Sep-1988

Book Review: The Handmaid's Tale

Francine Quaglio
Bridgewater State College

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol6/iss1/13
BOOK REVIEW

THE HANDMAID’S TALE

by Margaret Atwood

Fawcett Crest
1986

Now in Gilead nothing is unexpected, everything is regular, regulated. All relations are enforced by the Guardians, young men serving their country, working hard, living right so that some day they too will have a home, a Wife, a Handmaid and children. All infractions of the law and order are detected by and dealt with by the ever present secret service, The Eyes of God. All media is centralized in the hands of the High Commanders, and only men are allowed to read. The written word is power; the written word is possibility. Neither of these is to be available to women. Women might conceive something other than a child; they might conceive of alternative. And what can be conceived might be possible.

So the narrator passes her days, waiting. For The Ceremony, for Conception. She is clean, she is safe; well fed, regular check-ups by the doctor. She has a room of her own in a proper house. She is part of the Household, ruled by the Commander. "The house is what he holds. To have and to hold, till death do us part. The hold of a ship, Hollow."

Till death. Death permeates Gilead, in spite of, perhaps, its cleanliness, its order, its pro-life politics. There is the death of the flesh, its sensuality, its spontaneity. All sexuality is controlled, channelled toward officially sanctioned procreation. But the life of desire dies hard and the narrator feels its insistent throbbing at dangerous moments of ordinariness, "I would help Rita make bread, sinking my hands into that soft resistant warmth which is so much like flesh. I hunger to touch something other than cloth or wood. I hunger to commit the act of touch." And there is the death of the women in the Colonies, the toxic wastelands surrounding Gilead. Old women, dissident women, Handmaids who do not conceive in time, the narrator’s mother – deviants. These women constitute the clean-up detail, slowly and painfully dying as they do their cleaning. And there is the death, the salvaging, of all ‘irregulars’. Those who subvert the Gileadean Way of Life by saying something different, or by being something different; a Jew, a homosexual, a person with a sense of humor. All these deaths keep Gilead alive.

What happens to the narrator, what happens to the Land of Gilead, is ambiguous. This novel doesn’t end, really. It simply goes on reconstructing, as the narrator reconstructed her tale, as the scholars in the last few pages reconstruct the history of Gilead. But the act of reconstruction, as Atwood reminds us, is always going on in the now, if not by us, then by someone else. "As all historians know, the past is a great darkness and filled with echoes." So is the present. Read the newspapers, read Atwood’s text and listen for the echoes.

FRANCINE QUAGLIO
Associate Professor of Philosophy and Religious Studies