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The Irony of Taking Text Literally

Duality and irony as concepts can be attributed to nearly any aspect of a society, no matter the structure of said society. For example, in the Communist ideology there is the duality of the masses working for the “greater good” while a controlling government looms over them. Or in slavery-driven society, where an entire population provides for the economic benefit of the masses, and yet sees very little of that profit themselves. However, the duality and irony of the Bible and the ideas within, primarily in regards to sin, is the most glaringly obvious when taken literally. This fact is illustrated perfectly through Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, wherein the Bible is taken to its most literal extreme in a society that is attempting to deal with the aftermath of a catastrophic event that left most of the population sterile.

In order to understand the extremes of this society, it is important to first analyze the text from which they based their way of thinking on. The Bible and its views on sin are inherently contradictory if taken literally. For example: “Thou shalt not kill” is seemingly ignored in “Thus sayeth the Lord God of Israel, Put every man his sword by his side, and slay every man his brother…companion…neighbor” (Exodus 20:13, 32:27). Here is an example in which God is seemingly encouraging his followers to commit an act which was previously stated to be a sin. Additionally, the discrepancies between the Old Testament and the New Testament are in and of themselves dualistic in nature, for the idea that God is perfect presumes that God would not make a mistake in the Old Testament that would then later need to be rectified in the New Testament. And yet this idea of differences between testaments is not necessarily always the case, as seen in the above example where there is a contradiction within the same book., and only a few chapters apart.

This dualistic nature of the Bible is undeniable when viewed in a straightforward manner, and is eloquently portrayed in *The Handmaid's Tale*. At the beginning of the novel, before the reader begins reading what most would consider the story, there is a Bible verse which is the basis for this society’s reasoning behind the subjugation of what are considered to be “fertile” women so that they might replenish the dwindling human population. This verse tells of how Bilhah, the handmaid of Rachel, was to lay with Rachel’s husband Jacob so that Rachel may bear children through her maid (Genesis 30:1-3). In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, a majority of women are subjugated to the extreme, classified into varying roles in society and essentially stripped of all semblance of humanness. The most “coveted” of these roles is as a handmaid, which encompasses the same responsibilities as Bilhah in Genesis. And yet, is the act of laying with another woman’s husband not a sin in and of itself? So how can a society that revolves around this Ceremony still claim to be followers of the Christian faith without taking the Bible in the most literal sense possible?

Not only does this reading text as literal carry with it the obvious contradictions as mentioned above, but also more subtle ones that are only apparent when viewed from far enough away. For example, the enforcement of any kind of ruling with force, in this case through The Eyes, who act as the executive authority in doling out “justice”, would be inherently sinful for they are committing acts of violence against a fellow human. Of course, there are several instances in the Bible where it specifically insights violence against those who would take God’s name in vain, or tells stories of such (Exodus 20:13). And yet there are other passages where the exact opposite is proposed, such as the Ten Commandments, one of which specifically states “Thou shalt not kill” (Deuteronomy 5: 4-20). It is thus clear that a society which adheres to these beliefs in a very literal sense must make certain assumptions to believe that what they are doing is right and just.

Firstly, the society must remove any semblance of humanness from those which they subjugate, treating them more as objects than as people, to be used to their specified intent and nothing else. This is shown in Atwood’s novel through the brainwashing done to women into believing this very thing about themselves: that they are objects of salvation rather than beings of free will. Secondly, the society must convince the majority that this viewpoint is the only viewpoint that will benefit them the most. In Atwood’s case, this happened through a governmental overthrow that resulted in the manipulation of technology to suppress women and give men the false sense of authority over them. Since men were the majority in America at the time that *The Handmaid’s Tale* being written, it makes sense how this ego bolstering of men would fulfill the above assumption. Finally, the society must have the ability to ensure that the minority who does not agree with the new status quo would not rise up and overthrow the new authority. Again, this is achieved in *The Handmaid’s Tale* through the use of the mysterious Eyes who seem to have infinite resources to subdue any who whisper of insurrection.

As seen throughout the novel, it is evident to the outside reader that a society such as this has inevitable fallacies. The duality of committing a sin being the only way to enforce others to not commit a sin is a fascinating paradox that is perfectly illustrated in *The Handmaid’s Tale.* And not just in fiction but reality as well. Many of the conflicts common throughout the world are based on religious arguments over how certain texts should be interpreted. Oftentimes, the most violent outbreaks throughout history occurred due to not reading a religious work as guidelines to have faith in, but as a work of literal instructions on how society should function. The irony of reading text this way, as seen not just in religion (*A Modest Proposal* comes to mind) has an inherently dualistic nature.