Theme of Freedom in The Crucible and The Handmaids Tail: Comparative Essay

Freedom is the state of being without any restrictions or external control; a form of power in which an individual is able to act, speak, or think as one wants without receiving any consequences. However, in Arthur Miller's play, The Crucible, the theme of Freedom is portrayed as being a desire, one that characters in the play are deprived of, even though commonly any individual is entitled to it. The need for being free (thus, having freedom) is sparked during the witchcraft trials in Salem, Massachusetts, where each character's freedom is targeted and used as a point of conviction. A similar proposal in Margret Atwood's, The Handmaids Tail, readers are given an insight into how Freedom may be taken for granted relative to the oppressive government of Gilead, in which Offred, a handmaid (an individual whose sole purpose is to birth children) abides and lives by the strict and tyrannical rules set out the by the government of Gilead, where an individual's right to Freedom, becomes a mere desire. Both the play and the novel display aspects of a religion, confinement and gender as being factors in which their exposure to Freedom is influenced by. With the society in which the characters from both The crucible and The handmaids tale live in ultimately dictating whether or not an individual of their respective environment is free or not.

An overarching similarity that is displayed in both the play and the novel, is the oppressive, domineering and disorientated societies of both Salem, and Gilead. In Miller's The Crucible, Salem is illustrated as a society in which is in deep confusion, and uncertainty over the witch trials. This oppressive and vulnerable society, complemented the ability of characters such as Abigail Williams, to freely accuse any individual of engaging in witchcraft to resolve her personal issues, rather than truly identifying a real witch. This freedom that Williams was given enabled her to strip the freedom of others away. This is evident when we see that Williams is jealous of Elizabeth Proctor, describing her as a "cold, snivelling women' and a woman who John Proctor 'bends to." This scene foreshadows the conviction of Elizabeth in the forthcoming scenes; conviction that stems from the freedom of Abigail to freely accuse any individual who she wills. Similarly, Atwood's displays how Wives and Commanders have the freedom which enables them to strip the freedom away from Marthas and Handmaids. Readers are exposed to this proposal when Offred is first introduced to her room, where she realises "they've removed anything you could tie a rope to," and that these individuals (individuals of power, for example The eye) have removed these obstacles to disallow the handmaids to achieve the only true form of freedom in Gilead; death. As Offred understands that even if handmaids were to escape "[they] wouldn't get far. It's those other escapes, the ones you can open in yourself, given a cutting edge," where the edge may symbolise any weapon that can take life away, and the only 'escape' may indicate death. Hence, Atwood's portrays the idea of individuals who possess freedom, to have more power than others who don't necessarily have freedom, a similar idea addressed by Miller.

Freedom in both novels, is addressed as to be a mere desire, rather than traditionally a right. Miller uses John Proctor, a figure who possesses Freedom, however due to his own actions, he suffers the loss of it. This scheme is employed when John has an affair with Abigail Williams, whilst he's married to Elizabeth Proctor; exploiting the freedom that he possessed with the marriage. Where, he constantly feels guilt tripped by his Wife, Elizabeth, hence he loses the

freedom and trust that he once had in his marriage. This is evident when, Proctor exclaims, “Spare me! You forget nothin’ and forgive nothin’. Learn charity, women [Elizabeth],” exchanging his true feelings about how he assumes Elizabeth feels about the affair. The explosive and hurtful tone that he uses, indicates that he has made himself vulnerable, by losing his freedom in his marriage, which constantly positions his relationship with Elizabeth to be tense, and untruthful. Hence, he yearns for his freedom (in his marriage) to be restored. Likewise, Atwood uses Offred to establish the desire to have freedom from the powerful individuals of Gilead (such as the Wives and Commanders). Where Offred reminisces about her ability to love herself, and be more than a means of reproduction, saying “my nakedness is strange to me already…. I avoid looking down at my body, not so much because it's shameful or immodest but because I don't want to see it. I don't want to look at something that determines me so completely,” indicating that wants the freedom to love herself, a simple quality that she may have took for granted in her life before Gilead. She goes on to discuss about another freedom that she took for granted, questioning her own actions by saying “Did I really wear bathing suits at the beach?”, and responding in awe as wearing bathing suits is unthought of in Gilead, and thus she can’t seem to fathom her own thought process while she wore one. Displaying that the luxury of possessing Freedom in a life before Gilead seems unimaginable, due to the strict and confined setting that Atwood paints, where a right such as Freedom, may become a mere aspiration.

To add, both Miller and Atwood emphasise on different factors that influence an individual’s freedom. Miller emphasises the role of religion and indicates that it is a variable that influences ones’ freedom. He exhibits this idea by using Giles Cory, an honest, but gullible individual. Who loosely hints to Reverend Hale, that his wife may be a witch, as she doesn’t engage in reading the bible, and Christianity; the universal religion of Salem. By saying he saw his wife ‘reading mysterious books at night,’ numerous number of times and that he can’t ‘identify the books [that Martha reads], as she [Martha] hides them.’ He goes on to say that he feels ‘uncomfortable’ when he sees his wife reading, and that he has ‘difficulty praying while [Martha] reads [her books].’ Where Miller appeals to the notion of reading books other than the bible is straying from religion; and thus why Martha was later convicted to be a witch, hence stripped of her freedom. Atwood similarly appeals to the notion of gender being a major influence on ones’ freedom in Gilead. Where she frankly paints women as having less freedom than men; her own vision of a dystopian society. She paints this idea by relating to the factor of both gender and confinement, where males are more free, than that are females, hence they have more freedom. She relates to this notion by establishing a prominent and obvious hierarchy within Gilead, where it is the males that possess the highest degree(s) of power, such as the role of Commanders and Angels, in comparison to Marthas and Handmiads. This division of freedom to each gender is respective to the reasoning of the leaders of Gilead, who feel that women are ‘potentially life threatening and subversive and therefore require strict control.’ Thus, to suppress and combat the fear of women rebelling and taking control of Gilead, there is a social caste system that ensures that men will always possess a higher degree of power and thus freedom relative to women in Gilead. However, Atwood challenges this view by using Moira, an escapee and once handmaid (now rebel) female, who ‘has power no,’ since ‘she set herself loose.’ Making her a ‘loose [thus free] woman.’ Hence indicating that, although the gender of an individual is of influence to one’s freedom, the degree of confinement that an individual is exposed to has a larger influence on an individual’s freedom.

Both Miller’s The Crucible, and Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale discuss the main theme of Freedom. Both authors discuss Freedom as being a desire, how it may be given, or taken away,

and the specific factors that influence it in each respective environment, such as an oppressive society as seen in Gilead. Although both novels possess similarities relating to Freedom, the main difference that differentiates Freedom in both the play and the novel, it its specific role in each respective society, due to the respective qualities of each society.