

In Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, state indoctrination and a sequestering of women's rights has caused Gilead's female population to lose the meaningful agency they once had in their lives. This loss of agency results in the forgoing of one's personal identity and individualism.

Background:

- How the government started, perversion of 2nd wave feminism
- Role of women
  
- "The sitting room is supposed to be Serena Joy's territory, he's supposed to ask permission to enter it... before Serena Joy can speak he steps forward into the room anyway" (98)
  - Context: Offred meets her Commander for the first time
  - Serena Joy's life now in the regime strongly contrasts to the life she lead prior to the regime's rise to power.
  - While she used to be a free spirit, a singer who had the agency in her life to sing the way she wanted to sing and sing what she wanted to sing, her life now is relegated to be inside the home, embodying so-called traditional values.
  - Limits to her agency are subtly outlined when her husband, the Commander enters the room without her permission.
    - Undermines Serena Joy's authority within their home, but also demonstrates that Serena Joy's voice is completely irrelevant to the decisions he makes in the privacy of their own home, which further supports Serena Joy's loss of meaningful agency at the hands of the male elite.
  
- "And after she's gone: Little whores, all of them, but still, you can't be choosy. You take what they hand out, right, girls? That from the Commander's Wife" (132)
  - Context: While Janine is pregnant and the Wives are together partying on the Birth Day
  - Wives, through years of being relegated to follow so-called traditional values, have accepted the identity of the ideal Wife the state foisted upon them.
    - Serena Joy, and by extension, the other Wives, have accepted the state-sponsored identity of the ideal Wife, one who perpetrates the division within the classes of their classist society while remaining an example of a woman who follows so-called traditional values - whose voice, authority, and agency are disregarded by their husbands when it comes to making decisions.
  
- "'Don't look at me,' she says, 'They're watching'" (323)
  - Context: Ofglen's response to Offred during the Particution
  - One of the most poignant moments demonstrating how deep the state's sequestering of rights is.
    - Particution is meant to be a voluntary release from the so-called traditional values for the Handmaids to let go of pent-up energy, the Handmaids must actually beat the accused to death, lest they get interrogated and killed, or worse, by the Eyes.

- This sort of false sense of agency is exactly what the state wants to give the Handmaids so that they feel as if they are playing an active role in their lives, for the few moments between Aunt Lydia's whistles.
  - However, the falsehood of this catharsis undermines the agency the state seems to generously grant, instead painting the Handmaids as just a mass that can be silenced by granting false routine minimal agency, regardless of their individual views or beliefs.
- "‘Rest break once an hour’, says the Aunt, ‘You know the rules.’ The woman begins to protest, in a whiny desperate voice." (279)
  - Context: Aunt scolding one of the working women about abiding by her break schedule
  - The Aunt's presence within this scene demonstrates that the state's authoritarian presence even in Jezebel's.
    - Reveals that Jezebel's has a purpose, which is to satisfy officers' non-ideal primal passions.
    - The women who service these officers are still subject to some of the same restrictions women within the society are subjected to, although a little more lenient.
    - Regardless of the limits of restrictions, the state's presence in policing these women with Aunts that watch their every move robs even these women of meaningful agency.
- "She is frightening me now, because what I hear in her voice is indifference, a lack of volition" (288)
  - Context: Moira presenting her arguments about why life in Jezebel's isn't as bad as it's made out to be.
  - Moira's complete reversal of personality, from being a confident and brazen feminist, resisting the regime to being in resigned defeat, rationalizing her current situation as one she chose and a coping mechanism speaks to how deeply the state degrades the human spirit and robs these women of their agency, even when it means going against their own values.
    - Although she enjoys luxuries that Offred and the other Handmaids don't have like drink and drugs, she effectively traded even more control of her body and mind for those luxuries.
    - Moira is well aware that her time enjoying these luxuries is limited, and in three years when she is deemed unfit to be in Jezebel's, she is in resigned indifference to the reality that she'll be tossed out to the Colonies and spend the rest of her life in a toxic wasteland.
    - The insight that Jezebel's is a state-sponsored facility to satisfy officers is key in understanding the state's role in Moira's loss of agency and identity.

## Media Connection

Similarly to Cao Cao using one of his advisors as a scapegoat to quiet his men, the theme of using scapegoats to either justify the state's decisions or eliminate political enemies is one that is shared by authoritarian governments, and the Republic of Gilead is no

exception. We see this first hand through the participation of a member of MayDay, when it is revealed to Offred that the man in question is not a rapist, but is actually a politician, who the state wants to silence. This unchecked power leaves the government with no accountability, but with nobody left to question their authority.

## Conclusion

The Handmaid's Tale is a gripping, well-written, nightmare of a society in which the state twists ideas from a feminist movement to establish a classist, patriarchal regime that oppresses women by robbing them of meaningful agency, in every class class they're in, explored through the Handmaids, Wives, and sex slaves of Jezebel's. Moreover, the parallels this story of the future has with cunning and decisive warlords of Ancient China reveal key insight into the efficacy of Gilead's use of scapegoats. Thank you so much for listening to this presentation.