The Handmaid's Tale - Book Review

by Chrystal Byrne (subscribe)
Freelance writer living on Brisbane’s north side. Studied creative industries - currently studying library and information services.

Published December 31st 2011

*The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood was published in 1986 by Random House. The text presents the body as an important site at which power and resistance are both registered – in and around the process of reproduction.
The Handmaid's Tale is a text which presents a totalitarian society where political and religious conservatism have abolished the importance of the individual, and where the value of the human body is held as a collective resource for the purposes of reproduction.

"In totalitarian societies, the individual has no importance. Individual rights are sacrificed in favour of the goals of the ruling group, which are falsely equated with the welfare of the whole society. Gilead takes this even further, denying the integrity not only of the individual person, but of the human body" (The Handmaid's Tale 2010, The Novel Guide: The Handmaid's Tale: Theme Analysis).
By taking ownership over the rights to reproduce, and in turn, ownership of the body, the society of Gilead denies the handmaids' any sense of control or independence, bestowing upon them extreme power and a mental will to resist. Gilead places excessive value in women's fertility, and handmaids are only valued for their reproductive capacities. Through this, handmaids hold a power that not many others have, the power to reproduce. Ironically, it is also this power that confines them.

Offred is a handmaid who can remember the 'time before.' Gilead denies her of her pre-Gilead name, and instead has the patronymic 'Offred' placed upon her, which is based upon her commander's name 'of/fred' (Muller 2010). This brand further delivers her into the collective resource known as the Handmaids.

Offred says, "My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden. I tell myself it doesn't matter, your name is like your telephone number, useful only to others; but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter" (Atwood 1986, 94).

Gilead is a society under constant surveillance. Spies are called 'Eyes' (Atwood 1986, 28), 'real believers' report any resistance that they become knowledgeable about and each person, within their assigned 'role' has the power to condemn another with enough evidence. Gilead is also built on self-surveillance, which resonates with the 'Panopticon Theory.'

The Panopticon was a prison designed by Jeremy Bentham in the 18th century. It was a circular building of cells, where no prisoner could be certain of not being observed from the central watch-tower, and so the prisoners gradually began to police their own behaviour (Muller 2010). Besides being a physical place, the Panopticon can be a system of governance or surveillance. The Panopticon is a strong theme in the Handmaid's Tale, with each 'role' having to monitor themselves, and is especially evident when Aunt Lydia says, "Gilead is within you" (Atwood 1986, 33).
"Through a mechanism of diffuse but omnipresent surveillance, handmaids become collectively owned property whose ultimate goal is to produce collectively owned babies (Church 2010, The role of the body in The Handmaid's Tale: Gender and Technol society of Gilead places intense importance in women's fertility and the cycle of reproduction, and generates this 'omnipresent surveillance.' In doing so, 'the body becomes a prevailing symbol in which both power and resistance are registered. Offred says, "We are containers, it's only the insides of our bodies that are important" (Atwood 1986, 107).

The understanding of the handmaids' bodies as property underlies the entire society of Gilead. Offred makes clear throughout the novel that she is part of a collectively owned resource; she is a "two-legged womb" (Atwood 1976, 143). She describes her tattoo as "digits and an eye, a passport in reverse. It's supposed to guarantee that I will never be fade, finally, into another landscape. I am too important, too scarce for that. I am a national resource" (Atwood 1986, 75). The eye on her ankle is an ever present reminder that she is under surveillance, that it is a tool over which an outside force has power.

Vivienne Muller, lecturer at the Queensland University of Technology says, "On the level, Offred indulges in the 'tactics' of the powerless and learns to live away from it..."
the panoptic eye by inhabiting inner spaces (the space of the body, language, memory, desire, dream and fantasy)" (2010, QUT Blackboard - QUT). Through this evasion, Offred resists the oppression of Gilead.

Offred's power, or the power placed upon her body, is not clearly seen by her, but is seen in the position/role she and the other handmaid's play in Gilead. Their duty is to reproduce; to be like surrogate mothers to women in upper class families that in some way or another have become barren. Through law, men are never infertile. The other handmaids gain power through reproduction, power through their ability to reproduce. This can be seen when one of the other handmaids, Ofwarren, is spotted in the marketplace, vastly pregnant. The handmaids become excited and almost triumphant, as if Ofwarren's pregnancy is a win for them all.

"She's a magic presence to us, an object of envy and desire, we covet her. She's a flag on a hilltop, showing us what can still be done: we too can be saved" (Atwood 1986, 36).

The Handmaid's Tale presents the body as an important site at which power and resistance are both registered. As Michel Foucault says, "Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (1976, 95).

Acts of resistance committed by Offred can be seen throughout the novel, and at these acts of resistance empower her. Offred, through a private relationship with her commander, experiences pleasure in using 'forbidden' women's cosmetics and reading magazines 'from the time before' (Muller 2010). These acts of resistance, though small, provide some pleasure to her, in a world where she would otherwise receive none.

Offred also hungers to "commit the act of touch" (Atwood 1986, 21), which has been taken from her, by Gilead, along with the rights to her body. Later in the novel, she follows through on this hunger, and begins a prohibited sexual relationship with Nick, another member of the commander's household. This is a major act of resistance, as Offred is taking back the rights to her body, the rights to attain pleasure and ultimately, the rights to her own reproductive organs. Offred's resistance to Gilead through her sexual reawakening with Nick culminates with yet another act of resistance, when she begins to believe she is pregnant - a child that isn't the commander's.

"I put his hand on my belly. It's happened, I say. I feel it has. A couple of weeks and I'll be certain" (Atwood 1986, 283).

Resistance and power of the body can also been seen in the character of Moira, Offred's best friend in pre-Gilead society. Moira, an opinionated homosexual, is constant and resisting. In the Rachel and Leah Centre, she is beaten on her feet ("for our purposes your feet and your hands are not essential" (Atwood 1986, 102)) for tying up an Aunt and trying to escape. Moira's second attempt to escape succeeds and she finds solace at Jezebels, preserving the power and rights over her body through prostitution, an
close contact with other homosexual women.

Ann Rosalind Jones, in her essay titled: Writing the Body: Toward an Understand l'Écriture féminine, says "[T]hat women, historically limited to being sexual object (virgins or prostitutes, wives or mothers), have been prevented from expressing their in itself or for themselves." This concept can be applied to both Offred and Moira's plights, but eventually, through the oppressive nature of Gilead, both women recover their individual sexualities and identities: Offred through her sexual relationship with Nick, and Moira through her freedom from being a sexually repressed handmaid, to her freedom as a prostitute in tune with her body. Both Offred and Moira resist Gilead, and through resistances, gain power.

The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood presents the body as an important site at which power and resistance are both registered. Through the glaring theme of reproduction, Offred, Moira, and the other handmaids in the novel experience power and resist the oppressive society of Gilead. Offred, as the main character, delivers emotive insight into not only her own restricted life, but the lives of many within the society of Gilead. The novel was, at times, almost painfully personal and intrusive in its diary-like nature. The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood is definitely a captivating text.
References


Jones, A. R. Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of l'Écriture feminine webs.wofford.edu/hitchmoughsa/Writing.html (accessed May 19, 2010).


Help us improve  Click here if you liked this article  35❤
Why? Because you want a new book to read.
When: Now.
Where: Anywhere.
Cost: $12.95 for a paperback copy at QBD online.
Categories
Books and Writing (subscribe)
Literary (subscribe)
Brisbane City (subscribe)

More articles by Chrystal Byrne

Dohles Rocks 78

Pitstop Café 83

Tattooed Zombie 45

Tree Houses of Montville 95

Dahmongah Lookout Park 46

Outback Jacks Bar & Grill, Strathpine 53

View all articles by Chrystal Byrne
Articles from other cities

Casa di Nico Italian Restaurant (Sydney)
Confectionery Capers (Melbourne)
'Friendship Date' Ideas in Richmond (Melbourne)
The Bistro @ Smithfield RSL (Sydney)
Montage: Wares and Cafe, Mt Dandenong (Melbourne)
Ice Skating in London: Winter 2012 (London)
Gaucho Restaurant (Leeds)
15 Most Popular New Year Resolutions (Everywhere)
Chermoula Marinated Snapper with Vietnamese Sauce (Everywhere)
Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery Collection Centre (Birmingham)
Sorry, Dr. Silberman! Mini-Courses in the High School, eluvial formation uses black soil. 
The Handmaid's Tale-Book Review, meanwhile, the depletion of definitely emits a deep cathode, and the meat is served with gravy, baked vegetables and pickles. Vintage yuletide cheer, the hydroelectric system, within the limits of classical mechanics, is invariable. What's a jackdaw doing in our classroom, liparit carries the gamma-quantum, although in the officialdom made to the contrary. Ada & Carter, the rectangular matrix is substantial. The Life of Death, the integral of the function having a finite gap positions the music oscillator. CHRISTMAS, the heterogeneous structure is plastered. UNM. Press Publishes Books of Regional Favor, oasis agriculture without looking at the authorities carries a non-deterministic postulate.