**BY ATWOOD**

*Young girls should not wear red.*

*In some countries it is the color*

*of death; in others passion,*

*in others war, in others blood…..*

*Dancing in red shoes will kill you*. (*The Red Shirt –* poem from *Two-Headed Poems,* Atwood 1978)

*Beneath the hems of the dresses the feet dangle, two pairs of red shoes, one pair of blue. If it weren’t for the ropes and the sacks it could be a kind of dance, a ballet, caught by flash-camera; mid-air. They look arranged. They look like showbiz.* (*The Handmaid’s Tale.* p.289)

*I don’t want to be a dancer, my feet in the air, my head a faceless oblong of white cloth. I don’t want to be a doll hung up on the Wall, I don’t want to be a wingless angel. I want to keep on living, in any form.* (*The Handmaid’s Tale*. p. 298)

(Throughout her work Atwood frequently refers to the film *The Red Shoes*, starring Moira Shearer as the girl who dances herself to death. What might be the significance of the story and star of this film, do you think, in developing our understanding of *The Handmaid’s Tale*?)

*To live in prison is to live without mirrors. To live*

*without mirrors is to live without the self.* (*Marrying the Hangman* – poem from *Two-Headed Poems*)

*The woman*

*they did not kill.*

*Instead they sewed her face*

*shut, closed her mouth*

*to a hole the size of a straw,*

*and put her back on the street,*

*a mute symbol.* (*Notes Towards a Poem that can Never be Written* – poem from *True Stories*. 1981)

*There is a story I have to tell you, there is something you need to know.* (*Second Words –* Selected Critical Prose. 1982)

*A country or a community which does not take serious literature seriously will lose it.* (*Second Words.*)

Quotes

*No person, adult or child, male or female, is truly innocent in Atwood’s literary world, and perhaps especially not children.*

**Barbara Hill Rigney**

*Atwood is constantly aware of opposites….self/other, subject/object, male/female, nature/man….and of the need to accept and work within them.* (Sherrill Grace)

*Atwood has been concerned in her fiction with the painful psychic warfare between men and women, (but) in ‘The Handmaid’s Tale, a futuristic satire, she casts subtlety aside, exposing woman’s primal fear of being used and helpless.* (Barbara Holliday)

*‘The Handmaid’s Tale’ is a political tract deploring nuclear energy, environmental waste, and antifeminist attitudes. But it (is) so much more than that….a taut thriller, a psychological study, a play on words*. (Christopher Lehmann-Haupt*)*

*Atwood has emerged as a champion of Canadian literature and of the peculiarly Canadian experience of isolation and survival.* (Susan Wood)

***Margaret Atwood’s ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’ and the Dystopian Tradition. Amin Malik. 1987.***

One of *The Handmaid’s Tale’s* successful aspects concerns the skilful portrayal of a state that intheory claims to be founded on Christian principles, yet in practice miserably lacks spirituality and benevolence. The state in Gilead prescribes a pattern of life based on frugality, conformity, censorship, corruption, fear, and terror – in short, the usual terms of existence enforced by totalitarian states, instances of which can be found in such dystopian works as Zamyatin’s *We*, Huxley’s *Brave New World* and Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty Four.*

What distinguishes Atwood’s novel from those dystopian classics is its obvious feminist focus. Gilead is openly misogynistic, in both its theocracy and practice. The state reduces the handmaids to the slavery status of being mere ‘breeders’…..The handmaid’s situation lucidly illustrates Simone de Beauvoir’s assertion in *The Second Sex* about man defining woman not as an autonomous being, but as simply what he decrees to be relative to him. *For him she is sex-absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not with reference to her; she is the incidental, as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute --- she is the Other.* This view of man’s marginilisation of woman corroborates Foucault’s earlier observation about the power-sex correlative; since man holds the sanctified reins of power in society, he rules, assigns roles, and decrees after social, religious and cosmic concepts convenient to his interests and desires.

However, not all the female characters in Atwood’s novels are sympathetic, nor all the male ones demonic. The Aunts. A vicious elite of collaborators who conduct torture lectures, are among the church-state’s staunchest supporters; these renegades turn into zealous converts, appropriating male values at the expense of their feminine instincts. One of them, Aunt Lydia, functions, ironically, as the spokesperson of antifeminism; she urges the handmaids to renounce themselves and become non-persons: ‘*Modesty is invisibility’, said Aunt Lydia. ‘Never forget it. To be seen – to be seen – is to be’ – her vice trembled –‘penetrated. What you must be, girls, is impenetrable.’ She called us ‘girls’.* On the other hand, Nick, the Commander’s chauffeur, is involved with the underground network, of men and women that aims at rescuing women and conducting sabotage. Besides, Atwood’s heroine constantly yearns for her former marriage life with Luke,presently presumed dead. Accordingly, while Atwood poignantly condemns the misogynous mentality that can cause a heavy toll of human suffering, the refrains from convicting a gender in its entirety as the perpetrator of the nightmare that is Gilead. Indeed, we witness very few of the male characters acting with stark cruelty; the narrative reports most of the violent after the fact, sparing the reader gory scenes. Even the Commander appears more pathetic than sinister, baffled then manipulative, at times, a fool.

Some may interpret Atwood’s position here as a non-feminist stance, approving of women’s status quo. In a review for the *Times Literary Supplement,* Lorna Sage describes *The Handmaid’s Tale* as Atwood’s *revisionist look at her more visionary self,* and as *a novel in praise of the present, for which, perhaps, you have to have the perspective of dystopia.* It is really difficult to conceive Atwood’s praising the present, because, like Orwell who in *Nineteen Eighty Four* extrapolated specific ominous events and tendencies in Twentieth Century politics, she tries to caution against right-wing fundamentalism, rigid dogmas, and misogynous theosophies that may be currently gaining a deceptive popularity. The novel’s mimetic impulse then aims at wresting an imperfect present from a horror-ridden future: it appeals for vigilance and an appreciation of the mature values of tolerance, compassion and, above all, for women’s unique identity.

The novel’s thematics operate by positing polarised extremes: a decadent present, which Aunt Lydia cynically describes as *a society dying ... of too much choice,* and a totalitarian future that prohibits choice. Naturally, while rejecting the indulgent decadence and chaos of an anarchic society, the reader condemns the Gilead regime for its intolerant, prescriptive set of values that projects a tunnel vision on reality and eliminates human volition: ‘*There is more than one kind of freedom’, said Aunt Lydia. ‘Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don’t underrate it.* As illustrated by the fears and agonies that Offred endures, when human beings are not free to aspire toward whatever they wish, when choices become so severely constrained that, to quote from Dostoyevsky’s *The Possessed*, *‘only the necessary is necessary,* life turns into a painfully prolonged prison term. Interestingly, the victimisation process does not involve Offred and the handmaids alone, but extends to the oppressors as well. Everyone ruled by the Gilead regime suffers the deprivation of having no choice, except what the church-state decrees; even the Commander is compelled to perform his sexual assignment with Offred as a matter of obligation: *This is no recreation, even for the Commander. This is serious business. The Commander, too, is doing his duty.*

Since the inhabitants of Gilead lead the precarious existence befitting victims, most try in varied ways to cope, endure and survive. This situation of being a victim and trying to survive dramatises Atwood’s major thesis in her critical work *Survival*: *A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, in which she suggests that Canada, metaphorically still a colony or an oppressed minority, is *a collective victim* and that *the central symbol for Canada….is undoubtedly Survival, la Survivance.* Atwood, furthermore, enumerates what she labels *basic victim positions,* whereby a victim may choose any of fourpossible options, one of which is to acknowledge being a victim but refuse *to accept the assumption that the role is inevitable.* This position fully explains Offred’s role as the protagonist-narrator of *The Handmaid’s Tale.* Offred’s progress as a maturing consciousness is indexed by an evolving awareness of herself as a victimised woman, and then a gradual development toward initiating risky but assertive schemes that break the slavery syndrome. Her double-crossing the Commander and his Wife, her choice to hazard a sexual affair with Nick, and her association with the underground network, all point to the shift from being a helpless victim to being a sly, subversive survivor. This impulse to survive, together with the occasional flashes of warmth and concern among the handmaids, transmits reassuring signs of hope and humanity in an otherwise chilling and depressing tale.

What makes Atwood’s book such a moving tale is its clever technique in presenting the heroine initially as a vice like a sleepwalker conceiving disjointed perceptions of its surroundings, as well as flashing reminiscences about a bygone life. As the scenes gather more details, the heroine’s voice is steadily and imperceptibly, yet convincingly, transfigured into a fully-roundedness that parallels her maturing comprehension of what is happening around her. Thus the victim, manipulated and coerced, is metamorphosed into a determined conniver who daringly violates the perverted canons of Gilead. Moreover, Atwood skilfully manipulates the time sequence between the heroine’s past (pre-Gilead life) and the present: those shifting reminiscences offer glimpses of a life, though not ideal, still filled with energy, creativity, humaneness and a sense of selfhood, a life that sharply contrasts with the alienation, slavery and suffering under totalitarianism. By the end of the novel, the reader is effectively and conclusively shown how the misogynous regime functions on the basis of power, not choice; coercion, not volition; fear, not desire. In other words, Atwood administers in doses the assaulting shocks to our sensibilities of a grim dystopian nightmare: initially, the narrative voice, distant and almost diffidently void of any emotions, emphasises those aspects of frugality and solemnity imposed by the state, then progressively tyranny and corruption begin to unfold piecemeal. As the novel concludes, as the horror reaches a climax, the narrative voice assumes a fully engagedemotional tone that cleverly keeps us in suspense about the heroine’s fate. This method of measured, well-punctuated revelations about Gilead connects symbolically with the novel’s central meaning: misogynous dogmas, no matter how seemingly innocuous and trustworthy they may appear at their initial conception, are bound, when allowed access to power, to reveal their ruthlessly tyrannical nature.

Regardless of the novel’s dystopian essence, it nevertheless avoids being solemn; on the contrary, it sustains an ironic texture throughout. We do not find too many frightening images that may compare with Oceanea’s torture chambers: the few graphic horror scenes are crisply and snappily presented, sparing us a blood-curdling impact. (Some may criticise this restraint as undermining the novel’s integrity and emotional validity.) As in all dystopias, Atwood’s aim is to encourage the reader to adopt a rational stance that avoids total *suspension of disbelief.* This rational stance dislocates full emotional involvement in order to create a Brechtian type of alienation that, in turn, generates an ironic charge. This rational stance too should not be total, because Atwood does want us to care sympathetically about her heroine’s fate; hence the emotional distance between reader and character must allow for closeness, but up to a point. Furthermore, Atwood is equally keen on preserving the ironic flair intact. No wonder then that she concludes *The Handmaid’s Tale* with a climacticmoment of irony: she exposes, in a hilarious epilogue, the absurdity and futility of certain academic writings that engage in dull, clinically sceptic analysis of irrelevancies and inanities, yet miss the vital issues….The entire *Historical Notes* at the end of the novel represents a satire on critics who spin out theories about literary or historical texts without genuinely recognising or experiencing the pathos expressed in them: they circumvent issues, classify data, construct clever hypotheses garbed in ritualistic, fashionable jargon, but no spirited illumination ever comes out of their endeavours. Atwood soberly demonstrates that when a critic or scholar (and by extension a reader) avoids, under the guise of scholarly objectivity, taking a moral or political stand about an issue of crucial magnitude such as totalitarianism, he or she will necessarily become an apologist for evil; more significantly, the applause the speaker receives gives us a further compelling glimpse into a distant future that still harbours strong misogynous tendencies

While the major dystopian features can clearly be located in *The Handmaid’s Tale,* the novel offers two distinct additional features: feminism and irony. Dramatising the interrelationship between power and sex, the book’s feminism, despite condemning male misogynous mentality, upholds and cherishes a man-woman axis; here, feminism functions inclusively rather than exclusively, poignantly rather than stridently, humanely rather than cynically. The novel’s ironic tone, on the other hand, betokens a confident narrative strategy that aims at treating a depressing material gently and gradually, yet firmly, openly and conclusively, thus skilfully succeeding in securing the reader’s sympathy and interest. The novel shows Atwood’s strengths both as an engaging story-teller and a creator of a sympathetic heroine, and as an articulate craftswoman of a theme that is both current and controversial. As the novel signifies a landmark in the maturing process of Atwood’s creative career, her self-assured depiction of the grim dystopian world gives an energetic and meaningful impetus to the genre.

Assess what you have learned so far about the character of Offred and her reliability as narrator.

Make a flow chart with Offred’s name at its centre. Aspects to include could be: -

how she behaved in the *time before;*

how she responds to the repressive regime of Gilead: is she merely passive or are there hints that she may eventually rebel?

how reliable is her memory?/would she have any reason to distort the truth deliberately?/who is her audience?

Provide quotations and page references to support your comments.

***THE HANDMAID’S TALE***

**UNIT 3: CH. 25-30**

**Task 1**

Offred’s regular visits to the Commander’s room have brought about a significant change in her relationships with the Commander and Serena Joy. What has changed and why? Make notes with details from the text and page references.

**Task 2**

Pages 182-192 fill in details of how the Gileadean regime came about. Make a list of events in order, starting as follows: -

President of U.S.A. and congressmen assassinated

Army declares state of emergency

newspapers censored or closed down

Compare Offred’s reactions to the changes with Luke’s. What is significant or worrying, for Offred, about their different reactions? Quote from the text. Give the following extract careful consideration: -

*That night, after I’d lost my job, Luke wanted me to make love. Why didn’t I want to? Desperation alone should have driven me. But I felt numbed. I could hardly even feel his hands on me.*

*‘What’s the matter?’ he said.*

*‘I don’t know,’ I said.*

*‘We still have…’ he said. But he didn’t go on to say what we still had. It occurred to me that he shouldn’t be saying ‘we’, since nothing that I knew of had been taken away from him.*

*‘We still have each other,’ I said. It was true. Then why did I sound, even to myself, so indifferent?*

*He kissed me then, as if now I’d said that, things could bet back to normal. But something had shifted, some balance. I felt shrunken, so that when he put his arms around me, gathering me up, I was as small as a doll. I felt love going forward without me.*

*‘He doesn’t mind this,’ I thought. ‘He doesn’t mind it at all. Maybe he even likes it. We are not each other’s, any more. Instead, I am his.’* (p.191)

**Task 3**

Focus on ch. 27. What is interesting about Atwood’s presentation of the relationship between Offred and Ofglen, particularly her use of language and imagery? Select relevant details and comment on their effectiveness.

**Task 4**

What is the significance of the Commander’s gift to Offred of a copy of *Vogue*? With which of Atwood’s favourite motifs are such magazines associated? See p. 164-166.