

**“I AM A NATURAL RESOURCE”: THE ECONOMY OF COMMODIFICATION IN  
ATWOOD’S *THE HANDMAID’S TALE***

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**ABSTRACT AND INTRODUCTION**

Some critics praise Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* for inspiring feminist activism (Freibert 281; Howard 147); others, by contrast, criticize Atwood for portraying the oppression of women as a biological imperative of men (Dopp, 43). This paper assumes a materialist feminist perspective: the continued oppression in Gilead stems from an economy based on the exchange of women rather than money. This dystopian novel, set in the future in what once was the United States, suggests that the institutionalized oppression of women is fueled by an instinctive desire of men for immortality that can be fulfilled in a society in which they control the processes of production and reproduction. Once in place, this economy of commodification forces both male and female characters to view each other as tools in this unequal system. Each male character desires the objectified Offred only for the various use-values she can provide: children or sexual satisfaction, or in the case of the Commander, a perceived emotional connection. The women themselves, trapped by an imbalance of power, begin to view both men and one another in the same objectified manner, though their power to use male characters is severely limited.

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Azizah Al-Hibri claims that men need to dominate women in order to exclude them from production (of goods, technology, or information) and from reproduction. Patriarchy results from men’s desire for immortality through the reproduction of themselves in children and through technological production. Feeling biologically inadequate, men strive to “transcend [their] human condition by forcing [themselves] into the cycle of life from which [they perceive themselves] to be cut off through no fault of [their] own” (Al-Hibri 174). Moreover, for men “Production became an imitation of reproduction” (Al-Hibri 174); while they cannot reproduce without women, they can create goods that will offer a kind of immortality. Men thus achieve “a balance of division of labor.” “It would hardly have been acceptable for him if women reproduced and also produced, while men only produced” (Al-Hibri 175).

Luce Irigaray, too, claims that man’s “social existence, his economic structures and his sexuality are always tied to the work of nature” because only through nature can he produce anything lasting (“Women” 185). Women—specifically mothers—are thus “essential to [the social order’s] (re)production (particularly inasmuch as they are [re]productive of children and of the labor force: through maternity, child-rearing, and domestic maintenance in general)” (185). Women, according to Irigaray, “maintain the social order without . . . chang[ing] it” (185). Before Gilead, however, women not only reproduced, but were involved in the production of goods, technology, and information. Offred worked and supported herself, as had her mother, who raised Offred alone. But men felt threatened by women producing outside the home. Thus, as Offred tells Luke, the government decreed that “Women [couldn’t] hold property anymore” (Atwood 178). Because they could no longer own property, they became possessions themselves.

The crisis of childlessness in Gilead provides an excuse and impetus for men to seize control of women’s production and reproduction. Through such reproductive measures as birth control, abortion, and artificial insemination, women had enjoyed more autonomy. As Offred’s mother tells her, men had become “just a woman’s strategy for making other women” (Atwood 121). When sterility became dangerously prevalent, however, religious fundamentalists seized control of the country, blaming the

situation on women's misuse of their freedoms. Moreover, children now were separated into two categories: "keepers" and "unbabies." Only the former were born healthy enough to survive. Having a child, once a natural activity, became a privilege in Gilead, and children themselves, valuable commodities. In this society in which "man begets man as his own likeness, wives, daughters, and sisters have value only . . . [as] they . . . benefit . . . men" (Irigaray, "Women" 172). Thus, the more powerful Gileadean men are given Wives and, if the Wives are not fertile, reproductive Handmaids. Only men enjoy the privilege of siring their own biological children.

Margaret Benston notes that "if exchange of commodities becomes important enough, then increased efficiency of production becomes necessary" (19). This is so in Gilead, where abortions, contraception, and environmental pollution limit the birth of healthy children. "Such efficiency is provided by the transition to industrialized production, which involves the elimination of the kin-based production unit" (Benston 19). The "kin-based production unit," the traditional family, is still intact, but its integrity is undermined by government regulation of sexual reproduction, including use of Handmaids and community participation in birthing. Childbearing in Gilead is "rationalized, made vastly more efficient, and becomes more and more public – part of an integrated social network" (Benston 19).

When procreation is industrialized, the sex/gender system of Gilead is reduced to one official function: reproduction (Rubin 771). To enforce this focus on reproduction, all other aspects of sexuality are denied, outlawed, and forced underground. Sex with Handmaids is strictly procreative, as Offred observes:

We are for breeding purposes: we aren't concubines, geisha girls, courtesans. On the contrary: everything possible has been done to remove us from that category. There is supposed to be nothing entertaining about us, no room is to be permitted for the flowering of secret lusts; no special favors are to be wheedled, by them or us, there are to be no footholds for love. (Atwood 136)

Lingerie and pornography that might incite sexual desire are burned. Sexual activity that cannot lead to reproduction, such as homosexual relationships, is outlawed; homosexual men are likely to be seen hanging at the Wall. Sex for recreation is restricted to powerful men and prostitutes regulated secretly by the government, which also finds excuses to invalidate marriages to gain control of fertile women: "The regime created an instant pool of such women by the simple tactic of declaring all second marriages and nonmarital liaisons adulterous, arresting the female partners, and, on the grounds that they were morally unfit, confiscating the children they already had" (Atwood 304).

The sexual needs of this society are equated with the desires of politically powerful Gileadean men. As the Commander admits, "Better never means better for everyone. . . . It always means worse, for some" (Atwood 211). The Sons of Jacob decide this change must be made, and fear propels others to accede. As Irigaray states, "The law that orders our society is the exclusive valorization of men's needs/desires, of exchanges among men" (171). According to the Commander, the military coup was motivated by men's sense of sexual uselessness. As the Commander explains to Offred:

The problem wasn't only with the women, he says. The main problem was with the men. There was nothing for them anymore.  
Nothing? I say. But they had . . .  
There was nothing for them to do, he says.  
They could make money, I say, a little nastily...  
It's not enough, he says. It's too abstract. I mean there was nothing for them to do with women. (Atwood 210)

Feeling excluded from the processes of production and reproduction, the men in authority sought to reestablish their power.

Gayle Rubin poses a set of questions for evaluating a sex/gender system, with the aim of discovering what types of exchange value a woman has: can she be exchanged for other women, for money, for political power or social status (788-9)? The answers to these questions lead to another

possibility: that the exchange of women is “part of a system of stratification” (Rubin 789). Gilead, with its strictly regulated class system, uses women to maintain its hierarchy. Money is largely absent from *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Indeed, women pay for food not with money but tickets. Many kinds of food appear scarce, even for the family of the Commander. Women, not money, provide the basis for this economy.

For women, earning power is replaced by reproductive ability. The Commander claims that “We’ve given them more than we’ve taken away” and disdains the days when “Money was the only measure of worth” and women “got no respect as mothers” (Atwood 219). He assumes that this was their reason for “giving up on the whole business” and claims that Gilead’s process is better because “This way they’re protected, they can fulfill their biological destinies in peace. With full support and encouragement” (Atwood 219-20). Of course, this “support and encouragement” consists of threats and coercion to support the men’s needs. Gilead’s women enjoy no *right* to bear children, as “the right to motherhood is a matter of women’s right to choose whether or not they wish to become mothers in the face of a civil recognition that women’s bodies make them potentially mothers” (Martin 32). Rather, their reproductive potential becomes their means of survival. Their bodies become their only currency, useless to them because their worth and disposal is determined by the male system.

For men, women are the reward instead of money. The Commander, because of his high status, may or may not have considerably more wealth than others; the only certainty is that because of his status he may possess both a Wife and a Handmaid, and have access to prostitutes with impunity. Nick, by contrast, is “Low status: he hasn’t been issued a woman, not even one. He doesn’t rate: some defect, lack of connections” (Atwood 18). Offred predicts of the newly married Angels that they “will qualify for Handmaids, later, especially if their new Wives can’t produce” (Atwood 221). The Angels’ loyalty to the state is rewarded not with money, but women. Offred never remarks on the financial situation of lower status men; instead, she notes that they are assigned “Econowives” – devalued women who perform every function that other specialized women perform individually, and if they cannot produce children, that is unfortunate but unimportant.

Childbearing is not the only thing that becomes industrialized in Gilead. Irigaray speaks of value as “the equivalent of labor force . . . the reduction of man to a ‘concept’ – that of his labor force” (“Women” 183). Women in *The Handmaid’s Tale* are indeed reduced to their labor, defined by the specific tasks to which they are assigned. Upper class men, besides the opportunity to sire children, are assured their women are well controlled, kept rigidly in place. Each woman is allowed to do only one thing: Marthas perform housework; Handmaids reproduce; Wives raise children and provide pleasant company; Jezebels have nonreproductive sex; Aunts train Handmaids. Kept occupied by – and allowed to do – only one thing, no woman can venture into men’s territory: producing goods by working outside the home, or, information through writing. Poor men have Econowives, who “are not divided into functions. They have to do everything; if they can” (Atwood 24). They produce nothing significant; they probably cannot reproduce either, or they would have been conscripted by the government. The only Econowife pictured with a child is mourning an Unbaby (Atwood 44).

The use of women as tools in industrializing domestic work requires that both genders internalize a new perception of women. In order to sustain the political system, women must be taught to regard themselves as commodities. This perspective, enforced on Offred at the Red Center, is evident in her self-descriptions: “I will never be able to fade, finally, into another landscape,” she says, because “I am too important, too scarce, for that. I am a national resource” (Atwood 65). In order for women to be citizens of any nation, they must possess a clear legal identity as individuals with rights. This is impossible in Gilead, since “the right to human dignity for women entails the cessation of the commercial exploitation of their bodies in advertising, and preventing the exploitation of motherhood by the state or religious bodies” (Martin 32). While Gilead dramatically reduces the exploitation of women’s bodies by mandating modest dress, it exploits their bodies for motherhood. Ceasing to be individuals with legal rights, they are reduced to resources. The “freedom from” that Aunt Lydia espouses is really just freedom from violent crime or rape not sanctioned by the government (Atwood 24); violence or coerced sexual intercourse perpetrated by the Wives, Commanders, and government officials is sanctioned. “Freedom from violence” is a ruse that protects a woman only as a reproductive device owned by others.

According to Lucy M. Freibert, "The treatment of the individual Handmaid by both husband and wife reinforces the concept of person as property" (283). A Wife can punish her as long as she uses no weapons but her hands. The Commander can have sex with her, or she will be sent to the Colonies. The government can decide to torture and kill her at any time.

Irigaray's analysis illuminates the effect of commodification on Offred's sense of identity. Women are at once "*utilitarian objects and bearers of value*" (Irigaray, "Women" 175). They lose their personal, moral unity and agency because "*Women-as-commodities are thus subject to a schism that divides them into the categories of usefulness and exchange value; into matter-body and an envelope that is . . . not susceptible to appropriation by women themselves; into private use and social use*" (Irigaray, "Women" 176). Offred, like other women of Gilead's patriarchal society, has no sense of coherent self. She claims that her failure to conceive is "my body's fault, not mine" (Atwood 81). "I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will . . . There were limits, but my body was nevertheless lithe, single, solid, one with me" (Atwood 74). Before, Offred's body, her will, her *self* were united. Now she is reduced to one part of her body and what it is capable of producing, which she will surrender to another.

Of course, even before the rise of Gilead, in the less obvious American patriarchy, men and women were unequal, as Moira recalls. Only relationships between women were "an even-steven transaction" because "the balance of power was equal between women" (Atwood 172). She criticizes Offred's relationship with the married Luke as "poaching, on another woman's ground" (Atwood 171). Offred defends herself, saying that "Luke wasn't a fish or a piece of dirt either, he was a human being and could make his own decisions" (Atwood 171). Still, in the view of Moira, a staunch feminist, the imbalance is clear, as is the manner in which romantic partners are viewed as the property of the significant other. Later, in the Republic of Gilead, this imbalance increases drastically, and the commodification of people – particularly women – becomes obvious.

Offred notices this shift in the balance of power and her loss of identity almost immediately. After losing her job, she no longer feels equal even with Luke, who supposedly loves her. She wants to share her unhappiness with him, "But something had shifted, some balance. . . . I felt love going forward without me. . . . We are not each other's, anymore. Instead, I am his" (Atwood 182). As Al-Hibri notes, even relationships based on love are, in this "unequal power context" (180), a form of subordination of the woman's freedom.

The Commander certainly views Offred as something he can use. Her job is "to provide what is otherwise lacking" (Atwood 163). He wants someone with whom he can share sex that is actually pleasurable, and who will listen to him because "his wife didn't understand him" (Atwood 158). To him, Offred is practically interchangeable with the Handmaid who went before her; "If your dog dies, get another," she sarcastically thinks upon realizing that her predecessor spent time in the Commander's study, too (Atwood 187). Her worth to him is in her use-value; it is abstract, emphasizing the split between what she is and what she can provide. She always knows that she is "only a whim" to him (Atwood 159).

Although Offred's relationship with Nick may go deeper than this, readers see no clear indication of his feelings for her. Offred offers her feelings, her guesses and hopes about Nick's feelings, but nothing more. As Shirley Neuman has remarked, "There is no evidence in the novel that Nick's "rescue" of Offred is motivated by anything other than self-preservation" (864). Speculating on his purpose in helping the Commander run forbidden errands, she insists, "depend on it, there's something in it for him. Everyone's on the take, one way or another," though she "would like to think better" of him (Atwood 181-2). As Pieixoto suggests in the Historical Notes, perhaps Nick saves Offred to prevent her from betraying him under torture, or because he believes she is pregnant with his child, and "What male of the Gilead period could resist the possibility of fatherhood, so redolent of status, so highly prized?" (Atwood 311). Offred admits that she tells Nick her true name, "and feel[s] that therefore I am known" (Atwood 270). She also admits that this act and feeling are stupid. Her apparently one-sided relationship with him really does nothing to restore her identity. As far as she knows, she is still being used for her body, only now she feels grateful for it.

Offred's view of her relationship with Nick, though romanticized, reveals another aspect of the commodification evident in a system which puts everyone "on the take": Offred herself begins to objectify men. She says she continued their relationship "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? I did not feel munificent, but thankful, each time he would let me in" (Atwood 268). She has no self to give; she works within a system to take what she can. This requires viewing men as tools by which she can gain desired things: sexual fulfillment, a child, a cigarette, a safe life. Offred refers to the Guardians as "objects of fear to us, but of something else as well" (Atwood 4). They are objects; they mean nothing to her except for the consequences their actions may have on her, or the things she may gain from them. Describing her view of the Commander, she imagines women looking at him and thinking, "He can't do it, he won't do, he'll have to do, this last as if he were a garment, out of style or shoddy, which must nevertheless be put on because there's nothing else available" (Atwood 87). The Commander matters to the Handmaid merely because her life may depend upon him, and "if he were to falter, fail, or die, what would become of us?" (Atwood 88). During the Salvaging, she notes that the man being attacked "has become an *it*" (Atwood 280). Wives, daughters, and Aunts seek a better view of the action, and Handmaids vent their anger at this representative cause of their pain without considering truth, justice, or the rights and feelings of this man as a human being.

Called secretly to the Commander's office, Offred reflects that "To want is to have a weakness" (Atwood 136). When she discovers what the Commander wants – normal sex, companionship, and understanding – she begins to consider how to manipulate him:

Men are sex machines, said Aunt Lydia, and not much more. They only want one thing. You must learn to manipulate them, for your own good. Lead them around by the nose; that is the metaphor. It's nature's way. It's God's device. It's the way things are. I know I need to take it seriously, this desire of his. It could be important, it could be a passport, it could be my downfall. (Atwood 144)

From that moment, Offred carefully ponders each desire the Commander reveals and remembers it, waiting for the moment she may be able to use it to her benefit. She creates a mental list of things to ask for, such as hand lotion and information, taking advantage of every word the Commander lets slip.

The Commander is not the first man she views with an eye toward what he can get her. As she passes the Guardians at the front gate, she wishes, "If only we could talk to them. Something could be exchanged, we thought, some deal made, some tradeoff, we still had our bodies" (Atwood 4). The first time she sees Nick, she clearly understands that she does not desire him for himself: "Really what I wanted was the cigarette" (Atwood 18). Even before she becomes a Handmaid, Offred is aware that her need for a man's protection caused her to choose her words and actions carefully. Reflecting on her fear of Luke's attitude toward the government's oppression of women, she admits that "we never talked about it. By the time I could have done that, I was afraid to. I couldn't afford to lose you" (Atwood 182). Instead of preserving honesty in her relationship with her husband, she must hide certain feelings out of fear.

Women view other women in the same way. Irigaray points out that "Commodities can only enter into relationships under the watchful eyes of their 'guardians'" ("Commodities" 196). They cannot "go to 'market' on their own, enjoy their own worth among themselves, speak to each other, desire each other, free from the control of seller-buyer-consumer subjects" (Irigaray, "Commodities" 196). Offred laments that "It's hard to imagine now, having a friend" (Atwood 25). Introducing readers to her shopping partner, Ofglen, she remarks that "she is my spy, as I am hers" (Atwood 19). Their lives depend on their willingness to inform on each other if the occasion arises. Their words to each other and joint activities, from their greetings to their prescribed walks, are carefully chosen to conform to the expectations of the state; true friendship is impossible.

Friendship between women is impossible partly because "the interests of businessmen require that commodities relate to each other as rivals" (Irigaray, "Commodities" 196). Offred and Serena Joy, though they subvert the system to work together, do so in a way that precludes overt rebellion because they are rivals; their discreet rebellion, if it had proceeded according to plan, would only have furthered

the goals of the regime by providing the Commander and his Wife with a child. The two women cannot perpetrate anything more drastic because, despite working together, they still regard each other as means to an end. Serena Joy wants a child. Offred glimpses her daughter's picture, obtains a cigarette, and learns a means of suicide.

Depriving women of their human identities leaves the women of Gilead with nothing to give each other or members of the opposite sex, especially genuine companionship or love. Obviously, the system instituted in Gilead satisfies few people. Even the Commander is unhappy. "I find it . . . Impersonal," he says of the Ceremony. "How long did it take you to find that out?" Offred retorts (Atwood 162). While the government attempts to provide prostitutes and wives to powerful men for companionship and shared sexual pleasure, the system does not work.

The Gileadean government eventually falls, as the Historical Notes indicate. Oppression in *The Handmaid's Tale* is temporary, caused not by the irrepressible biological urges of men, but economic and political forces. Men's fear of their loss of control leads to oppression in Gilead, institutionalized by government and integrated into the economy. Once these political controls are established, it is difficult to escape them. In the end, however, a system that transforms people into reproductive commodities is unable to provide for important human needs. These things, Atwood argues, cannot be regulated by government.

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