Joonkyung Lee (Lena)

Short Paper 1.1: Close Reading

*The Handmaid’s Tale* by Margaret Atwood illustrates the life of a Handmaid named Offred, or ‘Of-Fred’, in the near-future fundamentalist republic of Gilead. In this world, the Old Testament is used to justify the oppression of women. Offred’s job as a Handmaid is to bear children for state officials whose wives are barren. She is a substitute for the Commander’s wife, Serena Joy. Offred has a memory of Serena Joy in the pre-Gilead world because Serena Joy used to be a gospel singer on TV and famous for her anti-feminist speeches. The complicated relationship brings an ongoing tension between Offred and Serena Joy.

Atwood depicts numerous relationships among women in this anti-feminist world to talk about various aspects of feminism. Particularly, in the scene where Offred describes a flashback of Serena Joy in the pre-Gilead world and her reaction to it, Atwood demonstrates how women can be their own oppressors. In this particular passage, Atwood explains the two types of female oppressors: women who actively vocalize their anti-feministic views and women who are indifferent towards feminism. Atwood shows the hypocrisy of active anti-feminists through the choice of words that Offed uses to describe Serena Joy. She also depicts how indifferent a woman could be in the world of feminism by playing with the narrator’s sentence structure.

Be examining the words Offred chooses to use to describe Serena Joy and her life before, Atwood shows that the women who are proactive about delivering anti-feminist messages are hypocrites. Offred tells straight up front that she thinks the name Serena Joy is stupid. She even thinks the name is so foolishly showy, it would be found “on the bottle, with a woman’s head in cup-paper silhouette on a pink oval background with scalloped gold edges” (45). As her name suggests, Serena Joy focuses heavily on her physical appearance so when she cries while giving a speech “the mascara [was] blackening her cheeks” (46) and she would put more make up on to cover them. It is hypocritical that Serena Joy, a gospel singer who preaches about her anti-feminist views, focuses so much on her physical appearnce. If she was to stay home and just did house chores –what she claims all women should do-she would not need to over-decorate her body with all her beauty products. Her contradicting physical appearnce takes away her credibility as an anti-feminist speaker and makes people wonder if she truly believes about what she says in her speech.

In this passage, the word speech appears frequently. Offred keeps reminding the readers that Serena Joy used to give speech about “the sanctity of the home, about how women should stay home” (45). Speech is an act of speaking. This act of raising its own voice is total opposite of the behavior that Serena Joy claims every woman should have. When she tells other women to stay home, she is out in public actively raising her voice to express her ideology of womanhood. Furthermore, now that she actually has to stay home in the Gilead’s world, Serena Joy has “becomes speechless” (46). Why does she become speechless instead of going around celebrating that her dream world has come true? Maybe she becomes speechless literally because she no longer has anything to say. Now all women stay home and are completely subordinate to men just as she used to preach in her speeches. Or, she did not expect that the anti-feminist world could actually come into existence and she is too shocked that now she has to live in that world. If the latter is the case, then it is evident that she does not want this to happen to herself. She does not want to stay home and only be a housewife even though she tells other women to do so. Again we see a contradiction in Serena Joy’s character.

Offred criticizes Serena Joy of her hypocrisy, but she is also to be blamed for this disastrous world to come into being. Analyzing the sentence structure in the passage helps the readers understand what Atwood is trying to say, through Offred, about women who are indiffernt towards feminism. Back then when Offred and Luke, her husband, saw Serena Joy on TV, they though she looked funny. Then she corrects herself and says that “Luke thought she was funny. I only pretended to think so” (46). Actually, Offred thought Serena Joy was “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 did not think she was funny, she adds a phrase to inform the readers that it was her husband, Luke, that thought Serena Joy was funny. Not only does this show Offred is coward and subordinate to her husband, she had 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, she pretended to agree with her husband and let it happen. And ironically, this is the quality of a woman that Serena Joy persuaded all women to have. The women like Offred who are indifferent bystanders are partly to be blamed for because they allow the hypocritical anti-feminists’ voices to be heard and let them penetrate into women’s lives.

In this passage, Atwood tried to show the readers how women can be their own oppressor. Her specific word choice to describe Serena Joy to explain how hypocritical it is for women to actively advoate anti-feminist ideas. Also, Atwood suggests that women who display apathetic attitude towards the backlash against feminism are also to be blamed for. The criticims of these women might seem subtle, but they are almost equally responsible for women’s inequality in this world. And their existence could possibly be more dangerous because it is harder to identify them as women’s opponents and they think of themselves as innocent since they remain spectators in the situation.

Lena - This is a strong first paper! You have a very strong claim that you support with insightful analysis and close reading; some thoughtful revision here could make this an excellent paper. Great work!

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| Claim | 4 |
| Close Reading/Analysis | 3 |
| Organization | 3 |
| Mechanics | 2 |

MLA Works Cited

Atwood, Margaret. The Handmaid’s Tale. New York: Houghton Miffliln, 1986. First Anchor Books Ed., 1998. Print.