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FACULTAD de FILOSOFÍA Y LETRAS

DEPARTAMENTO de FILOLOGÍA INGLESA

Grado en Estudios Ingleses

TRABAJO DE FIN DE GRADO

Patriarchy and Masculinity in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

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2017-2018



## ABSTRACT

In this dissertation I focus on a feminist vision of patriarchy, hegemonic masculinity, traditional gender roles, and male characters in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. My objective is to examine closely the structures of patriarchy present in the novel and to analyze the main male characters in relation to hegemonic masculinity and traditional gender roles. The conclusions reached at the end of the dissertation are that the society presented in the novel and its institutions are patriarchal and that the different male characters present a different grade of hegemonic masculinity and traditional gender roles influence.

Margaret Atwood, patriarchy, gender, feminism, masculinity, sexism.

## RESUMEN

En este trabajo de fin de Grado me centro en una visión feminista del patriarcado, la masculinidad hegemónica, los roles de género tradicionales y los personajes masculinos en *The Handmaid's Tale* de Margaret Atwood. Mi objetivo es examinar detenidamente las estructuras del patriarcado presentes en la novela y analizar los personajes masculinos principales en relación a la masculinidad hegemónica y los roles de género tradicionales. Las conclusiones alcanzadas al final del trabajo son que la sociedad presentada en la novela y sus instituciones son patriarcales y que los diferentes personajes masculinos presentan diferente grado de influencia de la masculinidad hegemónica y los roles tradicionales de género.

Margaret Atwood, patriarcado, género, feminismo, masculinidad, sexismo.



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## INTRODUCTION

One of the main topics of discussion nowadays is feminism. What used to be a critical theory in academia and a political activism is now present in mainstream media and is part of political debate.

Over its more than 100 years of existence, feminism has developed many of its arguments and incorporated new perspectives to its core. It is one of the most productive critical theories and has proven to be a powerful tool for social and political change. Lately, it has worked its way to mass media.

When something permeates to mainstream culture, it is always in a casual fashion, keeping its central elements and losing depth and nuance. Many of the terms are misused or are distorted when taken out of context. A prime example of that is feminism. For that reason, I believe that offering a comprehensive and clear overview of it is a must.

One of the things that has interested and puzzled me the most is how ideologies shape individual people. Sometimes, it is a blatant manipulation, but many others it is matter of minute details that go unnoticed and add up over time. When presented with the opportunity to do a dissertation on *The Handmaid's Tale* I saw the chance to deepen into that by reading about feminism and its concept of patriarchy but, I also wanted to know about the part we as men play into it and how those mechanisms work. What does being a man mean? How do you have to behave to be considered a man? How should a man behave? These are questions that can only be answered if the interrelationship between patriarchy and masculinity is studied.

I claim that Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is a suitable novel to analyze patriarchy and its structures. Furthermore, its male characters are very different and nuanced and are worth studying in relation to masculinity and traditional gender roles.

The aim of this dissertation is double. First, to collect and clarify feminist theory and terminology to create a proper theoretical framework suitable to be used for academic literary analysis; and secondly, to use that theoretical framework to conduct an analysis on patriarchy, masculinity, and male characters in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*.

The dissertation structure is divided into two big sections: the theoretical framework and the analysis section. The theoretical framework is the section where I will gather feminist theory from books, articles and other relevant sources written by experts in the field. It is further divided into subsections that deal with patriarchy, patriarchy structures, masculinity, hegemonic masculinity and traditional gender roles. The other big section of the dissertation is the analysis. In this section the theoretical framework will be used to do a literary analysis of the text. The subsections are: The author, About the text, Summary of the plot, Patriarchy analysis and Character analysis. The final sections of this dissertation are Conclusions and Bibliography.



# 1. UNDER HIS EYE – PATRIARCHY AND MASCULINITY

I believe it is mandatory to start by stating that this dissertation will work under the premises, assumptions and principles of feminist theory. Consequently, this section will deal with the theories, ideas, concepts, and terms necessary for the analysis. While some of these may be much more complex, I will try to offer the fundamentals, defining and explaining as clearly as possible, with the purpose of setting a solid foundation from where the text can be analyzed.

Feminism is a common and widespread term nowadays that is casually used in everyday language. This is precisely why it is required to provide a proper clarification of it with its several meanings. Historian Geda Lerner explains the different meanings of feminism:

a) a doctrine advocating social and political rights for women equal to those of men; b) an organized movement for the attainment of these rights; c) the assertion of the claims of women as a group and the body of theory women have created; d) belief in the necessity of large-scale social change in order to increase the power of women. (Lerner 236)

## 1.1 Patriarchy

Feminist theory states that women are subordination to men is due to the establishment of a system called patriarchy. Patriarchy is the social system created around the unequal power relations that men maintain over women. Lerner offers a detailed definition of the term:

In its narrow meaning, patriarchy refers to the system, historically derived from Greek and Roman law, in which the head of the household had absolute legal and economic power over his dependent female and male family members [...]. This usage is troublesome because it distorts historical reality. The patriarchal dominance of male family heads over their kin is much older than classical antiquity; it begins in in the third millennium B.C. and is well established at the time of the writing of the Hebrew Bible. (Lerner 238-239)

And she elaborates on the wider, better suited for academic analysis, meaning:

Patriarchy in its wider definition means the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over

women in the society in general. It implies that men hold power in all the important institutions of society and that women are deprived of access to such power. It does not imply that women are totally powerless or totally deprived of rights, influence, or resources. (Lerner 239)

Sylvia Walby briefly defines it in *Theorizing Patriarchy* (1990) as a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women (20). It is a system articulated on a gender basis. Whether you are born a man or a woman will determine your place on it, making it a sexist system. Sexism is the idea that men are superior to women, the ideology of male supremacy (Lerner 240). Lois Tyson offers another definition of patriarchy incorporating the notion of sexism in *Critical Theory Today*:

Patriarchy is [...] sexist, which means it promotes the belief that women are innately inferior to men. This belief in the inborn inferiority of women is a form of what is called biological essentialism because it is based on biological differences between the sexes that are considered part of our unchanging essence as men and women. (Tyson 81)

Lerner provides historical evidence of how patriarchy came to be in her book *The Creation of Patriarchy* (1986), providing in-depth information and explanations about the different stages. I think it is insightful to at least incorporate a brief summary of each of them if we are to understand the ideological development of patriarchy to its full extent. It refutes the argument of patriarchy being a “natural” organization of society or the perception that it has always been the same.

Lerner states that the very first step towards patriarchy as we know it today was a process that took place in a span of 2,500 years approximately, from 3,100 B.C. to 600 B.C., in the Ancient Near East (Lerner 8).

The stages are as follow:

- a) It began with the appropriation of women’s sexual and reproductive capacities. This took place at the same time that the notion of private property appeared. Consequently, it is prior to class society (8).
- b) The next step was the organization of society around patriarchy. From the beginning, the state seeks to maintain the patriarchal family since it is the base of the system (9).
- c) The next stage shows men having a higher hierarchy over women. Slavery was institutionalized; the first slaves being women of conquered rival groups (9).

- d) Women's sexual subordination was institutionalized and reflected in the first law codes (9).
- e) Men belonged to a class depending on their relationship to the means of production. For women, class was now mediated through sexual ties to a man who then gives them access to resources. Women were labeled in law codes as "respectable" if married and "non-respectable" if not (9).
- f) Despite this sexual and economic subordination, women were still playing active and respected roles in society as seers, priestess, diviners, or healers. Women's metaphysical power, especially the power to give life, was well respected by men and women alike in the form of a powerful goddess (9).
- g) The formation of a strong, imperialistic kinship removed the goddess and substituted it by a male dominant god. The mother-goddess becomes the wife/consort of the god-king. Fertility, formerly a goddess domain, is now represented by the mating of the god-king with her or her priestess. Eroticism and procreation were split into two different goddesses (9).
- h) The rise of Hebrew monotheism began as an attack on widespread cults of several fertility goddesses. In the *Book of Genesis* creativity and procreativity are now domains of an all-powerful God. Female sexuality that is not directed to procreation is associated with evil and sin (9-10).
- i) Women can only access to God and the religious community via their function as mothers (10).
- j) Women became symbolically devalued in relation to the divine which, together with the Aristotelian concept of women as incomplete and damaged human beings, are two of the founding metaphors of Western civilization (10).

## **1.2 The structures of patriarchy**

Walby argues that there are six main structures that compose the patriarchal system which are: housework, paid work, the State, violence, sexuality and, culture. Different interrelations between these create different forms of patriarchy (16).

These structures have causal effects on each other, both reinforcing and blocking, but are relatively autonomous (20). Each of the structures influences the others and together in simultaneity they form patriarchy. They are real, deep structures necessary to capture the variation in gender relations in Western societies (20).

The first structure Walby analyzes is housework, more specifically what she calls patriarchal production relations in the household. Housework labor includes chores like cooking, house upkeep, shopping, and care-taking of dependent family members among many others. She considers that it is through these that women's labor in the household is expropriated by their husbands or cohabitantes. Women usually only receive maintenance in exchange of said labor, especially when they are not engaged in waged labor (21).

It is clear that the family-household unit is central to social order and stability (61). Women are under patriarchal control in the family-household unit, first, as children obeying a father (or father-like) figure and, then, in an eventual marriage. The concept of family here is somewhat problematic since over the last few decades the composition of family has changed a lot. It is best to avoid this and consider it as discourse and explore its manifold implications nowadays (61).

The second structure analyzed is paid work. This section states that a very complex body of patriarchal closure around waged labor keeps women out of the better jobs and segregates them into the worse ones that are regarded as less skilled (21). Although it may seem that patriarchy and capitalism work together in harmony each one benefiting from the other, there are tensions taking place. There are opposite interests when it comes to women. If women are employed in a company they work less in the household (41) and they have more economic independence from the father or husband.

On the next section, Walby examines the State. According to her, the State is patriarchal first and foremost as well as capitalist and racist. It is a site of struggle that has a systematical bias towards patriarchal interests in each of its politics and actions (21). The role of the patriarchal State has changed over time acting on self-interest according to different situations, sometimes even in opposite direction. For example, women were able to join en masse the workforce in Great Britain during Second World War but at the expense of being expelled after it. Male-only unions lobbied so that legislation was passed to ensure women would be fired (51).

The next structure analyzed is violence. Male violence is another structure in and on itself regardless of its apparent individualistic and diverse character. Women routinely have to suffer these behaviors that effect and condition their own (21). Violence is exerted on women both in the private and public sphere, to various degrees and under

many forms: “Male violence is systematically condoned and legitimated by the state’s refusal to intervene against it except in exceptional instances, though the practices of rape, wife beating, sexual harassment, etc., are too decentralized in their practice to be part of the state itself” (21).

Often seen as individual acts, instances of violence against women by men are a social structure that condition social relations.

Male violence against women is sufficiently common and repetitive, with routinized consequences for women and routinized modes of processing by judicial agencies to constitute a social structure [...]. Male violence is thus a form of power over women in its own right. It is, however, importantly shaped as a result of patriarchal control over women in other areas. For this reason it is not appropriate to see male violence as the basis of other forms of men’s control over women. (Walby 143)

The structure that follows next is sexuality. Sexual patriarchal relations have compulsory heterosexuality and what is known as the sexual double standard as two of its key elements (21). Sexuality has been usually rendered as taboo in many situations and discourses and relegated to privacy when it comes to the act itself. Moreover, the discourse on sexuality is far from being a private topic. It is not something that can be reduced to individual inclination or a psychological process set in childhood; it is a socially organized structure heavily gender biased (121).

Patriarchy has sought to exert rigorous control over women’s sexuality, either by pointing at just one patriarchal figure for a lifetime or directing it towards as many men as possible (123-123). Patriarchy institutionalizes heterosexuality and considers it the norm, meaning the default and preferred condition.

Control over sexuality means control over childbearing. Pregnancy could only be attained through heterosexual intercourse up until just a few decades so it was of high value for patriarchal interests to control it.

Controlling sexuality also includes pleasure. Pleasure and sexual satisfaction have been overlooked, even ignored, when it comes to women and taken for granted in the case of men. Men objectify women, seeing them as mere sexual objects (118). Even when addressed as a topic, it has been from a male perspective with patriarchal interests in mind.

The last structure is culture. Patriarchal cultural institutions are important for the generation of several gender differentiated forms of subjectivity. These institutions create the representation of women within a patriarchal view and discourse in a variety of fields (21). It is a worldwide system mediated through beliefs, language and practice (101). Patriarchal principles are at the core of all religions and ideological systems. Examples of these can be seen in China's foot-binding, the removal of the clitoris in wide regions of Africa, and the Near East, witch burning in medieval Europe, or unnecessary gynecological surgery or practices in today's Western civilizations just to name a few of them (101).

These six structures allow a further categorization of patriarchy according to its form, private or public. Walby expands on it by saying:

I am distinguishing two main forms of patriarchy, private and public. Private patriarchy is based upon household production as the main site of women's oppression. Public patriarchy is based principally on public sites such as employment and the state. The household does not cease to be a patriarchal structure in the public form, but is no longer the chief site. In private patriarchy the expropriation of women's labor takes place primarily by individual patriarchs within the household, while in the public form it is a more collective appropriation. In private patriarchy the principle patriarchal strategy is exclusionary; in the public it is segregationist and subordinating. (Walby 24)

She states that Britain has seen a steady conversion from private to public patriarchy over the last 100 years (24), but this can be applied to other Western societies although each one of them may present their own particularities.

Tyson summarizes patriarchy in simple words by saying that patriarchy is a men's world: they invent the rules of the game they only play with one another and women are only to be found among the prizes (Tyson 97).

### **1.3 Masculinity**

Feminist theory points to how the concepts of hegemonic masculinity and traditional gender roles are a manifestation and further support for patriarchy.

Masculinity studies appeared in the late 70s and early 80s as a positive reaction to women studies and feminism as Michael Kimmel points in "Los estudios de la masculinidad: una introducción" (15). Opposite to reactionary political movements, this

academic branch tries to analyze and explore what being a man is. Kimmel adds that masculinity studies draw from feminism the following principles: first, it takes gender as the vertebral axis of its analysis, admitting it as a classification system that establishes that women become “feminine” and men “masculine”; and second, that it is an interweaving of relations between men and women that turn around power and, thus, there is inequality (16). Masculinity has many variables among which are history, culture, race, ethnicity, class, sex, or age (16). The differentiation of masculinities is psychological, based on the notion that men are and become, but it is also institutional, a collective practice (Carrigan, Connel and Lee 153).

#### **1.4 Hegemonic Masculinity**

Among the array of different masculinities there are some that can be labeled as “hegemonic”. The concept of hegemonic masculinity, just like any other masculinity, is not a single, cohesive unit easy to define. It has to do with groups of men on a given historical context that take positions of power and wealth, and how they reproduce and legitimate the social relationships that generate their dominance (Carrigan, Connel and Lee 154).

This hegemonic masculinity is such because it is found in the individual as much as it is present and embedded in the dynamics of institutions, the State, corporations, unions, and families. It has the ability to impose a particular definition on other kinds of masculinity (Carrigan, Connel and Lee 153).

Kimmel thinks that a big part of society is based on men rejecting femininity. Such rejection manifests in contempt towards women and everything related to them (Kimmel 19, Tyson 84). Men cannot freely cry, be gentle, nor show weakness because these are considered feminine, not masculine traits (Sawyer 26).

According to anthropologist David Gilmore other pillars of hegemonic masculinity are: protection, provision and potency. Protection would stand for conducts like heroism, courage, tenacity, or protecting people you are in charge of. Provision comprehends overtaking challenges, economic success, or to provide and support the people you are in charge of. Lastly, potency means seduction and sexual aggression (Gilmore 34).

Gilmore goes on further and states that there is a somewhat clear relation between masculinity and the military world, war and conflict (35). This can be seen as a direct consequence of the said three masculinity principles.

It seems then that we are dealing with a concept of masculinity that over the centuries and across almost every culture, especially after colonization and in the current globalized world, has promoted the same types of conducts and behavior. This model has caused oppression, discrimination and segregation, sometimes even outright violence on women and other minorities.

Male privilege can be considered as the advantages men get just for being men; these are greater the closer men are to the hegemonic ideal of masculinity. Part of it is the feeling men have about women owing something to them, they think of it as a right (Pease 29). This entitlement, conscious or not, usually ends in anger, resentment or violence when expectations are not met. Among these privileges we can name: respect, authority, female services, economic benefits, institutional power, and control over one's life (Pease 30).

Benefits of this gender privilege come with a cost, frequently emotional or physical harm (10). Benefits and costs are distributed among men in uneven fashion in terms of race, ethnicity, age, sexuality, or class (28).

## **1.5 Traditional gender roles**

It is impossible to talk about men and masculinities without addressing traditional gender roles since these are the blueprint for what men and women can or cannot become.

Sex and gender are almost interchangeable words in casual language but the difference must be clearly defined for the sake of precision and rigor. Sex is the biological features that make us male or female. Gender is a social construct, the cultural programming of feminine and masculine: "Traditional gender roles cast men as rational, strong, protective, and decisive; they cast women as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive. These gender roles have been used successfully to justify inequities, which still occur today" (Tyson 81-82).



This conception of what each gender should be sets men and women in opposite directions. Men are supposed to be assertive and dominant and, therefore, raised that way; women are meant to be submissive and obedient so their upbringing reflects that.

As mentioned before, abiding by these imposed gender roles has benefits, but it certainly has its costs, too. Individual personalities are shoehorned into rigid pre-conceptions of how they should behave, what clothes are appropriate to wear, what role to play in family and society, what kind of careers should be pursued, etc. In short, a corset that limits options and takes from individuals the freedom to choose who he or she wants to be.

Jack Sawyer expands on traditional roles in *Feminism and Masculinities*:

Sex-role stereotypes say that men should be dominant; achieving and enacting a dominant role in relations with others is often taken as an indicator of success. ‘Success,’ for a man, often involves influence over the lives of other persons. But success in achieving positions of dominance and influence is necessarily not open to every man [...]. Most men in fact fail to achieve the positions of dominance that sex-role stereotypes ideally call for. Stereotypes tend to identify such men as greater or lesser failures, and in extreme cases, men who fail to be dominant are the object of jokes, scorn, and sympathy from [...] society generally. One avenue of dominance is potentially open to any man, however— dominance over a woman. As society generally teaches men they should dominate, it teaches women they should be submissive, and so men have the opportunity to dominate women. (Sawyer 25)

And specifies when it comes to men’s sexual relations to women:

A major male sex-role restriction occurs through the acceptance of a stereotypic view of men’s sexual relation to women [...] they are still influenced by the implicit sex-role demands to be thoroughly competent and self-assured— in short, to be ‘manly.’ But since self-assurance is part of the stereotype, men who believe they fall short don’t admit it, and each can think he is the only one. Stereotypes limit men’s perception of women as well as of themselves. Men learn to be highly aware of a woman’s body [...] this interferes with their ability to relate to her as a whole person. Advertising and consumer orientations are among the societal forces that both reflect and encourage these sex stereotypes. Women spend to make themselves more ‘feminine,’ and men are exhorted to buy cigarettes, clothes, and cars to show their manliness. The popular image of a successful man combines dominance both over women, in social relations, and over other men, in the occupational world. (Sawyer 25-26)

One of the most overlooked aspects of men’s education is emotional labor. Emotional labor is the necessary effort needed to sustain affective relations. It requires of time,

energy and resources and it involves things like giving love, care, solidarity, etc. (Pease 41). Men tend to be on the receiving end of this emotional labor than women.

With this concludes the theoretical framework section where patriarchy and its origins and structures have been examined and defined as well as hegemonic masculinity and traditional gender roles.

## **2. FOR ADAM WAS FIRST FORMED, THEN EVE - PATRIARCHY AND MALE CHARACTERS ANALYSIS**

Under the assumptions and principles presented in the theoretical framework section, above, I will analyze Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986). Patriarchy as manifested in the text will be examined as well as male characters, their social status, economic conditions, psychology, and their relationships with women and other men.

The first part of the analysis will deal with patriarchy and its structures in the novel, illustrating each argument with pertinent references to both the theoretical framework and the text. The second part of the analysis will focus on masculinity in said patriarchal context and how it is used to create the main male characters in the novel.

### **2.1 The author**

Margaret Atwood is a Canadian writer, literary critic, political activist, and professor born in 1939 in Ottawa. She is a prolific author, having written novels, poem collections, essays, non-fiction books, and many other shorter pieces and articles. She has been awarded prizes like the Man Booker Prize, the Arthur C. Clarke or the Premio Príncipe de Asturias de las Letras. Some of her most famous works are *The Edible Woman* (1970), *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986), or *Cat's Eye* (1989). Recurring themes like Canadian identity, feminism, science fiction/speculative fiction, and ecology can be found in her works.

### **2.2 About the text**

*The Handmaid's Tale* (1986) is a first person narrative for most of its length. We find out at the end of the book that her story is being played in a lecture and being commented by a professor. There are three narrative frameworks: the lecture, the first person narrator talking about the present, and the numerous flashbacks the narrator does to tell the events that led to her situation. The narration is subjective, intimate. It seems to be very honest but, given the nature of it, we have to be aware of the fact that even if she wanted to be as true as possible, the narrative can be unreliable given how human memory works. Most of the lecture at the end deals with how trustworthy she is as historical source. The fact her story is being discussed at university shows that even

though there might be always that epistemic concern with such sources, her story is a valuable asset to know what happened.

It is set in the near future in the Republic of Gilead, a new totalitarian and theocratic State formed after a coup in what used to be the United States of America. The action takes place near Boston.

It is a dystopian science fiction narrative though the author prefers to consider it a speculative novel because she considers science fiction to be about things that could never happen. Published in 1986, the novel dwells on some of the concerns of the time. Among them we can find nuclear war, abortion and STDs, or chemical pollution (Biography). Some of Atwood's recurrent themes are present in the novel like feminism, ecology and the use of science fiction/speculative fiction.

### **2.3 Summary of the plot**

Offred is the protagonist of the story. She is a Handmaid in the Republic of Gilead, a totalitarian and theocratic State recently formed in replacement of what used to be the United States of America. Handmaids play a singular role in Gilead's ultra-religious society: they are the few fertile women left which is the reason they are assigned to high class families that cannot conceive. Handmaids are given a name every time they are assigned to a Commander, which consisted of the preposition "of" plus the Commander's last name. She serves one of the Commanders, the highest political standing, and his wife, Serena Joy. Every month, when she is most likely to get pregnant, the Ceremony takes place. In Ceremonies the Handmaid lies between the Wife's legs while she holds her hands and has impersonal, aseptic sex with the Commander. Offred has no choice, she is a servant. She can only leave the house to do shopping trips on foot and the Guardians, Gilead's security force, or the Eyes, Gilead's secret service, watch everybody's moves.

Through the many flashbacks we know of how her life was before and the events that led to the instauration of Gilead. She was married to a man named Luke with whom she has a child. When they started seeing each other, Luke was still married to another woman and then he divorced her to be with the protagonist. We know about her best friend Moira and her quirkiness and independence and about how politically involved was her mother with feminist activism. She comments on how, because of chemical

spills and pollution, fertility rates had plummeted. Social unrest was felt across the country and child abductions were not uncommon.

The coup started as a terrorist attack after which an exceptional Government formed and the Constitution was suspended temporarily until order was restored. With time, more and more repressive laws were implemented. Women's rights to hold property or work were revoked and the protagonist decides to attempt to flee to Canada with their daughter. They are caught and separated.

After being captured, their marriage is deemed void because he had been previously married. She is sent to an indoctrination center supervised by the Aunts where Handmaids are "trained". Aunts are indoctrinators in charge of brainwashing women into Gilead's ideology. Moira is sent there too but she eventually manages to escape.

One night after the Ceremony, Nick, the family's gardener and chauffeur, tells Offred that the Commander is expecting her in his study. Such a thing is totally forbidden. Commanders and Handmaidens are supposed to keep their relationship as aseptic as possible and not intimate. From that point on, they meet regularly under the same circumstances. On meetings they play scrabble, he lets her read old magazines, and talk about how life used to be and how it is now.

One day, in one of the shopping trips, another Handmaid tells Offred that she is in touch with a resistance group called Mayday. The constant paranoia atmosphere makes her distrust her and not pay attention to what she wants to tell her about it.

Despite several Ceremonies have taken place, Offred cannot get pregnant. Serena suggests her to try another way. She sets up an encounter with Nick. The same night the encounter was supposed to happen, she is taken by the Commander to Jezebel's, a former hotel turned into a brothel for high class men. There she accidentally meets Moira who tells her that, when she was caught, she was given a choice: do forced labor in the Colonies with the rest of political prisoners and other dangerous people in highly polluted areas or work in Jezebel's. They never meet again. The Commander then takes Offred to a room to have "real" sex and she has to fake passion.

Once she is back to the house in the middle of the night, Serena takes her to Nick's room and there they have sex. They are attracted to each other despite not having a real

say in it. From that point on, Offred keeps meeting Nick frequently without anyone else knowing.

Suddenly, after one of the shopping trips she is received by a furious Serena that has found out about the time the Commander took her to Jezebel's. She is told to wait in her room and that there will be consequences. In her room, she sees a black van of the Eyes coming to the house then Nick comes in and tells her it is Mayday members actually that have come to take her to a safe place. She is taken without knowing if it really is Mayday or the Eyes.

The last part of the novel takes place in the year 2195 after Gilead's regime has fallen. It is a history lecture given by professor Pieixoto. He says the tapes with Offred's story were found in Bangor, Maine, and suggests that Nick set Offred's escape but whether she escaped to another country or if she was recaptured is unknown.

## **2.4 Patriarchy**

In this section I will analyze the structures of patriarchy as they appear in the novel following the order seen in the theoretical framework section.

### **2.4.1 Housework**

All housework in Gilead is done by women. The amount or type of work women do depends on their social status. Seemingly banned from all paid work, women are secluded to the household sphere. The Marthas are sterile women that work as servants in Commanders' houses, they dress in green and cook and clean. The Wives are the women married to Commanders. They dress in blue and only engage in leisure activities like gardening or knitting. Econowives is jargon for working class women that do not have the status to have a Martha assigned to them. They dress in multicolor clothes and have to do everything by themselves. Handmaids are a special case. They only work in the household of a Commander and their only duty is to breed. They make them go shopping just because they think the exercise will help them get pregnant more easily. They eat better food than many people for the same reason. Handmaids are disliked by the rest of women groups because they consider them as privileged and their function as surrogate mothers morally reprehensible. Offred reflects on Gilead's households: "I wait, for the household to assemble. *Household*: that is what we are. The Commander is

the head of the household. The house is what he holds. To have and to hold, till death do us part” (124).

Finally, Aunts dress in brown and are an exception since their function is not domestic therefore they will be analyzed in the Paid work section.

#### **2.4.2 Paid work**

It is the vaguest of the patriarchal structures in the book. There are few references to paid work as we know it in the text. There seems to be a “token” system to purchase goods, but it is hard to call it currency. We can only assume every male worker gets a fixed amount according to their position and status. Some of the relevant jobs in Gilead are:

- The Guardians are the low level workers that perform unskilled labor unspecified most of the time. They are seen patrolling streets, examining Identipasses at checkpoints, or assigned to higher level men so, in practice, it means they become servants of those men and their families.
- The Angels are Gilead’s army. Capable Guardians are promoted to Angels. Not much is said about them except that the ones that prove themselves in the front and come back are assigned a woman, therefore, further improving their status.
- The Commanders are the political elite of Gilead. They can be considered part of the Executive. In the book, it is hinted that there are at least a few of them and that each one is responsible for a field. They have the right to own a car and have Guardians, Marthas, and a Handmaiden assigned to them.
- The Eyes are Gilead’s secret police. They operate mostly undercover and are focused on the investigation of dissidents.
- The Aunts have a special place in Gilead’s society. They are charged with the ideological indoctrination of Handmaids and are the only women allowed to read.
- Another special case worth mentioning is doctors. A few male doctors are allowed to keep on practicing. We know about it because Handmaids are checked regularly and they are called whenever a woman is about to give birth. They only take action if absolutely necessary.

Paid work is purposely only sketched by Atwood. We can only access Gilead through Offred's eyes so what she does not mention or does not know does not exist for the reader. Her story almost never touches this topic at length, probably because the writer does not want the reader's attention divided between the issues such a regime presents for women and the ones it presents for the economy, the State organization, labor, class division, etc. Is Gilead's market based on private companies? Were private companies nationalized? Is there a currency? The answer to these questions was not given.

### **2.4.3 The State**

“The Republic of Gilead [...] knows no bounds. Gilead is within you” (37). This quote from aunt Lydia synthesizes well Gilead's effort to impose their values on the population. Gilead's State is above all patriarchal; its core defining elements are not its economic or political regime but its gender relations. Its laws and institutions protect and safeguard male privilege. After the Sons of Jacob took over the government, a law was passed to ban all women from paid work and bank account ownership.

The other two pillars of Gilead's ideology are religion and racism. After prohibiting half the population to work a collapse of the economy is to be expected. Gilead's government tries to remedy the situation by instaurating slavery and forced labor. It is mentioned in the TV news that the “resettlement of the Children of Ham is continuing on schedule” (129). This is a biblical reference to black-skinned people. 30,000 people approximately are being displaced to the Colonies. This is the single mention to racism or a race based conflict and the reason why *The Handmaid's Tale* has been criticized as “white feminism.”

### **2.4.4 Violence**

Violence is very present in Gilead. Its martial preservation of social order; the constant presence of the Guardians, the checkpoints, the spotlights, and the barbed wire are telling. There are abundant examples of violence both physical and psychological: rape, sexual harassment, torture, public executions, indoctrination, enslavement, forced labor, deportation, medical violence, and discrimination based on gender, race, or sexuality. Men and women suffer from some type of violence to different degrees but it is women that definitely feel it the most. The following quote is significant to show Gilead's take on one of the vilest kinds of violence: rape.



The spectacles women used to make of themselves. Oiling themselves like roast meat on a spit, and bare backs and shoulders, on the street, in public, and legs, not even stockings on them, no wonder those things used to happen. *Things*, the word she used when whatever it stood for was too distasteful or filthy or horrible to pass her lips. A successful life for her was one that avoided *things*, excluded *things*. Such *things* do not happen to nice women. (Atwood 86-87)

#### 2.4.5 Sexuality

Sexuality is a vital aspect in the work. Gilead's repressive morality only deems acceptable a very narrow notion of sexuality which is only to happen between married heterosexual couples and for reproductive purposes.

Gilead's notion of sexuality is gender based. Men are considered to be very sexual by nature and woman are supposed to make themselves be "respected" by them. The next excerpt exemplifies this:

"Men are sex machines, said Aunt Lydia, and not much more. They only want one thing. You must learn to manipulate them, for your own good. Lead them around by the nose; that is a metaphor. It's nature's way. It's God's device. It's the way things are. Aunt Lydia did not actually say this, but it was implicit in everything she did say." (Atwood 222)

The State's appropriation of women's bodies for reproductive purposes, dissociating them from other aspects of sexuality like sexual pleasure or attraction is perhaps the most perverse and obvious violation of women's rights. The Ceremony is what first catches the eye of the reader and makes him or her keep a moral distance with Gilead's practices no matter what happens. Atwood's writing of an ultra-religious totalitarian State is built around this extreme practice. She strips women of all rights, decision over one's body or life, and we see Offred's struggles to maintain her own identity in a society where every man or the Aunts define her.

When it comes to men, sexuality is very different. Gilead protects male privileges and assures men a wife if they prove useful enough to the State. Male self-esteem is protected, too. Infertility cannot be attributed to men, even suggesting it could be considered a punishable offense. Like with many other parts of its ideology, Gilead draws from Biblical sources to support their claims:

"For Adam was first formed, then Eve."

"And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression."

"Notwithstanding she shall be saved by childbearing, if they continue in faith and charity and holiness with sobriety." (341)

#### **2.4.6 Culture**

Gilead reverts to the most puritanical values and morals. There is not a single mention of an educational system, but we can be certain that women are not involved in it since they are not allowed to read. The Eyes take the University campus as their headquarters twisting and perverting the notion of knowledge; knowledge is no longer a means to freedom but a tool for repression. The regime organized raids in search for books, magazines and "vanity" items; everything found was burned. The only sign of artistic appreciation is an old puritan church with paintings in it that is now used as a museum. Science is despised and persecuted; scientists and doctors that carried out abortions in the past are executed. The few doctors left are seen as a sort of "necessary evil" and they only intervene as a last resort. Gileadean society does not observe freedom of speech, freedom of the media, or religious freedom.

Religion is a fundamental concept in Gilead but religiosity is not. Religion is used as a source of legitimation of everything from law and institutions to private life organization; if there is a "Scriptural precedent" then it can be done. Patriarchy is in control of the texts, its interpretation is the only one, and hence discourse is controlled, too. The Commander has The Bible locked in a wooden box and he only reads the same passage on Ceremony nights. The absence of religiosity in the book is striking. There is little information about the Sons of Jacob and what differentiates them from other sects, there is no detail given about how they perform their religious liturgy, and no apparent sign of private spirituality. All public religious demonstrations are institutional.

The epitome of this lack of religiosity is "soul scrolls". Soul scrolls are automated machines where you pay so the machine says the prayer aloud for you. It is a service ordered by phone, only technicians go inside the building where the machines are. Offred thinks of it that "it must make a lot of profit" and that "ordering prayers from Soul Scrolls is supposed to be a sign of piety and faithfulness to the regime, so of course the Commanders' Wives do it a lot. It helps their husbands' careers" (Atwood 256-257). They are Gilead's equivalent to papal bulls: a monetization of spirituality that funds the State while easing the conscience of the wealthy. The epitome of this politically instrumentalization is the motto "GOD IS A NATIONAL RESOURCE" (329).

Gilead's society is heavily militarized. It is not a coincidence that the higher rank leaders are called Commanders and the army is called the Angels, which are God's warriors. Gilead seems to be at war with different insurgent guerrillas; soldiers victorious in the battlefield are received with honors and given a higher status.

Gileadean social division can be considered caste-like. Women cannot change groups; if someone is classified as a Martha then she cannot be a Handmaid. The only social promotion possible is available to men; Guardians are promoted to Angels and Commanders receive promotions if they succeed in having children (180).

## **2.5 Hegemonic Masculinity and Traditional Gender Roles**

Hegemonic masculinity, according to Gilead's standards, is that of the rational, strong, protective, and decisive father-husband; powerful enough to protect his household, rich enough to provide for his family, and potent enough to have children. Anything considered feminine is rejected and devaluated.

Interestingly enough, no male character completely falls under this definition of masculinity, the closest being the Commander. By doing so, Atwood points to the fact that hegemonic masculinity is an ideal that very few men come even close to attain.

Gileadean society embraces fully traditional gender roles. Men occupy all assertive positions in society and women are expected to be submissive and docile. Women are obligated to leave the labor market and go back to serve in the household. When it comes to sexual roles, the double standard is in effect. The only way men think of women is as "good girls" that submit to male dominance or "whores" that work in a brothel for the amusement of the powerful. A good example found in the text about the different roles expected for men and women is: "Women's Prayvaganzas are for group weddings like this, usually. The men's are for military victories. These are the things we are supposed to rejoice in the most, respectively" (Atwood 341).

## **2.6 Character analysis**

In this section I will analyze the three main male characters of the novel with an emphasis on their relationship with hegemonic masculinity and traditional gender roles.

I think each one of them deserves their own section given how different they are in terms of personality and narrative role.

### 2.6.1 The Commander

The Commander is a tall, thin man, probably in his 50s. He has gray hair and facial hair. He has a soft body, a little belly with some hair on it. He is one of the most powerful men in Gilead, a Commander, the tip of the top of the political elite. He has superior studies in market research and presumably played a key role in the Sons of Jacob terrorist coup to take hold of power and posterior founding of Gilead. He is aware of his power and authority, both public and private. He breaks rules like only someone very powerful and well-connected would do, especially when breaking those rules most certainly means death. Examples of this can be the secret meetings with Offred, turning on the radio to listen to radio Free America (322), or taking Offred to Jezebel's. When showing Offred the old magazines, a very telling conversation takes place where he shows how he thinks of himself as morally superior:

Why do you have this? I asked him. Some of us, he said, retain an appreciation for the old things. But these were supposed to have been burned, I said. There were house to- house searches, bonfires [...] What's dangerous in the hands of the multitudes, he said, with what may or may not have been irony, is safe enough for those whose motives are [...]. Beyond reproach, I said. He nodded gravely. Impossible to tell whether or not he meant it (Atwood 242)

Offred's, and hence the reader's, impression of him evolves throughout the story and it is all because of Atwood's talented writing. She manages to create a character with a complex psychology and motivations and, just as it happens with his wife, the reader cannot help but to empathize with him in some situations. For example, when we see the Ceremony is impersonal and uncomfortable for him (246-247, 250) or when he talks to Offred about his wife and we see that their relationship has deteriorated: "She wouldn't understand. Anyway, she won't talk to me much anymore. We don't seem to have much in common, these days. So there it was, out in the open: his wife didn't understand him" (243). He almost feels at times trapped in such a rigid society, as a victim; suffering the costs of the system and hegemonic masculinity. But, as the story progresses we see that behind everything he does there is only selfishness. He puts his own interests and desires before anything else. He helped to establish a totalitarian State through terrorism particularly unjust towards women and justifies it (323) and does not

bring Offred to his office to make her feel any better. It is not an act of compassion but of self-complacency. He does it just because he can. He does not want to start a relationship with her. He wants to be amused, understood, listened, admired, and desired. When he asks for a kiss after every meeting, he does not care if it is true or not, he just wants her to do it “as if you [she] meant it” (218).

The Commander’s morals are patent when he takes Offred to Jezebel’s and is known that he is a regular and when talking to her about the Sons of Jacob’s coup he says:

You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs, is what he says. We thought we could do better.

Better? I say, in a small voice. How can he think this is better?

Better never means better for everyone, he says. It always means worse, for some. (Atwood 325)

The Commander embodies hegemonic masculinity and in relation to traditional gender roles, the Commander is the father/husband that is supposed to provide and protect his family. He is a representation of men subjugating woman, first, as part of the political elite and, secondly, as the head of the household. He represents male privilege. He is so high in the social pyramid that he can even transgress, without any consequence, some of the rules and values of the society. Whatever respect, authority, female services, economic benefits, or institutional power he has, he thinks he deserves them. He never orders anything to Offred, but “there’s no doubt about who holds real power” (212). Is there a greater power than having your will satisfied without having to utter direct orders? His megalomania leads to his downfall, but had he chosen not to break any rule, he would have been safe of any harm. Certainly, that is not the case for Offred, who would have continued to be abused and mistreated.

Regardless of the ambiguous end, Atwood gives Offred and the reader a bittersweet small victory. While being taken down the staircase by the two Eyes/Mayday agents, the next passage shows an Offred out of reach of the Commander as he suddenly realizes the gravity of his situation:

I need to see your authorization, says the Commander. You have a warrant? [...]

Not that we need one, sir, but all is in order," says the first one again. Violation of state secrets.

The Commander puts his hand to his head. What have I been saying, and to whom, and which

one of his enemies has found out? Possibly he will be a security risk, now. I am above him, looking down; he is shrinking. There have already been purges among them, there will be more. (Atwood 453)

### **2.6.2 Luke**

Luke is Offred's husband with whom she has a child. Luke's description is mainly psychological. Almost no physical features are present, perhaps because, as Offred admits several times, she is forgetting about them. He was previously married to another woman when he met the protagonist and then divorced the former to marry the latter. He seems to be a sensitive partner and husband who cares about his family: he could not sleep the night their baby was born (195), he was tender and comforting when Offred lost her job and told her: "I'll always take care of you" (277). She found it patronizing even though he probably did not mean it that way.

Luke personifies a mild masculinity more in tune with equity and female sensitivities while diverting from traditional gender roles. His relationship with the protagonist seems to be based on mutual understanding and love, not on control. The fact that he was previously married tells us that his conception of marriage and sexuality is more liberal than Gilead's standards. At some point, he says that he enjoys cooking and calls it, "his hobby" (188), which undoubtedly breaks with traditional gender roles. He is not consciously sexist, but some of his words or actions have that notion behind them. He fails to comprehend what truly is being taken from Offred when she loses her job, how tilted is now the power balance towards one of the sides; and when he talks about cooking he refers to it as something he does for fun, whenever he feels like, not as something obligatory to feed the members of the family. This is because even if he is not sexist he was raised in a sexist society and has internalized many of its ideas.

### **2.6.3 Nick**

Nick is slim, has dark hair and tanned skin. He has a "long, sardonic, unrevealing face" (413). He is a Guardian assigned to the Commander's family and usually works as chauffeur or garden boy. He has not been assigned a woman so he must be very low status. Offred wonders the entire novel if he is an Eye incognito but the doubt remains. When she first meets him, he is casually cleaning the Commander's car with his hat sideways, the shirt sleeves rolled to the elbow and whistling. He talks and winks at her, which he is not supposed to do. Nick and Offred are attracted to each other from the

very beginning. The magnetism between them is seen when he finds her at night outside her room and tells her that the Commander wants to see her in his office.

Their first sexual encounter is not their decision; they cannot refuse. It is tragic that the buildup of sexual attraction between two people that like each other is culminated in such a perverse fashion: a sexual encounter just because Serena is desperate to have a child she cannot conceive with her husband. They could have despised each other, hated how the other looked, and they would have had to have sex anyway. They were lucky enough to like their partner. After that first encounter, Offred takes great risks and visits him at night regularly in secret. In these encounters, they are no longer objects that serve somebody else's desires but they act as subjects that choose; it means the first sense of control over one's life they have in the whole novel. In those meetings, Nick keeps to himself for the most part and it is Offred that talks while he looks at her. Nick's room and his company, the forbidden intimacy they share, become a safe haven for the two of them. We do not know Nick's motivations, they are unknown to the reader, but he keeps letting her in time after time so we can assume his relationship with Offred is not just physical relief.

Nick can be thought of as Offred's male counterpart. Even at some point, Offred mentions "for the moment we're mirrors" (154). They both are in a situation in which they have no control over their own lives. The reader might empathize with Nick and his tragic destiny. At the end of the novel, it is hinted that he "sacrificed" and died after Offred is taken. If he was a Mayday member, he compromised his cover so she could escape; or if he was with the Eyes, he betrayed them and Gilead not turning her in when he should have. I think Nick and Offred's goodbye is deliberately rushed and stripped of heroism. He does not tell her if he really is part of Mayday or the Eyes nor he shares his true feelings for her, so when they come for Offred, whoever they are, she has no choice but to leave escorted only with Nick's word that she will be safe and without any control once again over her situation.

The van waits in the driveway, its double doors stand open. The two of them, one on either side now, take me by the elbows to help me in. Whether this is my end or a new beginning I have no way of knowing: I have given myself over into the hands of strangers, because it can't be helped. (Atwood 453)

We can only assume Nick's intentions were good-hearted but very patronizing towards Offred. Nick does not embody hegemonic masculinity but still represents some of those traits and his participation in traditional gender roles is high. When she is in immediate danger and knowing that she might be pregnant of him, he acts as a protective father-husband and takes care of the situation at the expense of his own security.



### 3. CONCLUSIONS

This dissertation on Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* has provided a feminist theoretical framework valid for academic literary analysis. The work has proven to be a profound and beautifully written work full of nuance and meaning. It is perfectly suited for an analysis of patriarchy since patriarchy structures are ever-present throughout the novel. Male characters in the novel are far from being similar and exceptionally interesting to analyze; each of them has its own personality, motivations, and contradictions that make them fascinating.

As we have seen in the analysis, the structures of patriarchy introduced in the theoretical framework are clearly represented in the novel which I have tried to illustrate appropriately. Similarly, the main elements that define hegemonic masculinity and traditional gender roles have been defined and analyzed with suitable excerpts when they were necessary and relevant.

Patriarchy in the novel is absolute both in the private and public spheres. We see an evil, controlling, authoritarian theocracy that has managed to establish a ruthless society where women are subjugated to men on every aspect of life.

Atwood masterfully explores how individual selfish interests men may have intertwine with those of the system and takes her characters to situations of moral grayness. It is precisely those moments that give credibility to the narration. She manages to incorporate the internal tensions and conflicts that living in such a regime would rise in anybody. Male characters show different degrees of acceptance of hegemonic masculinity and traditional gender roles.

If I had to mention something I did not like about the book is that at times it seems a cautionary tale about the dangers of political and personal passivity. If I had to choose something that I really like that did not appear in the dissertation because it is off topic I would choose how elegantly she writes about sex and desire and the food and flower metaphors that accompany those passages.

I would like to conclude by saying I cannot recommend enough the reading of this book, while reading it myself I noticed the great potential for academic analysis it has.

Given its themes, feminism and gender studies first come to mind but I strongly believe many other critical theory schools can provide insightful analysis of the work.

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