

# Fragmenting the whole - the narrative inventiveness of *The Handmaid's Tale*

A Level student Katy Murr argues that in *The Handmaid's Tale*, fragmentation and the focus on playing with and laying claim to language, is closely connected to Atwood's feminist slant on dystopia.

Throughout *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred's voice appears deliberately fragmented. As Offred says, it is 'limping and mutilated.' We can see Atwood clearly breaking down the narrative by means of religious epigraphs, a multitude of staccato chapters, and huge time jumps. This sense of fragmentation, then, leads to a tone of fear, an effect of the dystopian world of Gilead.

## Claiming a voice

Crucially, *The Handmaid's Tale* sets itself apart from predecessors of the dystopian genre, offering an intimate, female, first-person narrative; Atwood steps away from narratives such as Huxley's *Brave New World* or Orwell's *1984*, choosing a voice which acknowledges major women writers, such as Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir. Despite the unsettled, fragmentary feeling of Offred's voice, it is also through this fragmentation that Atwood allows Offred to claim power. As early as chapter two, we see Offred reeling against indoctrination from the totalitarian state of Gilead:

*Waste not want not. I am not being wasted.*

Such manipulation of the Gileadian state's slogans epitomises Offred's power - a linguistically wielded awareness, an active observance which keeps her living. Although the state may warn the handmaids not to think, Offred recognises the pertinence of independent thought. Through her narrative, she claims a voice and a place for her thoughts.

*Thinking can hurt your chances, and I intend to last.  
I am alive, I live, I breathe.*

In any usual context, this last statement might be taken for granted. Here, however, Atwood shows how Offred uses the active verbs to reinforce her sense of identity, when it is being violently challenged by the state of Gilead. The 'I' which is usually morphed into a blanket term for the handmaids, as the state doubles them and reduces their individuality, labelling them 'two by two', is pushed away. Crucially, Offred begins to recognise the individual nature of herself, as the 'we' and 'two' of the state becomes an 'I': the declaration of Offred's own, separate identity.

## Claiming territory

Having highlighted her sense of individual identity, Offred proceeds to contemplate a sense of possession and questions whether she can really have her 'own' room:

*The door of my room - not my room, I refuse to say my*

This self-conscious awareness of having one's own space immediately engages with Woolf's feminist essay, *A Room of One's Own*. In Offred's characteristic style, elements of this discussion are scattered throughout the narrative, as she questions ideas concerning possession and belonging. Whilst she is possessed and reduced to a mere 'handmaid' by the Gileadian state, she in turn seeks to have something as her 'own', a means of control.

In chapter three Offred recognises that 'This garden is the domain of the Commander's wife', in turn realising that she does not yet have a domain. And yet a few chapters on, the fragmentary consideration of possessing spaces recurs. Offred claims:

*The night is mine, my own time.*

*As long as I don't move. As long as I lie still. The difference between lie and lay. Lay is always passive.*

A little further on, Offred finds herself asking:

*Was he in my room? I called it mine.*

*My room, then. There has to be some space, finally, that I claim as mine, even in this time.*

If we look again at the verbs, it is clear that Offred has a sensitivity to language, that it is within language, within her narrative, that Offred seeks to remain active. The words are almost sacred, something to relish. This idea of language as a huge freedom - for 'context is all' - is encapsulated in the description of the game of scrabble between Offred and the Commander:

*What a luxury. The counters are like candies, made of peppermint, cool like that.*

*Choice of words is something sensual for Offred. It is something she feels, tastes, enjoys. Here, in language, she maintains her individual place.*

Although the 'lie/lay' comparison occurs relatively early in the narrative, Offred's fragmentary narrative structure sees her alluding to it in the episode with the doctor, in chapter eleven. She corrects herself, with attention to linguistic subtleties, as usual:

*I went to the doctor. Was taken*

It is through her jumpy narrative that this distinction between active and passive, dominating and submissive, is heightened. By returning to ideas which were only briefly touched upon, Atwood builds up the idea of a narrator, Offred, who is incredibly responsive to language. Indeed, 'waiting is also a place' for Offred; 'it is wherever you wait.' For Offred, 'it is this room' - in other words, she waits for her freedom and inches towards it within her narrative.

## Piexioto's final say

Although you could say that inclusion of the historical notes threatens Offred's narrative, since the dry, academic, male-centric discourse weakens Offred's story by threatening the previous narrative in which the female, Offred, was the main focus, this reading doesn't seem to take into account the full scope of what Atwood, as a deliberate stylist of the narrative voice, is trying to do. As the fictional Professor Piexioto informs us, 'there was little that was truly original' about Gilead and this was deliberate on the part of its real author. Atwood garnered her ideas for Offred's narrative from the external world, be that Afghanistan with its 'full', covering-up clothes for women, or America's fundamentalist Christian right, criticised in the epigraph's religious extracts which echo in ironic fragments throughout the text. This external world of ours includes those who try to diminish women or their stories as 'little', as both the Commander and Professor Piexioto do:

*'How is the fair little one this evening?'... I notice that everything this evening is little. He wishes to diminish things, myself included.*

*As the title of my little chat implies [Historical Notes on The Handmaid's Tale]...*

Of course, it could be argued that Piexioto is being self-deprecating here. However, when you examine his talk in the wider context and see how he marginalises Offred whilst according importance to the role of the 'elusive Commander', it seems more likely that Piexioto is in fact attempting to reduce the authenticity of Offred's story. In deliberately posing such a male-centric narrative of someone who 'held out no hope of tracing the narrator herself', Offred's strong, female-centred narrative is challenged. Offred faces being reduced to a mere artefact, a sideline in a man's history. When Offred has worked to create a 'herstory' which tells of women being subordinated in extreme manners under a totalitarian state where writing is banned, what is key is that this is only a possibility, not a certainty or something that has already actually happened. And, for the reader, it is Offred's voice and the power of her story that remains in the mind, not that of the academic who attempts to 'own' her through his academic discourse.

Undoubtedly, Atwood does justice to the gender debate by encouraging the reader's 'questions', creating a conflict of narrative which demands our thought. Without the epigraphs, stream of consciousness-like interruptions and various voices, this would not have been possible. Atwood simultaneously presents a strongly female narrative voice, whilst also acknowledging the existing threat posed from males who seek to concentrate on 'his story' rather than 'her story.'

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