

# The Oppression of Women in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

RQ: To what extent is the portrayal of women in an oppressive society similar in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* from the point of view of gender roles, social class and religion?

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## Introduction

*Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë and *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood both present the oppressive society where women live. In the respective novels, Jane Eyre and Offred are the protagonists, both belonging to the middle class. Feminism is represented in both novels, despite their different settings and backgrounds. *Jane Eyre* takes place in Victorian society (Gettelman, 2007), while *The Handmaid's Tale* is set in a dystopian New England society during the late 20th century (Ketterer, 1989), the Republic of Gilead. In both societies, men have never considered women as their equal partners. From an impoverished, mistreated child, Jane becomes a governess, yet still remains a servant to men. Offred and other women require protection from Commanders and Guardians, and their value is seen solely through their ability to bear children. Both Jane and Offred end up succumbing to the oppression of men, and they internalize the rules society imposes on them.

The novels are from different time periods, but both female authors convey ideas of the feminist movement. *Jane Eyre* is written in 1847 (Cregan-Reid, 2024), one year before the first wave of feminism (Rampton, 2024), while *The Handmaid's Tale* is written in 1985 (Bauer et al., 2024) at the end of the second wave of feminism (*Women's movements in Canada: 1960–85*, 2016). The two novels are written almost 140 years apart, and the feminist movement progressed from focusing on equal opportunities for women, as represented in *Jane Eyre*, to reproductive rights and social equality, as shown through *The Handmaid's Tale* (Rampton, 2024). During Jane's time, society expects women to be unconditionally obedient to men. Along with other female authors of the time, Brontë was one of the earlier feminist authors before the widespread movement that brought on a positive change towards freedom and equality between women and men (Dutta, 1991). Brontë wrote in a time when Victorian girls were taught to repress and

conceal their feelings since they were perceived as servants to men, which poses a challenge for expressing their true feelings (Dutta, 1991). In contrast, Offred's story is one that echoes the 1965 to 1970 feminist movement when women realised that their troubles were universal to all women, and that society was unfair to them (Armbruster, 1990). *The Handmaid's Tale* has received many awards, yet is criticized for being different from traditional dystopian novels (Ketterer, 1989). David Ketterer counters Mary McCarthy's criticism of Offred's character for being weak, and he believes it works as a compliment to emphasize the style of Atwood's writing and adds realism to the Gilean society (Ketterer, 1989). The comparison between these two novels brings into light the similarities and evolution between these two time periods. This raises the question: **To what extent is the portrayal of women in an oppressive society similar in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* from the point of view of gender roles, social class and religion?**

The representation of the protagonists is an important factor in both novels. This essay will investigate how the authors critique gender roles and the way society expects women to conduct themselves. Next, the essay will study how the authors perceive social class as a factor to demonstrate women's real place in society. Additionally, the essay will examine the imposed expectations of the protagonists' roles in the society from the viewpoints of religion, specifically Christianity. From different perspectives on feminism, both Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* critique oppressive patriarchal societies from different time periods through the depiction of gender roles, social class and religion.

## Gender Roles

Gender roles, the way society expects women to behave, leads to their oppression. In the novel, *Jane Eyre*, Brontë uses the characterization and development of Jane to show how the gender expectations society places on women are unfair. When the headmaster of the Lowood Institution initially visits, Mrs. Reed, Jane's aunt, remarks, “I should wish her to be brought up in a manner suiting her prospects...to be made useful, to be kept humble” (Brontë 1: 38). Jane's prospects and future, instead of being determined by herself, are predetermined by society. Mrs. Reed enforces the ideal way that girls should behave in Victorian society “suiting her prospects”, which is to be quiet and compliant to men. She is meant to be useful to men and society, which means she is unable to choose her own path. Brontë critiques how women are expected to be humble rather than proud and independent, which reveals that women are inferior to men. Brontë emphasizes these expectations placed on women through repeating the words “to be”. The use of anaphora emphasizes the strict gender roles society places on women. After Jane retorts that it is Mrs. Reed who is deceitful, she responds, “children must be corrected for their faults...But you are passionate...now return to the nursery—there's a dear—and lie down” (1: 42). Mrs. Reed reinforces gender roles by referring to Jane's passion as one of her faults. This viewpoint oppresses girls in society, requiring them to be obedient to men and suppress their own opinions. Deprived of their personal opinions, women conform to a singular and subdued image that men create. Arnold Shapiro states that the gender roles removes the individuality of the girls (Shapiro, 1968). Even Mrs. Reed, as a woman herself, believes in the strict oppressive expectations that society poses. Women assimilate this repressive idea that reinforces gender roles, since they consciously choose to repress themselves and other women. Through the use of belittling diction such as “lie down a little”, she asserts her power over Jane to stress how she knows better about

the way that women should act, which is to be compliant. Thus, Brontë uses anaphora and language choice to reveal the oppressive gender roles placed on women and their assimilation of these gender roles.

Furthermore, with the character development of Jane, she adheres to gender roles as an adult instead of fighting against them like she did as a girl. When Mr. Rochester questions whether Jane will stay with him, he states, “A poor blind man, whom you will have to lead about by the hand?...A crippled man, twenty years older than you, whom you will have to wait on?” (2: 274). Brontë emphasizes Mr. Rochester’s negative points with the use of anaphora, yet Jane still wants to be with him. The reunion poses a disadvantage to Jane, who is now rich and young, while Mr. Rochester is old and impaired, which shows how Jane adopts the obedient gender role of women in Victorian society. Mr. Rochester appears to change from an arrogant and powerful person to a gentle one, which could be a factor in Jane’s acceptance of him. The critic Bonnie Zare claims that his gentleness comes from his physical limitations and not his true self, which is not the typical “fairy-tale” partnership (Zare, 1993). Since Jane can support herself, her decision to stay with Mr. Rochester and not seeing it as a sacrifice shows the development of the protagonist. As a child, she thought to treat people who mistreated her previously in the same manner, but she now chose to return to Mr. Rochester even though he tricked and attempted to marry her selfishly. She now follows the norms of the society where women serve men, which becomes part of her own ideas. She decides to stay with him even though he has fallen, and turns from a strong-willed girl into a docile woman. Thus, she conforms to Mrs. Reed’s “prospects” regarding how she should behave as a woman of Victorian society.

Similarly, *The Handmaid’s Tale* shows the oppression of women through the representation of gender roles with Offred’s character development. At the shop, Offred

describes a pregnant woman, “She's a magic presence to us, an object of envy and desire, we covet her. She's a flag on a hilltop, showing us what can still be done” (Atwood 29). The metaphor likens their final destination to a flag on a hilltop. It is not easy to reach and attaining it brings glory. Offred states this merely as a doctrine taught by the Red Center and does not truly believe it. In the dystopian society, pregnancy is coveted because of the society’s infertility. Offred has the brainwashed opinion of values concerning pregnant women as a result of the teachings of the Red Center, a training institution for handmaids, who produce children for the commanders. Men demonstrate their power by creating the covetous idea for women that is accepted as part of societal norms. They establish this as the highest standard for women, reducing them to tools for men to produce children, thus restricting their individual reproductive choices. In contrast, after Offred repeatedly visits Nick at the end, she remarks, “I did not do it for him, but for myself entirely. I didn't even think of it as giving myself to him, because what did I have to give?” (308). Using a rhetorical question, Atwood emphasizes how Offred cannot see her own value and accepts her subordinate situation. Offred believes in the place that the men and commanders have set for women. Though critic McCarthy disapproves of Atwood making Offred’s character weak, David Ketterer states that it is Gilead’s goal to deprive its citizens of their characters (Ketterer, 1989). The reason that Offred claims going to Nick is for herself is not because she desires to, but because she believes that she has no choice and nothing to give. Though she claims she does it for herself, she diminishes herself by relying on Nick, just as Jane chooses to stay with Mr. Rochester. Both characters assimilate the teachings that society instills in them. They stop resisting the oppressive measures and conform to the gender roles that are placed on them.

In both *Jane Eyre* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, society holds women to oppressive standards in comparison to men. The two authors criticize the repressive way that women are required to dress themselves. In *Jane Eyre*, when referring to a student's curled red hair, Mr. Brocklehurst, the headmaster of Lowood, exclaims, "I have again and again intimated that I desire the hair to be arranged closely, modestly, plainly" (Brontë 1: 77-78). Likewise in *The Handmaid's Tale* at the Prayvaganza, a large prayer event, a Commander announces, "I will that women adorn themselves in modest apparel...with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with braided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array" (Atwood 255-256). In each of these situations, men decide how women should dress, and women have no freedom in the choice of their own outfit. By asserting the power to decide women's attire, men display their power and superior role over women. Shapiro states it oppresses the girls' individual identities (Shapiro, 1968), which makes them conform to an image that men create. They desire women to follow a model of Christians and dress plainly without jewellery and with straight hair, in order to reinforce their inferior social status. Society is oppressive towards women, as neither author mentions that men have to dress a certain way. Therefore, both Brontë and Atwood communicate ideas of how gender roles, a series of requirements from women's childhood to adulthood and then to birthright, play a significant part in the oppression of women. From Jane Eyre's quest for equal opportunity, *The Handmaid's Tale* evolves to address a more specific aspect in feminism of reproductive rights and social equality.

## Social Class

The representation of women's social classes being lower than men's highlights their oppression. In *Jane Eyre*, Brontë criticizes how the public discriminates against women from the

aspect of their social classes. Jane works as a governess for Mr. Rochester, the master of Thornfield Hall, which puts her in a lower class than him. After Jane claims she must leave because she believes Mr. Rochester will marry Blanche Ingram, an upper-class woman, she asks, “Do you think I can stay to become nothing to you? Do you think I am an automaton?...Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless?” (Brontë 2: 17). Brontë emphasizes how Mr. Rochester plays with Jane’s feelings just because she is in a lower class. The comparison of Jane to an automaton diminishes her to not even be a human being. The anaphora of “do you think” emphasizes how he is the cause of her difficulties in her opinion, and shows how he controls her feelings. He further diminishes her by stating, “Jane, be still; don’t struggle so, like a wild frantic bird that is rending its own plumage in its desperation” (2: 18). Brontë’s use of simile compares Jane to a bird that is small, desperate and requires protection, which shows that Mr. Rochester asserts himself as the higher and more powerful person. Jane’s diminishment shows how Mr. Rochester, her employer of a higher social class, oppresses her to stay and follow his dishonorable wishes. On the other hand, even though Blanche and Mr. Rochester seem to be in the same social class, he still plays with her feelings, giving everyone the impression that he was going to marry her when he never had that thought. Therefore, the novel demonstrates that women, no matter what their social classes are, are oppressed by men.

Meanwhile in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the social class difference between the Commander and Offred conveys the inequalities between men and women. Offred the handmaid bears children in place of Serena Joy, the wife of the Commander. After Offred ponders the consequences of secretly going to the Commander, she contemplates, “If I’m caught, it’s to Serena’s tender mercies I’ll be delivered...But to refuse to see him could be worse. There’s no doubt about who holds the real power” (Atwood 157-158). The Commander uses his power to

his advantage and plays with the feelings of Offred, a woman in an inferior social class to him, and Serena, a woman in the same social class as him. He violates Serena's trust and puts Offred in a difficult situation that she is unable to refuse. The uncertain diction of "could be worse" gives insight into Offred's internal conflict, as both choices would offend a powerful person if found out. His power as commander is what ultimately influences Offred to decide to see him, as she is aware of the power difference (Stillman and Johnson, 1994). This highlights the influence of people in higher social class on difficult decisions and evokes pathos for her. Additionally, the Commander demonstrates his power at Jezebels, a night club, to Offred, who narrates, "He is showing me off, to them...But also he is showing off to me. He is demonstrating, to me, his mastery of the world. He's breaking the rules, under their noses, thumbing his nose at them" (273). The repetition of "showing off" emphasizes how the Commander's power allows him to do what he pleases with Offred because she is in a lower class. His thumbing his nose is rude and arrogant, yet he can do that in public because of his superior social class. This critiques how those in higher social classes abuse power and mock those in inferior classes. Stillman and Johnson state that Offred has no way to resist and ultimately falls victim to the power of men (1994). While Mr. Rochester uses patronizing diction towards Jane, the Commander demonstrates his power through his actions, such as bringing Offred to illegal places, which illustrates the superiority of men.

Furthermore, the way that men treat women of the lowest class demonstrates the inequality between men and women. Both men in the novels, Mr. Rochester and the Commander, have had relationships with multiple women and have considered it to be acceptable. Jane questions Mr. Rochester, "Did it not seem to you in the least wrong to live in that way, first with one mistress and then another?" (Brontë 2: 95). Mr. Rochester finds it degrading to himself to

have lived with the two mistresses, which puts the worth of those women far beneath his own. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, men insult women in the lowest class even more. Offred asks the Commander, "So now that we don't have different clothes...you merely have different women" (Atwood 274-275). Offred critiques how the worth of women is equivalent to that of clothes, which shows that men dehumanize women in the lowest social class. Clothes are used and eventually tossed away as they become obsolete, or because of the change of taste, styles or sizes. Using the metaphor of clothes for women emphasizes the worthlessness and disposability of men's attitude towards women in the lowest social class. Men believe that the women in the lowest class have no dignity and deserve no respect, and are not even human beings. From *Jane Eyre* to *The Handmaid's Tale*, while Mr. Rochester only finds it degrading to himself, the Commander completely reduces women to objects.

## **Religion**

Society uses Christian teachings as a front in education to oppress girls. In *Jane Eyre*, while speaking to Mrs. Reed, Mr. Brocklehurst proudly remarks, "Humility is a Christian grace, and one peculiarly appropriate to the pupils of Lowood" (Brontë 1: 38). As Mr. Brocklehurst is the headmaster of Lowood, he has the power to choose what the girls learn. Lowood is an all-girls school and he deems it especially important to educate the girls to be humble, which is an important belief of Christian religion. His version of humble is to starve, dress plainly and be uniform. Women's natures are suppressed and they are deprived of the freedom of the growth of their individual characters.

Similarly, the religious education at the Red Center by Aunt Lydia represses the handmaids in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Offred narrates about the ideas of the Red Center, "Behold

my maid Bilhah. She shall bear upon my knees...For lunch it was the Beatitudes...The voice was a man's... Blessed be the meek. Blessed are the silent" (Atwood 101). The allusion to Bilhah, a handmaid who reproduces in the place of the wife (Larson, 1989), represents the role of the Handmaids like Offred. The use of anaphora with "blessed" emphasizes the Christian beliefs that society drills into the handmaids. They are required to be "meek" and "silent", which essentially means obedient and easy to control, and it is to the best interest of men. As the person who gives the holy knowledge is a man, it shows how men oppress women through religion. In both schools, girls learn oppressive beliefs from an institution that is considered trustworthy. It is not necessarily good, as critic Stephanie Barbé Hammer states, people become liars and hypocrites in order to survive in Christian society (Hammer, 1990). Thus, the allusion to Christianity in the education of girls oppresses their personalities and beliefs.

Furthermore, women eventually adopt the oppressive Christian teachings. After Offred finds out that she is safe because of her friend Ofglen's sacrifice, she prays, "Dear God...I'll forget about the others, I'll stop complaining. I'll accept my lot. I'll sacrifice. I'll repent. I'll abdicate. I'll renounce" (330-331). The anaphora of "I'll" emphasizes how she will sacrifice and conform to Christianity. Her prayer to God shows that she believes it is God's idea for them to become handmaids and submits to the ideas of religion. Originally, she does not truly believe in the religious ideas, and now she stops resisting and instead determines that she will fully adopt the religious teachings of the patriarchal centered ideas from the Red Center.

In both *Jane Eyre* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, the authors use the allusions to Christian religion as tools to oppress women. In *Jane Eyre*, St. John explains to Jane, "God and nature intended you for a missionary's wife...I claim you—not for my pleasure, but for my Sovereign's service" (Brontë 2: 216). St. John rationalizes his argument through the allusion to the higher

power of God. He believes that Jane should obey him under all conditions and marry him against her will and move to India even though Jane does not desire to marry him. While she agrees to go to India only if he does not make her marry him, he questions, “Do you think God will be satisfied with half an oblation? Will He accept a mutilated sacrifice?” (2: 221-222). St. John dismisses her feelings and pressures her into marriage, with the allusion of God. Shapiro claims that it constricts her freedom (Shapiro, 1968). The use of strong diction of a “mutilated sacrifice” emphasizes how the half obligation is unacceptable to St John. The rhetorical questions create doubt around Jane’s decision and frame it in a way that suggests the answer is no, which supports St. John’s argument.

In addition, both novels use the allusion to the Christian figure Saint Paul to illustrate how religion can be used to oppress women. Saint Paul is an apostle who spread the teachings of Jesus (Sanders, 2024). In *Jane Eyre*, St. John speaks to Jane about doing the work given by God, he states, “With St. Paul, I acknowledge myself the chiefest of sinners; but I do not suffer this sense of my personal vileness to daunt me” (Brontë 217). He actually believes that he is fit to complete the job from God like St. Paul’s mission, and wants to persuade Jane to go with him. He uses St. Paul as a front to dissuade Jane from her doubts, attempting to convince her to marry him and to go to India, despite it going against her wishes. Brontë’s use of biblical allusion shows how men justify imposing their ideas onto women. Furthermore, in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Aunt Lydia also references Saint Paul. Offred recalls her words at the Red Center, “Hair must be long but covered...Saint Paul said it's either that or a close shave” (Atwood 70). Atwood references the biblical figure of Saint Paul to demonstrate how the Christian teachings and beliefs that schools and society enforce limit women’s choices. Society constrains the way that

women can dress and style their hair. Therefore, the Christian beliefs and teachings lead to the oppression of women in their way of dressing and make them act against their wishes.

## Conclusion

*Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë's and *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood both show how gender roles, social class and religion oppress women. The authors do this through the use of various literary devices including anaphoras, allusions, metaphors, and choice of diction. Though the novels reflect different times and periods, the progressive ideas regarding feminism demonstrate that women are oppressed by men in different aspects. The novels show the evolution of the waves of feminism going from equal opportunity in *Jane Eyre* to reproductive rights in *The Handmaid's Tale*. The authors critique the way men mistreat women of the same, lower and lowest classes. The teaching and spreading of Christian beliefs enable men to make women conform to their patriarchal ideas. Brontë critiques the oppression through Jane and Blanche's repression, while Atwood comments on it through the dystopian society where women's bodies are tools for men to have offspring. These similar ideas in unrelated novels showcase the continued criticism of oppression through a feminist perspective.

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