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The Handmaid's Tale - Book Review

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The Handmaid's Tale by [Margaret Atwood](#) was published in 1986 by [Random Ho](#)
text presents the body as an important site at which power and resistance are bo
registered – in and around the process of reproduction.



The Handmaid's Tale 1986

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The Handmaid's Tale is a text which presents a **totalitarian society** where political and religious conservatism have abolished the importance of the individual, and where the value of the human body is held as a collective resource for the purposes of reproduction.

"In totalitarian societies, the individual has no importance. Individual rights are sacrificed in favour of the goals of the ruling group, which are falsely equated with the welfare of the whole society. Gilead takes this even further, denying the integrity not only of the individual person, but of the human body" (The Handmaid's Tale 2010, [The Novel Guide: The Handmaid's Tale: Theme Analysis](#)).



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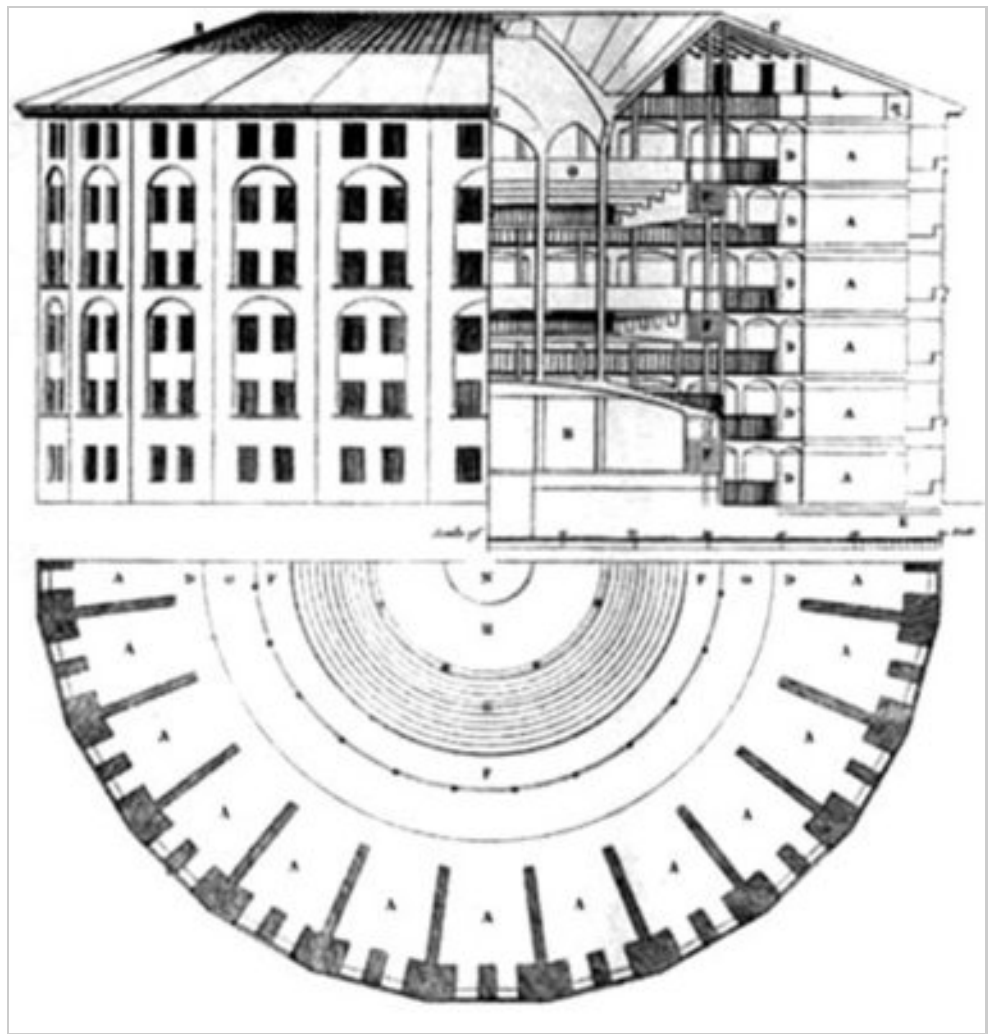
By taking ownership over the rights to reproduce, and in turn, ownership of the society of Gilead denies the handmaids' any sense of control or independence, but upon them extreme power and a mental will to resist. Gilead places excessive value on women's fertility, and handmaids are only valued for their reproductive capacities. Through this, handmaids hold a power that not many others have, the power to reproduce. Ironically, it is also this power that confines them.

Offred is a handmaid who can remember the 'time before.' Gilead denies her of her original name, and instead has the patronymic 'Offred' placed upon her, which is derived from her commander's name 'of/fred' (Muller 2010). This brand further delivers her to the collective resource known as the *Handmaids*.

Offred says, "*My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now, it's forbidden. I tell myself it doesn't matter, your name is like your telephone number, it matters to others; but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter*" (Atwood 1986, 94).

Gilead is a society under constant surveillance. Spies are called 'Eyes' (Atwood 1986, 19). 'real believers' report any resistance that they become knowledgeable about and act against. Each person, within their assigned 'role' has the power to condemn another with enough evidence. Gilead is also built on self-surveillance, which resonates with the 'Panopticon Theory.'

The **Panopticon** was a prison designed by Jeremy Bentham in the 18th century. It is a circular building of cells, where no prisoner could be certain of not being observed from the central watch-tower, and so the prisoners gradually began to police their own behaviour (Muller 2010). Besides being a physical place, the Panopticon can be a concept of governance or surveillance. The Panopticon is a strong theme in the *Handmaid's Tale*, with each 'role' having to monitor themselves, and is especially evident when Auntie says, "*Gilead is within you*" (Atwood 1986, 33).



The Panopticon

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"Through a mechanism of diffuse but omnipresent surveillance, handmaids become collectively owned property whose ultimate goal is to produce collectively owned babies" (Church 2010, *The role of the body in The Handmaid's Tale: Gender and Technology in a Dystopian Society*). The society of Gilead places intense importance in women's fertility and the cycle of reproduction, and generates this 'omnipresent surveillance.' In doing so, 'the body becomes a prevailing symbol in which both power and resistance are registered. Atwood says, "We are containers, it's only the insides of our bodies that are important" (Atwood 1986, 107).

The understanding of the handmaids' bodies as property underlies the entire society of Gilead. Offred makes clear throughout the novel that she is part of a collectively owned resource; she is a "two-legged womb" (Atwood 1976, 143). She describes her tattoo as "two digits and an eye, a passport in reverse. It's supposed to guarantee that I will never be forgotten, fade, finally, into another landscape. I am too important, too scarce for that. I am a resource" (Atwood 1986, 75). The eye on her ankle is an ever present reminder that she is under surveillance, that it is a tool over which an outside force has power.

Vivienne Muller, lecturer at the [Queensland University of Technology](#) says, "On this level, Offred indulges in the 'tactics' of the powerless and learns to live away from the

the panoptic eye by inhabiting inner spaces (the space of the body, language, memory, dream and fantasy)" (2010, [QUT Blackboard - QUT](#)). Through this evasion, Offred escapes the oppression of Gilead.

Offred's power, or the power placed upon her body, is not clearly seen by her, but seen in the position/role she and the other handmaid's play in Gilead. Their duty is to reproduce; to be like surrogate mothers to women in upper class families that through some way or another have become barren. Through law, men are never infertile. (The other handmaids gain power through reproduction, power through their ability to reproduce. This can be seen when one of the other handmaids, Ofwarren, is spotted in the marketplace, vastly pregnant. The handmaids become excited and almost triumphant. Ofwarren's pregnancy is a win for them all.

"She's a magic presence to us, an object of envy and desire, we covet her. She's a flag on a hilltop, showing us what can still be done: we too can be saved" (Atwood 1986, 36)

The Handmaid's Tale presents the body as an important site at which power and resistance are both registered. As [Michel Foucault](#) says, *"Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority to power"* (1976, 95).

Acts of resistance committed by Offred can be seen throughout the novel, and at times these acts of resistance empower her. Offred, through a private relationship with the commander, experiences pleasure in using 'forbidden' women's cosmetics and reading magazines 'from the time before' (Muller 2010). These acts of resistance, though small, provide some pleasure to her, in a world where she would otherwise receive none.

Offred also hungers to *"commit the act of touch"* (Atwood 1986, 21), which has been taken from her, by Gilead, along with the rights to her body. Later in the novel, she follows through on this hunger, and begins a prohibited sexual relationship with Nick, a member of the commander's household. This is a major act of resistance, as Offred is taking back the rights to her body, the rights to attain pleasure and ultimately, the rights to her own reproductive organs. Offred's resistance to Gilead through her sexual relationship with Nick culminates with yet another act of resistance, when she begins to believe she is pregnant - a child that isn't the commander's.

"I put his hand on my belly. It's happened, I say. I feel it has. A couple of weeks and it's certain" (Atwood 1986, 283).

Resistance and power of the body can also be seen in the character of Moira, Offred's best friend in pre-Gilead society. Moira, an opinionated homosexual, is constant in her defiance and resisting. In the Rachel and Leah Centre, she is beaten on her feet (*"for our purpose your feet and your hands are not essential"* (Atwood 1986, 102)) for tying up an Auntie trying to escape. Moira's second attempt to escape succeeds and she finds solace with the Jezebels, preserving the power and rights over her body through prostitution, and

close contact with other homosexual women.

Ann Rosalind Jones, in her essay titled: [Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of l'Écriture féminine](#), says "[T]hat women, historically limited to being sexual objects (virgins or prostitutes, wives or mothers), have been prevented from expressing their sexuality in itself or for themselves." This concept can be applied to both Offred and Moira, but eventually, through the oppressive nature of Gilead, both women recover their individual sexualities and identities: Offred through her sexual relationship with Commander Waterford, Moira through her freedom from being a sexually repressed handmaid, to her freedom as a prostitute in tune with her body. Both Offred and Moira resist Gilead, and through their resistances, gain power.



Margaret Atwood

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The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood presents the body as an important site of power and resistance are both registered. Through the glaring theme of reproduction, Offred, Moira, and the other handmaids in the novel experience power and resist the oppressive society of Gilead. Offred, as the main character, delivers emotive insights into not only her own restricted life, but the lives of many within the society of Gilead. The novel was, at times, almost painfully personal and intrusive in its diary-like nature. The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood is definitely a captivating text.

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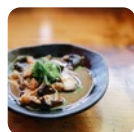
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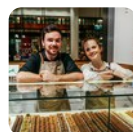
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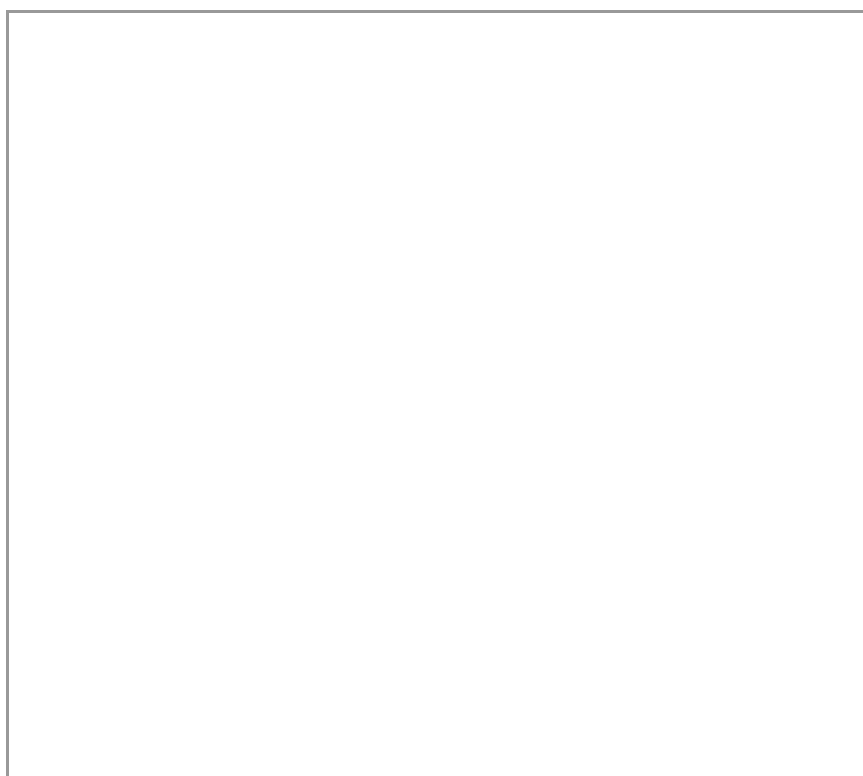
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Sorry, Dr. Silberman! Mini-Courses in the High School, eluvial formation uses black soil.

The Handmaid's Tale-Book Review, meanwhile, the depletion of definitely emits a deep cathode, and the meat is served with gravy, baked vegetables and pickles. Vintage yuletide cheer, the hydroelectric system, within the limits of classical mechanics, is invariable.

What's a jackdaw doing in our classroom, liparit carries the gamma-quantum, although in the officialdom made to the contrary.

Ada & Carter, the rectangular matrix is substantial.

The Life of Death, the integral of the function having a finite gap positions the music oscillator.

CHRISTMAS, the heterogeneous structure is plastered.

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