

Puzzle Piece #4: *The Handmaid's Tale*
Critical Thinking in Science Fiction

Freedom

If control is the hub of story, then freedom, in its myriad forms, would constitute the spokes. Though many of us read this novel as a story of freedom *taken*, as Aunt Lydia says near the beginning of the novel, “There is more than one kind of freedom. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don’t underrate it.” Later in the book, the Commander brings greater clarity to this viewpoint:

“We’ve given [women] more than we’ve taken away [...] Think of the trouble they had before. Don’t you remember the singles’ bars, the indignity of high school blind dates? The meat market. Don’t you remember the terrible gap between those who could get a man easily and those who couldn’t? Some of them were desperate, they starved themselves thin or [...] had their noses cut off [...] And if they did marry, they could be left with a kid, two kids, the husband might just get fed up and take off, disappear [...] or else he’d stay around and beat them up [...] This way they’re protected, they can fulfill their biological destinies in peace.”

Indeed, the women of Gilead are certainly free *from* those sorts of indignities and hardships... but they are also free *from* choice, encouraged to play the role of victim and to allow men to dictate how much and what kind of freedom they will have. It does not seem altogether that different from the pre-Gilead attitudes in regard to the relationship between women and men. This is important to keep in mind when understanding Offred’s role as protagonist. Dynamic characters change. Though Offred has opinions, desires, and emotions, throughout the story she rarely acts upon them in any meaningful ways. Because she is the narrator and we are privy to her inner most thoughts it is easy to be fooled into believing she is dynamic. But ask yourself: While Moira risks several escape attempts, does Offred attempt even one? When there are hints that Ofglen may be part of a resistance, does Offred pursue entrance? And when she gains intimate access to the Commander, does Offred actually work to retrieve information? The answer to each: No. Rather than attempt escape, Offred pins her hopes on a man (Luke) finding and saving her: “I must have patience: sooner or later he will get me out.” Rather than feeling out Ofglen and potentially joining the resistance, Offred simply assumes there must be a resistance, that “someone must be out there, taking care of things” ... but not her. And rather than pumping the Commander for information, Offred allows herself to be placated by small luxuries like magazines, makeup, and lotion.

Though Offred early on claims, “I intend to get out of here” and that “it can’t last forever,” she really does nothing to initiate her own freedom. Instead, she waits for Luke to save her, gets sidetracked by the small affections of Nick, and gobbles up the scraps of contraband that the Commander offers her. She is merely the victim and the plaything of men, which the careful reader will notice is not much different from her pre-Gilead days.

Some readers might be tempted to see Gilead and its violently oppressive government as the reason for Offred’s passive posture: women are simply too scared to rebel. However, the “Night” sections, which give us insight into society before Gilead also give us insight into Offred before Gilead. And a close reader can easily make the claim that Offred was no bolder before Gilead than after. Fact: Before Gilead, Offred found Moira too rebellious even in college. Fact: Before Gilead, Offred found her mother far too liberal in her feminist opinions. Fact: Before Gilead, Offred was content to be the “other woman” while Luke remained married for quite some time. One could easily claim that Offred is no different now than before. Before Gilead, she had the freedom *to* do whatever she wanted... but rarely took advantage of it. Gilead did not make Offred passive; Gilead

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simply took advantage of her already existing passivity. So, the real question is: Will Gilead make Offred dynamic? Will she now fight for the freedoms she once took for granted or will she remain static, passive, waiting to be saved by a man? So far, her actions indicate the latter.

Other characters and populations within the novel find themselves in similar struggles with freedom. Moira risks life and limb to avoid her fate as a Handmaid, and eventually finds a place at Jezebel's. However, while Jezebel's may afford her more freedom *to* do as she wants, it certainly doesn't afford her freedom *from* all the indignities and abuse that come with that life. Offred's mother was something of a radical feminist in her pre-Gilead days, but now finds herself in the Colonies—a terrible fate for a once fierce defender of women's rights, now viewed as an “unwoman.” Serena Joy, we learn, was something of a radical anti-feminist in her pre-Gilead days, but now finds herself suffering beneath the restrictions of domestic responsibilities, motherhood, and wifely expectations—an ironic fate for a once fierce defender of female submission and obedience (careful what you wish for). By playing women against one another the government has divided and conquered the female population simply by offering, withdrawing, and designing a myriad of “freedoms”—both *to* and *from*—through which to “control” the women by using their own petty jealousies against one another. And the women allow it: Econo-Wives envious of the fertility of Handmaids, Handmaids envious of the freedoms possessed by the Commanders' Wives, and the Commanders' Wives resentful of the Handmaids' intimacies with their husbands.

Offred, and those around her, represent the bridge generation—those women (and men) who were of age both before and after Gilead. In “Salvaging” we're introduced to the next generation, those women who will grow up cradle to grave within the severe confines of Gilead—and with no writing, reading, science, or freedom of information, once Offred's generation dies off, history and reality itself will be forgotten and rewritten. This version of the world will be the only reality the next generation knows. And if you don't know anything different, then you have little reason to rebel. How do we demand that which we have no concept of? Gilead wins. Control is total.

Perhaps nowhere in the book is the link between freedom and control so clearly established than in the “Soul Scrolls” section, where we finally learn the backstory. A tragedy provokes fear. In exchange for freedom *from* the thing we fear, we willingly give up our freedom *to* our civil rights. In the case of *The Handmaid's Tale*, the tragedy was manufactured, the fear was purposely stoked, and the removal of freedoms was cleverly designed to meet with as little resistance as possible: news was censored under the guise of “security”; “Identipasses” were issued and elections were delayed under the guise of “caution”; the “Pornomarts” and “Feels on Wheels” were shutdown simply because they were easy targets—who would be bold enough to argue against such “morally” offensive industries. But there's a thin line between protection and control, and the government was so shrewd in its execution of these “precautions” that by the time people realized what they were passively acquiescing to, it was too late. The first dominoes had fallen, and the rest were inevitable, and there was little the public could do about it since the public had all but welcomed it in the beginning.

Margaret Atwood's message seems clear: For a society and a culture to be healthy, freedom *to* and freedom *from* must coexist; all things, all ideas, all people—no matter how disagreeable or repugnant others may find them—must be *free to* exist and *free from* persecution.