Sam G.

Cami Pack

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Through One Woman’s Eyes: The world of *The Handmaid’s Tale*

*The Handmaid’s Tale,* by Margaret Atwood, can initially be viewed as a simple narrative about a single individual. However, upon closer inspection, the story touches on several larger themes, such as identity, religion, politics, dystopias, and feminism in relation to Gileadean society. These themes are also expounded upon by June’s descriptions of the world around her. For example, while the handmaid’s plight is part of the feminine struggle in Gilead, it is not the struggle that *every* woman goes through in this society; women are also Marthas, Wives, Unwomen, government sanctioned whores, and Econowives. While the full story regarding women in these positions is not given, the reader sees the plight of these women through June’s eyes. With June leading the reader, the book shows the true and terrifying scope of Gileadean oppression via extreme fundamentalism.

The word “dystopia” has been given multiple definitions by multiple sources, but none can describe the word the way the basic roots describe it: “dys- (bad) + Utopia” (Dictionary). Gilead is an excellent example of the basic idea of a “bad utopia.” The society has order, is well-enforced (for the most part), has dogmatic support amongst the important circles, and defends individuals from crimes of the past (for example, rape, as June points out throughout the book: “Women were not protected then”) (Atwood 24). However, even a cursory examination of the society will provide enough flaws to outweigh the benefits. A closer look will even undermine some of the benefits (rape still exists; it is simply government-sanctioned and with predetermined partners). In addition, while utopias are built to last forever, the historical notes give conclusive proof that Gilead collapsed fairly quickly. The system also betrays its religious principles readily; the largest and most apparent example would be the state-sanctioned whorehouses, such as Jezebel’s, which allows the Commanders to engage in activities expressly forbidden by society without violating any laws. Of course, as is readily shown throughout the book, the “republic” of Gilead is all too willing to do what it has to in order to ensure it maintains political dominance.

While Gilead’s political customs are based on religion–or at least claim to be—the amount of actual piousness the higher-class citizens engage in is severely limited. The very act of honoring God through prayer (something integral to the Christian faith) is done by machines, and many of the religious moral ideas are betrayed by the government or twisted to fit their own system. As the historical notes explain, many of the regime’s ideas were created for political rather than religious reasons. Specifically, the notes touch on the idea of the “particicution” and its creation as a way to allow handmaids to let off steam; as noted in the historical notes, “…the particicution ceremony…[an] effective way of ridding yourself of subversive elements but that it would also act as a steam valve for the female elements in Gilead” (Atwood 307). Of course, in June’s time, the given reason is related to a passage in Deuteronomy condemning rapists to death: “If a man find a betrothed damsel in the field, and the man force her, and lie with her: then the man only that lay with her shall die” (Deuteronomy). What makes this manipulation so obvious is the fact that Gilead does not even fully enforce its ideals. For example, when June and Ofglen go to the wall, they see men that were murdered for “gender treachery” (a.k.a. homosexuality) according to the fundamentalist Gileadean biblical principles: “If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them” (Deuteronomy). However, when June sees Moira at Jezebel’s, she learns that not only has Moira (a lesbian) been allowed to survive, there are many homosexual women there who act on their nature and are not killed because they are still doing their job as a prostitute. Of course, this might also be related to the simple fact that Gilead blatantly cares less about women, as they show repeatedly.

June’s position in Gileadean society can be explained simply and bluntly: she is considered an object. She is nothing more than a receptacle to be used for the creation of more healthy babies. Even though Gilead attempts to instill pride in handmaids via propaganda, the lack of individuality each handmaid is forced to deal with—the prime example being the simple lack of a name—makes it perfectly clear what the regime really thinks about them. Women in other positions are (from June’s point of view) not much better off. Wives are also stripped of their names and are forced to be present while they observe their husband (who they may or may not love, but at least care about) having sex with another woman every month. Even the Marthas, while relatively well-off compared to other women, are in a perilous position, as they are not nearly as “necessary” and can easily be sent to the colonies after only a minor transgression. In situations like this, it is hard to imagine why the people would not rise up against the regime. However, the answer can be provided in one word: complacency.

Throughout the book, Moira is portrayed as a fiery young woman who stands against oppression, the prime example being her escape from the red center. All that changes when June meets her again in Jezebel’s. By this time, Moira has become resigned to her fate and, unbelievably enough, has become complacent, as is made blatantly evident by Moira’s simple comment of “What’s the point?” (Atwood 243). While this may seem like a shocking character reversal, it is actually characteristic of the entire society. When put into an oppressive situation like the Gileadean regime, humans will eventually become complacent and adjust to their new life as an adaptive mechanism. This is made apparent early on when, after Moira’s escape, the other handmaids show no signs of following her lead and breaking free from the oppressive regime.

There is no reason to believe that *The Handmaid’s Tale* provides the reader with a complete vision and analysis of the Republic of Gilead. However, by showing the limited amount it provides through the eyes of a member of the oppressed, it paints a powerful picture that the reader can use to draw their own conclusions—which could potentially make the book a more unique experience for each individual. Unfortunately, as is made clear in the historical notes, the individual can always be ignored. The scholars in the future society chose to use *The Handmaid’s Tale* as no more than a source to cite in their study of Gileadean history. While the professors in the notes may know more about the society through historical records, the themes the book touches on are sadly ignored, once more proving the importance of the individual account of history. Their actions provide the reader with the book’s most terrifying implication; by ignoring the individual plight and human emotions of June’s story, the future society has not learned from it. Instead of acting as a warning about the dangers of oppressive regimes, her story could simply serve as a set of instructions for creating a new one.

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