



Research Article

# Power Writes the Body: Sexual Regulation and Political Control in *The Handmaid's Tale*

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## Abstract

This paper analyzes *The Handmaid's Tale* as a dystopian novel that examines how power controls sexuality, choice, and human freedom. Using ideas from Michel Foucault and Simone de Beauvoir, the paper shows how the state of Gilead turns women into objects by regulating their bodies through religion, law, and fear. The novel is placed within the dystopian tradition of works like *1984*, *Brave New World*, and *We*, while also highlighting what makes Atwood's novel distinctive: its feminist focus and use of irony. By tracing Offred's movement from passive victim to cautious survivor, the paper emphasizes Atwood's theme of survival and resistance. It also discusses the ironic "Historical Notes" to show how moral neutrality and detached analysis can excuse oppression. Overall, the paper argues that *The Handmaid's Tale* serves as a warning against totalitarianism, misogyny, and the loss of moral responsibility.

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In his book *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault discusses the complicated and somewhat contradictory relationship between sex and power. He explains how power controls and influences sexuality by creating rules and laws around it:

To deal with sex, power employs nothing more than a law of prohibition. Its objective: that sex renounce itself. Its instrument: the threat of a punishment that is nothing other than the suppression of sex. Renounce yourself or suffer the penalty of being suppressed; do not appear if you do not want to disappear. Your existence will be maintained only at the cost of your nullification. Power constrains sex only through a taboo that plays on the alternative between two nonexistences (Foucault, 1990, p.84).

To understand the suffering of Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale*, readers should keep Michel Foucault's ideas in mind. Atwood tells the story through one woman's experience to show how frightening and humiliating life is under a future society ruled by extreme

religious beliefs. Offred is one of the women known as handmaids, chosen only because they can still have children. They are kept in guarded spaces and forced to take part in planned sexual acts with powerful men called Commanders. This system exists in Gilead, a society that combines religion and government and justifies these practices as a response to widespread infertility among white citizens. As suggested in the novel's opening quotations, leaders use stories from the Old Testament to defend this arrangement. Following biblical examples, the Commander's Wife controls and oversees these encounters, while the handmaid is treated as less than human and has no choice. If a handmaid refuses or fails, she is sent to the Colonies, where women are forced to clean toxic waste under deadly conditions. In this way, the government of Gilead turns sex into something that can be traded simply to stay alive. One of the strengths of the novel is how effectively it presents a society that claims to follow Christian values but, in reality, shows little kindness or moral depth. Life in Gilead is shaped by strict

control, enforced sameness, limited freedom of expression, widespread fear, and constant pressure to obey. These conditions are typical of authoritarian systems and are also seen in classic dystopian novels such as Zamyatin's *We*, Huxley's *Brave New World*, and Orwell's *1984*. To place Atwood's novel within the dystopian tradition, it is necessary to identify the main features shared by these earlier works. The discussion that follows will examine how Atwood adapts these elements and gives them new meaning in her own narrative.

Dystopian stories are mainly concerned with power—especially power that blocks or twists human freedom. This power is usually shown in its most extreme form, allowing no mistakes or differences, much like the system described in *1984*. In these worlds, authority operates smoothly and without mercy, pushing society toward complete control. Often, war or the threat of outside enemies exists in the background, serving as an excuse for the state to justify fear, repression, and strict rule at home. Although dystopian novels can feel dark and frightening, their goal is not simply to scare the reader. Instead, they function as warnings. These works often include exaggerated or unreal elements that go “one step beyond our reality,” (Howe, 1983, p.8) but they are not meant to escape reality or create pure fantasy. Rather, they push existing social tendencies into the future to show what might happen if compassion and ethical limits are removed (Howe, 2002, p.242).

At the heart of dystopian fiction is the struggle between personal freedom and social control. Individuals resist having their own desires replaced by rules imposed by distant and uncaring systems. As one character in *We* expresses, the core issue is the desire to choose for oneself rather than having choices made by others (Zamyatin, 1993, p.v). This conflict extends into many other oppositions, such as feeling versus logic, creativity versus calculation, intuition versus science, kindness versus cruelty, faith versus material concerns, love versus domination, and ultimately, good versus evil.

Dystopian novels often present characters in a simplified way. This is likely because these stories focus heavily on ideas and political messages rather than on complex personalities. The dark and oppressive mood of dystopias also leaves little room for hopeful or strong characters who might comfort the reader. When such characters do appear, they usually fail, as they are powerless against the harsh and dominant systems they face. Societies in dystopian fiction are usually built on outdated beliefs and strict rules, which makes them resistant to change. Because these systems rely on force and rigid control, life becomes frozen and repetitive. For those at the bottom of society, everyday existence is dull, limited, and predictable, with no real chance for growth or transformation (Howe, 2002, p.240). As a result, dystopias focus less on progress and more on anxiety

about what lies ahead. At the same time, they quietly point back to the present, suggesting that a different path is still possible.

Dystopian novels are, to a large extent, driven by ideas and arguments. They invite readers to think through opposing concepts and social possibilities, creating what can be described as a form of theoretical debate. Although many viewpoints are explored, these stories ultimately express a clear political and philosophical position, using fiction as an effective way to communicate it. What sets Atwood's novel apart from earlier dystopian works is its clear focus on women and gender oppression. Gilead is openly hostile to women, both in its religious beliefs and in how it operates day to day. In this society, handmaids are treated as property and valued only for their ability to have children. They are not meant to be attractive or entertaining; instead, they are reduced to their biological function and described as living containers rather than full human beings. “We are all for breeding purposes: We aren't concubines, geisha girls, courtesans. On the contrary: everything possible has been done to remove us from that category. There is supposed to be nothing entertaining about us. [...] We are two legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices” (Atwood, 1986, p.146).

Beyond the handmaids, the regime also maintains an official group of prostitutes known as Jezebels, whose role is to amuse visiting officials from other countries. To further strip the handmaids of their past identities, the state takes away their real names and replaces them with names based on the men who control them, such as Offred or Ofglen. Through this practice, women become possessions, defined entirely by the men who dominate them sexually and socially.

The condition of the handmaids clearly reflects Simone de Beauvoir's argument that women are not seen as independent individuals but are defined only in relation to men. Men are treated as the central figures with authority and meaning, while women are pushed into a secondary position (Beauvoir, 2010, p.xvi). This way of thinking also supports Foucault's idea about the close connection between power and sexuality: because men control power in society, they also decide social roles, moral rules, and religious meanings in ways that serve their own interests.

Not every woman in Atwood's novel is shown as kind or admirable, just as not every man is presented as cruel or evil. The Aunts, for example, are a harsh group of women who support the regime and help enforce its rules. They train and discipline the handmaids through fear and punishment, fully backing the church-run state. Instead of resisting oppression, they adopt male-centered values and turn against other women. Aunt Lydia, in particular, speaks against women's independence and teaches the handmaids to erase themselves as individuals. She insists

that they must remain unseen and silent, treating invisibility as a form of virtue (Atwood, 1986, p.39).

By contrast, some male characters act in ways that challenge the system. Nick, the Commander's driver, is connected to a secret resistance group that includes both men and women and works to undermine the regime and help women escape. Offred also continues to long for her past life with her husband, Luke, whom she believes may be dead. Through these relationships, Atwood shows that responsibility for Gilead's cruelty cannot be blamed entirely on one gender.

Although the novel strongly criticizes the hatred of women that causes deep suffering, it does not suggest that all men are equally guilty. In fact, very few male characters are shown committing violence directly; most brutal acts are mentioned only afterward, rather than described in detail. Even the Commander is portrayed less as a frightening villain and more as a weak and confused figure, sometimes appearing foolish rather than powerful.

Some critics have argued that this approach weakens the novel's feminist message. Writing in the *Times Literary Supplement*, Lorna Sage suggested that the novel reflects a more cautious and reflective version of Atwood, even describing it as a work that values the present by contrast with a terrible imagined future (Sage, 1986, p.307). However, it is difficult to see the novel as praising current society. Like Orwell in *1984*, Atwood takes existing political and social trends and pushes them forward to warn readers about the dangers of religious extremism, rigid beliefs, and hostility toward women that may already be gaining support. In this sense, the novel looks to the present not to celebrate it, but to urge awareness, responsibility, and a stronger commitment to tolerance, empathy, and women's right to a distinct and independent identity.

The novel develops its main ideas by placing two extreme situations side by side. On one hand, there is a morally exhausted present, which Aunt Lydia mocks as a society overwhelmed by too many choices. On the other hand, there is a future ruled by strict authority, where choice is almost entirely removed. While readers may criticize the excess and disorder of a society without limits, they are far more disturbed by the world of Gilead, where rigid beliefs narrow reality and strip people of personal freedom. As Aunt Lydia explains, this society replaces the freedom to choose with freedom from choice, presenting control as a form of protection (Atwood, 1986, p.34-35).

Offred's suffering shows what happens when people are no longer allowed to hope, plan, or decide for themselves. When life is reduced to only what is strictly necessary, existence begins to feel like an endless prison. This loss of freedom affects not only the victims but also those who appear to hold power. Everyone in Gilead lives under obligation. Even the Commander does not act out

of desire but follows assigned duties, including his sexual role with Offred (Atwood, 1986, p.105).

Because life in Gilead is unstable and harsh, most people focus simply on surviving. This constant struggle reflects Atwood's argument in *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, where she describes Canada as a society shaped by a sense of collective victimhood and endurance. In that work, Atwood outlines several ways victims respond to oppression, including one position in which a person recognizes their victim status but refuses to accept it as unavoidable (Atwood, 1996, p.37).

Offred fits this model. Over time, she becomes increasingly aware of her condition and slowly begins to resist it. Her secret defiance of the Commander and his Wife, her decision to begin a relationship with Nick, and her involvement with the resistance all show her shift from passive suffering to cautious rebellion. This determination to survive, along with brief moments of kindness among the handmaids, introduces traces of hope and human connection into an otherwise bleak and oppressive story.

What makes Atwood's novel especially powerful is the way she introduces the main character not as a fully formed person, but almost as a distant voice. At first, the heroine seems half-awake, offering scattered impressions of her surroundings along with brief memories of her past life. As the story slowly adds detail, this voice quietly changes. Without sudden shifts, it grows clearer and stronger, reflecting the heroine's increasing understanding of the world she lives in. In this way, a woman who is controlled and pressured by others gradually becomes someone who plans, resists, and dares to break the twisted rules of Gilead.

Atwood also moves carefully between past and present. Memories of life before Gilead reveal a world that was imperfect but still rich in energy, creativity, warmth, and personal identity. These moments sharply contrast with the emptiness, control, and pain of life under a totalitarian system. By the end of the novel, the reader clearly sees that Gilead operates through force rather than choice, obedience rather than free will, and fear rather than desire.

The novel delivers its disturbing impact gradually. At first, the calm and restrained narrative voice highlights the strict simplicity and seriousness imposed by the state. Over time, cruelty and corruption appear bit by bit. As the story reaches its darkest moments, the narrator becomes emotionally engaged, keeping readers uncertain about the heroine's fate. This slow unveiling mirrors the novel's central message: ideas that seem harmless or reassuring at first can become brutally oppressive once they gain power. Despite its dark subject matter, the novel avoids being relentlessly grim. Irony runs through the story, and there are relatively few graphic scenes of violence. When brutality does appear, it is described briefly and sharply,

without lingering on shocking detail. This restraint encourages readers to remain thoughtful rather than overwhelmed. Like many dystopian works, Atwood wants readers to stay rational and critical instead of becoming fully absorbed emotionally. This controlled distance creates a kind of reflective detachment that strengthens the novel's irony.

At the same time, the reader is not meant to feel completely detached. Atwood wants us to care about the heroine, but not so deeply that we lose perspective. This balance between sympathy and distance allows irony to remain intact. The novel ends with a striking example of this irony in its epilogue, which mocks academic discussions that focus on minor details while ignoring moral responsibility. In a future scholarly conference, a speaker argues that the people of Gilead should not be judged too harshly and insists that the goal is understanding, not criticism. This closing scene exposes how empty and absurd such detached analysis can be when it avoids confronting real injustice. A

allow me to say that in my opinion we must be cautious about passing moral judgement upon the Gileadeans. Surely, we have learned by now that such judgements are of necessity culture-specific. Also, Gileadean society was under a good deal of pressure, demographic and otherwise, and was subject to factors from which we ourselves are happily more free. Our job is not to censure but to understand. (Applause.) (Atwood, 1986, p.314-15)

The section titled "Historical Notes" at the end of the novel works as a satire aimed at critics and scholars who analyze texts in a cold, detached way without truly engaging with the suffering expressed in them. These critics avoid difficult questions, organize facts, and build impressive-sounding theories using fashionable academic language, yet their work lacks real insight or emotional understanding. Atwood clearly shows that when scholars—or readers—hide behind claims of neutrality and refuse to take a moral or political position on serious issues like totalitarianism, they end up indirectly defending injustice. Even more troubling is the audience's applause at the lecture, which suggests that sexism and moral blindness still survive far into the future.

Although *The Handmaid's Tale* clearly contains the key elements of dystopian fiction, it also adds two important features: feminism and irony. The novel explores the close connection between power and sexuality, and while it strongly criticizes male-centered oppression, its feminism does not reject men entirely. Instead, it values relationships between women and men and presents feminist ideas in a balanced, humane, and thoughtful way rather than in an aggressive or bitter tone. At the same time, the novel's use of irony reflects Atwood's confidence as a writer. She handles dark and disturbing material carefully, revealing it slowly but clearly, which allows readers to remain emotionally

involved without becoming overwhelmed. This approach helps maintain interest and sympathy throughout the story. The novel highlights Atwood's skill both as a storyteller who creates a deeply human main character and as a thoughtful writer who addresses urgent and controversial themes. As an important point in her literary development, *The Handmaid's Tale* gives new energy and significance to the dystopian genre through its assured and powerful vision of a bleak future.

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