Handmaids Tale Part 2: Crash Course Literature #404

Crash Course: Literature
https://youtube.com/watch?v=zj05QxebnC4
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/zj05QxebnC4

===== (00:00) to (02:00) =====

Hi, I'm John Green, and this is Crash Course Literature. So, some of you might be familiar with Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* from the Hulu series, starring Elizabeth Moss, which is a great show. It's especially enjoyable if your favorite emotional experiences are fear, loathing, and waking nightmares. But the book is even better.

Now, that's not always the case. The movie *Die Hard* was better than the book it was based on. *The Fault in Our Stars* was a very good film. But it is true of *The Handmaid's Tale*.

So, read it. All right, last time we discussed the historical events that influenced Atwood, as well as why she characterizes her novel as speculative fiction. Today, I want to focus on the narrative's perspective or perspectives.

Although Atwood has said she wanted to write from a "female" point of view, and she obviously literally did that, I want to discuss today whether there is distinctively or inherent "female" or "male" point of view outside of just narration, and also why Atwood presents her final chapter from the perspective of a male scholar. (Music and Introduction) So *The Handmaid's Tale* is set in the reproductively challenged Republic of Gilead, where fertile women are forced to have babies with military commanders. And to maintain her sanity, Atwood's protagonist, Offred, engages in personal rituals and also connects with other women, like her college friend Moira and also a fellow handmaid named Ofglen. Let's face it.

Offred's life is terrible. Her husband and child have been taken away; her mother is missing; if she fails to conceive, she will be forced to clean up toxic sludge. And worse, her commander appears to be sterile.

A handsy obstetrician offers to help Offred conceive. She declines. The commander's wife then bribes Offred to mate with her gardener/chauffeur Nick, which Offred accepts.

Meanwhile, the commander entreats Offred to play Scrabble, to wear some seriously old lingerie, and to visit a brothel called Jezebel's.

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At Jezebel's, Offred discovers that Moira is working as a prostitute, and it's from Moira that she learns of her mother's fate. After that, Offred begins to lose her grip. When Ofglen asks her to become a spy for the Mayday Resistance Movement, Offred drops the ball. The commander's wife confronts Offred with the recently-worn lingerie, and, right before the novel ends, Offred is arrested.

So okay, let's talk about whether this narrative is presented from a female point of view. It's a tricky question. The relationship between gender and narrative has sparked decades of academic debate about how sex and gender and sexuality shaped texts and their analysis, and I'm not going to resolve it today.

I'm just going to try to introduce it to you. So, in the 1960s, the structuralist theorist, Tzvetan Todorov coined the term Narratology. So, we're accustomed to analyzing the themes and conventions and symbols of a text.

Todorov argued that we should also be analyzing the structure and function of narrative. Soon, feminist theorists began to explore the implications of gender on narrative forms. Some fought to define the distinctively feminist poetics.

Others resisted the idea that there's a fundamentally female consciousness or self. In 1975, the French theorist Hélène Cixous coined the term Écriture Féminine, loosely translated to mean Women's Writing, and yes, I know that my French pronunciation is fantastic. Cixous maintained that misogynistic culture had driven women from exploring their desires, and she encouraged the women to use their bodies as a source of inspiration.

But she also recognized that femininity is a social construct, defined as much by cultural convention as by biological characteristics. Cixous associated "féminine" writing with "openness." And for her, women's writing isn't the exclusive provenance of women; it's a non-exclusionary approach to exploring that which is different or "other." It's a way of regarding the world that's accessible to all genders. But I want to explore the degree to which *The Handmaid's Tale* exhibits this kind of openness.

We know that Offred often presents her bodily experience by cataloging physical sensations.

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"Sunlight comes in through the window too, and falls on the floor, which is made of wood, in narrow strips, highly polished. A chair, sunlight, flowers: these are not to be dismissed. I'm alive, I live, I breathe. I put my hand out, unfolded, into the sunlight." Now, this is a tiny moment of expressing bodily autonomy, putting her own unfolded hand into the sunlight, but it's still real. Offred has been robbed of her name and her freedom, but she still finds ways to express her existence using her body, including, by the way, her relationship with Nick.

And she also asserts her existence by telling stories. "If it's a story, even in my head, I must be telling it to someone. You can't tell a story only to yourself. There's always someone else, even when there is no one."

This is storytelling as a survival technique, as a way of establishing one's humanity when the broader culture is denying it. Those needs to testify and connect and experience the sensate world are human desires, not restricted by a particular gender.

But pay attention to the way Offred writes about her body and her bodily experiences. Sometimes she describes her body from an external perspective. "I know they are watching, these two men who aren't yet permitted to touch women. They touch with their eyes instead and I move my hips a little, feeling the full red skirts sway around me. I enjoy the power; power of a dog bone, passive but there."

Offred's ability to view herself from the outside here is one manifestation among many of her openness to imagining the perspective of others.

But at other times, Offred describes her body from a different perspective, from within. "I sink down into my body as into a swamp, fenland, where only I know the footing. Treacherous ground, my own territory. I'm a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping.

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Inside it is a space, huge as the sky at night and dark and curved like that, though black-red rather than black. Pinpoints of light swell,

sparkle, burst and shrivel within it, countless as stars."

Thinking into her body, Offred explores a territory that is inaccessible to others. A more real, vast space within, huge as the sky at night. Her own territory. She says it's treacherous ground but still her own.

And it's also worth considering that Offred chooses to have sex with the gardener Nick and states very clearly why. "I went back to Nick. Time after time, on my own. I did not do it for him, but for myself entirely."

So, Offred's descriptions of having a female body, her openness to external perspectives, and her exploration of desire exhibit the qualities associated with Écriture Féminine.

But here's the wrinkle. Offred recorded her story on thirty unnumbered cassette tapes, and it was two male scholars who used "guess work" to arrange her blocks of speech into texts. In other words, it was male editors who created the structure to Offred's narrative that we're reading.

So, to use an analysis word, that problematizes a bit what sex, gender, and/or sexuality have to do with narrative structure in this novel. All right, there is this theorist Peter Brooks who famously described the classic plot as a trajectory of desire that mirrors the sexual experience of a normalized male subject. Like in Brooks's reading, the start of the story requires arousal, the middle entails expectation, frustration and suspense, and the end involves a climactic release from desire.

Now, many readers, including, I must say, myself, feel that this theory leaves just a bit to be desired. Some feminist theories have argued that women's stories are patterns: they emphasize details, repetition, focus more intently on the relationships between events, contain circular plot structures and involve multiple moments of climax.

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But I would argue it's just too simplistic to say that sex or gender or sexuality dictate what kind of plot you can write. All narratives are the product of a complex series of choices, some conscious and some not. Men write circular fiction that doesn't resolve. Women write books with classic plotting. And all attempts to put story or, for that matter, gender into dichotomous boxes are doomed.

That said, Offred's story, as we read it, has the plot structure that mirrors the classic so-called male plot trajectory. But is that inherent to her story or created by later scholars? Thinking about that, other questions emerge: how might her story be different if presented in an alternate order, and why did Atwood include the Historical Notes on the Handmaid's Tale chapter in the first place?

Well, let's go to the Thought Bubble. So, like the final chapter of Orwell's *1984*, the Principles of Newspeak, the Historical Notes assures us that the dystopian regime will eventually be overthrown, and of course this is good news, but we have not left a dystopia for a utopia. In this chapter, we learn that the Conference Chair is Professor Maryann Crescent Moon, Department of Caucasian Anthropology, University of Denay, Nunavit.

Apparently, women will regain the right to education, and Caucasians may be marginal to dominant culture. But Crescent Moon works for a fictional university, while the male keynote speaker Professor James Darcy Pieixoto is affiliated with a historic bastion of Caucasianness, Cambridge University in England. Also, some readers have posited that Pieixoto's unusual last name is a reference to Pope Pius IX, the 19th century pope known for repressing liberal values.

So, that might say something about the kind of society that will dominate 22nd century America. Pieixoto's lecture and its reception suggest that the culture studying Gileadian studies is still profoundly misogynistic. I mean, Pieixoto objectifies Crescent Moon with some lame pseudo-flirting.

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He refers to what other historians have called the Underground Female Road as the Underground Frailroad, a joke that is met with laughter. And he says of Gilead, "Our job is not to censure but to understand," which elicits applause. But really, I mean, can't your job be both to understand and to censure? Pieixoto even credits Gilead for its "effective totalitarian system." So he may fancy himself above the injustices of Gilead but it's not like the structure of patriarchy has been dismantled.

Thanks, Thought Bubble. Pieixoto also critiques Offred for not having the "turn of mind" that could benefit his own research. "She could have told us much about the workings of the Gileadean Empire, had she had the instincts of a reporter or a spy." That is to say, he wished she had approached the Gilead as a prototypical male historian writing about great men and empire building. But of course, we as readers recognize the tremendous value in the way that Offred has told her story and the true heroism that telling it required.

And then after Pieixoto receives his final applause comes the novel's amazing last line. "Are there any questions?" There are many, of course, but the ones that reverberate for me are "Could this happen now? Could this happen here?"

I think what makes *The Handmaid's Tale* so upsetting is that it shows exactly how it could happen here and now. It reminds us that the battles for equal opportunity and equal protection under the law are never over and that they are never won, and that we all must heed Offred's mother's warning: Do not take our freedoms for granted.

Let us not be complacent. Next week, we'll continue our look at dystopian novels with Voltaire's *Candide*. Thanks for watching.

I'll see you then. Crash Course is filmed here in the Chad and Stacey Emigholz Studio in Indianapolis, and it's made possible by your support at Patreon. Patreon.com/crashcourse. Patreon is a voluntary subscription service where you can support Crash Course directly for a monthly donation to help us keep it free for everyone forever.

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