9-1988

Book Review: The Handmaid's Tale

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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol6/iss1/13

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“W e are two-legged wombs, that’s all; sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices.” Nuclear waste, toxic chemicals have devastated the reproductive capacity of the population. Babies are the most desired commodity. A fertile woman is rare; a fertile woman is cared for by the men for their new cars. Such a woman is allowed to become a Handmaid. She will be assigned to an up-right Family, solid senior citizens. Once a month she will feel the weight of The Commander’s body on hers as she lies in the lap of The Wife; she will feel his “regular two-four marching stroke, on and on like a tap dripping.” Once a month The Ceremony is performed. Like Rachel and Jacob and Bil­lah. Like surrogate mothers.

Atwood’s text is a tale of the future, to be sure, but it is a familiar future. A women’s culture, controlled by men; a women’s culture structured according to those traditional values so revered in our public discourse. What if? What if a certain Christian vision became The American Way; if there were no pornography, no prostitution; if the Family were the cornerstone of society, protected, inviolable? What if everyone did their duty according to God’s will, and society, protected, inviolable?

The Tale is told by a woman whose blood-red gown and white winged headdress signal her role as a Handmaid in the Republic of Gilead. Gilead is a land within a land, the Boston area in fact. It gained dominance over the splintering factions of American society. It gained this power quietly, cleanly, through financial consolidation, religious zeal, and the complicity and indifference of its women.

“We were the people who were not in the papers. We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of print. It gave us more freedom.”

The power of this novel is in the crystalline economy of its style and the shocking recognizability of its characters and their culture. The narrator is a woman we know, a woman, perhaps, that we are. In the ‘old days’ she went to college, fell in love, married, had a child, and worked. She also resisted her mother, a ‘left-over’ from the sixties who was trying to live a different way, build a different reality. The daughter disapproved. “Part of my disapproval was . . . perfunctory, routine. But also I wanted from her a life more ceremonious, less subject to makeshift and decampment.” The ceremonious life was not to be what she imagined. She lives now in perfect law and order, unalterable routine. She knew something was happening, something was changing, the day they fired all the women. They were sent home to their families. Their bank accounts, credit cards, all property was placed in the hands of the husbands. Soon even the husbands who resisted were sent away or salvaged, the way persons were salvaged in the days of the Inquisition, their bodies killed to save their souls.

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 insistently 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 reconstructs 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.”