

EXTENDED ESSAY

SUBJECT: ENGLISH B

The Systematic Suppression of Female Identity in The Handmaid's Tale

To what extent does Margaret Atwood's use of symbolic language and imagery effectively convey the mechanisms of cultural control and suppression of female identity in her novel The Handmaids Tale?

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Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Plot summary	4
Colour symbolism	5
Naming conventions	7
Architectural imagery	9
Body imagery	12
Conclusion	13
Work cited	15

Introduction

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is a dystopian novel set in the theocratic regime of Gilead. Dystopian fiction is a genre that often exaggerates social and political structures to reveal the mechanisms of control and warn about the consequences of oppression in real-life societies. In the novel, Atwood does not express oppression through physical violence alone, but also through ideology, language, and cultural symbols. *The Handmaid's Tale* explores the ideas of cultural control and suppression of female identity. Throughout the novel, repeated symbols and imagery show how oppression gradually becomes part of everyday life in Gilead. Cultural control normalizes the theocratic regime of Gilead, to internalize identity suppression. Colour symbolism, naming conventions, architectural imagery, and representations of the female body collectively reveal how cultural meaning becomes a mechanism of control. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood employs symbolic language to represent abstract ideas such as power and control, while imagery allows these symbols to be visualized, making the suppression of female identity more immediate and effective.

These imageries are effective especially because they help the reader feel empathy for woman. It enables us to see the world from the eyes of woman in Gilead and helps the reader emotionally understand the effects of oppression on women. Control starts to feel personal and disturbing when the descriptions of clothing, bodies and spaces reveal how every aspect of woman's lives is regulated. Other symbols and images show the political and religious beliefs of the regime, and cultural symbols such as colours, names show how authority justifies the wrong use of its power. Additionally, imagery reveals how Handmaids begin to accept and internalize the system through Offred's narration. Use of symbols in everyday life make oppression seem normal.

Therefore, colour symbolism, naming conventions, architectural imagery and representations of body collectively emphasize the themes of cultural control and suppression of female identity.

Plot summary

The Handmaid's Tale novel takes place in the theocratic and totalitarian system of Gilead. After the population decrease due to the fertility decline in the country previous democratic system gets overthrown and new theocratic regime is formed. New social structure causes woman in Gilead to lose their rights and result in the categorization of woman into different social roles.

The narrator of the novel is a Handmaid called Offred. Handmaids are fertile woman who are forced to bear children for elite families. Offred serves in the household of a Commander and his wife, Serena Joy. Being a reproductive servant Handmaids wear red head to toe except their white wings around their face. White wings cover their heads only enabling them to see where they are facing. By being not allowed to read, write or move freely without a supervision they are pushed into ignorance.

Offred reflects on her past memories, describing her life with her husband Luke and their daughter. When the new regime took over, they got separated while trying to escape the country.

Throughout the novel, Offred talks about her daily life under the control of the regime. She deals with strict rules and social expectations from her new role. Offred shows they must obey and do not disturb the so-called peace because they are watched by the police of Gilead regime, called The Eye. Even when The Eye is not watching, the internalized thought of being under

surveillance is imposed on the woman. Eyes are undercover so they could be anyone, this breaks the trust among people, making it hard to form an uprising.

Handmaids have strict routines involving going shopping with a prescribed list with another Handmaid. Offred travels with a Handmaid named Ofglen. In their walks, Offred finds the opportunity to observe the environment and reflect on the past and present.

During the time she spends on Commander's house she develops different relationships with the people like Commander, Serena Joy, Nick and the household driver. Towards the end, she finds a resistance movement called Mayday. Novel ends open-ended with her being taken away by unknown authorities.

Colour Symbolism

Colour symbolism in *The Handmaid's Tale* is one of the significant ways Atwood shows the control of identity and visual hierarchy. Colour functions as a visual system of power. The colour red is frequently seen throughout the novel whether worn exclusively by the Handmaids or shown across Gilead's setting. Atwood employs red to represent fertility, biological reduction, danger as well as the regime's control over women's bodies. Symbolism of red being reflected in the clothing such as "red shoes, red gloves, red umbrella, red robe" emphasizes the visual oppression replacing their identity. Inside the totalitarian structure of Gilead this oppression functions as an ideological control. By stating "Everything except the wings around my face is red: the colour of blood which defines us." (p. 12) Offred reveals that Handmaids are defined by their reproductive biology. This reference to blood imagery emphasizes red being the colour of blood, and it focuses on the Handmaids' reproductive function. While it removes individuality, it also suppresses the female identity. Offred states "I have never looked good in red." (p. 12) through this quote it is seen that Offred does not identify herself with the color red

and its connotations. Even though the regime can manage visible aspects of life it can not manage her inner identity.

While looking at her reflection Offred describes herself as “some fairytale figure in a red cloak” (p. 12). This red cloak symbolizes their femininity and being covered by it from head to toe shows their suppressed identities into the expectations imposed by the system to Handmaids. This reveals the irony where the phrase “fairytale figure” conveys the idea that what seems to be only a fictional scenario has become in real-life before they realized it. The blood metaphor in “a sister, dipped in blood” (p, 12) illustrates how Offred and other Handmaids are identified by a single oppressive identity, it draws attention to their suffering. Being “dipped in blood” conveys how a new identity is forced upon them without their will. Erasing everything what makes Handmaids themselves and constructing new identity aims to build a new system without the women.

Atwood repeatedly use red to convey how power mechanism uses abstract ideas and cultural control to suppress female identity. She uses such ideas to criticize patriarchal control. The normalized oppression looked from an outside view creates an irony; the reader realizes how patriarchal control often operates silently embedded within cultural and internalized expectations. The repeated use of red is deeply critical, reducing women to their biological function while ironically it is in contrast to conventional symbolism.

Although the categorization of women with the color symbolization is seen most clearly through the symbols and imageries for the Handmaids with color red, there are other categories for women with other colours such as blue for Wives and green for Marthas. Wives have the highest ranking a woman can have by being the wife of a commander. The idea illustrates the man will be always higher than the woman of the highest status. This shows the patriarchal beliefs applies to everyone even if the societal rules are different for categories. The phrase “a light blue veil thrown over her wide gardening hat” (p. 16) shows even though her status allows her to have

hobbies and more freedom than Handmaids and Marthas she is still controlled by the Commander and the regime. “a light blue veil” imagery symbolizes that the status they have comes with the suppression of their identity. These details are understood with the word “veil” suggest modesty and restraint referring to the hidden face and cutting the direct connection they have to their freedom. The colour blue symbolizes the purity, coldness and sadness of the Wives. They are often emotionally cold and distant towards others. Not being in control in their house and loss of control in their marriage get reflected the colour blue.

The Marthas are symbolized with the colour green. The colour green traditionally represents nature, life and growth. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood creates an irony, using the green as the representation of Marthas because they are usually old and infertile which is the opposite of the traditional meaning. This shows the Marthas are used for creating contrast with their function. Through the description “She’s in her usual Martha’s dress, which is dull green like a surgeon's gown of the time before.” (p. 13) it is seen that the Marthas’ position in the society is not like Handmaids or Wives. They do not serve the Commanders through their sexuality. They are described as wearing “dull green” dresses which highlights the passivity and the unimportance of the Marthas in the society. Their clothes are plain and do not attract attention. The “surgeons' gown” imagery points out that Martha’s body figures are not shown. This implies that Marthas are not sexualized or reduced to their biological function. Because Marthas serve to the Commander’s household, their identity is reduced to their domestic role. They work in the background without any authority or voice. Therefore, their role reflects the regime’s desire for control is not only focused on women’s fertility but controlling women’s entire identity.

Collectively, colour symbolism in *The Handmaid's Tale* is used for the categorization of woman and controlling them accordingly to their social functions. The colour symbolism being one of

the great control mechanisms in the theocratic regime of Gilead illustrates an outside view of the suppression of female identity.

Naming Conventions

Naming conventions in the regime of Gilead, hold a great significance as they determine the hierarchy and the societal roles. Naming system turns identity into a function, meaning a person's name does not represent who they are instead it represents their role. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Handmaids take their Commander's name addition to an "Of" preposition symbolizing the belonging. Names like "Offred" and "Ofglenn" shows Handmaids being owned by their commanders. Naming woman as their property conveys the idea that Handmaids are seen as objects rather than surrogate mothers. While their identities are being reduced to nothing, they are seen as walking wombs. Ownership of the Handmaids is often changeable, as seen in the novel. This detail reveals that Handmaids are interchangeable and disposable. The constant mention of object-like qualities in Handmaids, further objectifies them. Because these names can be temporary, Handmaids' constructed identity is defined entirely by their social function. After some time, the feeling of belonging turns to possession rather than connection.

Another aspect of the naming convention shows the different rules imposed on different statuses. Wives keep their full names; this makes them recognizable at the society and secures them a place in class system as a woman. Compared to the Handmaids the Wives has a sense of identity, even though its limited. This distinction highlights strict hierarchy among woman in Gilead. However, the power wives hold is still conditional and depends on their husbands' status. As demonstrated by the name "Serena Joy" who is the wife of the Commander in the household she stays. By stating "The Commander is the head of the household." (p. 77) Offred emphasizes Serena Joy is an example of controlled individuality. Although she has the authority

over everyone in the household, she does not hold any power over the Commander. Being dependent and controlled by their husbands limits the wives identity both socially and domestically. This means wives can not show any vulnerability and suppress their emotions.

The naming of the Marthas are based on their traditional roles. Names like “Rita, Cora” are socially more recognizable. Unlike the Handmaids the Marthas have stable and permanent names that represent their traditionally assigned functions. This conveys the idea that normalization of the gender expectations are standardized. In the structure of Gilead, low status infertile woman such as Marthas are assigned to roles like cooks and cleaners in the household. This reflect the regime’s beliefs on domestic labor is a female obligation. Marthas’ oppression is about labor unlike Handmaid’s fertility. In the line “The Marthas are not supposed to fraternize with us.” (p. 15) Offred reveals that Marthas are not allowed to be in a close relationship with Handmaids. This restriction aims to create division to prevent them feeling empathy for each other. Woman who suffer under the same system in different ways direct their hatred to each other rather than being united and standing up to the regime.

Architectural Imagery

The architectural imagery in *The Handmaids Tale* is a clear example for how oppression is applied into the environment in the novel. Atwood employs environmental descriptions to emphasize the use of space. The Gymnasium also known as the Red Centre highlights the concept of past and present, transformation of space, loss of freedom and institutional control. Red Centre is where Handmaids are thought to obey the regime. The quote “We slept in what had once been the gymnasium.” (p. 8) underlines the transformation from a school gymnasium Handsmaids were accommodating. The line “The floor was varnished wood, with stripes and circles painted on it, for the games that were formerly played there” (p. 8) and “the hoop for the

basketball nets was still in place, though the nets were gone.” (p. 8) shows now there still remains of the past, even when it is transformed. It is a reminder that the past has not completely disappeared. What once was a gymnasium where games were held, movement was there and students were free, now is a place where women are forced to stay and obey. This contrast creates an irony between the past and the present. The basketball nets taken from the hoops represent the meaning being taken from people’s lives. These descriptions serve as a visual reminder of change. Handmaids being treated like prisoners can be seen in “as we tried to sleep in the army cots that had been set up with spaces between so we could not talk.” (p. 8) quote while it highlights the lack of individuality and privacy the surveillance cause. In conclusion, gymnasium serves as an example of how spaces of freedom get transformed into suppression and control centers.

Through the imagery and symbolization of The Wall, oppression functions as a constant reminder of surveillance. The wall is depicted with “The hooks have been set into the brickwork of the Wall” (p. 36) phrase, revealing the wall is designed for execution. The wall and the hooks are a control mechanism to scare people into obeying. Offred states “The men wear white coats, like these worn by doctors or scientists.” (p. 36). This reveals the displayed executions aim to intimidate people and send a message. “White coat” descriptions suggest men are possibly doctors. In Gilead doctors are accused of doing abortions which is accepted as a crime and a sin. Bodies displayed in public, turn punishment into a public warning. Citizens are expected to look at the execution, “We stop, together as if on signal, and stand and look at the bodies” (p. 35) and “We’re supposed to look.” (p. 35) lines internalize fear to help it function as a psychological surveillance. Not being able to escape and being trapped in the regime of Gilead is shown in the line “No one goes through those gates willingly.” (p. 35) meaning you are either forced to join the exiles in the colonies or executed.

Architectural imagery in Offred's room is limited, reflecting the strict control of the regime. Descriptions like "A chair, a table, a lamp. Above, on the white ceiling a relief ornament in the shape of wreath, and in the centre of it a blank space" (p. 11) show the limited furniture and the removal of the objects understood by the blank space. Offred states "There must have been a chandelier, once. They've removed anything you could tie a rope to." (p. 11) implying there is no escape for Handmaids physically or mentally. The chandelier symbolizes the humanly touch and the artistic beauty past had. The removal of it shows how loss of artistic expression is used to deduce the individuality. The phrase "The window is partly open -only opens partly" (p. 11) once again convey the idea that their freedom is cut off. While outside symbolizes their freedom, freedom can not be reached. What seems like they have some freedom is a deception because the window can not open fully. Atwood uses this imagery in Offred's room to show the theocratic regime of Gilead controls woman's freedom of movement and identity.

To make sure their control is unavoidable, the regime internalizes surveillance to Handmaids. The description in lines "Why the window only opens partly and why the glass in it is shatter proof." (p. 11) reveals they can not escape or have freedom from the regime in any way. The partly opening window and the shatter proof glass make it impossible to suicide limiting their control on their body. This demonstrates the way they are treated like a property of the regime and do not have the basic human rights.

In the Commander's house symbolism and imagery represents the hierarchy among the women. The quotation "At the end of the hallway, above from door is a fanlight of coloured glass: flowers, red and blue." (p. 12) shows the relationship structure in the household. The colour red symbolizes the Handmaids and the colour blue symbolizes the Wives, these women's existence is acknowledged in the house unlike the Martha's symbolized by the colour green. Therefore, it is understood that Martha's are often overlooked in the house. Offred mentions "I go out by the back door." (p. 16). The quote suggests Handmaids are obligated to come and go from the

back door. “back door” implies secrecy and lack of visibility in the society. Because they are accepted as unimportant, their movements are limited and hidden.

Another use of symbolism is given in “The door to the Commander’s study is closed.” (p. 16). Commander’s room being a restricted area for all household emphasizes the power they hold. It is shown that no other figure is controlling them in the house. This quote also symbolizes the prohibition of knowledge and woman being led to ignorance. The “closed door” imagery implies secrecy, and the Commander is in the control of important decisions and information. Ultimately, this hidden power from woman contributes to the male dominance and exclusion of woman from authority.

Body Imagery

Atwood uses body imagery to illustrate the reduction of Handmaid's identity to their reproductive organs. In lines “We are two-legged wombs, that’s all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices.” (p. 128). The “two-legged wombs” imagery illustrates how Handmaids' being, only consist of their biological function. Through this imagery the Handmaids sense of self is erased. The use of religious language such as “sacred vessels” and “ambulatory chalices” function as a justification mechanism while defining Handmaids as containers in a religious way. The word “sacred” in phrase “sacred vessels” suggests holiness, purity and respect while the word “vessels” refer to woman as containers. This contrast creates irony highlighting how oppression disguises itself through the religious language. The phrase “ambulatory chalices” which means walking containers highlights the dehumanization of the Handmaids. Religious words make the oppression seen as typical and pleasing when it is suppressing and controlling. Even though the regime attempts to normalize objectification while revealing the idea that it is honorable to be

a human womb. Collectively, these show religion is used to reinforce the ideological manipulation.

Handmaids are defined as “containers” repeatedly throughout the novel. Atwood employs this motif to warn readers about the extreme patriarchal structure’s effects on women. Offred states “We are containers, it’s only the insides of our bodies that are important.” (p. 92), this description reveals that they have no value beyond their bodies. The word “container” makes women appear industrial. They are treated like products that are only valued for their fertility. The body becomes a biological production unit. Offred refers to Handmaids as containers consistently, she starts to accept the regime’s ideology. The suppression of female identity is no longer external and due to the regime’s cultural control, it is internal and caused by Offred’s internalized beliefs.

Personal relationships no longer exist in Gilead. The objectification of woman causes the meaning of relationships to end and gain the meaning of social structure and continuity of generations. The statement “My body is no longer an instrument of pleasure, but a place of duty.” (p. 261) Emphasizes that the intimate relationships are no longer romantic, it is political. Because the body is owned by the Commander, over time Handmaids become emotionally detached to their own bodies. This leads to the loss of significance of intimacy. The “instrument” metaphor symbolizes the need for the control of body to feel pleasure. The regime’s control over the woman’s bodies causes pleasure to lose its personal and emotional significance. Intimacy becomes an obligation.

Conclusion

Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* explores the use of symbolic language and imagery to make the cultural control and suppression of female identity visible. Control and suppression of identity is implicit in the novel rather than expressing it directly. Mechanisms of cultural control is embedded in everything life and social structures. From my analysis, I have made the following conclusion.

Firstly, Atwood represents the categorization of woman through the colour symbolism. Emposition of new functions is decided by the regime and that makes it an unfair hierarchy.

Secondly, the suppression of female identity is established with naming conventions. By redefining of the woman's identities, the control gradually shapes everyday life through the internalized social functions.

Another control mechanism is the architectural imagery in the novel. The descriptions presentation visualizes the abstract consist of surveillance internally and loss of freedom through spaces such as Red Center, The Wall, Offred's room and Commander's house. Atwood uses irony and highlights the contrast between the past and present. The reader gets reminded commander's spaces can be used as tools of control.

Finally, body imagery is used to normalize the suppression of Handmaid's identity to their biological functions. Being categorized by their fertility reinforces the systematic erasure of female identity.

To sum up, Atwood uses a range of literary devices including colour symbolism, Naming conventions, architectural and body imagery and irony to highlight the regime's control over woman in Gilead.

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