

Puzzle Piece #3: *The Handmaid's Tale* Critical Thinking in Science Fiction

Language

Rachel and Leah. Jezebel. Aunts. Handmaids. Marthas. Commanders. Wives. Angels. Guardians. Salvaging. Testifying. Daily Bread. Milk and Honey. In the society of Gilead, biblical, military, and familial references mix together in such a euphemistic way as to conflate, disguise, and even remake history itself.

There is perhaps no better example of this than in the very name of this new country: The Republic of Gilead. The name Gilead is a reference to a bountiful geographic region northeast of the Dead Sea and settled by the ancient Israelites of the Old Testament, while the word “republic” comes from the Latin *publicus* (of the people) and defines a state in which power is held by the people and their elected representatives. This blend of the political and the religious carries quite a bit of irony, given that there is nothing democratic about this “republic,” and yet it also functions as an apt symbol for this new country which might very well be described as a totalitarian, patriarchal theocracy. It is both true and misleading at the same time—and that is the point.

A society kept in such constant confusion will look for stability wherever it can be found, even if this means believing in a stable lie. Humans crave order. This happened in the 1920s in Germany, an economically depressed state, still reeling from WWI and looking for answers. Hitler’s message, though untrue, was consistent and afforded Germans an answer and a scapegoat. History is chock full of similarly unfortunate attempts to manipulate the public, from Joseph Stalin to Joseph McCarthy to Kim Il-sung. And language has always been an important tool in the arsenal of those looking to maintain power, as well as those looking to gain power.

In Gilead we see language used euphemistically in all the typically nefarious ways. To redefine reality: *Milk and Honey* is an Old Testament allusion to a land of abundance, yet, ironically, it is also the name given to the grocery store where Offred shops, whose shelves are continually empty. To soften: *Aunt*, *Angel*, and *Guardian* are typically comforting labels, and yet all who bear those titles are complicit in the subjugation of the public, particularly women. To conceal: “Salvaging” is simply a public execution, meant to instill fear and keep the public in line, but passed off as a way to release the souls of those who have strayed from the path of righteousness. To brainwash: “Testifying” at the Red Center is nothing more than victim blaming, but the word *testify* carries with it a confessional quality so that the victim comes to believe it is her fault, that she has done something wrong, and that peace will come only by testifying to her “sins.” To justify: Rachel and Leah were sisters and wives of the biblical patriarch Jacob, each compelled to birth as many children as possible, and falling into such a rivalry that each offered her own handmaid to Jacob as another potentially fertile womb; it is an apt and persuasive name for the Red Center, a place where young women are “re-educated” and turned into Handmaids for breeding.

In Gilead and throughout our own history, language has often been employed in this way and always for the same purpose: Control. And it is effective. It has always been effective. And will remain effective. Look around your own world even now and you’ll see hints of such linguistic manipulation. As in Gilead, it starts out small but grows larger, and under the right conditions it can metastasize... until history and reality itself is rewritten. *The Handmaid's Tale* is in fact a tale of that tipping point.