

## The Handmaid's Tale: Utopia or Dystopia?

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### **Abstract**

This paper discusses the critically acclaimed fiction, *The Handmaid's Tale*. It evaluates whether the freedoms that the citizens of Gilead have lost are worth the freedoms they have purportedly gained. It argues that the women of Gilead have lost more than they gained, that the supposed freedoms gained in this world do not actually exist within Gilead, and that, based on this, Gilead is truly a dystopia.

*Keywords:* dystopia, philosophy, Gilead, society, oppression, totalitarian, freedom

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### **The Handmaid's Tale: Utopia or Dystopia?**

This paper will discuss the much-acclaimed work of fiction, *The Handmaid's Tale* (Atwood, 1985/2017), to evaluate whether the loss of some freedoms referenced throughout are worth the gain of others. It will begin by briefly discussing this philosophical question itself before applying it to the specific context of the freedoms both lost and gained within the book. It will be argued that the women of Gilead – particularly the Handmaids – have lost more than they have gained. Finally, it will discuss whether Gilead is really a utopian society, as suggested in the novel. The freedom lost in Gilead is not worth the freedom gained, if it can be said that anything has been gained at all; Gilead is certainly a dystopia.

Is the loss of some freedoms worth the gain of others? This is a difficult philosophical question to which there is no right or wrong answer. This is because the question depends on the content of the freedom, both lost and gained, and the subjective value each individual places on different types of freedom. For instance, some believe it is worthwhile giving up freedom of speech in exchange for freedom from assault, rape, and/or murder; others hold freedom of speech in the highest regard and would not give it up for anything. Neither individual is wrong, it is all based on how the freedom is valued in that individual's life, and this value may change over time. As a result, there is no objective, straightforward answer to this question; the closest we come to an accurate, objective answer is simply 'it depends.'

#### **More Lost than Gained**

It is argued within this book that this world is better than the one before because women are free from sexual harassment, rape, and violence. One of the Aunts – teachers within the new world of Gilead – maintains “there is more than one kind of freedom... Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it” (Atwood, 1985/2017, p. 28). But is this freedom from fear and assault worth the loss of the multitudes of freedoms that women have had to give up? In Gilead, citizens cannot be homosexual, non-Christian, divorced, or receive or perform an abortion. Women cannot own property, have their own money, work, read, write, vote, expose their bodies, or drive. The life of a Handmaid is even more restrictive, although there is still a loss of freedom within all female roles in Gilead: Marthas, Wives, Jezebels, Handmaids, Econowives, and Aunts. Handmaids are fertile women in Gilead who have been assigned to a Commander in order to procreate, they are expected to adhere to his rules and schedules, which all revolve around ensuring that she

will be a healthy incubator for his children. Handmaids are not permitted to speak out of turn, drink alcohol, marry, retain their name, smoke, refuse food, or make friends. All their time is controlled by someone else, they have no privacy, they cannot love, they have no access to news or education, they cannot have a family of their own; in effect, they are slaves. If they attempt to refuse this job, they will be sent to the colonies, where there is a high likelihood of death.

How can freedom from assault possibly be worth the loss of these freedoms? Black et al. (2014) found that 1.5% of women had experienced attempted or completed non-consensual sex in the previous 12 months. The National Violence Against Women Survey reported that 17.6% of women surveyed had experienced completed or attempted rape at some point in their lives (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000); however, these numbers are likely seriously underestimated, as sexual violence is under-reported and under-prosecuted in our society (Morabito et al., 2019). This begs the question: Would you rather live your life with autonomy and the possibility of being raped, or give up your entire life to someone else as their slave in order to be free of that risk?

Kimerling and Calhoun (1994) found that women who had been sexually assaulted reported significantly higher rates of general medical health complaints, such as gynecological or gastrointestinal symptoms, chronic pain syndromes, and sexual dysfunction; they were also more likely to see a physician post-assault. Women who have been sexually assaulted are also at a higher risk of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Kilpatrick et al., 1989), major depression, suicidal ideation/attempts (Boudreaux et al., 1998), panic disorder (Kessler et al., 1995), and substance use disorders (Kilpatrick et al., 1998). While there have been very few studies conducted on the effects of slavery, the psychological effects of captivity (and Handmaids are essentially captives within their own homes and within Gilead itself) – such as that reported by Solomon et al. (2014) on ex-prisoners of war – found higher risks for early mortality, significantly more health-related conditions, poorer self-rated health, and higher rates of PTSD and depressive symptomatology.

Neither rape nor slavery is more psychologically or physically harmful than the other; the evidence suggests they both cause significant, lasting psychological and physical damage. Rape is a horrific, scarring trauma that can cause long-term damage but generally the individual still has their life to go back to, along with all the freedoms within it, should they so choose. In

contrast, life as a Handmaid involves regular, undesired forced intercourse that will eventually lead to impregnation of a baby one does not get to keep, plus an entire life belonging to a captor. Though most would rather experience neither scenario of rape nor captivity, if there was a choice, it could be argued that the better choice would be to be at the mercy of someone else for a limited period of time than for the entirety of a lifetime.

### **Nothing Gained at All**

Gilead claims that theirs is a better world because women are free from sexual harassment, rape, and violence and that women are truly valued in their society. However, it could be argued that the Handmaids of Gilead are free from none of these things. The definition of rape is non-consensual sex. Though Handmaids technically make the choice to be Handmaids, their alternative is being sent to the colonies where death is a certain outcome. Consent to be either a sex slave or to die is not a consensual choice. So arguably, rather than Gilead eliminating rape from the social fabric of humanity, it systematically legitimated and legalized it. Gilead essentially made slave prostitutes a legitimate “career” choice and ironically did this under the guise of morality and religion. It is probably true that the rate of unexpected, unsanctioned rape in Gilead is lower than the rate in the United States currently, but that is because they have instilled acceptable, sanctioned rape into the very fabric of their society.

Das (2009) discovered in a self-report study of women in the US that 41% had experienced workplace sexual harassment in their lifetime. Sexual harassment still exists in Gilead, although it may be less overt and pervasive than it was previously. Handmaids are assigned to commanders for two-year positions, if they pass through three assignments with no Keepers – babies born with no deformities or birth defects – then they will be assigned to the colonies to die. Men are no longer viewed as capable of being sterile; it is women who are either barren or fruitful. Offred, the main character of the novel who is on her third assignment with no Keepers, is propositioned by a doctor who, under the guise of sympathy, suggests that her Commander is sterile and offers to impregnate her. Offred notices his excitement at this prospect, implying that supposed sympathy is not his only motivation. She is also careful not to refuse in such a way as to offend him, as she is aware of the power he has over her. He has the ability to fake her test results and report that she is unfit to bear children, and she would be sent to the colonies as an Unwoman anyway. If she agrees and is found out, the punishment would also be death. The advances the doctor made towards her is an example of sexual

harassment and if things had proceeded, by today's laws and standards, it would have been rape. You cannot consent to sex in Canada when there is an abuse of power or authority (Criminal Code, 1985).

Women in Gileadean society are also clearly not free from violence. There are many infractions that result in physical punishment. The third conviction of a woman caught reading will result in her hand being cut off. Infidelity, attempted escape, and attempted or successful murder of a Handmaid will result in a public hanging; these laws apply to both Wives and Handmaids. The Wife of the house decides on the acceptable punishment of any minor infractions made by a Handmaid. Most punishments are considered acceptable, within some limitations; they cannot be beaten with any implement and the punishment cannot interfere with the fertility of the Handmaid. Though it may be less likely that a woman would be randomly attacked on the street, violence against women is still prevalent in Gilead. It is not uncommon for someone, often a Wife or an unsuccessful Handmaid, to attack a pregnant Handmaid out of jealousy. In the Red Centres – where the Handmaids are trained – escape attempts are an extreme infraction resulting in the maiming of hands or feet, sometimes permanently; the destruction of hands and feet does not interfere with the reproductive duties of Handmaids.

Arguably, even if Gilead itself did not support systemized rape, sexual harassment, and violence against women, in such a sexually restrictive society as Gilead, it is likely that rape would occur regardless. Men and women are not permitted to masturbate, there is no pornography of any kind, no lingerie, foreplay, or sex allowed for the purposes of pleasure. Men must be assigned a woman in order to have sex, and some are assigned none. A society where people are not allowed to pleasure themselves, are not allowed to have extramarital or premarital sexual relations, and where many men are denied sexual partners, is an environment which, some have argued, may contribute to sexual dysfunction or assault (Adams, 2003). The penalty for rape in Gilead is a particution, in which the Handmaids beat the rapist to death. You may argue that a death penalty for rape would be a significant deterrent to committing this crime, but research has been mixed on whether the death penalty is a strong deterrent for crime (Manski & Pepper, 2013).

Finally, it is said that women were not truly valued in the pre-Gileadean world, but that in Gilead, they are. Indeed, it could be argued that women are valued in Gilead, but they are valued as objects, not as people. Gilead has taken the objectification of women to its extreme

and women, especially Handmaids, are probably the most valuable object in Gilead. But they are considered nothing more than an object or a tool to be used to perpetuate male progeny. Women should not simply be valued as a means to an end – that end being children – but as an end in and of themselves; they should be viewed, just as men are, as beings of inherent worth, not simply worth based on what they can instrumentally provide. Value as a tool or an object is insulting for a living creature of our level of cognition and consciousness and is nothing less than a degradation of our status as people. To view the value that women have in Gilead as superior to women's current value in our society is laughable. At least in our current society, women are not just property to be owned or sold; women are, for the most part, seen as having inherent worth, not just reproductive value.

### **Gilead as a “Utopia”**

Watts (2017) states that a utopia is a shared social and geographic space that includes rights for all types of individuals, while sharing important values and a sense of belonging. Gilead has eliminated lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights entirely, homosexuality is met with death, assignment to the colonies, or the Jezebels (a house of prostitution) if you are female; transgender individuals face a similar fate. These gender and sexual orientations are punished because procreation is not viable and that is the only form of acceptable sexual activity in Gilead. Women's rights are non-existent, with Aunts arguably having the most power among women – and even that is less than the lowliest positions occupied by men. Women are not allowed to be educated, work outside the home, or own property, as they have been returned to the status of property themselves. There is no freedom of religion, speech, or information; all news is censored and limited. Perhaps most importantly, people are not allowed to leave Gilead; any attempt to escape results in death. All these restrictions are hallmarks of repressive societies that, within fiction, would be identified as dystopian. Gilead is the polar opposite of a utopian society, even as it pretends to be one.

The rules and values Gileadeans purport to have in their society are not what most would picture as a utopia. Even if what Gilead pretends to be could be considered utopian, society's members do not live up to their own expectations. As previously stated, Gileadeans argue their world is better because women are free from many of their previous fears, but rape, sexual harassment, and violence still exist in this world. Furthermore, the very leaders of this society, the Commanders, do not genuinely believe in or follow the values they preach. In secret, they

hoard sexually explicit magazines and go to brothels to engage in extramarital sex; all of which is banned and considered immoral. This society and its ideals were built to control the population and to increase the power of the Commanders, not because it is a genuinely better way of living or because the Commanders actually believe in the moral ideals they are perpetuating.

### Conclusion

The question, is the loss of some freedoms worth the gains of others, is a difficult philosophical question with no straightforward answer. In the context of *The Handmaid's Tale* (Atwood, 1985/2017), an answer seems attainable. Women in this society arguably lose nearly all autonomy, in exchange for supposedly gaining freedom from rape, violence, and sexual harassment. Freedom from these crimes could not possibly be worth the loss of the multitude of freedoms that the women of Gilead have given up. Although rape prevalence rates are high in our current society, fortunately, many never experience it (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). The psychological and physical effects of rape *and* slavery are pervasive and can be severe; arguably, Handmaids are slaves within Gilead and experience these negative effects, they have simply traded one trauma for another.

Even if freedom from assault was worth the loss of these freedoms, it could be argued that the women of Gilead are not *actually* free from rape, sexual harassment, or violence at all. The Handmaid agreement is systematized rape when the alternative is death; engaging in sex out of fear of death cannot be consensual. Sexual harassment, while perhaps reduced and less overt, still exists. Doctors abuse their authority by impregnating Handmaids who have been unable to conceive, under threat of being sent to the colonies. This unwanted attention through abuse of authority is sexual harassment and, if completed, rape. Violence is certainly not absent from the lives of women in Gilead. There are many violent punishments available for a wide array of offenses. Random assaults may have been reduced, however pregnant handmaids are often targeted for murder or assault. Even if rape was not ingrained in the fabric of Gilead, some have argued that in a society this sexually restrictive, sexual assault would likely occur (Adams, 2003). Proponents contend that women were not valued in the world before, while in Gilead they are. Here it is argued that although women are valued in Gilead, it is only as objects, not as people. Finally, Gilead is hardly representative of a utopian society. Gilead has removed the rights that many people view as being indicative of a progressive or idealistic society, such as

gender and sexual rights, religious freedom, and freedom of speech, among many others. Additionally, the leaders of Gilead do not follow the morals and regulations that they enforce. Gilead is an oppressive totalitarian society that uses religion as a method of controlling the population and it could not be further from a utopia. Gilead is a dystopian society.



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