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Major Paper 1

*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. Offred’s job as a Handmaid is to bear children for a state official, the Commander, and his wife, Serena Joy. As Offred struggles to conceive, Serena Joy suggests to Offred that the Commander may be sterile and she should try another man. Serena Joy then suggests that Nick would be the safest possibility. Offred takes her advice and decides to sleep with Nick. In Offred’s first account of her visit to Nick’s room, she relies heavily on the language of fairy tale romances. For example, she describes Nick as “a man made of darkness” (Atwood, 261), and when they are making love, she hears water falling softly everywhere. As if aware of the silliness, Offred admits that it actually did not happen that way and gives us another version. In the second version, Offred and Nick have trouble talking to one another, until they quote old movies from pre-Gilead days. Even though Offred has been kept away from media for a long time, we see that Offred still follows what she learns from the books and movies and limits herself and Nick to typical male and female characters portrayed in media. Because media has such an enormous power to influence people as shown in the example above, people who are at the top of a social hierarchy manipulate media to promote their ideas in order to maintain their power through oppression. Through the book *The Handmaid’s Tale* Atwood provides a number of examples that show how people with power can use media as a tool to oppress women. The men in the book as expected in such a patriarchal system use media to manipulate women. However, Atwood furthers this notion by demonstrating how powerful women at the behest of men can also use media to spread and instill anti-feminist ideas in other women.

Serena Joy is one of the female characters in the novel that uses media to promote her anti-feminist ideas. Serena Joy used to a famous gospel singer in pre-Gilead days, then as an anti-feminist activist and crusader for “traditional values.” Offred remembers seeing her previous name, Pam, in a news magazine and watching her singing on TV on Sunday morning. She eventually became famous enough to appear on *Times* or *Newsweek* to make speeches about the “sanctity of the home, about how women should stay home” (Atwood, 45). TV or magazine is the most efficient way for anti-feminists, such as Serena Joy, to advertise their ideas. Instead of going door to door to tell each woman to keep “traditional values” and stay home, by using the media the anti-feminists can easily approach thousands of women and deliver the message at once. Also, the fact that they appear in the well acclaimed media gives the anti-feminists the credit and gives the viewers an impression that their ideas are worthy of notice. Most women might not buy what these anti-feminists claim at first. However, as they get more exposure to the anti-feminist ideas regularly through the media, there is a high chance of them giving their ears to the ideas and eventually internalizing these messages without realizing it.

The irony here is that it is not the anti-feminists benefiting from appearing in the media to get their voices to be heard. For example, Serena Joy who used to be an advocate for traditional values and the establishment of the Gilead state in which women are confined to the home becomes desperately unhappy. Her transformation from pre-Gilead to post-Gilead shows that spokeswomen that actively spread anti-feminist causes in the media might not enjoy getting their way as much as they believe they would. So, who is profiting from this? It has been suggested by many scholars that it is the men who put the anti-feminist spokeswomen on the media frontier and leads women to fight against women.

One of the scholars who argues that men are the true enemy of feminism is Susan Faludi. In her book *Backlash*, Faludi explains how men purposely support active anti-feminist spokeswomen/female politicians (e.g. Serena Joy) in order “to rein in women’s political advances” (Faludi, xiii). These women supported by the male power can show up in the *Times* or CNN news with their perfectly sprayed hair and pearl necklaces around their necks and talk about anti-feminist ideas such as opposing abortion rights, women staying home protected by their men, etc. While these women are actively spreading the words of antifeminism through the media, the men who use these women as their shields are hidden behind, so they can kill two birds with one stone; they can promote the antifeminism ideas and, at the same time, avoid criticism raised by feminists. Therefore, feminists would end up fighting against anti-feminist women who are not the true core enemy. Faludi provides another example that shows how men, who own most of the media industry, use media to lead women to fight against women. The powerful males in the industry purposely deliver wrong information about today’s feminism in the media; they keep telling us that the women’s movement is women’s own worst enemy. For example, Faludi explains how the single/unwed women in Hollywood films are usually portrayed as desperate, humiliated and remorseful. These false images of the single women implant negative notion of feminism in women’s minds. Because the majority of Hollywood has been controlled by men, it shows how men can also manipulate the film industry to spread antifeminist ideas.

Serena Joy is not the only female character with power in the novel that uses media to advocate antifeminism ideas. Aunt Lydia who is assigned to indoctrinate the Handmaids with the anti-feminist ideology uses movie clips from pre-Gilead days to teach the ideology of the new society. And her media usage proves that the true power of media does not come from its content but, in fact, heavily relies on how it is used in a context. For instance, Aunt Lydia let the Handmaids watch a movie that shows a feminist rally from the days before Gilead. Outside of Gilead’s world, these movies are used to show a feminist movement and how women are fighting for women’s rights. However, in Gilead’s world, the same movie is used by Aunt Lydia to teach the Handmaids the opposite lesson. The women in the movie fighting for women’s right, acclaimed feminists, are now called the “Unwomen” and Aunt Lydia uses them to tell the women of their terrible plight in the old world and make them appreciate the ideology of Gilead society; now that women are protected by men, they do not have to fight for their rights anymore. This example illustrates that effects media brings to people are not defined by its contents. We must look at the context of its presentation- who presents it, and how, why, when and where it is presented-to successfully examine the effects of the media. The content could be manipulated and its purpose can be altered by people in power, so they can maintain their power by delivering the messages that will oppress others.

In order to use the strong power of the media, one should have access to media to begin with. In Gilead society in which there is an unequal distribution of media access, the people with power can use such power to get what they want from the low class people. For example, the Commander uses his power of media access as a dangling carrot in order to parade his power to impress Offred, make her not to reject him and fulfill his sexual desire. During one of their secret meetings, the Commander dangled an old copy of a women’s magazine, Vogue, before Offred “like fish bait” (156). In pre-Gilead days, she would not take magazines highly because she can get them whenever she wants. But, now that her access to media is extremely limited, she wants it so bad, it makes “the end of [her] fingers ache” (156). Also, in Gilead’s world, even a magazine can play a big role in her currently confined life because it functions as a bridge between Offred and her old life. Because the Commander is providing Offred with something that she deeply craves, she feels like she owes him and is forced to offer him what he wants in return; he wants a romantic and passionate sex. Although it was not her will to have a sexual encounter with him, Offred orders herself to fake it to satisfy his desire. This example shows how it is so simple for men to use media as a tool to oppress women. The Commander does not even have to come up with a strategy to manipulate the media’s content or the context of its presentation. By simply giving Offred some magazines that she has no access to, he is able to gain control over her sexuality. Furthermore, Offred does not blame the Commander because he does not directly force her to have sex with him. Even though it is hard to call their sexual encounter a rape because she chooses to do it, it is impossible for Offred to say no to the Commander because of his power over her and manipulation of her using the media.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood illustrates the three possible ways that people with power can use media as a tool to oppress women. The fact that media can be broadly accessible gives it an ability to promote an idea to its viewers. In the novel, a proactive anti-feminist, Serena Joy, appears in famous magazines and TV to advertise the traditional values of women. Her appearance in the media was so impactful, whether she agrees or not, Offred is unable to forget Serena Joy's anti-feminist speeches from pre-Gilead days. Also, the power of media greatly depends on the context of the presentation. An example given in the novel is when Aunt Lydia uses a movie clip of a feminist movement from pre-Gilead days to teach the Handmaids to be grateful for the oppressive Gilead regime. In a society such as Gilead's in which not everyone can equally access to media, having an ability to access to media can be a power itself. A powerful man like the Commander can gain control over a woman like Offred so easily by just providing her a magazine. Nowadays, there is more variety of types of media available than there were in 1980s when the novel was written. This means that people with power have more possible ways to play with media to watch and control women. Therefore, it is crucial for women to be aware of their tactics, so we can continue to pave our way for a society where women can freely define who they are.

Works Cited

Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986. Print.

Faludi, Susan. *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women*. New York: Crown, 1991. Print.