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Cover Page Footnote

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Parodies and Distorted Shadows: Pseudo-Feminism in *The Handmaid's Tale*

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Abstract

Margaret Atwood founded a genre of female dystopia when she published *The Handmaid's Tale* in 1985, but female does not always equate to feminist, and it certainly does not in this instance. This paper analyzes the ways in which *The Handmaid's Tale* villainizes women through characterization, parallelism, motifs, and other elements, paying particular attention to Offred as well as the ways in which women – particularly Offred's own activist mother and the violent, sadistic Aunts – are blamed for the Gileadean regime far more than any male character. In short, this paper will examine the ways in which *The Handmaid's Tale* mirrors a feminist call to action as a call to inaction and culpability, exploring the novel as a work of pseudo-feminism.

Keywords: The Handmaid's Tale, Margaret Atwood, Pseudo-Feminism, Feminism

Full Text

Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel *The Handmaid's Tale* is often hailed one of the greatest feminist works of the twentieth century. Atwood created a genre of female dystopia when she published *The Handmaid's Tale*, but female does not always equate to feminist, and it certainly does not in this case. While it exposes the inequalities that women face in our own society, *The Handmaid's Tale* contains an underlying, antifeminist narrative; through characterization, motifs,

and other recurring elements throughout the text, the novel paradoxically undermines its own message, villainizing and blaming women as a whole. The novel is not a call to action, but a call to inaction; it is not a tale of feminism, but one of pseudo-feminism.

Many aspects – including themes, events, and characters – are marked by duality or multiplicity throughout *The Handmaid's Tale*. In many cases, these duality motifs serve to further degrade women or prepare the context for other elements to degrade women. Several of these dichotomies recur as themes and motifs for the duration of the novel. The motif of blood, for example, is one of the key elements of the text and very easily displays a pivotal dichotomy; University of North Carolina professor Pamela Cooper explains in her article “‘A Body Story with a Vengeance’: Anatomy and Struggle in *The Bell Jar* and *The Handmaid's Tale*” that “blood . . . confesses the gendered ambivalences of the flesh by its double signification. In the repertoire of physical functions, blood marks both the site of the wound where life ebbs away, and the viability of the uterus where life declares itself” (93). Blood simultaneously signifies life and death. For handmaids, this symbol of life and death is taken a step further. In the case of handmaids, blood signifies both fertility and lack of pregnancy; the blood that makes handmaids valuable to Gilead is the same blood that shows they have not succeeded in providing a child for their Commanders. Blood, therefore, contradicts itself in proving a woman's value and her lack thereof. Offred is “allowed to survive only because she can bear children” (Devi and Swamy 130), but it is this capability that has diminished women to nothing more than a womb. Cooper touches upon this dichotomy as she goes on to claim that “blood and bleeding are not accidental to but *constitutive* of women's subjecthood” (“A Body Story with a Vengeance” 93); these handmaids are “used for their fertility” (Blondiau 47) and discarded for their infertility.

In Gilead, menstruation allows a woman to be a handmaid rather than a Martha or an “unwoman,” but, as Cooper states, it is menstruation that put women in a lesser position than men from the beginning. While this certainly displays an injustice faced by women and could appear as a call to action, this dichotomy in the role of blood for handmaids eerily hints at victim blaming; women in Gilead are not punished for *not* having penises but rather for having uteruses. They are capable of menstruation and thus put to work as victims of ceremonial rape, and if they continue menstruating for longer than Gilead deems acceptable, if they fail to get pregnant in their first three placements, they are sent to the Colonies. The text seems to subliminally suggest that the suffering of women is caused by women: women menstruate, so they suffer; they bleed of their own accord.

Diving deeper into the duality of the female body, Pamela Cooper points out in her article “Sexual Surveillance and Medical Authority in Two Versions of *The Handmaid's Tale*” that “the body of the fertile woman both conceals and denies the secret of male incapacity” (53). Women, therefore, have some small power over the men in Gilead. When visiting the doctor, Offred recounts a harrowing scene of coercion in which the doctor tells her, “Most of those old guys can’t make it anymore. Or they’re sterile.” Offred nearly gasps, remarking, “he’s said a forbidden word. *Sterile*. There is no such thing as a sterile man anymore, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that’s the law” (61). Though the doctor affirms that the men are indeed infertile, it is the women who are deemed barren. The female bodies disguise male infertility, providing a space for “the exiled male truth [to] safely lodge” (Cooper, “Sexual Surveillance” 53), keeping male secrets safe within their own reproductive organs through the questioning of their own fertility. Women’s bodies, therefore, hold power over men by their ability to conceal secrets of sterility.

Despite this small power that women are afforded, it is the female body itself that allows men to exert their power over women and render them powerless. In her article “‘The Missionary Position’: Feminism and Nationalism in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*,” American literature scholar Sandra Tomc explores this theme of masculine power: “within Gilead’s gendered economy of power, sexual penetration is the most obvious manifestation of threat” (76). Male penetration through sex becomes the primary display of masculine power over women, and it becomes the foundation of the gender imbalance within Gilead. Women are diminished to nothing more than “a usable body” (Atwood 163); a space to penetrate. This penetration becomes a religious experience for the men in Gilead, but for women, it is something to be feared. In fact, it was penetration that Aunt Lydia used as a scare tactic in the Red Center: Offred tells us that Aunt Lydia dramatically remarked, “to be seen – *to be seen* – is to be – her voice trembled – penetrated” (28). It is penetration – a display of utmost male power over females – that results from the female body, as it both lends and strips a woman of power. Further, if a woman were to become pregnant with her Commander’s child, the female body full of power contradictions would undergo a “grotesque transformation . . . into [a] passive receptacle for the perpetuation of the genes of the Regime’s Commanders” (Davidson); that is, on top of the power-lending versus power-stripping duality of the female body, there is also the concept of masculine power being perpetuated and birthed by the female body. Once again, this theme of duality and multiplicity serves to blame women for both their own misfortune and the downfall of society as a whole; women perpetuate the regime through childbearing and birth.

The subtle inculcation of women permeates both the past and the present. Because the story “weaves from the current to the past, the personal and the political” (Williamson 262), some of the most thought-provoking moments occur with the help of flashbacks into Offred’s

life before Gilead. While this technique serves many purposes and provides many insights into characterization and other important aspects of the novel, it also presents a continuity of timelines and a duality of events. In a flashback early on in the novel, Offred remembers going to a park with her mother. Offred recalls that “there were some women burning books, that’s what she was really there for . . . the books were magazines. They must have poured gasoline, because the flames shot high, and then they began dumping the magazines” (38). Later in the novel, it is revealed that the new government of Gilead has also burned magazines. When the Commander gives Offred an old *Vogue*, Offred says, “But these were supposed to have been burned . . . There were house-to-house searches, bonfires” (157). Magazine-burning occurs in both pre-Gileadean society and in Gilead itself; this is a chronological echo, a repetition of an event across the timeline. The personal – Offred’s mother – combines over time with the political actions of Gilead and women’s roles of past and present.

Why, then, is magazine-burning an act of feminism when a woman burns a pornographic magazine, but an act of misogyny when the government burns a *Vogue*? In an effort to blame the feminism movement for the existence of the new regime, the text suggests that the former and the latter are inherently linked. While Offred’s mother intended to burn magazines to end the objectification of women, she unknowingly foreshadowed the policies of Gilead; the future she had worked for “eventuated in the oppression she thought she was fighting in burning pornographic magazines” (Feuer 89). Offred’s mother deems the magazine models’ careers as indecent, ironically stripping them of their freedom with the intention of freeing all women from sexual objectification; because of this overlap between past and present, Offred’s mother’s action of burning magazines “subtly implicates Offred’s mother and her friends in the deeds of the

Gileadean society” (Tolan 151). The duplication of events in past and present seem to serve the same purpose as the blood dichotomy: woman blaming.

Offred’s mother’s magazine-burning, however, is not the only way that her character is used to cast a negative light on womankind; the ways in which she is treated by Offred also serve the anti-woman themes. Offred states directly that she resented her mother’s activism and her “rowdy friends” (180), and she even implies that she resents her mother’s resistance to gender role conformity. When Offred enters the kitchen in the Commander’s home, she remarks that it smells like bread baking and then goes on to say, “It smells of mothers; although my own mother did not make bread” (47). Offred has decided that women should remain in the kitchen baking bread, and she seems to resent the fact that her mother never baked bread and spent her days protesting rather than kneading. Even after Gilead has begun, Offred reflects back on her mother with criticism and sexist opinions; even the horrors of Gilead have not brought Offred to respect women.

Motherly figures throughout the text continue to disappoint Offred and both experience and incite envy for Offred and others. Perhaps Offred is seeking a surrogate mother to replace her rebellious feminist mother when she states that she “wanted to turn [Serena Joy] into . . . a motherly figure, someone who would understand and protect” (16) her in the ways her real mother did not. However, women in *The Handmaid’s Tale* are chronically malevolent, and “controlling Offred is the only outlet through which Serena can express her frustration” (Callaway 57); Offred merely experiences a distorted, horrific version of her already-strenuous relationship with her real mother. Much like Offred’s mother, Serena’s ultimate goal is to ignore Offred. Offred describes Serena’s eyes as “flat hostile blue . . . a blue that shuts you out” (15), and Serena openly states her expectations the very moment she meets Offred: “I want to see as

little of you as possible” (15). Offred has gotten her wish of attaining another mother, but this one is not warm and welcoming, either.

As foil characters, Serena Joy and Offred’s mother share many characteristics, but differ greatly. Ironically, both Offred’s mother and Serena Joy are blamed by the text for the new regime, but both women had very different philosophies; while Offred’s mother protested sexism and inadvertently stripped women of their freedom to rule their own bodies, Serena Joy advocated wholly in favor of a new regime in which “women should stay home” (Atwood 45). Though on opposite ends of the spectrum, both are given responsibility for the downfall of women. Further, both women degrade Offred in different ways. While Offred’s mother mocks Offred for being “such a prude” (180), Serena looks upon Offred with disgust, remarking simply and matter-of-factly, “A slut” (287). Though the two have vastly different ideals and actions, both are critical and demeaning toward Offred. As representatives of womankind, Offred’s mother and Serena Joy villainize and cast blame upon all women throughout the duration of the novel.

These woman-versus-woman sentiments are not secondary to the tale by any means. Before readers are exposed to a single corner of the world of Gilead, they are presented with the frequently overlooked first half of the framing narrative. Three quotes prepare readers for their journey to Gilead, the first of which spells out the very anti-women sentiments that continue throughout the novel. An excerpt from Genesis serves as the inspiration for Gilead’s new reproductive system: “And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister . . . And she said, Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her, and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her” (qtd. in Atwood IX). Rachel and Leah are the two sisters married to Jacob in Genesis and the presumed namesakes for the Rachel and Leah Re-

Education Center where future handmaids are sent for their training. In Genesis, however, Rachel envies her own sister her fertility and begins the practice of handmaidenship as “a female ploy, the strategy of a barren wife to keep her husband away from the other woman – who just happens to be his wife, and fertile” (Beauchamp 19). Envy, specifically the envy experienced between Rachel and Leah – is both the inspiration for Gilead and held in such high esteem that the handmaid training facility is named in homage to the envy. This is not hidden, secret knowledge; Atwood has provided readers with the excerpt from Genesis just inside the front cover. Envy is the foundation upon which Gilead has been built, and it was a woman who initiated this practice, subjecting her own maid to rape in order to keep her husband away from his other wife.

Just as Rachel envied Leah, the handmaids envy those among them who have gotten pregnant. When Janine shows off her large stomach, Offred describes her as “an object of envy” and states, “we covet her” (26). The barren wives, in Rachel’s role, envy the handmaids, too. When Janine gives birth to the baby, Offred notes that “envy radiates from them” (126). However, babies are not the only object of envy; the women in this text will envy anything of anyone. Though she questions it, Offred admits to her envy toward Serena Joy: “I was jealous of her; but how could I be jealous of a woman so obviously dried up” (161). Though most female characters express envy at one point or another throughout the text, Offred is one of the only characters in the novel to envy a barren female. She questions this feeling, but it is clear that Offred’s envy is not one for children, like Rachel or the other handmaids and wives. When she is watching Serena working in the garden, Offred remarks, “What I coveted was the shears;” Offred covets the shears after describing in depth Serena’s actions as, “some blitzkrieg, some kamikaze, committed on the swelling genitalia of the flowers” (153). Offred’s envy of Serena’s

shears is the desire for sterility and an escape from handmaidenhood, ceremonial rape, and life as a walking womb. Offred, a stand-in for Bilhah, brings the circle of envy together and reveals a major negative trait of women in the novel: whether pregnant or not, barren or fertile, women envy women.

While many female characters experience envy, complacency, and partial blame for Gilead's existence, Atwood's female characters would not appear nearly as sadistic if not for the Aunts. The Aunts are barren women who "saved their skins by collaborating and who train the handmaids in self-suppression" (Staels 455). As instructors at the Rachel and Leah Re-Education Center, the Aunts specialize in victim-blaming, brainwashing, and violence. When Janine speaks of her rape, the Aunts lead a chant of "*Her fault, her fault, her fault*" (72). When this is read in conjunction with the blaming of feminists and Serena, a distorted image is revealed: it is the Aunts who incite the woman-blaming. Envy is not the only malicious emotion felt between women; blame and hatred are felt, as well. The Aunts sacrifice their own sex for power.

As if victim-blaming and psychological torture was not enough, the Aunts are allowed to use extreme violence on the handmaids – just so long as they do not interfere with a woman's reproductive system; this is "important because even the wives are not allowed to use force to abuse or punish the handmaids" (Johnson 73). The Aunts are tyrants with actions far exceeding name-calling and jealousy. After Moira's attempted escape, Offred tells us in a dry, emotionless tone:

[Moira] could not walk for a week, her feet would not fit into her shoes, they were too swollen. It was the feet they'd do, for a first offense. They used steel cables, frayed at the ends. After that the hands. They didn't care what they did to your

feet or your hands, even if it was permanent. Remember, said Aunt Lydia. For our purposes your feet and your hands are not essential. (Atwood 91)

While Offred, her mother, Serena Joy, and the other female characters have displayed unlikability, complacency, jealousy, and verbal abuse, there is no character – male or female – in the text who shows such abhorrent characteristics as the Aunts, deriving extreme pleasure from the torture and disfigurement of their fellow women. Even the Commanders and other men do not seek to harm women, it is merely an unfortunate side effect of ceremonial rape. This element of the text serves to villainize women beyond reprieve. The Aunts suggest that woman's only enemy is woman.

The use of characters, however, is merely one way in which the text shows its anti-feminist undertones. As a rather introspective narrator, Offred spends a large portion of her story inside her head, dissecting words and formulating new meanings for sentences. In examining the duplicity of word meanings, Offred focuses much of the novel on verbal irony. One of the most analyzed instances of Offred's diction analysis comes while she sits waiting, thinking, in her bedroom: "I sit in the chair and think about the word *chair*" she states. "It can also mean the leader of a meeting. It can also mean a mode of execution. It is the first syllable in *charity*. It is the French word for flesh. None of these facts has any connection with the others" (110). In this excerpt, Offred rattles off five different meanings for a single syllable before declaring that they are not linked in any way. She claims that the chair in which she sits is neither power-lending nor lethal, neither a symbol of love nor a symbol of lust. However, as David Hogsette, Director of Writing at Grove City College, states, women in Gilead "do not have overt powers of choice" (263), and it is not surprising that Offred dismisses the responsibility of linking the words and pawns the job off onto readers. As Pennsylvania State University professor Jennifer Wagner-

Lawlor suggests, “Each time a choice is offered, Offred baulks” (86). Rather than putting in extra thought – which could potentially result in pain for herself – Offred simply dismisses the thought and moves on to an in-depth description of her breakfast tray.

However, readers remain far enough removed from the narrative to analyze these words and piece them together. As a symbol for Offred’s life in Gilead, the chair certainly does tie together all four of its alternative meanings. Upon closer examination, the four meanings are actually two options paired with their respective consequence. She could assume agency and become a large part of Mayday – essentially becoming the “leader of a meeting” – but she could lose her life as a result, so she will not choose that option. Her other choice is to embrace her relationships with Nick and the Commander – implementing the Christian virtue of charity and loving her neighbor – but if she gives in to Gileadean life so fully, then she will truly be reduced to all flesh – a walking womb – moving from Commander’s household to Commander’s household and becoming complicit in Gilead’s foundation. She neither wants to die nor give in to Gilead’s power structure. Neither choice is appealing to Offred, so she dismisses their relation and changes the subject of her thoughts. This dismissal of thoughts suggests that “very structure [of Offred’s narrative] is characterized by ironic provisionality, the refusal to commit to any one version” (Wagner-Lawlor 86). The multiplicity of word meanings coupled with the duality of options serve as a stark contrast from Offred’s choice to do nothing.

Another instance of Offred’s incredibly close focus on diction comes within the second chapter of the book; in describing the bedroom assigned to her, Offred states, “The door of the room – not *my* room, I refuse to say *my* – is not locked” (8). Offred, who focuses so closely on words that entire pages are dedicated to their various meanings, decides that an impersonal article would be best to describe the bedroom as opposed to a possessive pronoun. In choosing

this title for the room, she essentially relinquishes the one small possession she is permitted to have for herself in Gilead. Her bedroom is one of the only instances that she can rightfully use the word “my” – even her body hardly belongs to her so much as to the Commander and Serena Joy – and yet she forfeits it. However, this small act of giving up her only possession can be justified as an act of rebellion within and rejection of Gilead. Refusing to call the bedroom her own is perhaps one of the only acts against Gilead in which she partakes.

However, Offred cannot even stick with this small difference between possessive pronoun and article. By chapter eight, she sees the Commander near the bedroom and asks, “Was he invading? Was he in my room? I called it *mine*” (49). As Wagner-Lawlor states so plainly, in Offred’s many contradictions, “she appears to be fence-sitting” (86). Though Offred chooses her words carefully, tells her narrative with excruciating attention to detail, she begins to use the possessive pronoun when referring to her bedroom. Her small act of rebellion against Gilead is gone. This duality between *the* and *my* displays Offred’s inability to make a decision and stick with it. Because of subtleties like this one, the narrative is laced with dualities, duplicities, and dichotomies that work to degrade women’s reputations. In this instance, duality is implemented to showcase Offred’s contentedness in Gilead and her indeterminate nature.

Another motif that comments on Offred’s complacency appears early in the text when Offred begins to fixate on flowers, specifically tulips. Offred discusses the tulips growing in the garden, or, as she refers to it, “the domain of the Commander’s Wife” (12). Offred describes the tulips as, “red, a darker crimson towards the stem, as if they have been cut and are beginning to heal there” (12). In sharing the same color as the government-issued handmaid dresses, the tulips represent the handmaids, specifically Offred. Rooted into the ground in the domain of the Commander’s Wife, Offred is trapped and has been metaphorically cut away at, made into

nothing but a womb and stripped of her identity, and literally cut during the Ceremony when “the rings of [Serena Joy’s] left hand cut into [Offred’s] fingers” (Atwood 94). Both figuratively in the garden and literally in the bed, Offred has been cut – but she is already somewhat healed. This initial description of the tulips as red and healing sets the stage for Offred’s characterization for the remainder of the novel; Offred accepts her position quite easily and neither champions, nor supports, the resistance. Offred is healing and becoming accustomed to Gilead. The tulips become a motif throughout the text; they are nearly always present when Offred’s indifference increases.

On a walk with Ofglen, Offred’s handmaid double, the pair walk by the recent victims of the Men’s Salvaging. Offred describes six bodies hanging on a brick wall, blood stained with bags pulled over their heads. In a moment for which Offred’s honesty could be admired, she remarks, “What I feel towards them is blankness. What I feel is that I must not feel. What I feel is partly relief” (33). Here, Offred surrenders to the world of Gilead. She even quotes Aunt Lydia: “Ordinary . . . is what you are used to. This may not seem ordinary to you now, but after a time it will. It will become ordinary” (33). Offred’s acceptance of the world of Gilead is undoubtedly growing, and it is no surprise that tulips are mentioned on the same page. Offred describes one of the men hanging on the wall and the blood seeping through his bag on his head: “I look at the one red smile. The red of the smile is the same as the red of the tulips in Serena Joy’s garden, towards the base of the flowers where they are beginning to heal. The red is the same but there is no connection” (33). The Tulips of Complacency have returned, but Offred tells readers to look away, again declaring that two inherently and symbolically linked items are not in any way related. Here, Dr. Madonne Miner insists that “we must question her claim that ‘there is no connection’ between the red of the blood and the red of Serena’s tulips” (151). After

tracking the coinciding motif of tulips and theme of indifference, readers can quickly agree with Miner that Offred's word is not to be taken in this case; the victim of the Men's Salvaging does indeed have something in common with the tulips in Serena's garden: both evoke complacency in Offred.

Miner goes on in her article "'Trust Me': Reading the Romance Plot in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*" to analyze yet another similarity between Serena's tulips and the man's smile of blood: "Thinking about the red of a smile and that of tulips, we might argue that at least superficially, both items suggest a type of sensual pleasure" (151). Miner's thoughts on the connection between the use of tulips and a smile could open the door to another vehicle for – and reason for – Offred's complacency: sensuality. As early as the eighth chapter of Atwood's novel, Offred introduces a love interest to readers. Nick, the chauffeur, is described to readers with the tulip motif inserted right into the middle of his description:

In the driveway, Nick is polishing the Whirlwind again . . . The tulips along the border are redder than ever, opening, no longer wine cups but chalices; thrusting themselves up, to what end? They are, after all, empty. When they are old they turn themselves inside out, then explode slowly, the petals thrown out like shards.

Nick looks up and begins to whistle. Then he says, "Nice walk?" (45)

To have a description of tulips this overtly sexual crammed between descriptions of Nick is perhaps the most palpable form of foreshadowing in the entirety of the novel. In this section, the tulips become Offred and her womb. This is not the only time in the novel that a chalice is mentioned; Offred later describes herself and the other handmaids as "two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (136). The link between Offred and the tulips is clearer than ever. The chalices, Offred, thrust themselves up, desperate, but in the end, they are nothing

but empty; Offred is not pregnant. The description of exploding and throwing out petals “like shards” serves as a beautifully violent representation of ovulation.

However, it is the location of this blatantly uterine description of tulips that seems to further Miner’s belief in the sensuality of tulips. Interrupting the Nick narrative, the description of the tulips foreshadows that Nick will become Offred’s gateway into becoming pregnant. The sexual description of the tulips “thrusting” up foreshadows Offred’s affair with Nick, and the tulip motif in general, when associated so closely with Nick, foreshadows that Offred will sacrifice her freedom further because of Nick’s presence in her life; Offred’s devotion to Nick will eradicate any trace of her agency in *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

About midway through the tale of Offred’s normal life in Gilead, an option for escape is presented to her. After tentatively probing Offred on a walk, Ofglen has discovered that Offred is not “a true believer” (168) as she had previously suspected; Ofglen suggests to Offred, “You can join us” (168). Offred describes “hope . . . rising in [her], like sap in a tree. Blood in a wound” (169), but despite her excitement, Offred inevitably does nothing. Instead, Offred begins her romantic relationship with Nick. After establishing her relationship with Nick, Offred resolves to ignore Ofglen and the resistance: “I hardly listen to her,” Offred admits, “What use [is Mayday], for me, now?” (270). Offred has found her romance subplot and essentially given up on the primary plot of escape. Once “Offred begins her affair with Nick, she loses all interest in Mayday and in the possibility of escape” (Miner 162); Offred chooses romance over freedom, and, thus, demonstrates her complacency in the world of Gilead.

In her article “The Calculus of Love and Nightmare: *The Handmaid’s Tale* and the Dystopian Tradition,” Dr. Lois Feuer compares several dystopian works, primarily analyzing Atwood’s novel, and the inherent conflict within most dystopian works: “The choice – between

happiness without freedom or freedom without happiness – is presented by . . . Atwood’s Aunt Lydia, trainer of handmaids and explicator of the regime’s rationale for its oppression” (83). These credentials awarded to Aunt Lydia make her into a kind of figurehead for Gilead and the oppression by which it thrives. Aunt Lydia’s ultimatum – happiness or freedom – becomes Offred’s conflict – or *would* become her conflict, if she had not been so quick to become “enamored of the romantic fantasy” (Morrison 317). Offred chooses happiness over freedom without much thought on the matter. Though Ofglen discussed Mayday with Offred, a conversation which would have sparked rebelliousness in even the most apathetic of protagonists, Offred forfeits her desire and ability to fight Gilead; in response to an offer by Ofglen to get Offred out of Gilead, Offred admits to the reader, “The fact is that I no longer want to leave, escape, cross the border to freedom. I want to be here, with Nick” (271). The healing tulips that once were in Serena Joy’s garden have been replaced by black-eyed Susans, a flower known for its adaptability. Offred has adapted to her environment.

Though we are presented with a female protagonist and a tale that exposes the mistreatment of women, the text does not call for the action of women. Early on in the text, when Offred catches a small glimpse of herself in the mirror through her white wings, she describes her reflection as “a distorted shadow, a parody of something” (Atwood 9). In this brief moment, Offred’s reflection serves as a synecdoche for the text itself; *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a distorted shadow, a parody, of feminism. From a distance, from a surface-level read, it appears to advocate for change and the proper treatment of women, but once one shifts the white wings aside and views the whole picture, it is a frightening, distorted image. It is not feminism, but pseudo-feminism, advocating for nothing more than inaction and complacency.

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