
Deconstruction of the Feminist Dystopia

'If I wanted to say just one thing to one person, I would write a letter.' 1

- Margaret Atwood

Given the feminist reputation of *The Handmaid's Tale* – it has been called a “feminist dystopia”¹ – it is convenient to make the facile assumption that the novel issues its warnings of political apathy exclusively to a female audience. While this argument is seemingly unsophisticated, it is not without foundation. Indeed, many of the novel's female characters, including the narrator herself, are accused of political apathy, and it is the women of Gilead that are most impacted by its totalitarianism. However, this is an overly simplistic view of Atwood's social commentary, as she extends her message to all people to avoid succumbing to a world such as the one she describes: the men too are left unsatisfied by the regime, while some women preside over others, demonstrating that the author's message is not a typically feminist one; at the same time, it is clear, as Coral Ann Howells argues², that Atwood's sympathies lie primarily with the handmaids. Nonetheless, it is important to remember that *The Handmaid's Tale* offers warnings about issues other than totalitarianism, making comment, for example, upon the rise of religious fundamentalism that characterised global politics in the 1980s. It was of particular concern in the United States, where the New Right suddenly became a political force under the Republican presidency of Ronald Reagan, advocating a return to America's Puritan inheritance.

This essay will, however, challenge the assertion that the universality of Atwood's message is issued through its genre as a social satire; this is instead achieved through a blend of different genres, of which social satire is just one. Indeed, *The Handmaid's Tale* can also be categorised as a feminist novel or a dystopia, and it will be argued here that Atwood predominantly exploits the latter of these categories, rather than that of social satire, in order to forewarn her readers, though they do overlap in several respects. Instead, the novel's satiric elements seem to concern less harrowing matters than totalitarianism, focusing more upon the everyday life in Gilead and what the *Washington Post Book World* described as ‘some of the darker interconnections between politics and sex’³: the satire is therefore issued on a micro level, rather than a macro level as the question implies.

The feminist implications in Offred's narration seem to indicate that *The Handmaid's Tale* is

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primarily targeted towards women. Indeed, her style exhibits what Hélène Cixous termed 'écriture féminine' (literally 'gendered women's writing')⁴, which Elaine Showalter defines as 'the inscription of the feminine body and female difference in language and text'⁵. This is most palpable on the evening of the monthly impregnation ceremony, during which Offred, in a refusal to be subjugated by the state-sanctioned rape of the Commander, poetically explores her body whilst naked in the bath. She used to think of it as an 'instrument', which she could control and utilise to satisfy her own desires, and which, while intrinsically limited, formed a 'lithe, single, solid' whole; now, however, she has been reduced to a 'cloud', a metaphor used to imply a loss of self-possession. This 'cloud' is congealed around a central object that is 'the shape of a pear'; used to symbolise the womb, this has become 'hard' and 'more real' than Offred herself, suggesting that she is treated as a 'national resource' by the state and only valued for her child-bearing capabilities. To describe the rhythms of her menstrual cycle, she uses a cosmic analogy, comparing her ova to 'Pinpoints of light' that are traversed by a 'gigantic, round, heavy' moon, which has long been associated with menstruation. When this moon disappears, she sees 'despair coming towards me like famine', a hyperbolic simile used to emphasise the pressure on the women of Gilead to conceive. The female body is a prevalent theme in Atwood's work, and her poetic background is conspicuous in the explicative imagery of this passage, whose elements of extended metaphor and fluency epitomise Cixous's literary theory. Offred's style is therefore distinctly feminine at times, a narrative approach that could be seen to contract Atwood's readership.

In spite of her occasional lapses into 'écriture féminine', however, Offred is distinctly unfeminist in several respects, which is perhaps an indication that the perceived audience of *The Handmaid's Tale* is less narrow than an overwhelmingly female one. Indeed, as Arnold E. Davidson comments⁶, she is 'passive', 'tellingly domesticated' and 'embodies the same sexual dualities that Gilead exhibits in their starkest form'. In this sense, therefore, she represents what Howells describes as a 'moderate heterosexual feminism', in contrast to Moira's 'separatist feminism'⁷. While Atwood is not critical of this moderatism (herself distrustful of ideological doctrine), she does warn against the political indifference of her narrator: Offred frequently laments her own indifference to her mother's feminist activism, which, along with the political apathy of so many younger women, has contributed to the rise of the extreme right wing. As she now realises, 'We lived as usual, by ignoring. Ignoring isn't the same as ignorance, you have to work at it'. The paradox in the second sentence condemns such apathy, implying that young women consciously disregarded the feminist movement. The women that Offred criticises, including herself, can be classified as belonging to post-feminism (a term first used in the 1980s, at the time of writing), which is characterised by a backlash, or mere indifference, to the radical feminism that preceded it; Atwood therefore exploits the apathy of her protagonist and other female characters to criticise contemporary social developments, substantiating the opposing argument that *The Handmaid's Tale* is predominantly a warning to women.

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Atwood vindicates her warning through the backdrop of a totalitarian theocracy, in which the women are subjected to numerous hardships that the men are not forced to endure; this arguably makes the novel more shocking to a female audience, and it therefore seems to exist as more of a warning to this particular group. To exemplify, the women of Gilead have been dispossessed of their original names, illustrated by the patronymics assigned to the handmaids: they adopt the name of their respective Commander (hence 'Offred', 'Ofglen' and so on), which presents them as commodities and highlights the rigid patriarchy that has gripped American society. The fact that the reader never learns Offred's birth name serves to emphasise her loss of personal identity. The remaining women in Gilead are granted similar anonymity, referred to by the functions that they perform; the 'Aunts', for example, are in charge of training and monitoring the handmaids, although this is an ironic title given their callous authority. The 'Marthas', meanwhile, are recommended to a life of domestic servitude; their name has a biblical origin, based upon a story in Luke 10: 38-42, in which Martha, sister of Mary and Lazarus, is preoccupied by 'all the work she had to do'⁸. This allusion to Christianity is one of many in *The Handmaid's Tale*, which serves to emphasise Atwood's warning that religion can be used to justify all of society's ills. Contextually, this is a response to the rise of the New Right (and indeed religious fundamentalism in general), which pervaded global politics in the 1980s.

Along with the loss of their names, Barbara Rigney points out a myriad of ways in which Gilead is particularly oppressive to its female population⁹: they have been stripped of all civil rights, they are forbidden to read or write, and their position essentially amounts to that of a slave. The issue that permeates most through Atwood's novel, however, is the treatment of women as 'two-legged wombs' with no other purpose than to procreate. This is epitomised by the epigraph from Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal*¹⁰, a Juvenalian essay advocating the treatment of women and children as cattle, which Atwood uses to outline her thematic and satiric intentions. This comparison between women and cattle is not an isolated one in *The Handmaid's Tale*, however: the handmaids are controlled by 'electric cattle prods', which are generally used to control breeding animals. The satirical intent of the aforementioned epigraph anticipates the tone with which Atwood will handle Gilead's obsession with fertility. Indeed, the impregnation ceremony, which Rigney paradoxically yet appropriately describes as 'pornographic and asexual'¹¹, is laden with irony and humour, in spite of its perturbing subject matter. The sex is entirely devoid of feeling, highlighted by the coldness of the room, the fact that Offred remains fully clothed, and her description of the procedure as 'fucking', a stark verb that connotes emotional detachment; this is contrasted with the 'ethereality and matter' of the white canopy that hangs above them. The passionless atmosphere is furthered by the sense of regimentation, which is created through the 'two-four marching stroke' of the Commander and the description of Serena Joy as 'arranged'. Even the sexual act, therefore, has become a manifestation of the state's methodical ethos. Offred's use of the third person, 'One detaches oneself', serves to maximise this effect. The importance placed on conception by Gilead has a

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contextual basis, as Atwood was writing at a time of rising infertility and birth-defect rates, which resulted from environmental pollution and natural disasters; her work frequently offers ecological warnings, as in her short stories *Hardball* and *We Want It All*, from *Good Bones* (1992)¹². Her fictional state is therefore an embodiment of contemporary issues, whose solutions she warns against.

Interestingly, however, Offred's description of the ceremony, while rather blunt, has a 'sense of humour about itself', a quality that the *New York Times* discerned throughout the novel¹³. Indeed, she ironically comments upon the Commander's sexual performance, 'At least he's an improvement on the previous one', and, despite being a victim of state-sanctioned rape, manages to find 'something hilarious' about the situation. Atwood is therefore comparable to Dickens, who, in novels such as *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*, exhibits a coalescence of the comic and the bleak¹⁴. This substantiates Amin Malak's argument that the novel 'avoids being solemn' and 'sustains an ironic texture throughout'¹⁵. Clearly, therefore, *The Handmaid's Tale* is, at least in part, a social satire; however, Atwood does not harness this aspect of the novel to issue her warnings of political apathy. Indeed, her satire is more than often focused on small, private issues, which is significant given that the plot largely materialises in a domestic setting; this contrasts with Orwell's masculine emphasis on state machinery in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*¹⁶. Nonetheless, as Malak points out, this satire serves to dislocate full emotional involvement, producing a Brechtian type of alienation¹⁷. In a sense, therefore, it distracts from the novel's dystopian elements, which are Atwood's main channel for issuing her warnings of political apathy: after all, her readership is more likely to heed Offred's account of extremist social control rather than her humour underpinning it.

This social control does not only affect the lives of women, however, but those of all Gileadean citizens, and so the statement is correct in its assertion that *The Handmaid's Tale* extends its message to all audiences; to quote Malak, Atwood 'refrains from convicting a gender in its entirety as the perpetrator of the nightmare that is Gilead'¹⁸. Indeed, as he also points out, it is rare that the novel's male characters are portrayed as cruel, and 'Even the Commander appears more pathetic than sinister, baffled with manipulative, almost, at times, a Fool'¹⁹. It must not be forgotten that he too has been stripped of his name (though not officially), referred to only by his job title. Furthermore, as Offred herself acknowledges, the impregnation ceremony is 'not recreation' but 'duty' for the Commander, and his eventual attempt at a private relationship is a pitiable failure, because, to quote Howells, 'the personal has become inescapably political'²⁰. Ultimately, he is just as isolated as the narrator, and his strange desire to play *Scrabble* with her, and indeed with her predecessor, illustrates the extent of his loneliness. Moreover, in spite of their superior position in the social hierarchy of Gilead, the male population are subservient in a more subtle respect: deprived of sex, it is often easy for them to be manipulated by their female underlings. Aware of her power, Offred teases the soldiers at the barrier by 'flaunting her forbidden sexuality', and they are forced to 'touch with their eyes'.

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A similar sense of sexual desperation is created when the doctor, sexually starved, offers to make Offred pregnant. The state therefore prohibits sexual urges in men as well as women, serving as a warning to both parties in this respect.

In the same way that not all of Atwood's male characters are two-dimensional villains, Malak shows that not all of her female characters are sympathetic either, demonstrating that the novel's message is not a straightforward feminist one. He describes the Aunts as a 'vicious élite of collaborators'²¹, who, as Howells notes, bear marked similarities to leaders of the Concerned Women of America, a Christian women's movement of the late 1970s and early 1980s that urged 'family values' and played a significant role in Congress's withdrawal of support for the Equal Rights Amendment in 1980²². They therefore represent anti-feminism (as opposed to the mere complacency of the younger women), and Atwood's presentation of them as villains functions as a criticism upon the rise of religious fundamentalism. Indeed, they are portrayed as a paramilitary organisation, as signified by their khaki uniforms and their cattle prods, as well as propagandists of the regime, telling distorted tales of women living in pre-Gileadean society. They are also responsible for the most gruesome cruelties, such as the 'Salvagings' and 'Particutions', as well as for individual punishments at the Rachel and Leah Centre. Their only individuation lies in Aunt Lydia, who, according to Howells, possesses a 'peculiar viscousness' under her 'genteel feminine exterior'²³. Indeed, she is responsible for the 'dreadful spectacle of female violence'²⁴ of the Particution in which a man is accused of rape, in a perverse twist that sees women in violent command over men; the horror of this episode is vividly portrayed in Volker Schlöndorff's film adaptation of the novel, in which the handmaids visibly convulse with anger and engage in a bestial wave of hysteria and cruelty²⁵. This scene is evidently influenced by the 'Two Minutes Hate' routine in Nineteen Eighty-Four²⁶, during which Party members must watch a propagandist film conveying the enemies of the state and subsequently express their hatred for them. Atwood therefore employs elements of dystopian fiction to construct a terrifying world that serves as an effective warning to her readership.

This nightmarish vision of the future is Atwood's chief method for issuing her warnings of political apathy, and the ubiquitousness of its horror invites trepidation in all audiences. Malak articulates the salient features of a dystopia²⁷, all of which are satisfied, although to varying degrees, by the Gileadean regime. First and foremost, he emphasises the exercise of absolute power in a dystopian society²⁸, a quality very much present in *The Handmaids Tale*. Indeed, even the language is controlled by the state, in an attempt to manipulate the thoughts of its citizens: as Howells notes²⁹, the rhetoric of 'Aunts', 'Angels' and 'Salvagings' takes words with reassuring emotional connotations and distorts them into euphemisms that become instruments of oppression. This is reminiscent of Orwell's *Newspeak*, a fictional language in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*³⁰, containing similar warnings about the dangers of propaganda and censorship. Malak also specifies the use of terror in a dystopia³¹, a feature reflected in the

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ruthless violence applied by Atwood's theocratic state. Along with the Salvagings and Particutions, the reader bears witness to spontaneous assault by the secret police on 'an ordinary looking man', which is described by Offred in a factual tone to emphasise that such spectacles are commonplace. The violence of Gilead contrasts with its fundamentalist Christian backdrop, demonstrating how religion, regardless of its pacifist doctrine, can be exploited for violent means in a political context, an idea based on an international range of models including Latin America, Iran and the Philippines, with more recent examples including Iraq and Afghanistan³². Offred's declaration of 'relief' indicates how self-serving people become in totalitarian societies such as these. At the same time, however, Malak notes that the aim of dystopian fiction is not to 'distort reality beyond recognition', but 'to allow certain tendencies in modern society to spin forward without the brake of sentiment and humanness'³³; this is another feature met by the Gileadean regime, which is essentially an exaggerated representation of contemporary social trends. As stated in the 'Historical Notes', 'there was little that was truly original with or indigenous to Gilead: its genius was synthesis', a synthesis, to quote Howells, of 'fundamentalist principles, late twentieth-century technology and a Hollywood-style propaganda machine'³⁴. The novel therefore ends as a strong warning to learn from history, in order to avoid the development of a dystopian society such as Gilead.

To conclude, *The Handmaid's Tale* does indeed exist as a warning to all audiences to avoid the political apathy in which totalitarian regimes flourish: Atwood portrays not just the marginalisation of women but of men also, validating the comment from the *New York Times* that the novel exhibits 'an ambivalence towards even its worst villains'³⁵. It is therefore more comprehensive than its 'feminist' label suggests, its concern extending to include basic human rights. In addition, Gilead itself is unquestionably dystopian for all readers, and its depiction is therefore not gender-specific; indeed, the author exploits the horror and contemporary relevance of the regime more than any other aspect of the novel to communicate her message. The satiric facet of *The Handmaid's Tale*, meanwhile, is primarily encountered on a diminished scale in Offred's account of the everyday life in Gilead. Nonetheless, this represents Atwood's departure from traditional dystopian fiction: while her male predecessors have given textual priority to the structural relations between the private and public realms, this novel is told from the point of view of an 'ignorant peripherally involved woman'³⁶, a perspective also adopted in Atwood's preceding novel, *Bodily Harm*³⁷. Her narrative is therefore an incarnation of the 1970s feminist slogan, 'The Personal is Political'³⁸. For the reasons already outlined, however, the novel extends far beyond its feminist origins, and Gilead is ultimately, to quote Howells, a 'failed utopia for everyone'³⁹.

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