

ENGL 1500E

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“In front of me is a tray...with an egg cup on it, the kind that looks like a woman's torso, in a skirt. Under the skirt is the second egg, being kept warm. The egg cup is white china with a blue stripe...The shell of the egg is smooth but also grained; small pebbles of calcium are defined by the sunlight, like craters on the moon... I think that this is what God must look like: an egg.”
(Atwood 110)

The Virgin Mary as an Eggcup

Maternity is widely interpreted as celestial, across media, religion, and a multitude of other cultural expressions. One of the most well-known is Mother Earth— Gaia in Greek mythology — who supports and creates life. Others include Nut— the Egyptian sky god who gave birth to the Sun and stars. The novel *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood; however, focuses majorly on Christianity (though connections can also be drawn to Hindu mythology and Abrahamic religions in general). To that point, the indisputable Mother Figure in Christianity is The Virgin Mary. She is widely revered for more than simply birthing Jesus, and is recognized as a symbol of creation, purity, faith, and charity. The egg-cup scene in *The Handmaid's Tale* alludes to the Virgin Mary when describing an eggcup, reinforcing the text's message of women

being treated as vessels, and showing how totalitarian regimes often pervert religious iconography to reinforce their ideologies.

Offred, the titular character of the novel recounts her breakfast, describes the eggcup in a way which draws clear parallels to the most used depiction of the Virgin Mary. To start, “In front of me is a tray...with an egg cup on it, the kind that looks like a woman's torso, in a skirt. Under the skirt is the second egg, being kept warm. The egg cup is white china with a blue stripe.”, this clearly establishes that the eggcup is a woman, or rather— the torso of a woman. And the second part of the passage depicts the eggcup as white china with a blue stripe— Marian art commonly depicts her as wearing a white robe, with a blue sash running across her torso. This can be seen particularly in more celestial depictions. Finally, the passage ends with “I think that this is what God must look like: an egg.” (Atwood 110). An eggcup, which fits neatly into depictions of The Virgin Mary, carrying an egg— which is described as God— which in the Christian faith is interchangeable with Jesus, Mary’s son. The connection is direct.

Yet unlike the Virgin Mary in Christian tradition, who is intended to be revered; an eggcup is just an object intended to carry an egg— nominatively defined, like an anteater or a bookshelf. Further, the eggcup does not look like a woman, simply a “woman's torso”. By drawing a parallel between the two, it reduces The Virgin Mary to the same. One of the most pervasive messages of the novel is Gilead’s degradation of women to nothing more than their reproductive capabilities, and this extends even to the holy. The egg, which Offred directly associates with God, is not revered but consumed, reduced to breakfast. This shows the way Gilead manipulates Christianity: turning divine symbols into means of control. They’re violently emptied of their meaning and folded into daily rituals. Mary, as vessel, and God, as egg, are reduced to their most functional aspects.

This is a trend in totalitarian regimes and one of Atwood's sharpest critiques in the satire. Regimes like Gilead appropriate religious imagery not to honor its sanctity but to weaponize it for social control. This is seen across media, across history, and across the modern political landscape. Faith blends into ideology. The Lisan al-Gaib in *Dune*, the forced Christianization of African and Indigenous people during colonization, the crusades. It's not a new idea, the use of faith to justify ideology is a practice older than Christianity. Atwood demonstrates that in Gilead, even religious devotion is subordinated to state authority— and Gilead is a microcosm of totalitarianism. Faith is repurposed to sustain hierarchy, justify oppression— and this novel demonstrates the danger of that, and how easily it can happen.

To conclude: the eggcup scene in *The Handmaid's Tale* encapsulates Atwood's critique of Gilead's manipulation of both women and religion. It highlights how Gilead reduces women to mere vessels and perverts religious symbols to enforce control. By comparing an eggcup to the Virgin Mary, it shows how Gilead reduces women to their reproductive function— even the holiest of women— but further: it shows how totalitarian regimes reduce faith to a tool to justify ideology, through routine and control.

Works Cited

Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. First Anchor books edition. Anchor Books, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, 1998.