
Plot And Characters Of The Handmaid's Tale By Margaret Atwood

Plot

The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood is told from the point of view of Offred, a Handmaid in Gilead. Offred serves the Commander and his wife, Serena Joy. Her job as a Handmaid is to conceive and carry a child for the couple. The women in Gilead's sole purpose is to reproduce. They aren't allowed to own property or have jobs. The old idea that women should be submissive to men is part of the new doctrine that the Handmaids are taught. The government claims that this way of living gives women more respect and safety than the old world, but it's just sexual slavery. Offred tells her story in the present tense but often has flashbacks about her old life and family. Apart from the mundane activities of her daily life, Offred has secret meetings with the Commander, which is strictly against the rules. She gets caught by his wife. At the end of Offred's narrated story, she is taken away and it's not clear where she is going. Then, in the epilogue set in 2195, Professor Pieixoto speaks about the tapes that Offred's story was recorded on. He and his colleague attempt to figure out who she was talking about during her story, but they are unsuccessful. They never found out what happened to her.

Characters

Offred is the protagonist of The Handmaid's Tale. She is quiet and reserved for the most part, but she rebels in her own ways. Atwood uses Offred's acts of small disobedience to illustrate how she becomes more defiant of society. At one point, Offred looks for butter, "...in the toe of my right shoe, where I hid it after dinner... As long as we do this, butter our skin to keep it soft, we can believe that we will someday get out, that we will be touched again, in love or desire." The Handmaids are not allowed to use any creams because they aren't supposed to be seen as attractive, but Offred uses these small luxuries to get through her days. Atwood also uses Offred's internal thought processes to show how she changes throughout the story. Laying in bed one night, Offred thinks about her thoughts. "I try not to think too much. Like other things now, thought must be rationed. There's a lot that doesn't bear thinking about. Thinking can hurt your chances, and I intend to last." Offred wants to survive. She is not as fiery as someone like Moira, but her will to live is strong.

The Commander, though having a strong name, is weak. Atwood shows his weaknesses through his affair with Offred. He breaks his own rules just to have a relationship with her. He is so desperate for companionship that he is willing to put Offred's life in danger. When the Commander invites Offred to play Scrabble with him, she explains how it is, "...forbidden, for us. Now it's dangerous. Now it's indecent. Now it's something he can't do with his Wife. Now it's desirable. Now he's compromised himself. It's as if he's offered me drugs." As his name implies, he is the head of the household where Offred lives. However, Offred perceives him as not quite knowing what's going on. She says, "He manages to appear puzzled as if he can't quite remember how we all got in here. As if we are something he inherited, like a Victorian pump organ, and he hasn't figured out what to do with us." Atwood uses Offred's opinion of the Commander to show his weakness.

Moira was Offred's best friend in the old world. She is tenacious and fiery. These traits are shown explicitly through her dialogue with Offred in the "old world". Offred talks about one of Moira's "under where parties", where instead of selling Tupperware, Moira was selling lingerie. Moira says she was, "Working my way through college." Offred says Moira always made her laugh. Moira's escape from the Red Center shows how aggressive she is and how badly she wants to get out. Moira stabs Aunt Elizabeth with a part from a broken toilet and says, "I could kill you, you know..." Atwood makes Moira Offred's opposite in the way that she handles herself and the situation that the women are in.

Setting

The Handmaid's Tale takes place in the not-so-distant future. The epilogue reveals a rough timeframe since the year 2195 is mentioned. The novel is set in Gilead, which used to be the United States. Characters like Moira and Offred are described as they were in the past, and then how they changed once the government started taking away their rights. The story specifically relates to the setting because it is sending a message that the United States as we know it may end up run by a totalitarian government with sexual slavery being normal.

Theme

The theme of The Handmaid's Tale is the danger of complacency. Atwood presents this theme multiple times throughout the novel. The most obvious representation of the consequences of complacency is the women in Gilead. The government restricting women's bank accounts was the first sign that something was wrong, but surprisingly no one really fought back. In a flashback to her old life, Offred says that "We lived, as usual, by ignoring." She describes how life changed. It wasn't instantaneous. There were newspaper articles being written about what was happening, but, "they were awful without being believable." People often act this way today. Thousands of news reports and articles circulate the internet detailing everything from terrorist attacks in other countries to current political scandals. We read them and talk about them, but they never really feel "real" to us. Margaret Atwood wrote The Handmaid's Tale in 1985, but it was set in the future. I think the future she wrote about may be coming sooner than we care to believe.