

Themes

Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.

Women's Bodies as Political Instruments

Because Gilead was formed in response to the crisis caused by dramatically decreased birthrates, the state's entire structure, with its religious trappings and rigid political hierarchy, is built around a single goal: control of reproduction. The state tackles the problem head-on by assuming complete control of women's bodies through their political subjugation. Women cannot vote, hold property or jobs, read, or do anything else that might allow them to become subversive or independent and thereby undermine their husbands or the state.

Despite all of Gilead's pro-women rhetoric, such subjugation creates a society in which women are treated as subhuman. They are reduced to their fertility, treated as nothing more than a set of ovaries and a womb. In one of the novel's key scenes, Offred lies in the bath and reflects that, before Gilead, she considered her body an instrument of her desires; now, she is just a mound of flesh surrounding a womb that must be filled in order to make her useful. Gilead seeks to deprive women of their individuality in order to make them docile carriers of the next generation.

Language as a Tool of Power

Gilead creates an official vocabulary that ignores and warps reality in order to serve the needs of the new society's elite. Having made it illegal for women to hold jobs, Gilead creates a system of titles. Whereas men are defined by their military rank, women are defined solely by their gender roles as Wives, Handmaids, or Marthas. Stripping them of permanent individual names strips them of their individuality, or tries to. Feminists and deformed babies are treated as subhuman, denoted by the terms "Unwomen" and "Unbabies." Blacks and Jews are defined by biblical terms ("Children of Ham" and "Sons of Jacob," respectively) that set them apart from the rest of society, making their persecution easier. There are prescribed greetings for personal encounters, and to fail to offer the correct greetings is to fall under suspicion of disloyalty. Specially created terms define the rituals of Gilead, such as "Prayvaganzas," "Salvagings," and "Particutions." Dystopian novels about the dangers of totalitarian society frequently explore the connection between a state's repression of its subjects and its perversion of language ("Newspeak" in George Orwell's *1984* is the most famous example), and *The Handmaid's Tale* carries on this tradition. Gilead maintains its control over women's bodies by maintaining control over names.

The Causes of Complacency

In a totalitarian state, Atwood suggests, people will endure oppression willingly as long as they receive some slight amount of power or freedom. Offred remembers her mother saying that it is “truly amazing, what people can get used to, as long as there are a few compensations.” Offred’s complacency after she begins her relationship with Nick shows the truth of this insight. Her situation restricts her horribly compared to the freedom her former life allowed, but her relationship with Nick allows her to reclaim the tiniest fragment of her former existence. The physical affection and companionship become compensation that make the restrictions almost bearable. Offred seems suddenly so content that she does not say yes when Ofglen asks her to gather information about the Commander.

Women in general support Gilead’s existence by willingly participating in it, serving as agents of the totalitarian state. While a woman like Serena Joy has no power in the world of men, she exercises authority within her own household and seems to delight in her tyranny over Offred. She jealously guards what little power she has and wields it eagerly. In a similar way, the women known as Aunts, especially Aunt Lydia, act as willing agents of the Gileadean state. They indoctrinate other women into the ruling ideology, keep a close eye out for rebellion, and generally serve the same function for Gilead that the Jewish police did under Nazi rule.

Atwood’s message is bleak. At the same time as she condemns Offred, Serena Joy, the Aunts, and even Moira for their complacency, she suggests that even if those women mustered strength and stopped complying, they would likely fail to make a difference. In Gilead the tiny rebellions of resistances do not necessarily matter. In the end, Offred escapes because of luck rather than resistance.

Motifs

Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, or literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text’s major themes.

Rape and Sexual Violence

Sexual violence, particularly against women, pervades *The Handmaid’s Tale*. The prevalence of rape and pornography in the pre-Gilead world justified to the founders their establishment of the new order. The Commander and the Aunts claim that women are better protected in Gilead, that they are treated with respect and kept safe from violence. Certainly, the official penalty for rape is terrible: in one scene, the Handmaids tear apart with their bare hands a supposed rapist (actually a member of the resistance). Yet, while Gilead claims to suppress sexual violence, it actually institutionalizes it, as we see at Jezebel’s, the club that provides the Commanders with a ready stable of prostitutes to service the male elite. Most important, sexual violence is apparent in the

central institution of the novel, the Ceremony, which compels Handmaids to have sex with their Commanders.

Religious Terms Used for Political Purposes

Gilead is a theocracy—a government in which there is no separation between state and religion—and its official vocabulary incorporates religious terminology and biblical references. Domestic servants are called “Marthas” in reference to a domestic character in the New Testament; the local police are “Guardians of the Faith”; soldiers are “Angels”; and the Commanders are officially “Commanders of the Faithful.” All the stores have biblical names: Loaves and Fishes, All Flesh, Milk and Honey. Even the automobiles have biblical names like Behemoth, Whirlwind, and Chariot. Using religious terminology to describe people, ranks, and businesses whitewashes political skullduggery in pious language. It provides an ever-present reminder that the founders of Gilead insist they act on the authority of the Bible itself. Politics and religion sleep in the same bed in Gilead, where the slogan “God is a National Resource” predominates.

Similarities between Reactionary and Feminist Ideologies

Although *The Handmaid’s Tale* offers a specifically feminist critique of the reactionary attitudes toward women that hold sway in Gilead, Atwood occasionally draws similarities between the architects of Gilead and radical feminists such as Offred’s mother. Both groups claim to protect women from sexual violence, and both show themselves willing to restrict free speech in order to accomplish this goal. Offred recalls a scene in which her mother and other feminists burn porn magazines. Like the founders of Gilead, these feminists ban some expressions of sexuality. Gilead also uses the feminist rhetoric of female solidarity and “sisterhood” to its own advantage. These points of similarity imply the existence of a dark side of feminist rhetoric. Despite Atwood’s gentle criticism of the feminist left, her real target is the religious right.

Symbols

Symbols are objects, characters, figures, or colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.

Cambridge, Massachusetts

The center of Gilead’s power, where Offred lives, is never explicitly identified, but a number of clues mark it as the town of Cambridge. Cambridge, its neighboring city of Boston, and Massachusetts as a whole were centers for America’s first religious and intolerant society—the Puritan New England of the seventeenth century. Atwood reminds us of this history with the ancient Puritan church that Offred and Ofglen visit early in the novel, which Gilead has turned into a museum. The choice of Cambridge as a setting symbolizes the direct link between the Puritans

and their spiritual heirs in Gilead. Both groups dealt harshly with religious, sexual, or political deviation.

Harvard University

Gilead has transformed Harvard's buildings into a detention center run by the Eyes, Gilead's secret police. Bodies of executed dissidents hang from the Wall that runs around the college, and Salvagings (mass executions) take place in Harvard Yard, on the steps of the library. Harvard becomes a symbol of the inverted world that Gilead has created: a place that was founded to pursue knowledge and truth becomes a seat of oppression, torture, and the denial of every principle for which a university is supposed to stand.

The Handmaids' Red Habits

The red color of the costumes worn by the Handmaids symbolizes fertility, which is the caste's primary function. Red suggests the blood of the menstrual cycle and of childbirth. At the same time, however, red is also a traditional marker of sexual sin, hearkening back to the scarlet letter worn by the adulterous Hester Prynne in Nathaniel Hawthorne's tale of Puritan ideology. While the Handmaids' reproductive role supposedly finds its justification in the Bible, in some sense they commit adultery by having sex with their Commanders, who are married men. The wives, who often call the Handmaids sluts, feel the pain of this sanctioned adultery. The Handmaids' red garments, then, also symbolize the ambiguous sinfulness of the Handmaids' position in Gilead.

A Palimpsest

A palimpsest is a document on which old writing has been scratched out, often leaving traces, and new writing put in its place; it can also be a document consisting of many layers of writing simply piled one on top of another. Offred describes the Red Center as a palimpsest, but the word actually symbolizes all of Gilead. The old world has been erased and replaced, but only partially, by a new order. Remnants of the pre-Gilead days continue to infuse the new world.

The Eyes

The Eyes of God are Gilead's secret police. Both their name and their insignia, a winged eye, symbolize the eternal watchfulness of God and the totalitarian state. In Gilead's theocracy, the eye of God and of the state are assumed to be one and the same.