

The Handmaid's Tale – The Power Of Language and The Language Of Power

Kristina Murkett asks questions about linguistic relativism, the unreliability of Offred's narration, and how language offers scope for subversion and a route out of passive acceptance in Atwood's narrative.

In the dystopian world of Gilead, language is a tool used to manipulate, control and oppress. Language is no longer a simple means of communication, but a political weapon, designed to impose ideology; designate roles and entrench hierarchies; provoke mass hysteria; limit communication and freedom of expression, and maintain patriarchal authority.

There are three main language structures present in *The Handmaid's Tale*. There is the Gilead system, where Biblical references infiltrate every level of discourse, such as Aunt Lydia's slogan 'Gilead is within you', a parody of Christ's message that 'the Kingdom of God is within you.' There is Offred's narration, with all of its layers of unreliability: it is a retrospective, non-linear story distorted by memory and self-conscious reconstructions. Then there is the academic rhetoric of the novel's closing 'Historical Notes', which provide answers about the demise of Gilead but also raise questions about history, misogyny, and Offred's own fate.

All three of these structures use language as a means of exercising control – for Gilead, over its citizens; for Offred, over her readers; and for Pieixoto, over his audience. As Angela Michelle Gulick (1) argues, language is a vital prerequisite for the achievement of power, both public and private, in the novel. Once achieved, virtually every important characteristic of the human condition – memory, self-expression, self-identity, community, and freedom – faces the possibility of irreparable damage.

Language as a Political Tool

Language in Gilead is paradoxical; vocabulary is both expanded and restricted. On the one hand, new language is invented to describe religious concepts: portmanteau words such as 'prayvganzas' (a blend of 'pray' and 'extravaganza') and 'particicutions' (a mix of 'participate' and 'executions') help to capture the frenzy and hysteria of this theocracy. Titles such as Marthas, Wives, Guardians, Angels and Eyes are introduced to reinforce societal roles, whilst new names are created (Offred, Ofwarren etc) to label Handmaids as possessions of their Commanders.

The problem for Gilead is that language is fundamentally ambiguous and open to interpretation; it therefore cannot be trusted. Gilead restricts its citizens' access to language by eliminating reading and writing; all books, newspapers and films have been destroyed, and even the Bible is only distributed orally. Even the most innocuous uses of language have been removed, as shapes and images are deemed to be 'safer' than words. Public signs and billboards have been replaced by icons – a red hexagon means 'stop', whilst shop signs found above the Milk and Honey or Loaves and Fishes stores are pictures rather than words.

Colour is also used in Gilead as a way of visually communicating, a kind of language in itself. The Handmaids wear red, a symbol of blood and fertility, with white bonnets, to connote their purity and innocence. It also makes them incredibly visible, and so less able to escape. Wives wear blue, which is associated with the Virgin Mary, and so reinforces their roles as mothers, whilst the Eyes wear black uniforms, reminiscent of SS officers in Nazi Germany. Visual warnings are everywhere, from the hangings outside what used to be Harvard University to the electric cattle prongs around the Aunts' belts: all symbols of Gilead's omnipotence.

Language is so restricted in Gilead that even a simple game of Scrabble is an act of 'voluptuous', thrilling rebellion. Playing with the Commander may be breaking the rules, but it gives Offred a degree of autonomy and power, and allows her to express herself. The words she plays are telling: 'larynx' may refer to her need to keep silent, 'valance' to her need to keep hidden, and 'zygote' to her need to procreate. This subtle commentary on her life reflects many things about Offred – her astute awareness of the injustices around her, her secret subversive streak – but, most importantly, her desire for communication.

Language as a Psychological Tool

The most terrifying aspect of language in the novel is how it not only reflects the reality of Gilead, but reinforces it constantly. For example, communication between the Handmaids is heavily restricted, which shows their isolation but also exacerbates it. They greet each other with the Biblical phrase 'blessed be the fruit' and answer with 'may the Lord open', and these gestures may be automatic, but they are not mindless. The Handmaids repeat them in order to stay safe, but in doing so they are being socially conditioned and restricted from forming any type of friendship. As Linda Thomas says in *Language, Society and Power*,

language can be said to provide a framework for our thoughts, and it becomes very difficult to think outside of that framework.

One of the most disturbing examples of this indoctrination comes when Janine confesses that she was gang-raped. The Aunts ask the group whose fault it was, and the handmaids chant in unison,

her fault, her fault, her fault

and when Aunt Helena asks who led them on, they reply,

she did, she did, she did.

When Janine cries, Offred goes on to say that

she looked disgusting... even though we knew what was being done to her, we despised her... We meant it, which was the bad part.

This is a classic example of linguistic relativism: the idea that language can influence our thoughts and behaviour. Similar to the Two Minutes Hate in Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four, this ritual humiliation is not just about mechanically repeating words and phrases, but absorbing their meaning and internalising their doctrine until they 'meant it'. As Aunt Lydia ominously says in Chapter 6,

this may not seem ordinary to you now, but after a time it will. It will become ordinary.'

Language as a Private Tool

As Offred becomes more aware of the power of spoken language, she also realises the power of private, unspoken thought. She preserves her identity and resists authority through small acts of expression; for example, she

repeats [her] former name' to 'remind [herself] of what [she] once could do, how others saw [her].

By refusing to remain completely silent, she can hold onto some semblance of control, or, as she puts it, give herself

the power of a dog bone: passive, but still there.

By using language to hold onto her past, Offred lives in a kind of double consciousness, continually slipping back into memory. For example, she describes how she retraces the old city map in her head:

I'm remembering my feet on these sidewalks, in the time before, and what I used to wear on them.

In the opening chapter she also describes how the gymnasium is like a 'palimpsest of unheard sound,' an eerie mixture of the past (the 'army issue blankets' that 'still said U.S.') and the present ('a chain link fence topped with barbed wire.')

This metaphor of the 'palimpsest' is particularly important because it draws attention to how the new reality of Gilead has been superimposed but the past is still tangible, because it exists outside of language. The abundance of sensory imagery, from the 'sweet taint of chewing gum and perfume' to the touch of 'lifting flesh', proves that memory can be non-verbal, and therefore can be protected. Names can be replaced and forgotten, but memories can live on, and such private experiences are all the more precious because they cannot ever be fully written over.

Offred uses language to recapture her past, but also to distract herself from the present. There are many moments in the novel when Atwood scrutinises words and plays with their many meanings; for example, during the Ceremony, Offred thinks

Household. That is what we are. The Commander is the head of the household. The house is what he holds. To have and to hold, till death do us part. The hold of a ship. Hollow.

This train of thought is partly a defence mechanism, a way of detaching and disassociating from the situation at hand; it is also a comment on the loaded social and cultural context of language, and the multiplicity of meanings within a single word. By drawing our attention to the mutability of language on both a micro and macro level, Atwood can reinforce how it is so easily manipulated and weaponised.

Language as a Literary Tool

Finally, Atwood also explores the power of language through Offred's narration; she says,

I have to believe this is a story I'm telling... if it's a story I'm telling, then I have control over the ending.

If Gilead reduces Offred to an object, then telling her story can restore her to a subject: someone who has control over her reality. The problem is that she is all too aware of her subjectivity and continually draws attention to her own unreliability; she says 'all of it is a reconstruction', and that

it's impossible to say a thing exactly the way it was.

This self-conscious narration is typical of post-modern literature, and raises questions about how far we can trust Offred's testimony. When she is telling us about her first sexual encounter with Nick in Chapter 40, she teases us by giving several versions before confessing

it didn't happen that way either. I'm not sure how it happened, not exactly.

Perhaps Offred genuinely cannot remember, or perhaps she is deliberately withholding information, exerting power over the reader by creating ambiguity and secrecy. She has so little power in all other aspects of her life, that perhaps she enjoys having this momentary control, this temporary freedom of speech.

For Offred, the act of telling her story, just like the game of Scrabble, is part of her personal and political revolution, and it gives her hope for the future:

there will be an ending to the story, and real life will come after it.

By protecting her inner life – her memories and private experiences – Offred can stop herself from being totally overwhelmed by this totalitarian system, and hold onto some semblance of freedom. For freedom of expression is exactly that: freedom.

References

1. <https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1063&context=rtd>

Article Written By: Kristina Murkett is a freelance writer, English teacher and private tutor.

This article was first published in emagazine 92, April 2021.

Print

© 2021 | English & Media Centre. All rights reserved. Website by **Studio 24**