

ISU Log 1

The Handmaid's Tale

By Margaret Atwood ✓

ENG 3UR

Ms. Ellery

"A chair, a table, a lamp. Above, on the white ceiling, a relief ornament in the shape of a wreath, and in the center of it a blank space plastered over, ~~like the place in a face where the eye has been taken out.~~

tedious environment

simile

There must have been a chandelier, once. ~~They've removed anything you could tie a rope to.~~

plain.

references to sword

A window, two white curtains. Under the window, a window seat with a little cushion. When the window is partly open — ~~it only opens partly~~ —

the air can come in and make the curtains move. I can sit in the chair, or on the window seat, hands folded, and watch this. Sunlight comes in through the window too, and falls on the floor, which is made of wood, in narrow

boredom - lack of stimulation

strips, highly polished. I can smell the polish. There's a rug on the floor, oval, of braided rags. This is the kind of touch ~~they~~ like: folk art, archaic.

who is they?

like her, when she can no longer reproduce

made by women, in their spare time, from things that have no further use. A return to traditional values. Waste not want not. I am not being wasted Why

do I want?" (7)

out-dated decorations to bring Offred to the past.

foreshadowing
↳ her dissatisfaction with her current situation

Expand on your thinking a bit in annotation.

Context

This passage takes place at the Commander's house, just after Offred had been at the Red Center. The Red Center is a gymnasium where all the women with the ability to reproduce had been gathered and held until they are sent to live with a couple. Just after this passage, Offred hears a bell and ventures down to the kitchen where we meet Rita and Cora, the Martha's of the household. As she is walking down, she observes the other parts of the house, such as the "front staircase" (9) and the "hat-and-umbrella stand" (9). Offred is then given several tokens by the

present tense

Martha's, and sent to the Colonies. We learn that the Colonies is where the handmaids are sent to purchase meat, fruits, and vegetables, and that this shopping trip is Offred's only escape from her boring, gloomy home during the week. This passage is significant because it is the introduction to the setting of Offred's posting. This is the first time the reader learns about where Offred is staying, so it is important that an accurate impression is left. Atwood starts the description of Offred's posting with this passage, exploring the bedroom where she will be staying. This leaves the impression that Offred's bedroom is the most important room in the Commander's house. It is where Offred will spend any free time, and perhaps be the location where the sex takes place. Atwood provides the reader with a great amount of imagery and details to the mood and environment of the house, and leaves the reader with a very gloomy sense.

Analysis/Significance

One reoccurring idea in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is that the handmaids are forced to live a life with few rights and little perks. By describing a room with little detail and a negative energy, Atwood accurately demonstrates the women's poor living conditions. First off, Atwood fabricates a very tedious living space. Offred is observing only very simple furniture, such as "a chair, a table, a lamp." (7) There is also little color in the room. The walls are plain with a "white ceiling" (7), as well as the only draperies being "two white curtains." (7) Moreover, there is no mention of any light fixture in Offred's room. On the ceiling where a chandelier once hung, there is now only "a blank space, plastered over, like the place in a face where the eye has been taken out" (7). Atwood uses this simile to refer to Offred's isolation. She compares the ceiling of Offred's new room to being a face that could perhaps once look down on

almost
claustrophobic

the person living in that room. However now that the eye has been removed, Offred no longer has anybody to watch over ^{her}. Just like society, the face will be blind to the events happening in the room, leaving Offred to face them on her own. ✓

Moreover, because there is no light fixture, Offred must rely on the sun to light up her room. She says that only a limited amount of sun is able to shine in through the window, as "it only opens partly." (7) This lack of light gives the reader a sense that the room is not only plain, but somewhat gloomy. Finally, Atwood portrays the room as being a very boring space. Offred says that sometimes she can "sit in the chair, or on the window seat, hands folded, and watch [the curtains blow in the wind]" (7). This implies that there are no other means of entertainment or education in Offred's room. ^{In} On her spare time, she must sit in her room and pass time by watching the curtains in the wind. By portraying a very simple and gloomy living space, Atwood provides the sense that the handmaid's are being held almost inhumanly. ✓

↳ And that mental stimulation is counterproductive or even dangerous for the handmaids

This passage also portrays the idea that the handmaid's are living a miserable life. Atwood provides the reader with subtle hints that living in the atmosphere they have been forced to live in is enough to make the handmaids suicidal. ✓ First off, when Offred is observing the spot where the chandelier had been removed she explains that "they've removed anything you could tie a rope to." (7) Offred is suggesting that if any hooks or light fixtures were left in the rooms, many handmaids would capitalize on the opportunity to hang themselves. Moreover, when Offred goes on to describe the window she includes that "it only opens partly." (7) This again is a reference to the prevention of suicide. Offred is implying that if the windows were to open all the way, handmaids would be desperate enough to jump out the window and fall to their death. This idea is echoed again shortly after Offred's initial description of her bedroom. Offred, still in her room, restates that "the window opens only partly" and includes that "the glass in it is

shatterproof"(8). She then explains that society is not worried that the handmaids will run away, it is the "other escapes, the ones you can open in yourself," (8) that they fear. Offred is referring directly to suicide, saying that the proper prevention must be taken at the postings in order to stop the handmaids from killing themselves. With the multiple references to suicide attempts, Atwood accurately portrays the misery a handmaid faces.

So death is their only escape. Implies that there is nothing to run-away to. What does the outside world look like?

This passage questions the idea that it is the simple pleasures that matter. As Offred is observing her room, she mentions a rug on the floor made of old "braided rags." (7). She explains that it is part of a reoccurring theme, as at postings they usually use "folk art, archaic, made by women, in their spare time, from things that have no further use." (7). By surrounding the handmaids with out-dated art made by women, it gives the sense that society is trying to bring the handmaids' mindsets back to the past. Atwood describes the art as a "return to traditional values," (7). She is suggesting that the will help bring the handmaids back to the days before women had rights, where they were satisfied by achieving their simple duties of cooking and cleaning. Offred goes on to say "waste not want not" (7), and announces that "[she] is not being wasted." (7). Offred is recognizing that just as the old rags that make up the rug are not being wasted, her body is not being wasted either. She has been given a duty, a reason to be valued by society. However Offred then asks herself "why do I want?" (7). Offred is essentially saying that although she recognizes that she is not being wasted – that her life is considered valuable and useful to society – she is still not satisfied. This foreshadows that later in the novel, Offred may begin rebelling against society. She is already showing desire for something more, and with a little bit of courage may decide to stick up to society rather than just being pleased by the small pleasures.

Not Offred, but "them", the ones who control the handmaids.

→ And reproducing

"I sink down into my body as into a swamp, fenland, where only I

Simile

know the footing: Treacherous ground, my own territory. I become the

recognized her body is political, for shadows

earth. I set my ear against, listening for rumours of the future. Each

twinge, each murmur of slight pain, ripples of sloughed-off matter,

personification

swellings and diminishings of tissue, the droolings of the flesh, these are

signs, these are things I need to know about. Each month I watch for my

brings her body to life

blood, fearfully, for when it comes it means failure. I have failed once

again to fulfill the expectations of others, which have become my own.

her period is a sign that she has failed her duty to society

I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a

Simile

means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my

will. I could use it to run, push buttons of one sort or another, make things

Explain

happen. There were limits, but my body was nevertheless lithe, simple,

solid, one with me.

hyperbole

metaphor

Now the flesh arranges itself differently. 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 within its red translucent wrapping. Inside it is a

implies body is a gift

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

gives a magical sense

shrivel within it countless as stars. Every month there is a moon,

gigantic, round, heavy, an omen. It transits, pauses, continues on and

metaphor

passes out of sight, and I see despair coming towards me like famine. To

moon is her period

feel that empty, again, again. I listen to my heart, wave upon wave, salty

Simile

and red, continuing on and on, marking time." (91)

hyperbole
metaphor

hyperbole
- a hyperbole is exaggeration

simile
this could also be hyperbole, exaggerating the size of the space.

failing @
her duty makes her feel useless and empty.

her life and the passage of time is measured in menstrual

Legend? What do the different colored highlighters represent?

Context

This passage takes place while Offred is in her bedroom, just after she had been practicing her pelvic thrusts. Offred is lying on "the braided rug" (86), her ear to the ground. Offred had remembered Aunt Lydia teaching her how to practice, which leads to a flashback of life at the Red Center. The Red Centre is a gymnasium where women with the ability to reproduce were sent and held until being assigned a posting. She begins remembering the day she was first taught to practice, and the ways the women were show how to use their bodies. Just after this passage, Offred goes back to her day dreaming and has vivid flashbacks of the day she was separated from her husband, Luke, and her daughter. The placement of this passage is significant because it demonstrates the great contrast between Offred's new life and her old. Offred begins analyzing her body, she is referring to the misery brought by her failed attempts at becoming pregnant and saying that she feels empty. By immediately following this passage with a flashback introducing the daughter Offred once had, it accents Offred's struggle and how much her life has changed. Offred is struggling to achieve the thing she was taken away from. This not only provides pathos towards Offred for losing her daughter, but presents somewhat of an irony. Offred has already once had a child by her own will. However, ever since reproduction was ruled her duty to society, she has been unable to become pregnant. This passage changes thing as it is the first ^{own} eloquent knowledge the reader receives about Offred. Atwood vividly portrays Offred's thoughts and feelings, giving the reader a great understanding of her mindset.

Significance

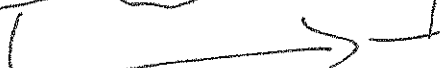
tense → should be in present tense

But Expand!

she had a family of her own and now is obsessed with providing one for someone else. Begs question what happens to her family??

But for someone else.

One main idea found in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is that a woman's sole purpose is to give birth. They are considered objects of reproduction, only valuable if fertile. At this point in the novel, Atwood has not yet explained why society is functioning this way. In this passage, Offred's aspiration of reproducing is clearly demonstrated. Offred is lying on the floor in her bedroom, and soon "becomes the earth [she] sets [her] ear to, listening for rumours of the future." (91) This hyperbole is used to demonstrate how attentive Offred has become to her physique. She is searching for any symptoms that this month it has worked: that she has finally become pregnant. Offred refers to "each twinge" (91) and the "diminishings of tissues" (91) that she feels inside of her as being signs. She says that they are "things she needs to know about" (91), as they are potential indicators of pregnancy. Offred says that "each month, [she] [watches] for blood, fearfully, for when it comes it means failure." (91). She is referring to her period, acknowledging that her only significance to society is reproduction. When her period comes she knows she has failed to become pregnant, meaning she has once again failed at her duty. Offred admits that her expectations have become parallel to the expectations of society, leading her to pray each month that her period will not come.



And she seems surprised by this

Moreover, Offred echoes her thoughts on her period a second time in this passage. She uses a simile to compare the great emptiness she feels inside of her body to a space as "huge as the sky at night" (91). In this space, Offred metaphorically states that "Every month there is a moon, gigantic, round, heavy, an omen" (91). She is comparing the cycle of the moon to her ovarian cycle. Just like her period, when the moon comes it "transits, pauses, continues on and passes out of sight" (91). Offred considers it a reminder of her failure, and when it comes she sees "despair coming towards [her] like famine." (91) By comparing Offred's misery to famine with the use of a simile, Atwood demonstrates just how emotionally destructive Offred's period

is. Each month when it comes it abolishes all of Offred's hope, making her feel "empty, again, again." (91)

A second main idea expressed in this passage is that women who still possess the ability to reproduce have been completely stripped of their rights. They have been taken away from their lives and their families and sent to a Red Centre. Here, they are assigned different postings of men to have sex with, in hopes of becoming pregnant. In this passage, Offred briefly describes how she felt about her body before she was taken to the Red Centre. She uses a simile to compare it to three things: "an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement of the accomplishment of [her] will." (91). Atwood uses these similes to indicate that in her old life, Offred had control of her own body. She is able to compare it to a tool "of pleasure," (91) or of "the accomplishment of [her] will" (91), meaning that Offred was the pilot of her own body. She had the ability to choose how it would be used, and make these decisions for herself. Offred goes on to say her body was "one with her" (91). She knew how to navigate it, and was able to recognize her limits. However, in the new social setting, this is no longer the case. After reflecting on her control in the past, Offred uses a hyperbole in saying "now the flesh arranges itself differently" (91). Although the flesh does not literally position itself differently, this exaggeration provides the reader with the sense of a great contrast. Offred is saying that in the new society, she is no longer the one making decisions regarding her body. She is literally being used by society for reproduction, and being forced to dedicate her body to this purpose.

Moreover, even Offred's name is a reminder to her and the rest of society that she is being ruled. The reader never learns what her real name is, as a handmaid's name is delegated based on the man she is assigned to. Her name was derived from the combination of "of" and "Fred", Fred being the name of the Commander.

Finally, although Offred has watched herself lose power over her body, she still takes time to concentrate on it and analyze herself. In this passage, Atwood uses a simile to compare the way Offred is connecting with her body to the connection felt when sinking “into a swamp, a fenland, where only [she] [knows] the footing.” (91) Atwood uses this simile to demonstrate how focused and intact Offred is becoming with her own physique. Although she feels like she has lost all control, this shows that she is still able to become deeply in touch with her body. Offred then goes on to refer to her body as “treacherous ground, [her] own territory.” (91). She is recognizing that her body has become a political ^{idea} ~~figure~~, however inside she still believes that it belongs to her. This demonstrates that Offred has not completely given into society. Although she is being forced to give up her body for sex and reproduction, she still identifies it as being her own. This foreshadows that at some point in the novel Offred may begin rebelling against society, as she does not have corresponding beliefs.

The language Atwood used in this passage provides the reader with a sense that a woman's body is very complex. Not only does Atwood use a great amount of literary devices while describing Offred's body, but the vocabulary itself creates a somewhat magical sense. First off, when Atwood is describing the signs of Offred's period she refers to them as “*swellings and diminishings of tissues*” (91) and “*the droolings of the flesh*” (91). By bringing Offred's flesh to life with the use of a personification and the vivid descriptions of her body tissues, Atwood provides the reader with a more compound view of Offred's body. Moreover, Atwood describes Offred's body as being “hard and more real than [Offred] [is]” (91) and says it “glows within its red translucent wrapping.” (91). By referring to Offred's red dress as a “translucent wrapping” (91), Atwood provides the sense that Offred's body is like a gift to the earth. Atwood also says that Offred's body “glows” (91), which gives the effect that her physique is somewhat

magical and important. Finally, Atwood goes on to say that inside Offred's body, "Pinpoints of light swell, sparkle, burst and shrivel" (91). This again provides the reader with a magical feeling, by embellishing all the chemical processes going on inside Offred's body. By providing all these vivid details of Offred's body, Atwood portrays the idea that a woman's body is an extremely valuable and special thing. It has the ability to do all sorts of amazing things, such as reproduce as child, however society is abusing the privilege. By forcing the handmaids to unwillingly use their ability to reproduce, society is turning such a beautiful power into something dark and miserable. *Excellent*

Connections

While reading Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, I have noticed several similarities with Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Text to text connections can be made between these two novels in their characters, plots, and author's styles. First off, both novels have a female protagonist. They feature a woman in a powerless position with few rights. In Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Miriam is an Afghan woman who is not allowed to leave the house without her husband. She cannot show any skin to the public, and is forced to wear long dresses and burquas whenever she goes out. A second woman named Laila is also introduced, forced to lead a similar life to that of Miriam. Similarly, Offred has few rights. She is not allowed to read, and is only able to leave the house if she has been sent to the market. She as well cannot show skin, and is forced to wear long dresses, headskirts, and wings cutting off their peripheral vision. Moreover, both women are being forced to live in the house of an undesired man. Miriam lives with an abusive man named Rasheed, whom she is forced to marry, obey, and

have sex with. Offred lives in a Commander's house, whom she must also have sex with once a month in hopes of becoming pregnant. Finally, there are also similarities in the way the novels are written. Both Hosseini and Atwood include several flashbacks of the protagonist's life before they were stripped of their rights. These flashbacks often include a past lover who they long for throughout the novel. In Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Laila has flashbacks about Tarek, her teenage love. She often ponders whether or not he may still be alive, and wishes she could see him once more. Likewise, Offred has frequent memories of Luke, the man who she had married before being forced to be a handmaid. Offred often wonders where Luke has ended up, or if he is even still alive. Both women also had a child with their past lover who they are longing for. Several text to text connections can be made between the plots, the characters, and the authors' styles in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*.

✓ Excellent

Text to world connections can also be made to *The Handmaid's Tale*. Very recently in Arizona, several bills regarding abortion were passed by their governor, Jan Brewer. The three laws that were signed were one that prohibits abortion after the first 18 weeks of pregnancy, one that forbids lawsuits against doctors who withhold information about the unborn baby, and one that says school teachers must teach that birth and adoption are the greatest options for an unwanted pregnancy. One of the main idea's portrayed in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is that women have lost control over their bodies. Although all three laws contribute to the restriction of a woman's control over her own body, one in particular has become very controversial. The second bill that was passed says that by their discretion, doctors can withhold information about the unborn baby if they believe it may convince the mother to receive an abortion. If a doctor notices any problems, such as a genetic disorder like down syndrome, he

can opt not to tell the mother. Then, when the baby comes with an unexpected disorder that the mother knows is detectable early in the pregnancy, she does not have the right to sue the doctor. By withholding information about a woman's pregnancy, doctors are eliminating the debate. They are no longer even presented with the option of keeping their challenged baby, as they think everything is coming along normally. Babies with disabilities also take a great amount of planning. The care and the necessary tools take a lot of researching, so the surprise of a disabled baby could cause not only emotional stress, but financial stress as well. As the life of being a handmaid takes away almost all power the handmaid has over her body, the withholding of information can also destroy a lot of a woman's control. ✓

Although I cannot relate any personal experiences to Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, I can still make text to self connections with the novel. First off, the novel is written in first person from the point of view of Offred. This allows me to see Offred's in depth feelings about the events she is put through. By writing the novel in first person with such detail, Atwood is able to establish somewhat of a relationship between Offred and the reader. I often feel as if Offred is speaking directly to me, which provides a great amount of pathos when things go wrong. ✓ I also learn about just how awful her lifestyle has become. Seeing women in such a powerless position, being useful only if fertile, provides a horrible picture. It makes me feel extremely uneasy to imagine myself in Offred's shoes, living in a home with no love and no rights. Moreover, the text becomes even more relatable by providing flashbacks of Offred's old life. Before Offred was captured and brought to the Red Centre, she lived with her husband, Luke. They were in love, they had their own home and even had a young daughter. Offred was a young adult who once lived a typical ^{North?} American life. This makes her even easier to relate to, as I know she once lived a life similar to my own. Finally, *The Handmaid's Tale* is set in the future

in America. It is set close to home, and is something that could potentially happen in the near future. At this point in the novel, the reason that society has begun functioning this way is unknown. However, the change from Offred's old happy life to her life as a handmaid is portrayed as having happened very quickly. This presents somewhat of a fear as I am able to picture myself in her shoes, and ask myself what I would do if this actually happened in North America.

Commentary Checkbric ~ Log 1

Knowledge and Understanding

Mark:

- ☒ Very good/excellent annotation of passages (identifies ~~not~~ all 'noteworthy' aspects of passage)
- ☒ Very good/excellent details about context
- ☒ Explains significance of context - *Expand a little more*
- ☒ Research (references/vocabulary) properly cited

17/20

Thinking and Inquiry

Mark:

- ☒ Very good/superior analysis of details and significance of passages organized around 'big ideas'
- ☒ Explains significance of passages with very good/excellent support from text
- ☒ Includes onomastic analysis
- ☒ Very good/excellent discussion of themes/ideas in passages using support from text
- ☒ 3 page minimum length

20/20

• Communication

Mark:

- ☒ Style (clear, effective communication)
- ☒ Good paragraph form
- ☒ Good quotation form
- ☒ Inclusion of all relevant aspects of assignment
- ☒ Effective structure and organization
- ☒ Uses language conventions with considerable/high degree of accuracy *- minor errors
- word choice*

18/20

Application

Mark:

- ☒ Draws sound/excellent connections made (Text to world, self, text)

→ well done

10/10

Feedback

*Well Done !
Excellent choice of passages
and excellent effort.*

65/70