

Bibliography:

Kaci Sziraki

7 pages

The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood is a speculative fiction novel that describes a society in which a theocratic regime called Gilead has taken over the United States. The story, following a woman named Offred, places specific roles onto different groups of people: fertile women are given the name of Handmaid and forced to bear children for households run by men called Commanders, Marthas are housekeepers and servants for these families, and wives are the partners of the Commander husbands. Enforcing the regime are members of the military group split into both Guardians and the higher ranked Angels, in addition to the Aunts teaching Handmaids, and the secret spies called Eyes. These groups, signified by their names, separate people into their respective roles, all different but all expected to uphold the order of Gilead. In this essay I argue that names of professions in *The Handmaid's Tale*, such as “Handmaid” and “Angel”, as well as names of individuals, such as “Offred”, carry religious connotations that, through Christian extremism, justify the oppressive nature of Gilead. These names reduce the individuality of a person into that of a group—ex. Fertile women were stripped of their individual identities and labeled “handmaids”—in order to symbolize the regime’s control over them.

It must first be noted that names themselves do not necessarily dictate control and oppression. A “name” is a word or set of words by which a person, animal, place, or thing is known, addressed, or referred to. From this definition, a name can be anything from a broadly described general object like a “book”, to a specific way of addressing/recognizing each individual—ex. “her name is ...”. While these names have purpose, they do not carry

implications other than simply defining and differentiating one “thing” from another. Only through external connotations—for example the cultural significance of giving someone the same name as a deceased family member, signifying marriage in changing a surname, differentiating a friend, family member, child, etc—do names gain autonomy. At the same time, negative external factors, like slurs or insults, can give names negative purposes that allow them to be utilized as a method of control, dehumanization, or other harmful reasons. For the purposes of this analysis, in regards to *The Handmaid’s Tale*, names will refer to either a person (when describing individual characters), or group of persons (when describing occupations of these characters). Utilizing evidence from *The Handmaid’s Tale*, I will elaborate on this claim in the following paragraph.

The first example of names in *The Handmaid’s Tale* used as a symbol of control occurs through the naming of professions given to women, specifically the “Handmaids”. While a handmaid at its most basic definition means a female servant, a Handmaid in *The Handmaid’s Tale* describes the role of a woman beyond simple servantry. Offred describes the Handmaid’s services through a process known as the Ceremony, where every month they are forced to participate in a ritualistic sexual intercourse with the Commanders of the household in order to get pregnant: “The Commander, as if reluctantly, begins to read ... Give me children, or else I die. ... Behold my maid Bilah. She shall bear upon my knees that I may also have children by her” (Atwood 1985:88). Here, the Commander reads a biblical passage that explains the reasoning behind Handmaids’ role—Gilead’s attempt at validating the monthly Ceremonies as a regular practice. The verse, Genesis 30:1-3, describes Rachel, the wife of Jacob, and her deep desire to have children. Unable to conceive, she offers her maid Bilhah to Jacob so that she may have children through her. It must also be noted that in this short excerpt of the story, Billah has

no say in whether or not she wants to have children with Jacob. Rachel has full power over her handmaid's actions. Bilhah in the context of *The Handmaid's Tale* is the "blueprint" for the roles expected of Offred and many women: she is the first Handmaid. In the Gilead regime, the story of Rachel and Jacob acts as a justification to the monthly raping of women because the leaders of the regime rationalized and even idolized the original handmaid's tale, twisting its contents to fit their intentions to offer a religious background behind the ceremonies. Offred even says that "the moldy old Rachel and Leah stuff we had drummed into us at the Center ... We had it read to us every breakfast" (Atwood 1998:88). The constant repetition of this bible passage to the Handmaids makes it clear that bearing children remains their purpose and duty to Gilead—it makes it their profession. By adding the religious background to the simple name "handmaid", Gilead creates the role of "Handmaids", where the value of these women is placed solely on their ability to reproduce. At its core definition, the name itself means a female servant, but in the context of Gilead "Handmaid" takes on a new meaning: a fertile woman expected to bear children for commanders and wives. In order to fit the extremist religious ideals of the nation, this new definition reduces the livelihood of these women to that of child bearers. In that sense, the biblical connotations described in Rachel, Jacob, and Billah's story justify the degradation of women into that of objects in Gilead, and the name Handmaid becomes symbolic of that story and the nation's control over them.

Now that it is clear how differences in the context of names can create meanings past a basic definition, the same idea can be explored further, at a more personal level. Beyond just the name of Handmaid's as a group, the degradation of these womens' individuality into that of their role takes form in the personal names of Handmaids themselves. Throughout *The Handmaid's Tale*, characters such as Ofglen and Ofwarren appear alongside Offred. These names are created

by taking ‘Of’ and adding the Commander’s names to the end. They remain completely separate from the Handmaids’ original names before Gilead came into power. The author describes the name Offred in particular as: “composed of a man’s first name, Fred, and a prefix denoting ‘belonging to’ ... within this name is concealed another possibility: ‘offered’, denoting a religious offering or a victim offered for sacrifice” (Atwood 2017: XV). Here, Atwood explains Gilead’s naming system and once again connects a name to a religious background. The first explanation that Atwood gives to the naming of Offred already degrades her character into an object utilized for the purposes of the Gilead regime. She is ‘of’ Fred: ‘belonging to’ Fred, the Commander. If she switches to a new Commander, she will therefore take on his name. This even happens to Ofglen at the end of the novel, and Offred reflects, “Ofglen, wherever she is, is no longer Ofglen. I never did know her real name. That is how you can get lost, in a sea of names. It wouldn’t be easy to find her now” (Atwood 1985:283). Offred describing how one can “get lost” when new Handmaids replace the previous ones remains a telling indicator for how personal names carry identity. This is because Ofglen herself was not a real person, for anyone belonging to Commander Glen replaces the original and thus becomes Ofglen. In stripping these women of their personal names, Gilead removes the individuality of their character through erasing their identity and replacing it with that of the man in charge.

To go a step further, the second explanation Atwood gives to the main character, Offred, goes hand in hand with the first. In the bible, religious sacrifices (or offerings) occur many times: To name a few: “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship” (Romans 12:1), and “take his only Son, Isaac... and offer him as a Burnt Offering’ to Him, whereupon Abraham dutifully and unquestioningly sets out to do so” (Exodus 22:29). Recalling

Atwood's message from *The Handmaid's Tale*, "within this name is concealed another possibility: 'offered,' denoting a religious offering or a victim offered for sacrifice" (Atwood 2017: XV), the ties to religion can clearly be seen. Offred is offered to the Commander as a Handmaid. Since Gilead deems her life's purpose solely that of a child bearer, her body becomes the object of sacrifice to the Commander, as well as the sustainability of Gilead's future, through the children she must bear. She even makes a note of this by stating: "Below [my skirt] the Commander is fucking. What he is fucking is the lower part of my body. I do not say making love, because this is not what he's doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and only one is involved" (Atwood: 1985: 94). By discussing the ceremony as a completely separate part of her, Offred's detachment from her own body represents the detachment she feels towards the commander: the sexual intercourse is but a task that is required of her body by Gilead, ie. her body is sacrificed for the purpose of making a child. In that way, Atwood's choice to name the main character Offred symbolizes the control that Gilead has over women, reducing Offred's individuality by making her name connected to the Commander, as well as degrading her existence into that of a religious 'offering' for Gilead's cause.

Up to this point in the analysis, examples of names indicating religious symbolism in Gilead have only been seen through the oppressed group, the Handmaids. Yet, these biblical names also appear as symbolism through the group maintaining Gilead's order, i.e. the oppressors. The most blatant example of this occurs through the name "Angels". In the context of The Bible, angels are spiritual beings believed to act as an attendant, agent, or messenger of God. They appear during important moments in the scripture and often offer guidance to people who encounter them—to name a couple instances: they appear during the birth of Jesus (Luke 1:26-38) and they provide messages to people (Genesis 22:11-22). In *The Handmaid's Tale* the

name “Angel” refers to the elite military group of Gilead. Offred recalls her friend Moira trying to escape, attempting to fake an illness and try bribing the Angels with sexual favors. Her plan backfires and, “Afterwards she could not walk for a week, her feet would not fit into her shoes, they were too swollen ... She shouldn’t have tried it, not with the Angels” (Atwood 1985:91). Moira’s failed escape plan (and subsequent torturing) establishes the Angel’s loyalty to Gilead and their willingness to uphold violence against those who attempt to break the rules. Through their behavior, these Angels appear “unhuman”. They do not showcase sexual desires or deviate from the rules, they don’t even look at the handmaids, for Offred notes that, “the Angel stood with his back towards us, as they had been taught to do” (Atwood 1998:91). Similarly to their significance in Christianity, the name “Angel” in *The Handmaid’s Tale* signifies a group in service under a leader. Though ironically, instead of God they work for Gilead, and instead of offering guidance, they enforce order. Of course, these men are not divine, inhuman entities, yet because they bear the name Angel, they are de-individualized and Gilead attempts to portray them as such. In short, the religious connotations behind Gilead naming their elite military group “Angels” symbolizes the nation as an all powerful being—as God. Through the Angels, Gilead’s violence and oppression is justified as the will of the nation and subsequently the will of God.

In the introduction of the novel, Margaret Atwood warns the reader by stating: “Change could also be as fast as lighting. It can’t happen here could not be depended on: anything could happen anywhere, given the circumstances” (Atwood 2017:XIII). After analyzing names in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, it’s clear to understand that many carry religious connotations twisting Christian ideology in order to fit Gilead’s standards: the oppression of women, the monthly sexual assault on Handmaids, and the enforcing of it all through military power. As seen throughout the novel, the names of professions such as Handmaids and Angels, as well as

individual women such as Offred, all reduce people into their respective groups and minimize their individuality through making these groups their entire purpose of existence. While Christian extremism occurring in *The Handmaid's Tale* may appear absurd, unrealistic, and far from its original intentions written in the scripture, the novel still serves as a warning for how easily beliefs can be twisted and pushed to their limits. In the end, Atwood reminds us that the line between absurdity and normality remains dangerously thin, and her work serves as a stark reminder that once ideology is twisted, the destruction of individuality can happen with terrifying ease.

Work Cited

Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1985.