**Biblical Narratives in *The Handmaid's Tal*e**

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Abstract

This article will examine the biblical narratives in the Canadian author, Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* published in 1985. This novel became a symbol for the women’s rights movement and it addresses a slew of questions central to Feminism. Through her novel, Atwood successfully raised international awareness and fueled the debate surrounding the global plight of women. Belles-lettres has the ability to rally the masses and infuse them with values. The novel deals with the unconscious experience of politics as a human and moral phenomenon. The novel’s allusions to biblical stories is not only blatant but even extreme. Atwood weaves many biblical concepts, names, and motifs relating to the status of women into the novel, with a particular focus on the concept of the handmaid whose sole function is child-bearing. However, when we discuss the status of women in the Bible we need to be careful not to generalize because the biblical narrative contains a panoply of diverse voices on this matter. In this article, I will take an in-depth look at the name *Gilead*’s biblical source for Atwood chose to set her tale in the Republic of Gilead. Furthermore, since the novel presents a radical, social hierarchy among women based on their child-bearing duties, I will also examine the biblical narratives foundational to such a hierarchy. In this terrifying novel, the transformation of women into child-bearing handmaids is based both on the biblical story of the handmaids and on the proprietary relationship of mastery that men have over women in the Bible. When a story is based on our cultural past as it relates to the patriarchal treatment of women, even if the depiction is taken to the extreme, its aim is to bring about a different future. This critical approach’s main goal is deconstructing the unspoken assumptions of a particular way of life.

Keywords

Handmaidens, women, Atwood, Bible, Gilead, social hierarchy

**Introduction**

As I write these lines, women wearing red cloaks and white wimples that hide their faces have taken to the streets of the State of Israel to protest the impending judicial reform which they believe will worsen the state of women. Their choice of dress alludes to the Canadian author Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* published in 1985. In this novel, Atwood paints a radical picture of the future by employing many elements from our cultural past and present.

In this article, we need to first ask ourselves whether it is reasonable to conduct an educated discussion about the status of women in the twenty-first century using a fictional work as a springboard for discussion. Usually such political questions are debated in forums dedicated to political or social thought and are not the province of scholars of belles-lettres.[[1]](#footnote-1) According to Keren, belles-lettres should be seen as a stage in the development and distillation of political ideas that succeeds in rallying the masses or, at least, infusing them with a sense of values.[[2]](#footnote-2) As such, this literature deepens our engagement with contemporary issues even if it contradicts reality. Keren maintains that we must facilitate a productive dialogue between abstract theory and belles-lettres.[[3]](#footnote-3) Paul Dolan claims that it is not enough for politics to be understood through the eyes of political scientists, historians, and even philosophers. In his estimation, the novel provides us with its own special kind of knowledge—“the unconscious experience of politics as a human, moral, psychological, and aesthetic phenomenon.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

Atwoood’s dystopian novel, by taking matters to the extreme becomes a moral, cautionary tale, necessary because of humanity’s great propensity for acclimation: “Truly amazing what people can get used to, as long as there are a few compensations.”[[5]](#footnote-5) The story takes place in the not-too-distant future, in which the radical, Christian Protestants foment a revolution and establish the Republic of Gilead, a theocratic, military dictatorship located on the edge of what was once the United States of America. “That's how they were able to do it, in the way they did, all at once, without anyone knowing beforehand … That was when they suspended the Constitution. They said it would be temporary. There wasn't even any rioting in the streets… The thing to do, they said, was to continue as usual.”[[6]](#footnote-6) In this society, people are separated based on status and gender, and they are required to dress in clothing signaling their function in society. During the chaos that had been created by the second American civil war, the revolutionaries took power and instituted a new world order based on the Old Testament and ultra-Conservative values. The women were returned to the ‘normal’ status that had been theirs since the dawn of time, as handmaids dedicated to child-bearing–“The Commander said… all we've done is return things to Nature's norm.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

The story is told from the point of view of an educated woman named Offred, who finds herself wearing a wimple and occupying the new status of a handmaid, a woman who is a concubine, used for reproductive purposes by the men of the ruling class: “This way they're protected, they can fulfill their biological destinies in peace.”[[8]](#footnote-8) In her epilogue, the author explains why it is necessary to learn about women’s status from literary works and not just academic scholarship. She describes an academic symposium that took place after the fall of the Gileadite regime, in which Professor Pieixoto—who along with his colleague Professor Knotly Wade, discovered Offred’s tapes in a sealed iron chest and transcribed them—speaks. The topic of the symposium was “Problems of Authentication in Reference to the Handmaid’s Tale.”[[9]](#footnote-9) The fact that Atwood chose to conclude the book with this academic symposium attests to her criticism of the academic world’s attitude to this subject.

In his lecture, Professor Pieixoto tells the story in a manner entirely devoid of empathy, as he objectively—as it were—analyses the Gileadite Period. “In my opinion we must be cautious about passing moral judgement upon the Gileadeans. Surely, we have learned by now that such judgments are of necessity culture-specific. Also, Gileadean society was under a good deal of pressure, demographic and otherwise, and was subject to factors from which we ourselves are happily more free. Our job is not to censure but to understand. (Applause).”[[10]](#footnote-10) In her critique of the academic world Atwood describes the detachment, the remoteness, and even the hypocrisy, which, as Keren notes, characterizes those who deal with the problems of others and are certain that they will never find themselves in such a circumstance.[[11]](#footnote-11)

The book addresses a slew of questions fundamental to Feminism: the relationships present between women, the reproductive role and the ability to procreate, sexuality, subjugation, violence against women and opposition to it, and a series of forewarnings that we must heed.[[12]](#footnote-12) Atwood calls upon all of us not to ignore the harsh decrees, the violence and the discrimination against women: “We lived, as usual, by ignoring… Nothing changes instantaneously: in a gradually heating bathtub you'd be boiled to death before you knew it. There were stories in the newspapers of course … but they were about other women, and the men who did such things were other men. None of them were the men we knew… We were the people who were not in the papers. We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of print.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

The connection to the biblical narratives in this work is neither concealed nor hidden. Throughout the novel, Atwood weaves many biblical concepts, names, and motifs relating to the status of women into the novel, with a particular focus on the concept of the handmaid whose sole function is child-bearing. The author returns from the fictional future to the biblical past from which, among other components, Western culture developed and reminds us that this past has not vanished entirely. It remains present in the deep structure of the culture.[[14]](#footnote-14) In this article, I will take a deep dive into the biblical past that functions as the background to this story, always keeping in mind the critical understanding that arises from the interweaving of these motifs.

When we discuss the status of women in the Bible we do need to be careful not to generalize because the biblical narrative contains a panoply of diverse voices on the subject. When we read the Bible we discover two parallel tracks, one, patriarchal social structures in the children of Israel’s families, and two a group of female leaders and leading women in ancient Israelite society. In general, we find a small number but a diverse group of women in biblical literature: seductresses (Eve), handmaids (Hagar, Bilhah, Zilpah), betrayers (Delilah), the homicidal Jezebel, and alongside them prophetesses (Miriam, Huldah) and women who filled significant societal and public roles and served as symbols of might, wisdom, and courage (Shifrah and Pu’ah, Deborah and Yael, Ruth and Naomi, and more).[[15]](#footnote-15)

Even after they have been secularized and are no longer connected to the religious world they came from, deep structures remain in a culture. When certain concepts appear frequently in canonical literature, such as the Bible, and last for a longtime, they attest to psychological, societal, and cultural structures through which individuals and groups of individuals filter their behavior.[[16]](#footnote-16) Atwood calls upon us to return to the biblical roots of our Western culture in order to examine the very bedrock out of which this culture grew. Engaging in such contemplation, will enable us to take a fresh look at our ideological positions and take responsibility for them.[[17]](#footnote-17) As Jung has argued, when a weltanschauung is deeply rooted in religious experience, it has an innate ability to maintain itself within the secular experience. [[18]](#footnote-18)

1. Keren 1999, 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Keren, 2015, 7–16. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Dolan 1976, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Atwood 1985, 273. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., 172. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., 222. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., 221. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., 302. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid, 303. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Keren 1999, 90–91. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Williamson 2017, 261. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Atwood 1985, 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Filipczak 1993, 171 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Shinhar 2008, 11–13 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Nir, 2016, 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Foucault 1977, 152. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Jung, 1987. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)