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## Agent Red: Fashioning Agency in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

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# Agent Red: Fashioning Agency in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

## **Cover Page Footnote**

I would like to thank Dr. Jeffrey Collins for all of his hard work helping me get to Oxford for the Hilary Term 2013.

Chris Yalen

Dr. Ballam

Dystopian Literature

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“How are the female characters of the novel implicitly powerful in their various realms? How does Atwood balance the potential for these women to regain their rights against their lack of agency?”

### Agent Red

In Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, we find a society that is balanced precariously on the whims of a male-dominated theocracy. Without a doubt we can consider Offred and her Handmaid sisters as repressed and demoralized throughout the novel, but there are times when the Republic of Gilead *seems* like it is not ruled entirely by men at all. Reminiscing on her mother's struggles in the time before Gilead, Offred concludes that in some ways her mother's dream of a “world were women rule” had been realized in an inverted, dystopian way. While some women, such as the Marthas, have little power, others, such as the Commanders' Wives, hold almost an iron fist inside the home. Even the Handmaids themselves, although locked away, hold the most valuable asset in this war-torn world, fertility. This duality of men ruling Gilead, yet women still ruling other aspects tied to notions of femininity, provides an interesting interplay of role management in the story, as sometimes there is no clear answer to who is really in control, or who is really being marginalized. Who and what is really running this society? While Atwood heavily

critiques the patriarchy in Gilead, and its lack of civil rights, she also presents how some women, namely the Handmaids and the Wives, implicitly retain power over their male counterparts even though they lack the agency to openly revolt against their society.

The government in Gilead is one that is undoubtedly male-dominated on the face of things. Women are not allowed to own property, they are not allowed to have jobs, or money, and forced to assume one of four relegated positions in society.

Women are even banned from reading the Bible, the document that so conveniently provides the moral justification for many of these terrible laws and practices.

(Atwood 49, 99-100) But on the whole, because of the scarcity of fertile women, many women are now regarded as the last vessels of modern society, and are not taken advantage of in the ways they were previously (Atwood 34). The “rape culture” that existed in the time before Gilead exists no more (or at least in theory), and men who even think about breaking these laws protecting women suffer major consequences (Atwood 32). While the men in Gilead have simply found other, more convenient ways to exploit women, the object of worship in this culture is the fertile female, not the man. Fertile men are prized, yes, but they are not coveted in a way a fertile Handmaid is. Since the management of the Handmaid falls to the Commander’s Wife as part of her duties, like many other parts of the home, this is a realm that the Commander is simply not allowed to interfere with. (Atwood 24-26, 97) Their own practices of returning women to domesticity seem to work against them, as despite their perfectly formulated and controlled male society, the Commander still seems feels the need to meet secretly with his Handmaid in his

own home, lest he face the wrath of his Wife. (Atwood 162-163) Even though a Commander belongs to the highest strata of society, and is powerful enough to freely break rules, much like Mustapha Mond of Huxley's *Brave New World*, he dares not get caught breaking one of these rules in his own house. Although being the master of such a small domain is not true freedom for Serena Joy, it seems that at many times she exercises power over the Commander despite his clearly defined role as the "head of the household". Even when Offred suggests him showing an outlawed women's magazine to his wife instead of her, he just sadly mutters that "she wouldn't understand" and proceeds to complain about how distant they have become. (Atwood 166) All this power, all this prestige and wealth, and this Commander still falls prey to the trappings of the married man in the time before Gilead. (Atwood 166) He still is seeking the desperate approval of a female figure even though he is part of the new ruling class. So while the world seems to have turned the clocks back for women in Gilead, it seems that men simply fall prey to the same trappings that they did before their "better society", giving power back to women in ways they probably do not expect.

Beside the role of the Handmaid, the two roles we see most intimately in this society are the roles of the Marthas and the Jezebel girls, both of which are featured prominently as roles that are connected with the male-dominated past in the "time before". Whenever we see the Marthas Cora and Rita, they are always practicing domesticity incarnate, cooking, cleaning, and running baths; their roles do not extend far outside of the kitchen. (Atwood 20-21, 70) Here we are not confronted with overt oppression as we are in other parts of the novel, but rather Gilead

relegates the Marthas to outdated roles, as Atwood paints a common picture of women that existed before the later part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This domesticity incarnate is something that we are familiar with in pop culture, as it is a mode of femininity that dominated until arguably the 1940's. But the Marthas are not without their abilities as well, as Atwood frequently mentions how the Marthas act as a sort of inter-house communications network. "They talk amongst themselves, passing unofficial news from house to house. Like me they listen at doors, no doubt, and see things even with their eyes averted." (Atwood 21) With this power of information, the Marthas could potentially be the underground revolution communications network that the women in this society so desperately need, but it seems instead they would rather perform work for their Commander's Wives. (Atwood 240) At Jezebel's, we also see something that is also familiar enough to us to evoke feelings of the "old" world: the brothel. While "the world's oldest profession" is not something you would think the male populace would need to employ considering all the wives they have, again like the cold beds they share with their Wives, these working girls again seem to trap these Commanders in the same sad places they always have been in. But these Jezebel girls, although seemingly powerless, are in an environment where they rub more than shoulders with the most powerful men in the land, and even the Commander knows that they hear things that could prove useful. (Atwood 249) Like the Marthas, they too have the potential to do great things with their knowledge, but they simply are complacent with the small consolations that they do receive for their services, such as booze, drugs, cigarettes and the ability to lead a lifestyle of their choosing. Even Offred

notes this change in her once feisty friend Moira, who escaped once before from the Red Centre, but now has fallen into this same complacency. "I don't want her to be like me," Offred remarks, "Give in, go along, save her skin. I want gallantry from her, swashbuckling, heroism, single-handed combat. Something I lack." (Atwood 261) So while it seems that these women too have the ability to revolt against the oppression, they have simply become too complacent to bother doing anything about it.

The Commander's Wives, on the other hand, seem to possess the most power in the realm of the home. All members of the house besides the Commander report directly to the Wife, and what she says goes. Offred's entire existence at the house is not to serve the Commander, but the Wife. She is *her* Handmaid. (Atwood 24-26) This applies to the Marthas too, as when Serena is trying to get Offred on board to sleep with Nick, she allows her, although it is forbidden, to have a cigarette. When Rita catches Offred with this contraband item, Offred simply needs to invoke Serena's command in order for Rita to bend. (Atwood 216-218) Serena also has control over Offred during the "fertilizing" sessions. "This is supposed to signify that we are one flesh, one being. What it really means is that she is in control, of the process and thus the product." (Atwood 104) Serena also has many of the best privileges, other than the Commander, as she can leave the home as well to visit other wives, she rides in the much more comfortable Wife's Birthmobile, she can eat and drink whatever she wants, and most of all, she will be the recipient of Offred's baby (Atwood 162, 125, 104). Yet that does not mean that she does all of this with the Commander's consent. The earlier conversation with Offred is a great example

of this. “‘What about the Commander?’ I say. ‘Well,’ she says, with firmness, no, more than that, a clenched look, like a purse snapping shut. ‘We just won’t tell him, will we?’” (Atwood 216) Serena cares little for her husband, and why should she, considering his philandering, but if there is one thing that she does care about, it is getting Offred to have her baby. Serena even has a forbidden picture of Offred’s former daughter, further showing her ability to control the Marthas and command them to steal if it means getting what she wants (Atwood 240). It is clear Serena has more than enough capability to wrestle control from the society she lives in, but with her vast privilege, why would she bother sharing it with “little whores” like Offred? (Atwood 125) So while she does display the ability to control her household, and the lives of those in them, she, like the Marthas and the Jezebels, does not feel the need to fight back, although for very different reasons.

Despite her marginalized and repressed role for most the book, our protagonist Offred still holds the power that everyone wants throughout the novel, the power to conceive a child. While this is a burden she does not choose for herself, part of the dystopian nature of the novel, it is the trait that fosters jealousy in most of the female members of the society. Serena may hold others facets of power over Offred, but she we will never be able to conceive a child (Atwood 56). Rita may look down on her because of her position, but in the end, Rita cooks for Offred the same way she cooks for Serena and the Commander. The position of a Handmaid, although the most repressed throughout society, is the one that is guarded most fiercely, because without children, Gilead has no future. But unfortunately, like all of the other women in the novel, Offred lacks agency, lacks fire. (Atwood 261) It is



even *Serena's* arrangement with Nick that allows her to escape in the first place, if Nick was the one who did in fact organize her escape. If Offred had never played along with *Serena's* design, then she still may have been at the house. While Offred does show some drive, as she continues to go to Nick's room without *Serena's* consent, she does not bring up any desire to escape with Nick (if it is indeed an escape) and her escape seems to be something that is entirely orchestrated without her knowledge or consent (Atwood 280). That being said, Offred does not try to escape at any other point, nor does she attempt suicide or try and start a revolution, she simply tries to live through whatever society she has fallen in to (Atwood 261). Her lack agency signifies the larger issue of the whole book, and the focus of this paper, in that she is in power in the sense that she has what everyone else in her society vies for, yet she does possess the internal drive to fight back. This is the case for herself and the other women throughout the novel, as they each possess a power, whether it is physical, emotional, or sexual over the men that they are supposed to serve yet they lack the agency to do something about it. So while Offred does have a valuable commodity in this society, she, like her fellow women, is unable to use their abilities in a way that would improve their standing in their world.

So throughout *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood has taken special care to balance the abilities of the woman of the novel against their lack of agency in an oppressive patriarchy. Characters like Rita and Cora are ghosts of by gone era where women simply did not question their role in the large societal picture, or did not have the voice to. Moira has the drive and the potential to fight back, but the endless

battle against the regime has taken the wind out of her sails and made her complacent. Serena is the most capable to make substantial changes to the society, but because of her background and her fair positioning she too lacks the desire to make a change for other women. Our protagonist however, has what this society needs, what it desires, yet she too lacks the essential qualities needed to rebel. While the patriarchy takes great measures to grind her down in order to keep her in place, it is ultimately that Red-Centre-bred complacency that leads Offred to follow Serena's wishes, sleep with Nick, and ultimately be saved by him, ironically enough. While the Atwood leaves the end of the novel intentionally vague and open for interpretation, this happy ending scenario does raise some problems, as it seems unlikely that Atwood's feminism would allow her protagonist to show zero agency, and get rewarded for it in the end. Even then, we cannot argue conclusively for the other option, which is that Offred is actually being taken away by Gilead's secret police and being punished for her misdeeds. There is evidence to support both endings, but nevertheless, the overall narrative of women being ground into complacency by men is unchanged regardless of the final moments. So while the ending of the novel may be different depending on interpretation, Atwood's story seems to me to be best summed up in the words, which have been inconclusively attributed to him, of the Conservative philosopher Edmund Burke, "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."

### Works Cited

Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. London: Bloomsbury, 1986. Print.