

**UNIVERSITY OF TARTU  
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**FUNDAMENTALISM AND MALE-FEMALE RELATIONSHIPS  
IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE HANDMAID'S TALE***

**BA thesis**

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to analyse the complex way the themes of fundamentalism and male-female relationships have been handled in Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. The primary aim of the thesis is to counter the more simplified interpretations of these themes that are circulating due to articles published by various contemporary media outlets.

This thesis is composed of four main parts: the introduction, two chapters, and the conclusion. The introduction gives a concise overview of Atwood's novel, provides an explanation for the book's resurgence in popularity and the influx of articles about it. Additionally, it emphasises the importance of highlighting the complex nature of the themes presented in the novel and contains a short overview of the thesis.

The first chapter provides a brief history of the novel's past reception and then examines the way contemporary articles have approached the subjects of fundamentalism and male-female relationships in contrast to critics' past appraisals of those themes.

The second chapter serves as the empirical part of the thesis. The chapter analyses the fundamentalist aspects of the book's world, discusses the novel's protagonist, and explores male-female relationship through said protagonist's interactions and relationships with secondary characters.

The conclusion summarises the main findings of the thesis.

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## INTRODUCTION

Dystopian fictions, such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), or George Orwell's most famous work, *1984* (1949), will enjoy eternal relevancy due to the nature of genre. They serve as warnings, incorporating just enough elements familiar from the real world that they can be frightening. Canadian author Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* is in that regard no different.

*The Handmaid's Tale* is Margaret Atwood's first dystopian novel, although Atwood herself is fond of the term *speculative fiction*. The novel is influenced by George Orwell's dystopian classic, *1984*, which Atwood has cited on numerous occasions. By Atwood's own admission, *The Handmaid's Tale* was her attempt at creating a dystopian novel in the same vein as *1984*, but from a female perspective.

*The Handmaid's Tale* takes place in a dystopian version of the United States of America, namely in the fictional Republic of Gilead, a totalitarian and fundamentalist state where perverse and literal interpretations from the Bible have been used to shape the law. Gilead is a hierarchic society, which generally favours men more than women, where citizens belong to different social groups and statuses. One of these are the titular Handmaids – a group of women that are officially recognised as nothing more than walking wombs, whose only societal function is to conceive and give birth. Handmaids are specifically used to combat the country's low birth rates, which are a direct result of growing infertility in both men and women. *The Handmaid's Tale* is narrated from the point of view of one of these Handmaids, who goes by the name of Offred in the new regime. Offred's story details her life in the Gileadean regime, as well as her interactions and relationship with other characters.

*The Handmaid's Tale* experienced a resurgence in popularity after the

announcement of a TV adaptation based on the novel and surprise victory of candidate Donald Trump in the United States presidential elections of 2016. After these events, the book enjoyed a 209% increase in sales (Maher 2017: 4) and became widely talked about. Due to the polarising political climate of the USA, a myriad of articles appeared drawing parallels between themes from the book and contemporary social issues or the new administration, with considerable emphasis put on the female oppression depicted in the novel. With the fairly unilateral nature of these articles, the themes seem to have undergone substantial simplification, so that they can help reinforce whatever political points are being made in the accompanying article. The aim of this thesis is to explore the themes concerning fundamentalism and male-female relationships in *The Handmaid's Tale* to counter more simplified understandings of these ideas born from the various media outlets.

In the first chapter, this thesis aims to contrast contemporary articles written in the light of the then new TV adaptation of the novel with analyses from various critics and Margaret Atwood herself. In the second chapter, it will analyse the themes concerning fundamentalism and male-female relationships in greater detail. This thesis will show that the way *The Handmaid's Tale* handles fundamentalism and male-female relationships is more complex and nuanced than might be inferred from contemporary articles.

# 1. CONTROVERSIAL RECEPTION OF MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*: LITERATURE REVIEW

## 1.1. Introduction

With the renewed interest in *The Handmaid's Tale*, on account of the announcement of the TV adaptation and the political situation in the United States, a wave of fairly one-sided articles and opinion pieces have led to some of the novel's themes being simplified and, furthermore, the line between the TV adaptation and novel being blurred, with journalists seemingly conflating themes and ideas from the admittedly altered and modernised adaptation with Atwood's original. For the uninformed reader, this could create a false understanding of what the novel is about. Due to these articles not being academic in nature and mostly consisting of pieces largely based on opinion, one may be tempted to dismiss the concern that these articles may influence the public's perception of the novel as immaterial. However, due to the nature of social media, misconceptions about Atwood's novel can spread faster than ever before in history, unchecked and in high numbers. The result of this could very well be that a distorted perception of *The Handmaid's Tale* might enter public opinion, either giving potential readers false preconceptions about the book before reading it or effectively alienating others due to the potentially unfavourable light the story has inadvertently been presented in. Therefore, it is important to contrast these articles with critics' analyses and academic articles, to get a more balanced understanding of Atwood's novel.

## 1.2. History

Properly refuting today's misinterpretations of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, as well as examining the more relevant issues present in the novel, necessitates

looking into the past reception and interpretations of the book.

According to Lee Briscoe Thompson (Thompson 1997: 19), the male and female divide depicted in the story of *The Handmaid's Tale* actually spilled into the real world critical reception of the novel as well when it was first published in 1985. Female critics made up two-thirds of reviewers in the U.S. and Canada. Coincidentally, the book fared better overall with the female critics than with their male counterparts. Additionally, when assessing the plausibility of the novel's story, the verdict was similarly disparate between the two sexes, with women finding the scenario more believable than men. This shows that even back when the novel was first published, the themes concerning male-female power structures and relationships already resonated strongly with the populace and was the subject of debate and disagreement, especially in the States (Thompson 1997: 13). Furthermore, Offred, the protagonist of the novel, would also spark debate, with some critics believing Offred's apparent passivity or the story's use of the popular female romance to be "an abysmal political lapse", as pointed out by Sandra Tome in her article (1993: 79).

Much like today, the popularity of the story in the U.S. was in no small part due to the political climate and contemporary societal attitudes and anxieties back then. As Thompson points out, the timing of the novel's release aided in capturing the American public's interest, due to the rising popularity of extremist solutions in a "post-Watergate, post-Vietnam America" (Thompson 1997: 17). Margaret Atwood herself explained that the extremist aspects of Gilead's society in her novel were merely commonplace beliefs at the time "taken to their logical conclusions" (An Interview with Margaret Atwood N.d.: 4). Atwood also stated that the society portrayed in *The Handmaid's Tale* was primarily based on the early Puritans, which can be seen in the way the novel handles religious fundamentalism taken to the extreme. Contributing to the popularity and relevance the

book enjoyed at release was the setting of the story, namely the United States. Rather than having the novel take place in her own native Canada, Atwood opted for the States as, in her opinion, the U.S. was politically more extreme (Howells 2005: 96) and would therefore better serve her story, making the scenario depicted more plausible. It is also important to note that one prominent group which served as an inspiration for Atwood's story back in the 1980s was the American religious right, known then as the 'New Right'. These American influences are at the core of the story, so it is of no surprise that the people of the States would feel so strongly towards it then as they do now.

Only after the initial release and when the exploding popularity had died down did more measured critical analyses of the novel become more prominent (Thompson 1997: 21), helping to create a more balanced perception of the novel. When analysing *The Handmaid's Tale* today, completely disregarding all of the preceding will result in an incomplete understanding of the ideas and issues the book delves into. The aforementioned misconceptions can lead to the uninitiated developing a false preconception of the book. Therefore, it is of uttermost importance not to misunderstand what the novel is trying to communicate and keep context and history in mind when tackling its themes.

### **1.3. Focus on Male-Female Relationships**

*The Handmaid's Tale* presents the patriarchal regime of the Republic of Gilead in a way that showcases how society as whole suffers from this kind of system. The plot of the novel is not presented as a morally black and white story, where the problems and solutions are clearly discernible to the reader, nor is any group in its entirety singled out to be blamed for the ills the book's world suffers from.

With the recent revitalisation of the novel's popularity, an awful lot of stress has been put on female oppression specifically. It is, of course, not incorrect to point out that



the novel largely focuses on the perspective of a female character who is indeed being oppressed. However, by solely focusing on this aspect without providing proper context or expanding on the subject, it paints the picture that the novel's plot, concerning the relationship between men and women, is decidedly one-sided. In his opinion piece for the *Guardian*, Matthew d'Ancona (2017) emphasises the hardships women face in the Republic of Gilead, while just mentioning Christian fundamentalism in passing and not delving any deeper, such as exploring in what way the regime affects the men of this society or analysing the fundamentalist elements further. He focuses on women in order to make analogies between the novel and the administration of U.S. President Donald Trump as well as the #MeToo movement, but by omitting any kind of nuance the story provided, he has, perhaps unwittingly, manufactured a very partial view of Gilead's society and the themes portrayed in the book. Moreover, d'Ancona can be seen segueing between the TV adaptation and the book so seamlessly that anyone oblivious to the source material could easily have the line between the two blurred for them. This article is not an isolated incident, where this is the case. Many other media outlets have produced similar appraisals. Phoebe Reilly, for example, similarly decries the unfair treatment of women in her article for the *Rolling Stone* (2017) while giving the fundamentalist aspect a mere cursory glance and not taking an in-depth look at the relationship between men and women. While these articles are not directly spreading false interpretations, it can be argued that they perpetuate them by omission. After all, somebody unfamiliar with the source material is most certainly not going to get the full picture of the way male-female relationships are portrayed, perhaps even pre-emptively shaping their perception of Atwood's novel. Some articles can be seen as being more overtly complicit in the spread of unilateral understandings of the book, however. In an article written for the *Verge*, Adi Robertson recalled explaining to a male confidant that the novel suggests that he, as a man, would be

indifferent to women losing their rights (2016: 1), going so far as partly agreeing that “feminist dystopia” would be an appropriate label for the book. Robertson cites a scene in the novel where Luke, the husband of the story’s narrator and protagonist, seems apathetic towards the government barring her from working and how the Gileadean government takes over with little resistance. By exclusively highlighting this aspect, it puts tremendous focus on the victimization of women, while putting men in an unmistakably negative light. Again, it is the one-sided nature of the examples provided that might lead to the misconception that the novel is somehow a binary anti-male and pro-female story.

In reality, *The Handmaid’s Tale* is much more nuanced in its approach to the subject matter of male-female relationships, something which has been touched upon in the past by critics. In her analysis dedicated to *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Hilde Staels (1995: 175) has observed how the novel portrays the radical feminist movement not as an antithesis to the regressive Gileadean regime but rather as a different side to the same coin, even suggesting that the story indicates that radical feminist beliefs might in fact vindicate the Christian fundamentalist ideas about the inherent differences between men and women justifying roles in society based on gender (Staels 1995: 162). Staels notes that the narrative text shows radical feminism to be just as dogmatic as the regime it ideologically opposes and that Atwood’s story clearly does not advocate any form of extremist world views, no matter how well intentioned, and that one cannot propose replacing a patriarchal society with a matriarchal one as a solution. This cements the fact that the “feminist dystopia” nomenclature is unsuitable for *The Handmaid’s Tale*. As Coral Ann Howells pointed out in her own analysis of the book (2005: 98), Atwood’s story renounces any form of binary opposition and allows a critique of extremes on all sides due to the moderate nature of its main character.

The more balanced stance is also reflected in the way characters are portrayed. In

his article, Amin Malak draws attention to the fact that not all the female characters in the story are portrayed as good nor are all the male ones presented as evil. He references one of the primary male characters Nick being a part of the resistance working against the Gileadean regime and also mentions Aunt Lydia, a female propagandist working with the government (Malak 1987: 12). Through her characters, Atwood shows that even in a society that favours men over women, that does not make men more inherently evil or vice versa. A lot of the oppressive practices in the Republic of Gilead have not been engineered by men as a collective group, but pushed by select ideologues who run the state.

Margaret Atwood herself has commented on the use of the term “feminist dystopia” when referring to *The Handmaid’s Tale*. In an article published by the Modern Language Association, Atwood (2004: 516) stresses that her novel is merely speculative fiction in the same vein as George Orwell’s *1984* but written from a female perspective. Atwood expresses the belief that the novel is labelled “feminist dystopia” by some because simply providing a woman with a voice and inner life “will always be considered “feminist” by those who think women ought not to have these things” (Atwood 2004: 516). Atwood goes on to mention that one of the most prominent opposing forces to the tyranny present in the Gileadean regime is basic human decency (2004: 517), further distancing the novel from any anti-male interpretations or extremist sentiments.

While the regime in Gilead is undoubtedly patriarchal, the way male and female relationships are presented is most definitely not simplified. The society does indeed benefit men more than women, yet Atwood has made sure to emphasise that everybody will still suffer from the system in place in the Republic of Gilead. This aspect of the novel is very important, since, as “speculative fiction”, it is supposed to serve as a universal warning for all, rather than just single group. This serves as the central appeal and accentuates the importance of *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

#### 1.4. Christianity

Similar to how male-female relationships have been misinterpreted in Atwood's novel, so too has the subject of religion. The simplified interpretation of *The Handmaid's Tale* has led to American Christians feeling attacked by the TV adaptation's and, by extension, the book's themes. Christian websites and outlets have taken to defend Christianity from the supposedly anti-Christian messages contained in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Articles like these create the narrative that the fundamentalist elements explored in Atwood's novel can only be applied to Christianity and that it is a criticism of religion itself. David Robertson from *Christian Today* (2017) published an article excoriating the film as being blatantly anti-Christian – dismissing both the TV adaption as well as the book as unrealistic fearmongering. Robertson's defence consists of comparing Christianity with religions he deems far more dangerous, such as Islam and Scientology, as well as pointing out the flawed interpretations of the Holy Scriptures made by the Gileadean regime. Other outlets, such as the similarly named *Christianity Today*, have also published articles using a similar defence, criticising the botched interpretations of the Bible passages referenced in the story (Kelly 2017: 4). Specifically, Robertson proclaims in his article:

Despite the constant citation of Scripture, the portrayal of Christianity in the drama is the antithesis of what real Christianity is. Real Christianity is not religious hypocrites enforcing their perverted teachings through the barrel of a gun. (Robertson 2017: 10)

Interestingly, Robertson has himself pointed out a key element in Atwood's novel that counters the narrative of *The Handmaid's Tale* being an anti-Christian work, ostensibly without realizing it. The aforementioned element being that religion as whole, Christianity included, is not portrayed as inherently evil in *The Handmaid's Tale* nor are people who practice any sort of religion demonised. Rather, it focuses on how people, specifically governments, could potentially twist religion and manipulate its followers in order to further their own agendas.

In an interview, Atwood stated that she believed the only way to garner mass support in the United States would not be through liberalism or socialism, but rather through the word of God (An Interview with Margaret Atwood N.d.: 4). She explains how the mentality in the Republic of Gilead is reminiscent of the early Puritans who settled in America with the intention of establishing a religious theocracy under the guise of pursuing religious freedom, comparing it to the situation in Iran.

One of the most prominent examples of how the Gileadean government is using religion to justify their policies, is the regime's use of very literal interpretations of the Bible to rationalise measures taken in order to counter the country's plummeting birth rate. An article by Jon Pahl discusses this in greater detail (2010: 127). It should first be acknowledged that while Pahl's article primarily focuses on the 1990 film adaptation, his understanding of the story does not contradict the novel in any way. He points out how the religious government in the Republic of Gilead essentially regulates human sexual behaviour and desire. In other words, giving birth is a controlled process and religion has been used as an excuse to maximise efficiency. The very reason for the existence of the Handmaids in the story is a direct result of this. As Hilde Staels remarks (1995: 157), Handmaids have been introduced to the Gileadean society due to a warped interpretation of texts from the Old Testament. These views naturally also extend to other issues, such as abortion. The Gileadean regime has turned a reproductive issue into an ideological one.

Critics have also noted how the glorification of traditional values has also been used as an excuse for the Gileadean government to further their own goals. As Pahl once again calls attention to in his article (2010: 134), these traditional values enforce heterosexual relationships by denying homosexual couples the ability to marry or, as is the case in the Republic of Gilead, outlawing homosexuality as a sinful practice. Under the guise of perpetuating Christian family values, the Gileadean government is regulating

sexuality for the purpose of optimising procreation.

This could potentially be interpreted as the novel suggesting that religion itself is influencing the decision-making process of the government. However, it should not be forgotten that the Gileadean regime's devotion to Christianity, as can be ascertained, is insincere. Therefore, their enforcement of traditional family values should not be seen as a genuinely earnest gesture nor as a result of strict adherence to values extracted from the Bible, but rather as a tool for justifying their own ulterior motives. This is similar to how some of the aforementioned policies concerning reproductive freedom stem from deliberately misconstrued literal interpretations of the Bible. Religion is merely used by the government as a pretext for implementing these authoritarian policies. As Joseph Andriano aptly expresses in his article (1992: 90), the novel's handling of Christian fundamentalism seems to imply that "the Bible may be interpreted in any way that is convenient to justify the most outrageous practices."

To reiterate, these literal interpretations of the Bible or the act of writing certain values into law should not be seen as attacks on the Bible itself, but rather as a criticism of people who would use deliberately flawed readings of religious texts as nothing more than a means for justifying their actions. That is why it is important not to falsely label *The Handmaid's Tale* as purely anti-Christian propaganda, since the story provides a warning that is relevant to all religions or even ideologies in general.

## **1.5. Conclusion**

Due to the recent explosive resurgence of *The Handmaid's Tale's* popularity, not to mention the seeming conflation between TV adaptation and novel, it arguably makes it that much more important to ensure the book's themes are not overly simplified.

As various critics of the past have clearly expressed, the novel's themes

concerning gender relations are not as one-note as might superficially be evident when reading some of the more recent opinion pieces. Critics have highlighted the complex way the relationship between the two sexes is portrayed, how the negative repercussions of a patriarchal society can extend to men as well as women, and how the different characters are shown in a positive or negative light regardless of gender. Most importantly, as can be ascertained from critics' analyses of the characters, not to mention Atwood's call for basic human decency, the characters are presented as not just representatives of their sex, but as actual people, both favourable and flawed. In addition, this extends to the way Christianity and religion is treated in the novel, where the problematic aspects can be traced back to fundamentalism or, more specifically, the human part of the equation. Even though the regime invokes the Bible, the book itself is presented as a mere tool used by the state to justify the enforcement of their malicious practices.

*The Handmaid's Tale* does not blame generalised groups or religions, but rather showcases recognizable trends and beliefs in society taken to the extreme while exposing people who would manipulate ideologies to suit their every whim. Therefore, *The Handmaid's Tale* serves as an effective and eternally relevant warning, further stressing that its themes should not be simplified.

## **2. COMPLEX HANDLING OF FUNDAMENTALISM AND MALE-FEMALE RELATIONSHIPS IN *THE HANDMAID'S TALE***

### **2.1. Introduction**

With *The Handmaid's Tale* Margaret Atwood has crafted a story that analyses aspects related to religious fundamentalism and explores gender relations in a patriarchal society. It would have been possible for Atwood to stumble and turn the plot into a banal anti-religious, anti-male tale with the story showcasing binary morality and opposition between the two sexes. Instead, Atwood takes care to present the novel's world and its characters in a critical but complex manner.

When focusing on the system in place in the Republic of Gilead, it is possible to see that the policies implemented predominantly stem from the fundamentalist worldview mandated by Gilead's rulers. The story emphasises how the texts contained in the Bible have been deliberately misused as an excuse to gain control, and consequently exposes the people behind its misuse as the true root of the problems afflicting the society portrayed in the novel, rather than laying the blame on the religion itself. Similarly, Atwood has handled the oft emphasised gender relations in her novel with certain nuance, which can be seen in the way she has portrayed power structures between different groups and the romantic aspects of male-female relationships. Atwood primarily analyses these latter aspects through the protagonist and narrator of the novel, Offred, and her interactions with other secondary characters.

### **2.2. Fundamentalism in the Republic of Gilead**

The Republic of Gilead is a fundamentalist Christian dictatorship, where the power of the regime's leaders is absolute. The government suppresses any dissent with the help of



the secret police under their employ, known as the Eyes. The society in Gilead is hierarchal, with both men and women possessing different social statuses that determine their rights and duties. Inevitably, this leads to certain classes of people acquiring privileges the less fortunate do not have. In this system women are, on the whole, treated as inferior to men, with most of them acting as possessions or prizes for men to earn through servitude to their country. The maladies that plague the Republic of Gilead can, by and large, be traced back to the aforementioned fundamentalism.

The basis of the law in Gilead has its roots in the Holy Bible, meaning literal or corrupted interpretations of the texts found within it have been used by the government to shape the order of their regime. A lot of the terminology present in Gilead originates from these texts as well. The nomenclature and societal role for the Handmaids themselves has been derived from The Bible. Atwood prefaces *The Handmaid's Tale* with a citation from Genesis 30: 1-3, which references Jacob and his relationship with that story's version of handmaids. From Genesis 30: 1-7, the character of Jacob is given a handmaid from each of his two wives, Leah and Rachel, to have them bear his children at points in time where the wives themselves are unable to. This is mirrored in the Republic of Gilead as the primary function assigned to the Handmaids is to bear children in order to fight Gilead's declining birth rate.

This parallel is especially apparent in the Ceremony. The Ceremony in *The Handmaid's Tale* is a ritualistic event, where the Commander attempts to impregnate his Handmaids. It is presented very similarly to how Jacob is presented with his own handmaid in the Bible. In Genesis 30: 3 it reads: "And [Rachel] said: 'Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; that she may bear upon my knees, and I also may be builded up through her'" (Biola University 2006). In other words, Rachel is asking to bear Jacob's children through her handmaid, essentially claiming ownership of the child even though it

is not biologically hers. During Offred's Ceremony with the Commander, the Commander's wife, Serena Joy, is present, holding hands with Offred during the process. In the novel Offred explains that Serena Joy's presence is meant to symbolise how the two are connected into one being, but further remarks that "it really means she is in control, of the process and thus of the product" (Atwood 1985: 104). The method of conceiving through another body is taken literally and enforced by the state in order to serve their own goals. In addition to the biblical parallels, the Ceremony also illustrates, especially through Offred's detached and dry narration of the process, the regime's breaking down of any romantic or passionate aspect of sexual relations, reducing it to a necessary act for reproduction and nothing more.

Earlier in the story a direct quote from Genesis 30: 1 is referenced: "Give me children or else I die" (Biola University 2006). This quote encapsulates the literal nature of the interpretations. The line is referenced when Offred visits the doctor who offers her a chance to let him impregnate her, as she is required to give birth soon or else face the possibility of either being sent away to the Colonies or being killed outright. In the Bible story, the quote is meant to signify Rachel's desperation for offspring with Jacob. However, as Atwood has Offred point out, "there's more than one meaning to it" (1985: 71). In Offred's case in the novel, her life quite literally hinges on her ability to bear children. It is through this line that Atwood captures the dangerous nature of literal readings of texts open to interpretation, as that is what the Republic of Gilead is essentially built on.

A more specific example of this would be Offred mentioning a Scriptural Precedent during an interaction with Serena Joy. Offred mentions this precedent in regards to the Wife of the Commander being legally allowed to strike the Handmaids with her hand (Atwood 198: 26). The reality that a text as vague and open to interpretation as the Bible

can set legal precedents in the Gileadean regime demonstrates the freedom the state has to twist the law in their favour when citing the Bible. It shows the danger of a fundamentalist government and how religious texts can be used by the state to further their agenda and seize power.

### **2.3. Offred and other women in *The Handmaid's Tale***

Before being able to properly analyse the themes handled through Offred's relationship with different male characters, it is important to establish what kind of character Offred is and what she represents in the story. Her character is the subject to considerable debate, with critics attempting to assess her role in the Gileadean society, seeing her as perhaps a subversive heroine or even an indirect accomplice to the regime (Weiss 2009: 138). In order to best analyse what kind of person she is, one need only contrast her with some of the other major female characters depicted in the novel.

Offred is a complicated character. Being a Handmaid in Gilead's society, she is stripped of any kind of identity or agency, forcing her to be nothing more than a receptacle for children. She is not outwardly rebellious, yet she is not completely meek and submissive either. Offred can be seen as a survivor, doing what is necessary for her to live, but never completely yielding to the regime, at least not on a personal level. Throughout the novel Offred has a number of private victories, instances where she defies the Gileadean authority, sometimes openly, albeit subtly. These victories can either involve deliberately invoking improper thoughts in men or actively seeking to learn things she is not supposed to. Through Offred's various acts of mischief and apparent need for forbidden knowledge, Atwood shows that the state in Gilead is unable to completely weed out all forms of defiance, especially on a personal level.

In the story Offred ends up in an illegal affair with the Commander, the head of her

household. Signifying her victim status, Offred has no real choice whether or not she wants to meet with the Commander. However, while she does not express any interest in the Commander himself, she does see it as an opportunity – as declining is not an option – to satisfy her own curiosity, to learn about his secrets (Atwood 1985: 146). It ends up being another one of her victories, with her being able to gain something from the relationship. It shows that Offred is not afraid to keep her own interests in mind, even when her actions are not strictly prohibited under the regime.

While Offred might not be completely submissive, she is still not an activist, outwardly resisting or fighting the regime in power in the Republic of Gilead. This comes in particularly sharp focus when contrasting Offred with fellow Handmaid Ofglen. Unlike Offred, Ofglen is revealed to be a member of the underground resistance that is actively fighting to overthrow the government. Ofglen ends up taking her own life for her cause, avoiding capture by the Eyes, who could have potentially made her compromise the resistance through torture. When Offred finds herself in a similar situation at the end of the story she does not commit suicide, though she thinks about it (Atwood 1985: 304). While there are differences in the way both of these characters have elected to express their defiance against the state, neither is presented as an incorrect choice. Offred's survivalist mentality should not be seen as mere submissiveness. Again, Offred is not an active fighter in the resistance, but she still uses what she can to her advantage, to try and live a decent life in a hostile environment. It provides a protagonist that is easier to identify with by the book's readership, since Offred is more of a regular person in a terrible situation rather than an outright hero.

Another character that can be contrasted with Offred is Moira. Moira is also shown as a more rebellious spirit in nature than Offred. While Offred's resistance is more personal and internal, Moira's rebellion is shown through direct action, such as her

multiple escape attempts from The Rachel and Leah Center, a training ground for Handmaids. Conversations between the two characters also reveal their differences. In an argument the pair had before the takeover of the Gileadean state, Moira's feelings towards men and women and their inherent differences is revealed. Moira expresses sentiments that hint at her believing men and women are incompatible, such as thinking women can only share an equal standing with other women (Atwood 1985: 181). Offred promptly rejects the idea of a woman-only utopia. These beliefs are reflected in their personality, as well as in their attitudes and behaviour in the Gileadean regime. Offred's more subdued personality and Moira's fighting spirit are more understandable when taking their views into account.

Offred's alleged complicity in the regime, concerning her hesitancy towards aggressive rebellion, can also be analysed through her relationship with Moira. As stated earlier, Moira's personality matches that of the archetypal hero much more than Offred's does, yet her efforts at resisting the regime would ultimately result in her being sent to and forced to work at a brothel called Jezebel's. While this should not be interpreted as a way for the story to express the futility of revolt, it does serve to make Offred's reluctance to actively resist the regime more understandable.

It is clear that Margaret Atwood wanted her protagonist to be as commonplace and ordinary as possible. With Offred's character established, her relationship with the male characters in the novel can be properly analysed.

#### **2.4. Male-female relationships**

While the regime ruling over the Republic of Gilead has established a patriarchal system, wherein many of the policies in place are a product of the fundamentalist nature of the government, it is important to note that *The Handmaid's Tale* does not demonise men

as a group nor does it make the regime seem appealing to male readers in any way. Through Offred's relationship with other male character, Atwood analyses how the relationships between men and women function as a whole in Gilead's society.

### **2.4.1 Power**

The concept of power between men and women in Atwood's novel is presented in a way that is more intricate than simply having men be unambiguously in control with no nuance. Through Offred, Atwood demonstrates how women can still wield a modicum of power in a society that actively oppresses them in favour of men.

Early in the novel, one scene which demonstrates this is when Offred teases two Guardsmen with her body. The Guardsmen are allowed only to stare as Offred deliberately flaunts her femininity in front of them, invoking the yearning for something which is forbidden to them. The social standing of Guardsmen in Gilead is not high enough to permit them the privilege of physical contact with women. Offred sees herself as something akin to a bone held out of reach from a dog and revels in the power that position gives her, "passive but there" as Atwood has her put it (1985: 32). Not only does this scene encapsulate the undesirability of a Puritan society which has limited any outlets for men to vent their desires or frustrations, it also seems to suggest that women can never be completely stripped of all influence they possess, even when removing all their basic human rights.

However, Offred's interactions with the Commander illustrates the complex nature of power between the two sexes more thoroughly. Combined with the Commander's wife, the novel provides an interesting perspective when tackling how the power structures actually work in practice. As the Commander is the head of the house, he is, undoubtedly, at the top of the hierarchy at home. This becomes more complicated when he starts his

affair with Offred, wherein he arranges meetings with her to either play games with, take on excursions, or simply talk to. Offred is put into a position where, due to the Commander's influence, she is unable to refuse without risking any negative consequences, clearly showing his dominance over her. Of the relationship, Offred remarks that "it could be a passport, it could be [her] downfall" (Atwood 1985: 154). Saying this means that Offred realises that while the Commander has power over her fate, she in turn also provides him with something that he wants. Something that he cannot get anywhere else in the new regime, least of all his wife. When the Commander shows Offred a forbidden magazine, he laments that his wife would not understand and that they rarely see eye to eye anymore (Atwood 1985: 166). Offred's curiosity and tendency towards mischief are therefore appealing to him, providing him something which transforms Offred into more than an empty receptacle in his eyes. This does give Offred some influence over him, which she ends up using to her advantage, albeit modestly, such as asking him for hand lotion or ask him questions she would not be allowed to under normal circumstances. At the very end of the story when Offred is escorted away by, unbeknownst to her or anyone else, members of the resistance masquerading as Eyes, the true nature of the power Offred actually wielded against the Commander is revealed. As Offred is taken away, the Commander is told she is being arrested for violation of state secrets, leading him to worry about the things she might have told about him, as well as labelling him a security risk. In this moment, Offred remarks how she is "above him, looking down; he is shrinking" (Atwood 1985: 306). Offred might have possessed more power over the Commander than even she herself could have imagined, from the very moment she was allowed into his study, which she could have potentially used to gain much more than she ultimately did.

The Commander's wife, Serena Joy, is also a very interesting character when it comes to power. Officially, she is in charge of the other women in the house, as

disciplining subjects for transgressions has been deemed women's work in the Gilead, giving her more power within the regime than the average woman. Of her relationship with the Commander, Offred bemoans that not even he would be able to intervene should his wife decide to go after her (Atwood 1985: 170). However, when it comes to the Commander, she could also be seen as one of the biggest victims in the household in terms of her powerlessness to act. Serena Joy is shown to be protective of the Commander during her first meeting with Offred, where she firmly establishes that the Commander belongs to her, already hinting at the possibility that the Commander had previously been unfaithful with another Handmaid, similar to how he would begin a relationship with Offred later. She further hints to this towards the end of the novel when Offred's relationship with her husband is exposed and she tells Offred she is "just like the other one" and that she'll "end up the same" (Atwood 1985: 299), referring to the previous Handmaid before Offred who had committed suicide shortly before the events of the novel. While it cannot be said for sure how Serena Joy used her power to influence Offred's predecessor, the fact that the Commander seemingly faced no official repercussions means that she elected to not expose his illegal affair. The love between the Commander and his wife is left somewhat ambiguous, but Serena Joy's irate outburst when confronting Offred about her affair indicates that she does feel some form of attachment.

In the end, however, she does not expose Offred nor the Commander, leaving her in a powerless state, with the Commander essentially doomed to repeat the process, although, according to the Historical Notes at the end of the book, he is indeed killed shortly after the events of the novel during a purge (Atwood 1985: 321). It all goes to show that widespread oppression can still not entirely suppress or manipulate every individual's personal control over themselves or others.



### **2.4.2. Romance**

Atwood's use of elements more commonly found in generic romance stories serves a larger purpose than merely enlivening the story with some romantic intrigue. Namely, it shows some of the finest aspects of male and female relationships.

Offred's affair with the character Nick arguably presents the only truly positive relationship between a man and a woman portrayed in the novel. In the story Nick is initially depicted as nothing more than a chauffeur, officially devoid of any meaningful social status or position. Towards the end of the story, Offred and Nick develop a romantic and physical relationship – a relationship that is almost jarring in the way it clashes with the others found in the book. At the end of the novel, Nick is revealed to be a part of the underground resistance against the Gileadean regime and liberates Offred from her servitude under the Commander. Offred being saved by Nick was met with a little acrimony by some critics (Tome 1993: 79) who found casting Offred as a damsel in need of rescue to be a misstep for the story. However, it should not be forgotten what Atwood herself expressed to be the primary opposing force to the Gileadean regime: basic human decency. Through Nick's rescue of Offred, Atwood clearly advocates cooperation between men and women, expressing the two are capable of uniting against a system that would subjugate women.

The relationship between Nick and Offred also serves to highlight another theme present in the novel: the revivification of romance between men and women. Romance is clearly shown as something desirable when juxtaposing the lethargic nature of the Ceremony with Offred's more passionate encounters with Nick. As was pointed out earlier, the regime has removed any passion from sex by regulating it with laws and turning it into a mandated practice absent love or desire. Desire is the key word, since it is what motivates Offred and has been shown to be something she and others have wanted for a long time.

When moisturising her hands with butter, Offred expresses that by keeping their hands soft, women can believe “that [they] will some day get out, that [they] will be touched again, in love or desire” (Atwood 1985: 107).

An important element that contributes to this revival of romance is choice. Contrasting Offred’s passionate affair with Nick with the fairly one-sided relationship with the Commander, one pertinent differing factor in the two is choice. As discussed earlier, Offred essentially had no say whether or not she wanted to start seeing the Commander. Like everything else that happens in the household, it is still out of her control, hence there is no actual passion. When Offred and the Commander make love in a hotel room (Atwood 1985: 267) her experience does not differ from the apathetic one during the Ceremonies. With Nick, it is important to note that Offred’s own desire to see him is what drives the relationship and that pursuing the relationship, perhaps more importantly, is a choice that she makes. For Offred, the Commander becomes little more than a means for her to kill her boredom, for her to have something to do, which does bring her some happiness, yet Offred insists that she nevertheless feels no love towards him (Atwood 1985: 172). With Nick, Offred has revived the forbidden feelings of passion, desire, and romance, which the state has tried to suppress. Through this the novel stresses the importance of personal liberty, the ability to make choices and how that can lead to more meaningful interactions and relationships with others.

## **2.5. Conclusion**

In *The Handmaid’s Tale* Margaret Atwood has shown the way religion can serve as a tool for manipulation and seizing power. Additionally, she has managed to tackle male-female relationships in a society such as Gilead’s in a complex manner.

Through the parallels that can be drawn between stories from the Bible and the

policies in the Republic of Gilead, it is possible to see how vague texts largely open to interpretation can be used to gain power when written into law, something Atwood immediately draws attention to by explicitly referencing the Old Testament in the opening pages of the book. For this reason, the novel makes it clear that the fault does not lie within the teachings of Christianity, but rather the manipulation of Christianity by people desiring to seize power.

By presenting Offred as a fairly unexceptional everyday person, Atwood has provided readers with a character they can easily identify with, considering that the likelihood of the average reader being a mighty hero devoid of flaws or fears is rather low. The relatability of Offred's character makes it easier to immerse oneself in the world of *The Handmaid's Tale* and that in turn makes the other characters and relationships depicted feel more authentic. This helps enhance some of the themes concerning male-female relationships.

Although the story could have simply presented a world where men were in power while women suffered, Offred's relationship with the Commander and Serena Joy explores the complex way power could theoretically work in a society like Gilead's, highlighting how women can still retain a certain degree of influence in a regime that actively oppresses them. Both Offred and Serena Joy are both depicted as simultaneously having a certain amount of power over the Commander in some specific instances and being completely powerless in others. Atwood also highlights some of the more positive aspects of male-female relationships with Offred's affair with Nick, through which themes of romance, cooperation, freedom, and passion can be seen.

It all serves to create a story that ideally should not alienate any groups of people and create a world where the dangers of fundamentalism and literal interpretations are brought into focus and where many positive and negative aspects of male-female

relationships can be explored in detail.

## CONCLUSION

The story in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* might be told from a woman's perspective, yet it is nonetheless a story anyone can relate to, presenting a future no regular person could find appealing. The way Atwood has handled the dangers of religious fundamentalism and the complexity of male-female relationships in a moderate and fair manner makes the book all the more relevant in a world filled with extremist, binary viewpoints. Furthermore, stressing the more nuanced way Atwood has approached the themes tackled in the novel is even more important when simplified understandings of the story are spreading due to contemporary media outlets.

This thesis has shown that the themes present in the novel are far from simplified. The appraisals from critics in the past have highlighted how the novel has treated its characters, both men and women, as equally human in an unequal society. These critics include people such as Hilde Staels, Coral Ann Howells, and Amin Malak, who have all also emphasised that the novel does not advocate extremist worldviews, regardless of the intentions behind them. The themes concerning the religious aspect of the novel have also been analysed, with critics, such as Joseph Andriano, Jon Pahl, and Hilde Staels, pointing out how religion and religious texts can be manipulated by authoritarian leaders to justify their actions.

The book makes it clear, as revealed in the empirical part of the thesis, that the lack of any passion and romance between men and women in the Republic of Gilead can be traced back to the state's policies regarding reproduction, showing male-female relationships being directly affected by the fundamentalist government. However, this analysis has also stressed that the book does not relay the message that religion itself should be held accountable for the fundamentalist tendencies of its insincere followers. Rather, the novel aims to illustrate the dangers of such strict dogmatic adherence to texts

that can be as open to interpretation as the Bible and serves as a warning about the people who do so.

*The Handmaid's Tale* pulls the reader into the fictional world through the novel's relatable protagonist, Offred. As demonstrated, the story explores the concept of power, passion, and romance in male-female relationship through the character of Offred and her interactions and relationships with others. The most favourable aspects of male-female relationships portrayed in the novel serve to emphasise the primary force that could be considered the antithesis of what the Gileadean regime represents. In Margaret Atwood's own words: "The force that opposed the tyranny in my book is /.../ ordinary human decency" (Atwood 2004: 517).

*The Handmaid's Tale* is therefore a story that does not intend to divide, as some of the articles its recent TV adaptation has spawned would seem to suggest. Its true purpose is, rather, to unite. A story that inspires cooperation, one that highlights and glorifies positive aspects of male-female relationships, while not shying away from examining the negative ones that go with it. A story that will be eternally relevant due to the warnings it contains and the complex ways it presents them.

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## RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL

ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

**Morten Mägi Ravn**

**Fundamentalism and Male-female Relationships in Margaret Atwood's *The***

***Handmaid's Tale***

**Fundamentalism ning meeste ja naiste suhted Margaret Atwood'i romaanis**

***Teenijanna lugu***

Bakalaureusetöö

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Annotatsioon:

Käesoleva töö eesmärgiks on analüüsida fundamentalismi ning meeste ja naiste suhteid puudutavate teemade kompleksset käsitlust Margaret Atwood'i romaanis *Teenijanna lugu* vastandades seda lihtsustatud või kallutatud teemakäsitlustele, mis on ilmunud erinevates tänapäeva meedia väljaannetes avaldatud artiklites.

Sissejuhatuses on antud lühike ülevaade Margaret Atwood'i romaanist *Teenijanna lugu*. Samuti on välja toodud taust, mis selgitab uuritavate teemade aktuaalsust tänapäeval ja selle seost vastavaid teemasid ühekülgselt käsitlevate artiklitega. Toodud on ka töö eesmärk.

Esimeses peatükis on esitatud ülevaade romaani ilmumisaegsest vastukajast, seejärel on vaadeldud, kuidas tänapäeva meedia artiklites on käsitletud fundamentalismi ning meeste ja naiste vahelisi suhteid puudutavaid teemasid võrreldes varasemate hinnangutega.

Teises peatükis on analüüsitud romaanis kujutatud maailma fundamentalistlike aspekte, samuti on läbi teose peategelase vaadeldud mehi ja naisi ning nende omavahelisi keerulisi suhteid, hõlmates nii võimuküsimust kui ka tundeid.

Kokkuvõtteks võib öelda, et romaanis on fundamentalismi ning meeste ja naiste suhteid puudutavaid teemasid käsitletud väga nüansseeritult, vastupidiselt tänapäeva meedias leiduvatele lihtsustatud käsitlustele. See kajastub varasemate kriitikute artiklites ja Atwood'i enda kommentaarides ning väljendub ka teose sügavamas analüüsis, kus selgub, et Gileadi ebavõrdses ühiskonnas kannatavad kehtiva režiimi tõttu kõik, nii naised kui ka mehed, nii igasuguste õigusteta jäetud inimesed kui ka privilegeeritud eliit.

Märksõnad: Kanada kirjandus, düstoopia, fundamentalism

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