Lena Lee

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” (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” (281-2). When her friends are either dying or going insane, all Offred can think of in the disastrous situation is her love affair. Because of these reasons, Weiss argues that Offred should be blamed for the creation of a Gilead rather than being seen as a victim of the regime. When he makes his argument in the essay, he admits that he is aware of the counter-argument: Offred can do nothing. However, he overlooks this counter-argument carelessly and leaps to a conclusion that Offred is not “helpless as [she] like[s] to believe” (Weiss 137). The essay ““Trust Me”: Reading the Romance Plot in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*” by Madonne Miner argues that 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.

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, but also they use it to keep Offred “in the position of the unempowered” (Miner 155). 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 hang on to their belief that men are superior to women.

Because Offred is profoundly involved with each man in a relationship, both men inculcate their chauvinistic belief in her mind. And we see how this 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, she pretends to agree with her husband and let it happen. She becomes helpless as Weiss criticizes.

Offred 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. 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.

Lena - You have some good ideas here and the quality of your writing is strong; however, this paper isn’t as successful as it could be because it is a summary of the articles rather than an argument in which you engage with their ideas and build upon them with your own analysis of the novel. See my comments above for suggestions in revising in your claim. With some thoughtful revisions, this will be an excellent paper!