The Handmaid's Tale - Worrying at words

Margaret Reynolds reads The Handmaid's Tale as a novel about words.

One of my favourite moments in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale is in Chapter 23, the first occasion when Offred and the Commander play Scrabble together. Offred tells us the words they spell: larynx, valance, quince, zygote, limp, gorge.

As a reader you have to bring to this passage quite a few pieces of knowledge of your own. First of all, you need to have some idea of what Scrabble is, how it's played, what the board and the counters look like. Then you have to have some idea of how the scoring system works. Obviously, if you got all those letters - q and u, x and z and y - then you'd be well on the way to winning the game. Finally, you have to know what kind of context is suggested by two people playing Scrabble. And that would usually be Sunday afternoon with Grandma, or a bored Boxing Day when you're stuffed full of turkey.

When Jonathan Noakes and I were working on the Vintage Living Text study guide for Atwood we came up with an exercise for this passage. We suggested that readers make up a story with as few sentences as possible, but using each one of those (high scoring) words from the Scrabble game. I've done this several times since with different groups of readers in schools and colleges. And guess what? The stories they come up with are invariably rude.

It's a good joke, and we all enjoy reading these saucy tales out to each other, but this exercise does have a serious point. On the one hand you - as a competent reader - have the capability of drawing on your own cultural background and knowledge. Atwood has set up a situation where we can all come up with a shared collective 'meaning' for what Scrabble represents. On the other hand, you - as an imaginative and receptive reader - have teased out a subtext by re-arranging the apparently 'innocent' words that Offred and the Commander spell out on the board. And that subtext - in clear contradiction to the safe, family oriented positioning associated with the game of Scrabble - is one of desire, risk, exploitation and danger in a sexualised setting.

That is, of course, the point of the scene, and Offred herself ponders the distinction:

> *This was once the game of old women ... in the summers or in retirement villas ... Now ... it's something different. Now it's forbidden, for us ... Now it's indecent.*

In essence, this scene also represents the whole premise of the novel. Offred begins and ends Chapter 23 by telling us that 'this is a reconstruction'. In other parts of the story she tells us 'Context is all'.

The Handmaid's Tale is a novel that is about words, the manipulation of words, the construction of text - in and out of context - and the tensions that often result, or the meanings that still slip out. So

it's about writing, and it's about reading. (And here I will say that it is no accident that Atwood, as well as being a writer of important fiction, is also an eminent and gifted poet.)

All the way through The Handmaid's Tale the text worries away at words. One of the clever things that the reigning regime in Gilead has done is - deliberately and self consciously - to pervert the 'meanings' of words. The 'Guardians' should suggest protection; instead their role is policing. The 'Aunts' - 'Sara' and 'Elizabeth' - should be associated with family, safety and comfort baking (as in the famous American cheesecakes), but instead they enforce control. Right at the end of the novel - in the 'Historical Notes' from the conference taking place in 2195 - we discover that Waterford - a high up official in the Gilead regime whom scholars deduce may have been Offred's Commander - was responsible for inventing the names and terms for the practices that defined and formulated Gilead's ideology.

But Offred herself is also infected by the regime's 'play' with words. As a thinking, literate person in a world where her literacy (as a woman) is illegal, Offred considers the importance of words and meanings. In Chapter 2 she quotes a well known saying 'Waste not, want not'. But then she goes on, 'I am not to be wasted. What do I want?', and she effectively puns on the double-meanings in the idea of 'want'. In Chapter 12 Offred says 'I compose myself. My self is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech'. Again, she puns - playing with 'compose', as in 'quieten down' and 'compose' as in 'hone and mould into a pattern'.

Offred's particularity with words also comes out of her situation as a storyteller. Words are her medium, just as paint is an artist's medium, so, while she seems to be giving us 'the truth', she herself is aware of her own unreliability. Over and again Offred asks herself if it really was 'like that'? The trouble is that in some ways she is both writer and reader of her own text, and she has no other source for confirmation or denial. Early on, in Chapter 7, she tells us that she needs to invent a 'you' to whom she can speak: 'But if it's a story, even in my own head, I must be telling it to someone. You don't tell a story only to yourself. There's always someone else ... Even when there is no one.'

And if Offred herself is troubled about the authenticity or the truthfulness and reliability of her own text, how much more important is the requirement that we should question the reliability of that text - in the form in which it is given to us - overall.

In the course of reading the 'Historical Notes' at the end of the story we discover yet another uncertainty, another instability. Offred's narrative was found recorded on a series of old fashioned tapes, but no-one knows what order they should be in. The 'text' of her experiences and memories - the most apparently personal part of her - is actually a construct, the result of editorial decisions made by scholars and critics from 2195 who are more interested - all in the name of historical and political accuracy - in working out the name of Offred's Commander than in acknowledging the power of her individual voice. As the old feminist slogan used to go, 'The personal is the political.'

I do have another favourite part in The Handmaid's Tale. The ending - or, if you like the second of the two endings, or maybe both endings together.

The first is:

> *And so I step up into the darkness within; or else the light.*

And the second goes:

> *'As all historians know, the past is a great darkness, and filled with echoes. Voices may reach us from it; but what they say to us is imbued with the obscurity of the matrix out of which they come; and, try as we may, we cannot always decipher them precisely in the clearer light of our own day.'*
> *Applause.*
> *'Are there any questions?'*

Offred is simple, short and ambiguous. Professor Pieixoto is pompous, longwinded and certain. But they both speak in their own voice and their own words, and they both mention 'dark' and 'light'. In the end this text turns in on itself. Because Atwood is a poet and a storyteller she loves words, she asks questions and she resists answers. At the end of The Handmaid's Tale we have barely any more information than we might have had when we started to read. As Atwood says, 'Everything that goes on here, has either happened, or is happening now'. As readers, we began knowing nothing, but we had no questions either. As readers, we end knowing nothing (or very little) for certain, but we certainly do have a lot of questions.

How then should we read The Handmaid's Tale? On its own terms - as a text full of words, about words and text.

Applause. That's for Margaret Atwood.

Are there any questions? That's for us. And the answer is: Absolutely ...

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