The Handmaid’s Tale: Notes and Quotes

**The Repression of Women**

Women are defined by their ability or inability to reproduce

*Clothing - The Handmaids*

“Everything except the wings around my face is red; the colour of blood which defines us (...) The white wings too are prescribed issue; they keep us from seeing, but also from being seen.” (P18)

“Given our wings, our blinkers, it’s hard to get the full view (...) We have learned to see the world in gasps.” (40)

“Doubled, I walk the street.” (P33)

Clothing defines a woman’s role in Gilead - *it strips away their individuality and makes them the same as every other woman in their category*. It restricts their freedom and confines them to a particular ‘use’. The Handmaid is for reproductive use only - the colour of red is symbolic of the menstrual cycle and this ability to reproduce.

“We are two-legged wombs” (146)

*Images of Flowers and Gardening - Fertility*

“On the wall above the chair, a picture, framed but with no glass: a print of flowers, blue irises. Flowers are still allowed.” (P17)

“She said, think of yourselves as seeds.” (P28) *[Aunt Lydia at the Red Centre to the handmaids in training.]*

The master bedroom is decorated with "a starry canopy of silver flowers."

“Many of the Wives have such gardens, it’s something for them to order and maintain and care for.”

Flowers are a symbol of fertility and the reproductive organs. The Handmaid’s are women within this society who have the ability to reproduce where others are sterile. The Wives are always gardening, emphasising their inability to reproduce because they’re old and withered. Offred is always observing how Serena Joy spends a lot of time gardening and giving her the ‘evils’- jealous of Offred’s ability to ‘flower’. Offred steals a Daffodil from one of Serena’s floral arrangements! Why?

*The Reoccurring Symbol of the Egg – Fertility and Reproduction*

Offred is always talking about eggs. She eats eggs for breakfast; she mentions things looking like the colour of yolk. Cora drops eggs on the floor when she finds Offred sleeping in the cupboard - she thinks that Offred is dead! Dropped eggs symbolises no babies! Eggs are a reoccurring symbol of fertility - a reminder of the reproductive role of the Handmaid’s in this world.

*Unwomen*

Women who are sent to the Colonies because they are either sterile or have opposed the regime either in the past or present. Essentially this is where they extradite the old feminists- like Offred’s mum. Moira chooses a life as a Jezebel rather than the Colonies. The Colonies are a toxic waste dump- the women who live here usually die a slow death from radiation poisoning. *This society doesn’t like feminism!*
Reading and Writing

Women are forbidden to read or write.

“It’s also a story I’m telling in my head. Tell, rather than write, because I’ve nothing to write with and writing is in any case forbidden.” (P49)

“This is a reconstruction.”

The Commander’s study is “an oasis of the forbidden, no wonder we are not allowed in here.” (P 147)

“In the corner where the darkest shadow fell: Nolite te bastardes carborundorum (...) it pleases me to ponder this message.” (P62)

The translation: “Don’t let the bastards grind you down.”

Offred finds freedom in her musings and memories. In Gilead, she is restricted from expressing thought, however, she expresses her subversion internally. The Commander also allows this subversion as they play scrabble. She continually plays with words as she narrates her tale, but, she also continually notes how this is a story - that it can never be completely true. That she has altered aspects to suit her or that she cannot remember exactly everything as it occurs.

It is part of her survival.

This notion of her tale being a “reconstruction” becomes particularly clear in the ‘Historical Notes’ when Professor Pleixoto dismisses her tale. He changes it from her-story to a focus on history. A woman could never be a credible source of the workings of a totalitarian government. The Professor is focused on the identity of the Commander rather than Offred herself. He is critical of Offred’s tale because she does not tell of the governmental structures and policies of the Gileadean regime- she seems to be only focused on herself and the things that personally affect her.

Relationships

A Relationship based on love and trust is forbidden. Relationships within Gilead are based on fear and distrust. The relationship between The Commanders and The Handmaid is supposed to be simply biological.

Offred remarks, “We are not a Geisha or a Concubine (...) any form of entertainment is discouraged.”

The Commander craves a ‘relationship’. The relationship he has with his wife is empty. He seeks conversation and frivolity- he uses Offred for this purpose, just as he used the previous Offred. “He is the head of the house is what he holds.”

Ofglen and Offred ‘chaperone’ one another. Offred reveals her distrust of Ofglen at the beginning- it is too risky to reveal any form of distaste for the regime for fear of being caught out. However, in the conclusion of Offred’s tale, it is implied that Ofglen kills herself in order to keep Offred ‘safe’.
Biblical/Religious Imagery

There is indoctrination of religious beliefs within Gileadean society. Laws are ‘cherry-picked’ to suit the purposes of the regime and used as a justification or as propaganda within this world.

Epigraph at beginning of novel:

Genesis, 30: 1-3

“And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, Give me children, or else I die. And Jacob’s anger was kindled against Rachel; and he said, Am I in God’s stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb? And she said, Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her.”

Genesis is the first book in the Old Testament- it is part of the Torah (first 5 books of the Bible). Genesis follows the lineage of the patriarchs- the early fathers of Judaism; Abraham, Issac and Jacob. Jacob’s wife Rachel was unable to conceive, therefore, she offered up her servant to have Jacob’s child.

“That text, with its focus on bringing a "maid" or Handmaid into a childless marriage to create heirs, is the fundamental idea behind the Republic of Gilead. Specific parts of the Bible that glorify marriage, that absolve men of adultery for the purposes of childbirth, and that convict women of it, have been cherry picked from the text and made into law.” (Source: Shmoop.com)

The Red Centre or the Rachel and Leah Centre

Training camp for the handmaids
Leah was Rachel’s sister and she was also married to Jacob and gave him lots of babies.

Gilead picks and chooses religious beliefs/laws from the Old Testament to justify their regime and the indoctrination of these beliefs upon society.

The Handmaid’s speak in religious rhetoric:

“Praise be”

“Blessed be the fruit”

“May the Lord open” (P29)

The stores that Offred and Ofglen visit on their shopping trips have names such as Lilies of the Field, Loaves and Fishes, Milk and Honey or Soul Scrolls.

They are all tools of propaganda- to keep citizens repressed and under control.

Prayvaganza – a prayer extravaganza (Ch 33)

A Mass marriage ceremony for the entertainment of the women. It symbolises male domination – a patriarchal society- and the reduction of women to their biological function. This ceremony dismisses all idea of relationships being based on love. It represents the subjugation of women in this society.
Totalitarian Regime – Oppression and control through fear

The Wall and the Salvagings

"We stop (…) and stand and look at the bodies. It doesn’t matter if we look at the bodies. We are supposed to look: this is what they are there for, hanging on the Wall." (P42)

The salvaging is used to purge those whose behaviour challenges the beliefs of the regime – past or present. The salvaging is a ritual where groups of men go hunting for dissidents and brutally kill them and place their dead bodies on display. It is used as a way to spread fear and control citizens in Gilead. To maintain the order of the regime.

The Eyes of God (The Eyes)

The eyes are the spies – they create this sense of distrust between people. There is always that fear that you are being watched and could be taken away by the black van. This allusion to the omnipresent God – all seeing, all knowing.

Women’s Salvagings and Particicutions (Part XIV Salvaging)

Offred begins this part by saying:

“I wish this story was different. I wish it was more civilised.” (P279) She continues to say, “I'm sorry there is so much pain in this story. I'm sorry it's in fragments, like a body caught in crossfire or pulled apart by force. But there is nothing I can do to change it.” (P279)

“There’s a surge forward, like a crowd at a rock concert in the former time, when the doors opened, the urgency coming like a wave through us. The air is bright with adrenalin, we are permitted anything and this is freedom." (P291)

“Death makes me hungry” (P291) Offred says after the particicution (gross).

The particicution is similar to a lynch mob: the handmaid’s get a chance to lose control and literally rip a man apart under the justification that he committed the crime of rape. This event highlights the control that these women are under. It can be noted that by allowing them this type of freedom every now and then, the women are kept ‘happy’- they are less likely to rebel because every now and then, they are given a chance to be completely free. Even if this freedom is bloodthirsty.

Satire:
Margaret Atwood:
“There’s nothing in this book that hasn’t happened all ready.”

- Not only is this a ‘futuristic’ dystopian text but it is also a satire.
- The use of humour, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize people’s stupidity or vices, particularly in the context of contemporary politics and other topical issues
- Atwood draws from elements of the ‘real world’ and exaggerates them to expose particular ‘flaws’ in society.
**The Environment**

“The air got too full, once, of chemicals, rays, radiation, the water swarmed with toxic molecules, all of that takes years to clean up, and meanwhile they creep into your body, camp out in your fatty cells.” (P122).

“The sea fisheries were defunct several years ago; the few fish they have now are from fish farms, and taste muddy. The news says the coastal areas are being ‘rested’.” (P173).

“Could they (fish) all be extinct, like the whales?” (P173).

“The other Colonies are worse, though, the toxic dumps and the radiation spills. *They figure you’ve got three years maximum, at those, before your nose falls off and your skin pulls away like rubber gloves.*” (P26)
**The Handmaid’s Tale** by Margaret Atwood

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<th>Exposition</th>
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<td>• Repression of women</td>
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<td>• Indoctrination of religious beliefs</td>
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<td>• Sterility due to Environmental disasters etc.</td>
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**Development of Conflict**

Sequence of flashbacks/memories – Offred flits between past and present so that we can see the contrast between pre-Gilead and Gilead society:

- The Commander wants to have more than the relationship dictated by the regime.
- He plays Scrabble with Offred and enjoys conversation *for his own gratification*.
- Serena Joy wants Offred to get pregnant so she can get rid of her - arranges for her to rendezvous with Nick.
- Nick and Offred take the relationship further than allowed.
- The Commander takes Offred out to Jezebels – this is where she realizes she is indifferent to the Commander.

**Climax**

The women’s Salvaging and the Participation- Ofglen and Offred’s safety are compromised. The next day, a new ‘Ofglen’ appears and Offred is told that a black van came for the other Ofglen, but before they could get her she killed herself.

Offred falls in love with Nick and reveals that she is pregnant.

The Commander’s Wife discovers that Offred has been meeting up with the Commander. Offred awaits her punishment.

The eyes appear to take Offred away – we don’t know whether they are real or whether they are resistance fighters. The Handmaid’s Tale ends with, *“And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light.”* A reader is left to question whether Offred has survived or not.

**Resolution**

**The Historical Notes**

- This is a flash-forward to 2195, where Offred’s tale is being examined by Professor Pieixoto, a speaker at a convention outside of America.
- Her fate remains a mystery and Gilead society has disappeared.
- He is more concerned with Gilead than the identity of Offred - he fails to tell us who she is!
- The Professor distances us from her and almost discredits her story. Offred is just this nameless woman.
- Like Gilead society, he depersonalises her.
- He reverts his focus back to ‘HIStory’ – the Commander, rather than ‘HERstory’- Offred. Perhaps it ends on a satirical note- history does tend to be focused on the ‘patriarchs’.

**Applause**

*“Are there any questions?”*
The Handmaid’s Tale

By Margaret Atwood

Faith

We slept in what had once been the gymnasium.

And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light.

This is a reconstruction.
All of it is a reconstruction.

PA 1985