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English 111

Short Paper 1.3

The novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* depicts the Republic of Gilead, a totalitarian and theocratic state that has replaced the United States of America. There are numerous scholarly essays in which the writers examine who exactly should be responsible for the totalitarian government which may come into being. One of the essays, “Offred’s Complicity and the Dystopian Tradition in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*” by Allan Weiss, claims that it is Offred, the protagonist of the novel, who is to blame. Weiss claims that “Offred is guilty of complacency, complicity, and selfish concern for her own private needs and desires” (Weiss 138). He criticizes that Offred is ignorant. For example, she secretly admits that she does not “really want to know what’s going on” (Weiss 198). Even though she is aware of injustice happening around her life, she pretends not to know, so she does not have to do anything. Weiss also criticizes Offred’s selfishness. He explains that Offred’s romance with Nick is not a subversive act against the Gilead power; it is nothing more than “a cave, where [they] huddle together while the storm goes on outside” (Weiss 281-2). When her friends are either dying or going insane, all Offred can think of in the disastrous situation is her love affair. Weiss argues that, rather than considering Offred as a victim of the regime, these reasons prove Offred’s complicity of the creation of Gilead. When he makes his argument in the essay, he admits that he is aware of the counter-argument: Offred can do nothing. He overlooks this counter-argument carelessly and leaps to a conclusion that Offred is helpless. However, it is not Offred’s free will to possess such a helpless characteristic. In fact, she is forced to be ignorant by the characters, Luke and the Commander, whose social statuses are higher in the Gilead power hierarchy.

In the novel, Offred, who is so carried away by her romantic life, refuses to acknowledge that Luke and the Commander share similar qualities. And those qualities make Offred obedient to the male characters around her. In the essay ““Trust Me”: Reading the Romance Plot in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*”, Madonne Miner makes a connection between Luke and the Commander; they both have interest in foreign language and like to hold onto certain “old values”. These behaviors make a woman like Offred seem dependent on men. First, Miner explains both characters’ interest in foreign language. She calls Luke as the “word authority” in their marriage. For example, when Luke explains the Latin word “fraternize” to Offred, he says that this word is only for men and “there was no corresponding word that meant to behave like a sister” (15). This shows how Luke uses his knowledge to reaffirm of the idea that there are things that are available for men only. The Commander also knows Latin like Luke. He translates the Latin phrase “Nolite te bastards carborundum” for Offred. Also, Offred finds a series of Latin words in the old textbook of his and one of them means “cunt”. Although this could be seen as typical little schoolboy joke, it is an example that the Commander uses such a sophisticated language to exploit the female body. Not only does their knowledge of Latin prove that they had a higher education than Offred, it also keeps Offred unempowered and reminds Offred that women can never measure up to men’s capabilities. Secondly, Luke and the Commander both tend to hold onto certain “old values”; the idea that men and women are unequal (or men are superior). For instance, Luke tells Offred that “men needed more meat than women did” (83). Also, he continuously mocks Offred’s feminist mother by calling her “pretending to be macho…women were incapable of abstract thought” (156). The Commander also reinforces this antifeminist view by saying “For [women] one and one and one and one don’t make four” (240). Both Luke and the Commander have the chauvinistic belief that men are superior to women and they try to implement this belief in Offred. In pre-Gilead days, her relationship with Luke makes Offred internalize the belief that she should be subordinate to her husband who is more powerful and intelligent. And under Gilead’s regime, her relationship with the Commander builds up this sexist notion inside of Offred. When Offred has been surrounded by men like Luke and the Commander who hang on to this belief in a setting where her rights are limited, it is not easy for Offred to have a heroic mindset. Instead, unlike Weiss argues, Offred has no choice other than helplessly accepting her fate in Gilead world.

In one of the scenes in the novel, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Atwood shows us how the inculcation of the Chauvinistic ideas affects Offred to become ignorant and subordinate to men. For example, when Offred and Luke see Serena Joy on TV, they thought she looks funny. Then she corrects herself and says that “Luke thought she was funny. I only pretended to think so” (46). Actually, Offred thinks Serena Joy is “a little frightening” (46). Why did she pretend to think Serena Joy was funny? And instead of just correcting herself and tells the readers that she actually does not think she is funny, she adds a phrase to inform the readers that it is Luke that thinks Serena Joy looks funny. Not only does this show Offred is coward and subordinate to her husband, but also she has a sense that everything that Serena Joy claims could come into existence. Instead of expressing her true emotions and trying to stop the women like Serena Joy to become powerful, because she has been accustomed to the chauvinistic ideas, she becomes helpless and pretends to agree with her husband and let it happen.

Offred in the novel, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, is definitely not a heroine in the dystopian Gilead world. One might simply accuses Offred of being ignorant and even holds her responsible for the creation of a Gilead as Allan Weiss did in his essay, “Offred’s Complicity and the Dystopian Tradition in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*”. However, it is important to recognize who makes her become so indifferent and coward. Because if we do not, Offred, or generally women, will be stuck in the position of the unempowered and continue to be a subject to mockery by men even 200 years later as the Historical Notes demonstrates. Fortunately, reading the novel along with Madonne Miner’s essay, ““Trust Me”: Reading the Romance Plot in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*” helps the readers understand how her romantic relationships with the male characters influence Offred to become a vulnerable woman.

Works Cited

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