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EXTENDED ESSAY

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Research question: To what extent does the clothing affect the characters and the power structure in The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood?

Abstract

In this extended essay, I will try to analyze the effect of clothing on the characters and the power structure in The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood. The scope of my investigation will be thorough analysis of the clothes that are worn in Gilead, where the story takes place, whilst examining the symbolic meanings and the effect of clothing on the characters and the power structure.

In The Handmaid's Tale, the clothes are used to solidify the new social structure of the theocratic and patriarchal republic of Gilead (formerly the United States of America), which is born in the late twentieth century and therefore has to regulate the society strictly to prevent rebellions. The society is broken down into groups, and all groups are assigned some new roles and responsibilities, along with new clothes, or rather uniforms, which everyone has to wear. With these clothes, people grow into their assigned roles and easily adapt to the social structure of Gilead. With the help of symbolic meanings, the responsibilities and roles of groups are enclosed in the uniforms. In time, people lose their originality and characters and become what they wear, which is the main aim of the new 'designs'.

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I. Introduction

Clothing is a way to express ourselves and the way we dress symbolize who we are in the modern sense of fashion. However sometimes our clothes are not only determined by free will or fashion but society, and in this sense, how we dress becomes a matter of not personality but where one stands on the social ladder. In *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood, the clothes are the way of the totalitarian regime's grouping people and are used to incorporate people's roles with their social status.

The Handmaid's Tale is the story of Offred, a handmaid, set in the dystopia of Gilead, a theocracy formed towards the end of the twentieth century and was formerly the United States. Offred has lived most of her life in the United States as an independent woman and has experienced every change, has seen the new regime coming. As the system changes, it becomes dependent on Bible and therefore, patriarchal. The protagonist, Offred is taken by force and educated to become a handmaid. The handmaid's job is quite simply put in the Bible:

“And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, [...] said unto Jacob: Give me children, or else I die.

And Jacob [...] said, Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fault of the womb?

And she said, Behold my maid Bilinan, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her.” (Atwood 3)

The women chosen to be handmaids, the women who are able to reproduce, in short have only one responsibility: to bear children to their Commanders. They are therefore given names according to their Commanders, names that also do not symbolize their personality but their roles: Of-fred comes from this origin, and however not dedicated to Gilead, she has to live in it.

In Gilead, the classification of the social groups (commanders, wives, handmaids etc) is made by clothing, and is a means to generate a power structure to a new-born society. In this essay, I will try to talk about how this classification is made, the meanings and symbols that are within these clothes, how the clothing has an effect on the individuals' characters' and how these clothes help the overall regulation and integrity of the society.

Although there are many essays on the *Handmaid's Tale*, when I looked up the databases of universities, I didn't come across one that had a similar topic to mine, there was not a direct examination of clothing in Gilead done that I could find. Due to that reason, the use of secondary sources in my essay are limited, but I used some books about fashion, fashion sociology and symbolism which I made use of during the essay, even if not directly quoted.

Background information:

Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* is a dystopia set in near future, in a country called Gilead which has replaced the United States by means of religious revolution (made by a group who calls themselves 'The Sons of Jacob'¹). Gilead's social and political system is dependent on the Bible; or rather, the Book of Genesis, which sets a convenient base for almost all the rules that form the Gileadean society. The novel's protagonist is a woman called Offred, who tells the reader in first person narrative, about the social codes and rules that define human relations in Gilead along with her own story.

Gilead is formed during the late years of twentieth century as a result of some consequent events: First there is the assassination of the President and the machine-gunning of the congress, which is told to be done by fundamentalist Islamic fanatics. The effects of nuclear plants and bombs are felt everywhere and products are, therefore, reduced. People who have been affected are not able to reproduce, and the birth rate is decreasing. People are panicked and stressed, and the raging of the society is then taken under control by a mysterious group who resembles the army, only the uniforms are different. They suspend the Constitution of Human Rights, and then, cancelling their credit cards and forcing employers to fire them, imprison women, denying they ever had the same rights as men.

Offred along with many others feel that the acts were "*Unworthy, unjust, untrue. But that is what happened.*" (Atwood 192), however any rebellion or marches against this regime are cut short by the death of some marchers, and everyone is forced into this system: families are broken apart, men are sent to labour camps which are 'the Colonies'² or become Guardians (chauffeurs or gardeners for wealthy Commanders), women who are fertile are taken to Education Centres to become Handmaids (women who are responsible for bearing children), Marthas (women who are responsible for cooking) or maids (women who are responsible for taking care of houses) and children are given to rich and upper class families as adoptions. Offred, who then had a different name, was one of the women who are chosen to be a handmaid when she, her husband Luke and her child were trying to immigrate and were caught. After her education, she is brought to Commander Fred's house (her second house), where she meets Serena Joy, the wife of the Commander, Rita, the Martha, Cora, the maid, Nick, the Guardian and Ofglen, her jogging partner who is also a handmaid.

¹ Jacob is the third biblical patriarch and he plays a major role in The Book of Genesis, which the system of Gilead takes its base from. He has two wives, Rachel and Leah, and two concubines, Bilhah and Zilpah. Jacob's association with the novel is that he sets an example for the community of Gilead where Commanders have wives, handmaids, cooks and maids, all at their services and whom, at the book, are seen as the Commander's "*inventory*" (Atwood, 97).

² The Colonies are the colonial grounds of Gilead, which have been highly affected by nuclear bombs and wars. In the colonies, where the infertile Unwomen and rebellious men are sent, there is little consideration of women and many die because of nuclear infections.

Offred does not tell the reader about her real name or any details that may lead to her identity; therefore she could be anyone who has lived in the first years after the revolution as a handmaid and served to a Commander named Fred³. On the other hand, she does reflect on her feelings, and how before the revolution she was a free women and how now she is sick of living up to the strict laws, but cannot truly rebel because an upright rebellion means suicide in such a fiercely controlled society. Therefore, she tries to join the underground rebellion, Mayday, by the help of her jogging partner, Ofglen, and tries to rebel in her own way to the restrictions of the society by having an affair with Nick, the Guardian. Another rebellion is brought to her when the Commander ‘asks’ her to secret evening get-togethers, in which he lets her read, play Scrabble, drink alcohol (which are forbidden by law) and takes her to a brothel. Offred feels like her escape is near, that she can get out and this system will come to an end when the Eyes, (federal service and police whose appearance often means death) come for her, but it isn’t revealed whether Offred dies or survives, since the Eyes could have been a set up by Nick to save Offred. In any case, she leaves Commander Fred’s house, and that is either a new beginning or the end for her.

II. The motives of the designer:

Gilead is a new country born from the ashes of the United States, and with its great emphasis on Christianity, it brings a much ancient formation of society and ethics to the otherwise modernized twentieth- twenty first century world. Among other society rules, they take the freedom to wear whatever a person likes away and instead, bring uniforms. But why?

To understand the motives that lay behind this new ‘clothing line’, one has to know the world into which Gilead was born.

The last quarter of the twentieth century, especially the last 15 years which sets up the base for the novel, was the time when the system people had been accustomed to have started to collapse. With the collusion of Soviet Union, which was indeed a victory for the capitalist United States of America after the Cold War, the equilibrium the world had been standing upon since the end of Second World War dissolved, and capitalism, which had gained momentum since 1950s, reached its high point. The most powerful country, in the sense that the twentieth-centurions acknowledge a country to be powerful, was again, United States of America, and with an extreme force on many domains (such as world politics, military forces, aspects of culture such as cinema, literature, fashion), it was, as it had been preparing to be since the beginning of the century, the world leader (Hobsbawm, 1996).

³ However, in the appendix, which is called ‘Historical Notes’ and is the text of a seminar on Gilead made in 2195, after the collusion of Gilead, the identities of Offred and her Commander are narrowed down.

Due to the globalization of capitalism, consumerism also became one of the basics of people's lives. With the effect of consumerism and capitalism, fashion was very popular in 1990s, and this mainly had an effect of women's wear. Fashion, was told to be a mechanism of social grouping (as it is in the book) especially up to 20th century by many sociologists (Fred Davis, 1994), and was always the interest of upper class. Fashion of 20th century, however, had differentiated along with capitalism and clothes had ceased to be merely a way to cover oneself or social grouping, but combined with the phrase 'style' had become an evidence to one's identity and to the character of that person. Through 'prêt-a-porter' (ready to wear), department stores and mass production, fashion mentality had also changed. New designs became attainable and more accessible to everyone. Plus, the media had a specific acclaim for fashion and there were a number of fashion magazines (such as Harper's Bazaar, Vogue, W, Elle) that took up a great part in the everyday lives of people, and clothing has turned into a pile of 'styles' and 'trends'. The upper-middle class, especially women, were the aimed community to consume these goods, and they were expected to integrate fashion with their characters. This helped clothing become an acquired identity for the greater part of the society and a way of expression of self (Davis, 1994).

The modern fashion of late 20th century, was fixed on youth, slenderness, sexuality and eroticism of women, and the clothes designed by most male designers were centralized to accentuate the outer beauty of the female (Davis, 1994). This was one of the main reasons for revolution in Gilead, the Commander tells Offred:

"We've given them more than we've taken away [...]. Think of the trouble they had before. [...] The meat market. Don't you remember the terrible gap between the ones who could get a man easily and the ones who couldn't? Some of them were desperate, they starved themselves thin or pumped their breasts full of silicone, had their noses cut off. Think of the human misery." (Atwood 231)

The new grouping of society with new clothing, the Commander therefore suggests, solves the problem as women no longer have to fight with their own decided self to get a man.

Another reason for the new range of clothing is setting the new social code. The government of Gilead is by all means patriarchal and does not hesitate to hide the fact that it doesn't believe in the equality of sexes, it actually is built upon this (Beforehand, there had been many liberties and everyone had freedom to choose what to wear and thus, who to be). However, this is restricted in Gilead. The society is grouped in a certain manner to support this anti-equal ideology and for having been formed in a century when women rights and feminism were of utmost importance in many countries, has to set strict rules for the continuity of this regrouping. Clothing is the main way they choose to do this, and the safest. The newly formed social ladder where men are always above women and which is formed according to state-assigned 'jobs' and 'responsibilities' is based on uniforms, therefore the liberty to

wear whatever one chooses is gone along the liberty to do whatever one likes and clothes become the way of society's performing and regulating the regrouping, whilst integrating people with their newly assigned social roles.

III. The Designs

Designed by the revolutionaries, the clothes in Gilead can be described as uniforms. Contrasting with the 1990s fashion mentality which valued itself on personal expression, these uniforms are binded with social groups and although have no stylistic concern as one understands now, have a greater concern: to set the power structure with these clothes. In order to do this, the clothes enclose symbolic meanings that help adjust the social status of groups and in contrast with the hard power imposed upon people by military forces and the Eyes, the clothes emit some sort of soft power, which is used as a device to materialize the new social pyramid and solidify the new roles people have in their minds, by the ruling group.

a) Men's wear

In the patriarchal system of Gilead, the designs reflect the mentality of the government, who are all male and who rely on the rules of the Bible, but only use them as a base and make up their own rules. Therefore, men's clothes are those of power, because men are the governing, ruling and regulating powers of Gilead and the clothes they wear are designed to reflect their status. However, men's attire is also sub-categorized as Commanders and Angels and Eyes.

1. The Commanders

As the ruling and upper class of Gilead, the Commanders have the best there is. In the theocratic atmosphere, they are the oligarchic group setting the rules which the citizens have to obey and therefore can be assumed as designers of the clothes mentioned. Actually, in the novel, the only real Commander in sight is Fred, who is thought to be one of the key characters who have applied the ideologies of revolution to everyday life, including the clothing.⁴ Given this information, the commander becomes very much integrated with his uniform: It is indeed what he has designed.

The clothes of commanders are made in such a way that they inflict power upon others. The most obvious sign is the military: Army forces, in the novel, scare people and do not allow them to rebel and because they have guns, they have force. This hard power reference is the explanation why the commanders are the ruling class: They are, because they can kill whoever they want.

⁴ This affirmation is made in the appendix, by Professor James Darcy Pieixoto, during the Twelfth Symposium of Gileadean Studies while they are examining the notes of Offred and trying to figure out the identity of the commander.

To announce this power, the commanders wear black, which is considered the antithesis of all colours and the absolute colour to which all colours led. It also is the official colour that is adorned in modern life and the colour which is deeper, more mysterious and darker than it seems (Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 1997). The commanders' uniform combines all these together: the blackness of their uniforms is both the symbol of their higher statuses in the society, them being the ruling class and having more power than they seem to. Commander's shoes, for example, which Offred comes to examine closely at a time, are described as to create a sense of power: "*They feel hard, unwinking, like the shells of beetles: black, polished, inscrutable. They seem to have nothing to do with feet.*" (Atwood, 245)

In a more religious sense, black is considered the colour of sorrow and faith in Christianity. Reverends dress in black and the colour to wear to church is more than often also black (Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 1997). With Gilead having strongly been rooted on the Biblical context, black's association with the Commanders' uniforms has also a religious meaning: they are the ruling class of a theocracy and they, therefore, are the man of religion in their own houses (Fred, for example, reads Bible for his household).

2. The Angels and the Eyes

Like the Commanders' uniforms, the Angels' and the Eyes' uniforms are black. These two groups are proposed as sections of Commanders, since the ranks of men are interchangeable and the Commanders stand for unity and wholeness.

The Angels are in charge of state security and regulation, and can be attributed to police: therefore the black in their attire is supposed to exemplify solidity and secure the society. The Eyes, on the other hand, is like the federal service: their blackness stands for mystery and unpleasantness.

b) Women's wear

Although the society of Gilead is patriarchal and all social codes and laws are formed according to this fact, the emphasis on women is much denser, as it is in many theocracies. Women's wear is one of the main stylistic aspects Giledean government uses to manipulate the idea of feminine power and increase the suppression. To support this, women's clothes enclose the symbols that are corresponding with their roles on social pyramid, and are designed specifically for each group according to a man's needs: ("*From each according to her ability... to each according to his needs*" (Atwood, 127)) a lover, a house-maker, a cook, a maid. This strict separation highlights the strict grouping of women. Also all women are 'state-servants' whereas men are 'state-rulers': Hence, the uniformity in their attire is more corresponding to the association of uniforms and inferiority. Men wear what they have designed, but women wear what they are assigned. "*Think of it as being in the army*" (Atwood 17) one of the aunts suggest, but unlike the military reference in Commanders' and Eyes' clothes, women's uniforms

do not connote the idea of hard power and influence, instead they evoke feelings of collectivism and loss of individual. Therefore, the sub-categories in women's wear can be made as the Handmaids and the Wives.

1. The Handmaids

Handmaid's clothes are given the greatest importance in the novel since the protagonist and the narrator is a handmaid. In almost every chapter, there are descriptions of the clothes they wear and many repetitions are made to highlight the pressure of apparel on Offred. The colour assigned to handmaids is red, which, in mythology and history has many connotations, however, in this context; symbolic meanings of red are all associated with one of the simplest: blood.

The handmaids are the group who are in charge of continuation of population, in other words their responsibility is to breed. Their duty is reflected in every step of their lives: breeding, giving birth is affiliated with blood, blood is red, and therefore the process of becoming and living as a Handmaid is surrounded with the colour red. They are educated at the 'Red Centre' (given the name because "there is too much red") and almost all of their attire is red: "*red shoes, flat-heeled [...] red gloves [...] red skirt is ankle-length, full, gathered to a flat yoke that extends over the breasts, the sleeves are full [...] red cloak*" (Atwood 18-19)

The significance of colour red is in two contexts: First, it is the symbol of blood, therefore an emblem of human life, menstrual cycle and feminine body. The reference to Little Red Riding Hood while describing the handmaids "*some fairytale figure in a red cloak*" (Atwood 18) is a support of this denotation since the red hood is said to symbolize the womanhood of Little Red Riding Hood (Dezutter 2000-2001). This is in relation with the duties of the handmaids; they are seen as breeding machines giving life to human beings. However, the other connotation of red is contrasting with the first, and the intention of Gileadean designers: eroticism. The government wants to disperse lust and passion from within sex, but the handmaids who are "*sexual vessels*" (Atwood 136) cast eroticism, lust and passion with their clothes, red being the main colour of the pornography and lingerie industry in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The clothing that defines handmaids is also very unrevealing. They wear wings "*to keep [them] from seeing, but also from being seen*" (Atwood 18) and put on veils while going out, also their dress are long and wide, hiding all the curves. This anti-exposure attire is also adopted by other religious societies⁵ as to diminish the femininity and sexuality of women, and in Gilead, it is a contrast to the highly revealing fashion of 1980s and 1990s. Aunt Lydia, one of the teachers at the Rachel and Leah Centre (Red Centre), highlights this contrast by talking about women in earlier days: "*The spectacles*

⁵ Such as the Islamic countries where the laws forbid women to wear anything that reveals their body or as the Christian nunneries where the sexuality and the body of women is hidden beneath wide dresses and cloaks.

women used to make of themselves [...] bare backs and shoulders, on the street, in public, and legs, not even stockings on them” However, this idea contrasts with erotic symbol of red and the more they dress up, the more they evoke ideas of lust and passion.

Offred, throughout the book, feels the pressure of these clothes and also grows into them little by little. She never totally gets accustomed to what she’s wearing. By stating that “*red have never been my colour*” (Atwood 18) she brings forth two ideas: That she does not look good in red, and that, when she was free, she did not symbolise neither eroticism nor the sanctity of life.

The suppression of clothes is first seen when Offred faces some Japanese tourists. She sees the women wear skirts that reveal their body and show off skin, high heeled shoes. She recalls that she used to wear those too, but the clothes seem so distant that she is repelled, because the clothing system in Gilead makes her think that they are undressed. Furthermore, Offred is very unfriendly with the other women living in the house (Rita and Cora); because they seem to think that she is lower than they are, because of her attire. “*It is the red dress she disapproves off and what it stands for*” (Atwood 19) .

2. The Wives

The Wives’ (who are the highest rank of women in Gilead) clothing is in blue, and in the story it doesn’t have much significance but one: contrasting the handmaids. According to Jung, blue is the opposite of red and also in the chromatic scale, blue is the cold colour whereas red is the warm (Chevalier, and Gheerbrant, 1997). This dialectic highlights the difference between the two ranks along with the clash of Serena Joy and Offred. The Wives (Serena Joy) symbolize home, higher ranking and sexually frigidity when the handmaids illustrate lower ranking and eroticism.

IV. The effect of clothes on the characters

Moira is the symbol of feminism throughout the novel along with Offred’s mother and the character whose personality is most affected by the clothes she wears. Before the revolution, Moira complies with the anti fashion trend⁶ wearing mismatched clothes. However, after the revolution, she becomes a regular at the ‘Jezebel’s’ (the brothel) and with her “*once-shiny satin outfit [...] pushing up the breasts*” (Atwood 250), loses her feminist ideologies and her character disperses into the clothing: “*So here I am. They even give you face cream [...] the food’s not bad and there’s drink and drugs [...] and we only work nights.*” (Atwood 261)

When reminiscing, Offred always thinks of clothes first, rejoicing the characteristics of the people in her past with what they wear. She always remembers Luke with the clothes he was wearing the day

⁶ The anti-fashion trend is the trend that is adopted by feminists in the last quarter of the 20th century: “It sees in fashion and for that matter, in the clothing code of West generally, a principal means as much as symbolic, by which institutions of patriarchy have managed over the centuries to oppress women and to relegate them to inferior social roots.” (Davis 81)

they were caught and the shoes her daughter used to wear and associates them with the characters since the clothes do not change “*possibly because [...] his face had different expressions, his clothes did not*” (Atwood 114)

V. Conclusion

Through the use of clothes, the characters in the novel grow into their assigned selves and lose their originality and individuality, turning into unnamed and stereotypic masses. Furthermore, the government’s utilisation of the uniforms enables them to easily control and group its citizens, therefore support the patriarchal pattern that is adorned in Gilead. With the clothes, they divide and benumb the people and hence easily regulate the newly formed society.

It is an important fact that the use of clothes is in contrast with the fashion of pre-Gilead period, and while men’s clothes are imposing power, women’s are illustrating inferiority, servitude and slavery. Thus, the uniforms of Gilead period are actually not unlike those of before in the feministic sense: both periods are favouring men and degrading women.

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