would be remiss to assume that Atwood spontaneously generated a connection between gender and economy. In fact, keeping in mind her quote about the realistic genesis of this book, we can prove that this socioeconomic relationship is far from a fictional invention. During Ronald Reagan's presidency, “women made up an increasing percentage of those in the lowest-paid occupations, and they made no gains or lost ground in the better-paid trades and professions” (Neuman). This was likely the result of increased competition for jobs in an economy that was beginning to globalize. Incidentally, the general consensus is that capitalism also creates a feeling of entitlement among the elites who are, in Western society, historically wealthy, white, property owning men. It is not outlandish to understand how this sense of material entitlement could be extended toward people, possibly making these men feel as though they are just as entitled to do what they please to women as they are to their impractical and fancy cars.

Kristen Billy cites Azizah Al-Hibri who claims that “men need to dominate women in order to exclude them from production” explaining that “patriarchy results from men’s desire for immortality” and feelings of “inadequacy” that result from their inability to carry children (Billy 24). However, in the sociological article “Capitalism and the Oppression of Women”, Martha Gimenez argues against the idea that patriarchy is a biological imperative of men, insisting that gender inequality is a “structural characteristic of capitalist social formations” that is not sufficiently explained through “microfoundations” such as “men’s or women’s intentions” and biology because gender inequality is “the structural effect of a complex network of macro-level processes through which production and reproduction are inextricably connected” (Gimenez 24). This explanation coincides with the novel’s portrayal of capitalism as an agent of oppression. Furthermore, the article argues that since a capitalist system is unable to provide “full employment and pay to all workers...male and female workers are forced to compete with each other for scarce jobs” (Gimenez 30). This system, in turn, creates two spheres of occupation. Women are allocated to the “sphere of reproductive labor” because men are unable to reproduce in the same fashion while property owning men are given the scarce paid jobs. Essentially, Gimenez is suggesting that in a perfect world in which everyone could obtain employment, gender inequality would vanish.

It is impossible to discern from just one work of literature whether or not Atwood herself is anti-capitalist or anti-materialist however, she indisputably recognized some of the problems that these economic practices created for women. This understanding is exemplified in the novel, in

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which women's bodies are commodified for procreative purposes. According to the text, this began, presumably, with the commodification of sexual pleasure in pre-Gileadean society, showcased by the presence of places like "Porno-Marts." Moreover, in the scenario Atwood presents, fertility has become a scarce resource perhaps as a result of these commodified sexual practices or environmental degradation. Whatever the cause, infertility grew rampant, giving the Gileadean regime the impetus to seize power. Since men control the means of production, fertility becomes another resource that they have dominion over. However, although the conservative regime sought to end the less moral sexual excess of contemporary America, they still commodify sex, further subjugating women. Childbearing in Gilead is "rationalized, made vastly more efficient, and becomes more and more public—part of an integrated social network" (Billy 19). When procreation is industrialized, the sex/gender system of Gilead is reduced to one official function: reproduction.

In the time before the fertility epidemic, similar to the 1980s, women were becoming a more integral part of the workforce and using reproductive technologies to reproduce without men, which potentially excluded men from both the productive and reproductive spheres. This problem is alluded to in one of Offred's Scrabble conversations with the Commander:

"The problem wasn't only with the women, he says. The main problem was with the men. There was nothing for them anymore.

"Nothing?" I say. But they had . . .

"There was nothing for them to do", he says.

"They could make money", I say, a little nastily...

"It's not enough", he says. "It's too abstract. I mean there was nothing for them to do with women." (Atwood 210)

Therefore, widespread infertility provided men with a way to relegate women to the reproductive sphere, giving the men "something to do" with them, and effectively eliminating their competition for success in the capitalist system.

Using this logic, it would seem as though Atwood is suggesting that, under capitalism, the only way to achieve equilibrium is to subjugate half of the population. In this fashion, the novel reveals sexism as a necessary component of capitalism, a radical and frightening notion, considering the fact that her audience is composed of people entrenched in similar- albeit far less extreme- capitalist societies.

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Thankfully, Atwood provides her readers with some reassurance. Return for a moment, to the excerpted conversation between the Commander and Offred. The Commander wants “something to do” with women, not to them or against them. Buried beneath the more prominent elements of the novel, Atwood posits a possible solution to this problem; love. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, love is the force able to connect men and women independently of production and reproduction. Moreover, love is the only force with the potential to subvert the system of capitalist subjugation because it is the only resource that cannot be controlled or purchased.

In chapter nineteen, Aunt Lydia says that “A thing is valued...only if it is rare and hard to get.” This astute observation is the principle that governs economic and interpersonal relations in the novel. In Gilead, love is the only resource rarer than fertility and therefore vehemently sought after. Offred herself ruminates on “falling in love”, observing that the more “difficult” love was the more powerful it seemed, and acknowledging love as a word so powerful that it “made flesh” (Atwood 225). Here, the protagonist is recognizing the power the concept of love has over the human psyche.

This theme is shown primarily through Offred’s relationship with both the Commander and her possibly deceased husband. The Commander is a man of the highest rank who enjoys the fruits of capitalism that Gilead has to offer, such as his previously described car and his access to rare items such as hand lotion and magazines. He even has access to non-procreative sex, as evinced during Offred’s trip to Jezebel’s. However, though the Commander has all that he could purchase, he still longs for love. This is revealed during his meetings with Offred which are ultimately about emotional companionship as opposed to the lewd alternatives that Offred imagines. Rather than asking Offred to perform sexual acts the Commander asks her to play Scrabble with him and to kiss him as if she “meant it” (Atwood 140). Though she finds it peculiar at first, Offred uses love as a subversive tool, exploiting the Commander’s desire in exchange for small conveniences like hand lotion and prohibited information about Gilead.

However, the Commander is not the only character suffering from the absence of love. Offred often longs for the love she experienced with her husband Luke. In one of her late night introspections she admits that she wants “to be held” and told her name. She wants to “be valued” in ways that she is not, to be “more than valuable” (Atwood 97). Technically, Offred is already the most valued commodity in Gileadean society because she is a fertile woman, but this quote implies that Offred wants more than to be valued as a rare commodity; she wants to be loved.

It may seem peculiar that Atwood spends a significant portion of her novel describing Offred’s relationship with Luke, a character that never actually appears. However, when juxtaposed with descriptions of Offred’s relationship with the Commander, it evinces the difference between real

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love and the type of love that can be bought. The Commander attempts to find love with Offred through an economic exchange, but the type of love he's looking for, the type that Offred had with Luke, is invaluable. This is further emphasised in a particular description of Offred and Luke's relationship:

Luke and I used to walk together, sometimes, along these streets. We used to talk about buying a house like one of these, an old big house, fixing it up. We would have a garden, swings for the Children. We would have children. Although we knew it wasn't too likely we could ever afford it, it was something to talk about, a game for Sundays.

Such freedom now seems almost weightless. (Atwood 120)

Gimenez insists that men and women need each other for purposes of procreation, and this potential is controlled by economic factors. Though it "wasn't too likely" that Offred and Luke could afford the material markers of a family unit, ie: (a big house, "swings for the children") their economic inabilities do not infringe on their happiness and do not lessen their bond. Moreover, it is important to give attention to the connotation of the word "weightless." Perhaps Atwood uses this word to describe Offred's freedom because her freedom is intangible, especially when compared with her discussion of the tangible items she and Luke could not afford. This connotes to the reader that it is not the material luxuries that Offred values even though they were the subject of her conversation with Luke. Instead, she values the freedom of discussion and the intimacy she shared with her husband. Furthermore, they do eventually have a child despite these economic difficulties, showing that the desire to procreate out of love supersedes economic boundaries.

Still, one could argue that even Offred's relationship with Luke is affected by economic factors and that Offred intimates that her husband shares the traits of other repressive men. In this case, their relationship would not represent the pure, unsullied love that I have been describing. This alternative view of Offred's relationship with Luke is best presented when Offred loses her job. Luke attempts to comfort Offred, saying that "it's only a job" and that he will "always take care" of her. Initially, Offred thinks that he is patronizing her but then changes her mind, acknowledging that she is "starting to get paranoid" (Atwood 179). Nevertheless, this example does reveal a possible issue with argument this discourse has presented in favor of true love. Moreover, if Luke exhibits behavior that perpetuates the ideals of a "patriarchy", this example dissembles claims that Atwood is not blaming men as a gender for creating and enabling this horrific society. However, when reading the above excerpt, it is prudent to keep in mind the novel's mantra, "context is all." Luke's behavior seems patriarchal in the context of the sexist capitalist system that has rendered his wife jobless. Under different circumstances, his promise to "take care of" his wife would not have such a negative connotation and Offred herself realizes this when she recognizes her own paranoia.

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In a hyper-capitalist society like Gilead, that which cannot be commodified retains the most value and in this case that is love, specifically the love shared between a man and a woman. Atwood portrays heterosexual love as humanity's most benevolent and simultaneously subversive asset. For this reason, it is impossible to say that Atwood "blames" the biological imperatives of men for her dystopian vision because she includes them as a necessary part of the solution. This book is much more concerned with presenting a society in which capitalism has run amuck and human beings are commodified than it is with the "patriarchy." Thus we return to the original question of critics and readers alike:

Is *The Handmaid's Tale* a feminist text?

According to the author's own definition the answer is affirmative. This text promotes a belief in the "rights of women", particularly women disadvantaged by the sexism inherent in capitalism and it does so without "blaming" or excluding the male gender. It promotes the rights women have to think, to learn, to live, and especially to love both themselves and the male receivers of their affection. Perhaps this is the most feminist claim a person could make; to advocate for a future in which a woman does not need a man for survival or social utility but still retains the privilege to love be loved in return and to not feel entitled to anybody but each other.

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