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A Darwinian Feminist Analysis of Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale

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A Darwinian Feminist Analysis of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
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requirements for the degree of

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in
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by

Morgan Petersen

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Abstract

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* presents a dystopian world in which women have lost all individualism and have been reduced to breeding machines. This paper analyzes the patriarchal characteristics of *The Handmaid's Tale* by using a Darwinian feminist theory to understand the evolutionary psychological root of male control of women in the narrative. Additionally, this in-depth reading relies on David Geary's analysis of male and female mating dynamics and Barbara Smuts' study of the evolution of patriarchy in humans to further give evidence to the evolutionary root of Gilead's patriarchy. The men of Gilead control women through creating a fundamentalist biblical society, eliminating economic and educational resources for women, forcing women into becoming surrogates, implementing uniforms, and instilling social isolation; each of these cultural changes can be further explained through Darwinian feminism.

Keywords: Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, Evolutionary Psychology, Darwinian Feminism, Feminism, Patriarchy

A Darwinian Feminist Analysis of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

Introduction

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* creates a world that has revoked women's rights. Taking place during a dystopian version of the 1990s, *The Handmaid's Tale* includes women who can remember a time when they were able to walk down the street freely or live independently. However, the new society, Gilead, has taken everything women have earned. During the time before Gilead, the previously democratic community dealt with population decline, rapes, murders, and access to birth control. Some powerful men, who called themselves the Sons of Jacob, worked together to overthrow the government to stop these things from happening. Once in power, the Sons of Jacob created the Republic of Gilead, a religious fundamentalist society that based its beliefs and practices on incorrectly interpreting the Bible. Gilead categorizes women based on their ability to have children; once they are determined fertile, these women are uprooted from their previous families and forced into a different home to produce a child.

There have been many feminist analyses of *The Handmaid's Tale* which focus explicitly on women's loss of power and identity within Gilead. These analyses observe the implementation of uniforms, the lack of economic freedom, the power of the male gaze, and the elimination of language to observe how women have lost their identity and are subject to Gilead's patriarchy. Although these details are apt when analyzing Gilead's patriarchal control of women, previous analyses have not scrutinized the evolutionary root of why men desire to control women. Additionally, previous theories of *The Handmaid's Tale* have not focused on

women's part in playing into Gilead's patriarchy, which is a significant portion of understanding the narrative.

A Darwinian feminist analysis of *The Handmaid's Tale* illuminates the social consequences from perpetuating control in a patriarchal, retrograde environment. Gilead's primitive environment forces women back into submissive roles; although there are various reasons for this action, this happens, in part, because of a generation of women's complacency. Using Darwinian feminism to analyze this narrative shows the evolutionary root of patriarchal themes present such as, changing environment and female identity loss, male control of female sexuality and resources, and competition between classes of people.

In this analysis, I will additionally use Barbara Smuts' research on the evolution of patriarchy in humans to compare actions in *The Handmaid's Tale* to her hypotheses for the growth of patriarchal systems. The root of Smuts' research is to understand how male control evolved to such a prominent and unequal degree in human societies in comparison with higher primates. She argues that patriarchal systems stem from the lack of female alliances and social groups, growth of male alliances, male control of resources females need to survive, increasingly unequal relationships among males, female perpetuation of patriarchy, and the evolution of language and ideologies.

Overview of Evolutionary Psychology and Darwinian Feminism

Charles Darwin, through his observations of various species, discovered small adaptations that occur in species over time. His theory later became known as Darwinism. Darwinism is the theory that species evolve and adapt over long periods of time through natural selection and sexual selection. Evolution through natural selection is the random mutations that give an individual in a species selective advantage. These random mutations are also known as

small, evolved traits that will help the individual to better acclimate to the changing conditions in their environment. For example, if there were two types of giraffes, some with long necks and some with short necks, and there was a shortage of low-lying trees (a food source for the short neck giraffes), eventually the short neck giraffes would die, and the long neck giraffes would reproduce and make more of their kind. Darwin observed that animals are consistently changing and adapting to the environments around them. He noticed that if a certain species could not adapt, they would die. This observation would become known as Darwinian fitness, which meant that the animals most fit are the ones who can best survive in their environment. This does not necessarily mean that the most “fit” are the strongest animals, but that they are the ones that are the most effective at surviving in their present environment. These animals who are most fit are able to continue because the process of natural selection eliminated the other animals who could not adjust to the changing environments.

Sexual selection is a different process of adaptation because the evolved characteristics that happen in this form of selection serve to attract a mate; these characteristics are not always physically functional to the animal, but they signal that the animal is an attractive option for mating. Darwin mentioned in *The Origin of Species* that sexual selection does not entail a “struggle for existence, but on a struggle between the males for possession of the females; the result is not death to the unsuccessful competitor, but few or no offspring” (89). Through sexual selection, males and females show off beautiful features in order to persuade their mate that they have healthy genetic fitness. For example, the male peacock’s tail is a beautiful feature of the bird, but it is extremely heavy and cumbersome. Because of the tail’s heaviness, it would hinder the peacock from escaping an incoming predator yet, in a mating situation, it would be beneficial to attract a female peahen with its striking colors.

Evolutionary psychology, a recent distinction of Darwinism, can give reasoning as to why a peahen would desire a peacock with a strikingly flamboyant tail. Evolutionary psychology pertains to the psychological adaptations that have evolved over time in species. Instead of studying evolved physical characteristics in animals like body size and facial changes, this theory focuses on the changes in psyche in relation to natural and sexual selection. Two emphases within evolutionary psychology that relate specifically to sexual behavior are competition and mating behavior. Competition, also a feature of natural selection, relates to the actions that take place within and between the sexes to have better access to mates. Depending on the environment, competition can look different across species. Mating behavior is a large part of mating dynamics. Naturally, animals and humans have the desire to spread their genes through reproduction. Although the desire of gene dispersal is often unconscious in most species, it is a vital part of an animal's environmental fitness to create and sustain offspring.

Before reproduction can occur, animals and humans have to pick the appropriate mate in order to have good, healthy offspring. Often, the decisions animals make when choosing a mate require observing a potential mate's level of parental investment. Parental investment involves the amount of time or energy that a parent will use on its child. The amount of investment they give to their child directly affects other components of the parent's environmental fitness like pursuing other mate options or gathering resources. Parental investment theory, also referred to as the Bateman-Trivers hypothesis, hypothesizes an important characteristic of female and male choice of mates. In 1948, Angus John Bateman introduced the idea that the cost of reproduction in females is higher than males. This is because females need more time and physical energy in the gestation period of their pregnancy. Since the female has to hold the fetus inside them for several months, they are unable to continue procreating until delivering the offspring. Since

females cannot conceive during gestation, the males around pregnant females will be limited to the availability of eligible females in order to reproduce. Males, unlike females, can fertilize multiple females without a waiting period.

In 1972, Robert Trivers added to Bateman's hypothesis; he argued that the sex who has the most parental investment or cost in reproducing will be choosier in selecting a mate. Often, females are the choosier mate because they devote a greater deal of parental investment than males. That being said, this can cause competition between males in order to secure their chance to mate with her. The Bateman-Trivers hypothesis calls attention to choosing between focusing on the quality of mates or accumulating a quantity of mates. These differing focuses mean that an animal will either seek a quality mate that will provide resources and benefits for both themselves and their offspring, or the animal will focus on accumulating a large quantity of mates by mating with as many available mates as possible. In the latter scenario, the animal is not concerned whether the mates will provide any resources.

Within evolutionary psychology, there are four mating dynamics that animals subconsciously use in order to choose mates. These mating dynamics are female choice, male choice, female-female competition, and male-male competition. These are all ways that males and females determine which mates they will choose and how to eliminate the competing animals in their species. Female choice contributes to how, either consciously or unconsciously, a female chooses her mate. These can be implicit and explicit reproductive decisions made by the female. Since the female already has to give a significant amount of time and energy to the gestation period of her pregnancy, she will desire a mate who will provide an equal or greater amount of resources so that she does not have to expend more energy than necessary. The female

is more likely to invest in a quality mating partner than accumulating multiple partners who may not provide any resources to her young.

In humans, social status is an important factor when women are choosing their mate, although it is not the only factor. According to David Geary, “In societies in which material resources are not easily accumulated, social status is often determined by the coalition formation and other sociopolitical activities. In other societies, social status is determined by the accumulation and control of material resources, in addition to sociopolitical activities (which are typically focused on the distribution of these resources)” (123-124). Depending on the environmental situation, a woman may need to rely solely on a man in order to best take care of herself and her child; a man who has reached a high social status may also have access to the most and best resources. Outside of the social status, the personal and behavioral attributes of a man are a large factor for some women. The way men act personally can be a great indicator for how they will handle their child’s social and emotional needs. Additionally, if a man has a humorous, intelligent, and kind personality, a woman will most likely be attracted to those attributes even if he does not have access to the most resources. The reason for this being that she can see how she and the man emotionally connect, which will allow longevity and security in the relationship.

In some situations, women can engage in a different mating tactic called mate switching. Mate switching involves the woman having sexual intercourse with multiple men around the same time during her ovulation period of her menstrual cycle. By doing this, the woman heightens her chances of conceiving, and if she conceives, she will not know for sure which man is the father of her child. Through this action, the woman can claim resources from both men as long as the men do not know about each other. Although this can seem dangerous for the

woman, it can allow her to accumulate different resources for herself and her child. Some hypotheses for mate switching are aimed at “expelling, replacing, or adding an extra mate for insurance against losing the current partner” (Sefcek 162).

Like females, males also have conscious and unconscious preferences when choosing a mate; this is called male choice. The Bateman-Trivers hypothesis argues that males are more concerned with accumulating a quantity of mates rather than choosing one good quality mate. This means that males will tend to search for various mating opportunities over the course of their lifetime as a way to ensure they have strong reproductive fitness. For humans, men are highly concerned with the physical characteristics of their potential mate. Women’s body size and facial features can indicate their fecundity and internal health; if women have youthful looking features, there is a higher chance that they are still able to conceive. Thus, these youthful indicators will subconsciously signal to men that the woman is healthy and able to produce.

Men have somewhat of a different strategy than male primates in reproduction. Geary states, “Basically, men more than women, have a mixed reproductive strategy, pursuing short-term, low-investment relationships with some women and long-term, high-investment relationships with others” (145). Men who are seeking to form short-term relationships will conflict with many women who are seeking the opposite. This forms a conflict of interest between men and women and in certain situations the man can use force or manipulation in order to persuade the woman to give him what he wants. Nancy Easterlin argues that “men typically seek to control women as part of a psychological profile derived from their normative reproductive strategy, a strategy that is in conflict with the basic human desire for autonomous individuality” (391). Although men may desire to find a mate who is independent and autonomous, the action of taking control of women as a reproductive source inevitably takes

away the woman's autonomous nature. In male primates, males will sometimes use female alienation in order to better control females they are interested in mating with. Female alienation is a way for a male to seclude his desired mate and bully her until she submits to his invitation. This tactic keeps the female from gaining power and resilience from her counterparts, or to keep her friends from protecting her from the male. In humans, men can perform this tactic through moving himself and his mate far from the woman's family and friends. Doing this will inevitably make the woman more emotionally dependent on the man until she can branch out and make new connections with other women.

Female-female competition and male-male competition assist in eliminating competitors for mates of the opposite sex. Within different environments, one of these forms of competition may be more prevalent due to an unequal operational sex ratio. An operational sex ratio is the ratio of marriage-age men and women in the local population. Over the course of human history, there have been different periods where there are more women than men in a population. Although it is not clear how this happens, when there is an unequal operational sex ratio, it has a profound effect on mating choices and competition. David Geary explains, "Whatever the cause, during periods when there is an oversupply of women, such as from 1965 through the 1970s in the United States, men are better able to pursue their reproductive preferences than women are. This is so because an oversupply of women decreases the intensity of male-male competition and increases the intensity of female-female competition, so that women, on average, are not in a position to exert their preferences" (152). Females compete with each other because they are seeking eligible, resource-rich mates. Usually, it is more likely for this to happen in a society where there are more women than men; less men means that there are less men available for each woman, so the women in that population much compete for those resource-rich mates.

According to Geary, female-female competition amongst animals is different than amongst humans. He states,

In most of these primate species, female-female competition is over access to high-quality food, not access to mates...the situation is more complicated for women, however. Given that men in many societies strive to restrict the access of women to those resources needed to raise their children successfully and that they more generally compete with one another for resources acquisition and control, men, in a sense, become potential 'resource objects' to women (136).

Since men have the potential to control and restrict resources like money, jobs, and food from women, men have more control overall than primates. In situations like these, women may resort to competing through "social gossiping and social exclusion." Women can use this tactic as a way to make other women seem undesirable for a partner (Geary 137-138).

On the other hand, males seek to control other males and females through male-male competition in order to better their mate prospects. If one male can control the other males in his environment, that would make him dominant, and therefore, the most resource-rich. A male with significant access to resources is the alpha male, and thus a prime mate choice for females. According to David Geary, man's "cultural success is directly related to his reproductive success" (139). Male animals desire to mate with as many females as possible, so having the access to an abundance of resources is a significant objective for them. Geary also points out that men in pre-industrial societies would also have "coalition-based aggression" in which the men would have more "personal gain, including more wives, larger territories, the acquisition of slaves, and most important, higher reproductive success" (141). The high-status men in an environment such as this one would have more access to women than low-status men who were

resource-deficient. This inequality between high-status men and low-status men creates an environment in which women are forced to rely on the high-status men to take care of their children.

When analyzing these mating behaviors, there is value in using evolutionary psychology and Darwinian feminism together because both theories attempt to give reasoning behind inequality between genders. Darwinian feminism, another recent addition to Darwinism, originated from evolutionary feminists who desired to explore Darwin's theories from observing various female species. S. Pearl Brilmyer states that "since the publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, feminist theorists and activists have found in Darwin an ally in the battle against biological essentialism—that is, the assumption that human behavior can be explained by a series of unchanging, biologically determined facts" (19). Darwin wrote that many female animals acted submissive to the males around them. He found that they relied on the males to take care of them and their young. Darwinian feminists argued that since Darwin believed that animals were constantly evolving, they could hypothesize that female animals and women are not genetically determined to have submissive behaviors. Making this argument allows Darwinian feminists to determine that although men and women are biologically different, these physical differences do not insinuate that men and women are unequal, or that one sex is naturally submissive to the other. Barbara Smuts, a professor of psychology and anthropology at the University of Michigan argues that since males and females have differing mating concerns, there is a natural conflict between the sexes. She states, "Male interest in mate quantity, combined with female interest in mate quality, creates a widespread conflict of interests between the sexes" (5). When courting a female, a male can sometimes avoid the costs of

parental investment by using force against the female (Smuts 5). This conflict is the root of the male desire to control female sexuality.

Changing Environment and Female Identity Loss in *The Handmaid's Tale*

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* needs to be analyzed using a Darwinian feminist theory in order to discover the evolutionary root of the patriarchal similarities in various themes in the novel. These themes are the changing environment and female identity loss, male control of female sexuality and resources, and competition between classes of people. Each of these themes can be compared directly to Barbara Smuts' hypotheses for how patriarchal systems have evolved in human history.

The Handmaid's Tale takes place during the 1990s in a community known as Gilead. It is difficult to know exactly where in the United States Gilead is located, but it is roughly around the northeast corner near Canada. The narrative is told from a Handmaid named Offred's perspective, and she does not give many details of how Gilead came into being. Her ignorance during "the time before" Gilead is the reason she does not exactly know what ultimately caused the massive societal change. However, Offred does mention various comments about an environmental crisis caused by nuclear waste, which led to vast infertility and a population decline. Additionally, there is a religious war happening in the background of everyday Gilead life, although it is not clear how it started. Gilead centers its repressive structure and rules on fundamentalist biblical beliefs; many of the manipulative aspects of this system come from incorrectly interpreting the Bible. Before Gilead, Offred lived in a modern society where she was able to have a college education, a job at the library, an independent income, a marriage of her choosing, and a child.

One of Barbara Smuts' hypotheses for the evolution of patriarchy is the female perpetuation of patriarchy. Women can contribute to the patriarchy because "it is not always in a female's reproductive interests to ally with other females against males. Often, females do better by competing with other females and/or allying with males. Among humans, such female strategies can enforce patriarchy" (Smuts 18). As mentioned earlier, Gilead became the new society, in part, from a generation of women's complacency in governmental changes. Offred is meant to represent this generation of complacent women who have grown up with the rights that previous women before them fought for, but who do not truly understand what life would be like without those rights. Once in Gilead, Offred realizes that the Wife she works for is Serena Joy, a once popular female tv personality, who argued that women should return to more subordinate positions as being in the home full-time. In Gilead, Serena Joy can no longer work in television, but is forced to stay home—she received what she wished.

Although there were undoubtedly women who sympathized with Serena Joy's message, there were many feminists like Offred's mother who fought against this mentality. In "the time before," a phrase Offred uses to refer to the period before Gilead, many feminists held rallies throughout the United States. Offred often remembers her mother being a devout feminist and being part of these rallies, but Offred did not share the same views and even was ashamed and embarrassed by her mother's passion for women's rights. In Offred's many moments of reflection, she remembers with shame how she ignored the signs. She states,

Nothing changes instantaneously: in a gradually heating bathtub you'd be boiled to death before you knew it. There were stories in the newspapers, of course, corpses in ditches or the woods, bludgeoned to death or mutilated, interfered with, as they used to say, but they were about other women, and the men who did such things were other men. None of

them were the men we knew. The newspaper stories were like dreams to us, bad dreams dreamt by others. How awful, we would say, and they were, but they were awful without being believable. They were too melodramatic, they had a dimension that was not the dimension of our lives. We were the people who were not in the papers. We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of print. It gave us more freedom. We lived in the gaps between the stories (56-57).

Offred now understands the part she played in allowing this patriarchal system to take over by ignoring the changes within her community. Because none of these horrific instances were directly affecting her at the time, she did not pay attention. Once the changes affected her, the damage had already been done.

In a generation of complicity, it is likely that stronger leaders will try to promote their personal ideologies on those who are unlikely to fight it. The growth of language and ideologies is another important aspect of creating a patriarchal system. According to Smuts' hypotheses, the evolution of language and creation of ideologies over the course of human history has given men a chance to convince others of his right to controlling the female population. Smuts' states, "Once the capacity for language evolved, it probably greatly facilitated further development of male-male alliances, male control of resources, and the development of hierarchal relationships among men by making it easier for men to communicate more directly and clearly about potential alliance formation and the uses to which such alliances could be put" (19). This coincides directly with Gilead biblically purifying the community's culture. Gilead leaders removed everything that could be considered promiscuous, and for women, they additionally removed anything educational. It became strictly forbidden for all women to read or write. All marriages that were second marriages for individuals were erased; Gilead believed that the Bible

ruled them illegitimate. Offred was married to Luke, but it was his second marriage, so Offred was taken away from him and her daughter. All women whom Gilead considered single and were able to have children were made into Handmaids. If they were not fertile, the government either made these women Wives, Aunts, Econowives, or Unwomen. Once the fertile women were removed from their families, Handmaids were put into a manipulative education system called the Red Center.

The Commanders' control of discourse, language, and ideologies eliminate the women's freedom of speech. Through this control, they are able to push their beliefs and rules on everyone; they are able to take away each woman's voice, so that she feels that she cannot work against them. If she tries to fight it, the Commanders have the privilege of using brute force to counteract her attempts. The Red Center is one of the ways in which Gilead begins controlling and subduing the female population. Atwood declares that the Handmaids "must learn to renounce their previous identities, to know their place and their duties, to understand that they have no real rights but will be protected up to a point if they conform, and to think so poorly of themselves that they will accept their assigned fate and not rebel or run away" (Introduction, XV). In this new reality, the Handmaids have to abandon their identities and become known solely by the Commander they belong to. To emphasize the lack of identity, Gilead has a naming system for the Handmaids which eliminates the Handmaid's original name and forces her to take on the name of her Commander. The main character's name, Offred, is her new identity. She is "Of" her Commander, "Fred."

Gilead's biblical ideology is further pushed in the Red Center by teaching the Handmaids that their main purpose is to become breeding machines for the good of their community. This repetitive lesson forces Handmaids to believe they are merely empty vessels that provide a womb

for a child they will never get to nourish or love. Part of the education the Handmaids receive is a Bible verse that has been interpreted fundamentally. The Bible verse is the story of Jacob, Rachel, and Bilhah:

And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, Give me children, or else I die.

And Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel; and he said, Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb?

And she said, Behold my maid Bilhah, go in under her, and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her (Genesis 30:1-3).

The Bible verse is read to the Handmaids consistently throughout their time in the Red Center, and then when they are moved to their Commander's house, he is supposed to read it to the household before their conceiving ceremony. The conceiving ceremony is a replica of this biblical story: the Commander has sex with the lower half of the Handmaid while the Handmaid lays her head upon the Commander's Wife's pelvic bone. This ritual is meant to symbolically include the Wife in the process since she is unable to conceive children.

In addition to eliminating the Handmaid's voice and identity, Gilead has revoked women's access to educational resources like reading materials. All objects within the community that have words written on them have been removed; this includes all signage for stores. Offred describes one of the shops while making her weekly grocery shopping trip. She states, "The store has a huge wooden sign outside of it, the shape of a golden lily; Lilies of the Field, it's called. You can see the place, under the lily, where the lettering was painted out, when they decided that even the names of shops were too much temptation for us. Now places are known by their signs alone" (25). This detail shows the complete absence of words throughout

the society: both written and spoken. Also, the name of the shop is a biblical allusion to a portion of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. He says, "And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin" (Matthew 6:28). In this verse, Jesus explains to his followers that they should not spend time thinking about how they will receive their resources like food, water, and clothing, but that they should trust that God will provide these things for them. Further, the deeper meaning in this verse is preaching passive acceptance; Jesus uses the lilies of the field to explain this analogy. In this analogy, humans are the lilies. Just as lilies need food, water, and sunlight, humans need resources to survive. However, the lilies do not have to "toil" or "spin" because everything will be provided to them; they just exist and passively accept all weather that comes. The same is being said for humans in this simile: humans must passively accept all that is given to them from God. Since the reference of lilies of the field is being applied to Gilead, Gilead is the new God that will bestow all "blessings" and resources upon its people, who must passively accept all of these "gifts."

In patriarchal systems, the most powerful people often have access to resources that others do not, which creates a rift between those who can achieve their potential and those who are limited because of what they have access to; the Commanders in Gilead, who are the most powerful men, have access to the educational materials that were removed from the communities. Allowing women to continue to have access to educational resources would be extremely dangerous to the Commanders; it would give women the chance to educate themselves on how they are being treated, while giving them an opportunity to argue against the inequality. Books are now considered illegal amongst the female population in Gilead, but the Commanders are allowed to have their own special collection of books. Fred, Offred's Commander, has a study with many bookshelves filled with books, which Offred notices immediately upon entering

his space. She says, “Books and books and books, right out in plain view, no locks, no boxes. No wonder we can’t come in here. It’s an oasis of the forbidden. I try not to stare” (137). Offred’s amazement that these books are out in the open further proves the lack of free knowledge for women in this new world.

Another massive resource that women have lost in Gilead is their ability to have their own financial independence. Money and educational resources can help give access to a group of people in order to achieve a higher independence, but once Gilead took both of these away from women, they have lost their independent identity and are forced to live dependently on men. Offred remembers the shift in her marriage to Luke once she lost her job at the library. Luke tries to make her feel better by consoling her and mentioning that they hadn’t lost everything. She says, “It occurred to me that he shouldn’t be saying *we*, since nothing that I knew of had been taken away from him. ‘We still have each other,’ I said. It was true. Then why did I sound, even to myself, so indifferent?...something had shifted, some balance. I felt shrunken, so that when he put his arms around me, gathering me up, I was as small as a doll...he doesn’t mind this, I thought. He doesn’t mind it at all. Maybe he even likes it. We are not each other’s, anymore. Instead, I am his” (182). Now that her financial property has been taken from her, she feels that ultimate shock of losing her resources. She will officially have to depend on her husband to take care of their financial needs, and therefore, he has the greater control over the wellbeing of their relationship. The physical feeling of Offred’s loss of independence is evident in her reference to feeling like a doll in Luke’s arms – she is completely malleable to others’ wishes.

Male Control of Female Sexuality and Resources

Part of the controlling nature of Gilead is the elimination of individuality. Gilead implements uniforms in order to categorize everyone by their class within the system. Although

everyone is uniformed, the Handmaid uniform is the most confining and covers the most of their features. Specifically, the Handmaid uniform is meant to keep non-Commander men from becoming sexually aroused or attracted to these women by eliminating the opportunity of seeing their figures or hair. According to evolutionary psychology, physical features are important for males when choosing mates. David Geary describes the physical nature that goes into male choice of women. He states, “Men’s ratings of women’s physical attractiveness have been found to be related to a number of specific physical features, including WHR (recall, waist-to-hip ratio), facial features that signal a combination of sexual maturity but relative to youth, body symmetry, and age. This combination of features appears to provide an indicator of female fecundity” (149). Evolutionary psychology points out that men value the physical qualities of their mates, so hiding these features could potentially halt sexual alliances. The Handmaids wear a long, red cloak-like dress paired with a large, white bonnet that controls the amount of visual space the women can see around them. The ill-fitting cloaks hide the Handmaids’ bodies, and their headdresses shield their faces and cover their hair. Not only does this uniform completely hide any physical indicator of fecundity that a man can see, but it also prevents the Handmaids from taking any “vain” pleasure from their physical features.

Part of the male control of women in Gilead revolves around the idea that Handmaids have been demoted to being a piece of property. Similar to some primate groups, some primate males will be aggressively territorial and controlling over their females. Barbara Smuts says, “When a female strays too far from her male, he threatens her by staring and raising his eyebrows. If she does not respond instantly by moving toward him, he attacks her with a neckbite. The neckbite is usually symbolic—the male does not actually sink his teeth into her skin—but the threat of injury is clear” (7). Handmaids, like female primates, are sexual resources

for the males. A Commander and his Wife request a Handmaid, if they cannot produce themselves, and the Handmaid serves as a fertility procedure for the couple. The couple “owns” the Handmaid with the understanding that they will take care of her, but if the Handmaid rebels against the family, the government will either sentence her to death or she will be sent to the Colonies to dispose of nuclear waste—a slower death.

According to evolutionary psychology, males sometimes seclude females with whom they want to mate; this is called female alienation. The purpose is to keep her from gaining strength and protection from her female allies so that the male can more easily coerce her into mating. This can more easily happen in humans because of the lack of female coalitions. Barbara Smuts argues that another reason that patriarchy has evolved in humans is from the “reduced social support from kin and female allies” (12). This social support is absolutely essential for men and women. Humans are social creatures, and without creating emotional connections, an individual can feel isolated. Liza R. Moscovice argues the importance of social bonds between humans. She states, “It is likely that social relationships work through both main effects and stress buffering pathways to reinforce positive behaviors and self-image and reduce stress responses to negative events” (64). Social bonds are necessary to help an individual find respite during massively stressful situations. Additionally, there have been studies that show that women specifically “maintain a larger and more diverse range of social bonds, are more active in providing and receiving support from their social networks, and report more benefits from contact with same-sex friends” (Moscovice 65). In Gilead, the Commanders are better able to utilize female alienation because there is a lack of female coalitions and connections. The Commanders do not want the women to begin comforting and strengthening each other because that would encourage the women to become stronger as a unit and fight back. By eliminating the

opportunity for women to create and maintain social bonds in Gilead, the society intends to force women to experience more isolation in order to better control them in a weakened emotional state.

Although the common practice is isolating the women in Gilead, Offred's Commander seems to feel a conflict of interest within this system. Fred disobeys the rules and arranges for Offred to secretly spend time with him in his study every night; he wants to pretend that Offred is spending time with him of her own volition, but in reality, the world he creates mandates that she be his plaything. Fred's actions come across as his need for an emotional connection to a woman. There does not appear to be any intimacy between himself and his Wife, Serena Joy, so he is seeking intimacy in private with Offred instead. During Offred's routine visits to Fred's study, Fred asks her to play Scrabble, which is another strictly illegal object in Gilead. Offred remembers the game from the "the time before," she says, "This was once the game...to be played when there was nothing good on television. Or of adolescents, once, long long ago...now of course it's something different. Now it's forbidden, for us. Now it's dangerous. Now it's indecent. Now it's something he can't do with his Wife. Now it's desirable. Now he's compromised himself" (138-139).

Further, as Offred and Fred spend more time together in his study, Fred occasionally opens up to Offred about discussing Gilead and its purposes. Fred does not benefit from sharing this secret information with Offred, and yet, he wants to know her opinion of the new society. He offers her an explanation for the confining rules, almost as a way to convince her of the necessity of Gilead and to receive her approval. One night, Fred tells Offred the reason for the Commanders creating Gilead. He says,

‘We’ve given [women] more than we’ve taken away,’ said the Commander. ‘Think of the trouble they had before. Don’t you remember the singles’ bars, the indignity of high school blind dates? The meat market. Don’t you remember the terrible gap between the ones who could get a man easily and the ones who couldn’t? Some of them were desperate, they starved themselves thin or pumped their breasts full of silicone, had their noses cut off. Think of the human misery...And then if they did marry, they could be left with a kid, two kids, the husband might just get fed up and take off, disappear, they’d have to go on welfare. Or else he’d stay around and beat them up. Or if they had a job, the children in daycare or left with some brutal ignorant woman, and they’re have to pay for that themselves, out of their wretched little paychecks. Money was the only measure of worth, for everyone, they got no respect as mothers. No wonder they were giving up on the whole business. This way they’re protected, they can fulfill their biological destinies in peace. Now tell me...what did we overlook?’ (219-220)

In this conversation with Offred, Fred argues that all of these human experiences were making women so miserable that the Commanders believed that women would be happier and better off if their independence was revoked. However, the fact that Fred is sharing this information with Offred is the bigger issue; because of his status and being a man, he does not need Offred’s approval however, he wants her approval as a way to fill the emotional void he feels.

Lacking female coalitions can stem from females leaving their native territory and their families (Smuts 13). Women are similar to species of apes in this dispersal from kin groups. Although it is unclear why females leave their natal groups to follow the males, it is significantly clear that this act is connected to making it more difficult for female primates and women to challenge male coercion tactics (Smuts 13). However, some monkey species do not disperse

from their natal groups and their “females form strong, life-long bonds with their female kin, and females cooperate to protect their female relatives against male aggression” (Smuts 9). However, in Gilead, female friendships are nonexistent and female alienation is strongly emphasized. Handmaids only interact with one another if they are going grocery shopping for the household, or if they have to come together for Handmaid duties like a Birth Day or a Salvaging. Offred reflects on the reasoning behind the Handmaids going shopping in pairs. She says, “We aren’t allowed to go there except in twos. This is supposed to be for our protection, though the notion is absurd: we are well protected already. The truth is that she is my spy, as I am hers. If either of us slips through the net because of something that happens on one of our daily walks, the other will be accountable” (19). Handmaids have limited interactions with one another once they are released from the Red Center; when they do interact, it is common to suspect one another of spying.

Again, Smuts’ hypothesizes that patriarchy evolved partly due to women’s acquiescence to patriarchy. This can happen from women preferring to be with men who have resources. Smuts argues, “the world over, women express a preference for marrying men with more resources; this preference is consistent with the importance of resources to female reproductive success” (18). This connects to the female’s desire to find a mate who has a high parental investment of giving resources to her and her offspring. In Gilead, part of perpetuating the patriarchy comes through distrusting women and further adding to the unequal power structure. Women cannot let their guards down solely as a survival tactic because none of them can be certain that the other women intend to resist the administration. Jennifer Dunn argues that this isolation between women “fosters the culture of fear and reinforces the assimilation process initiated at the Red Center. Most important, it prevents solidarity among women. There is little

opportunity in Gilead for collective political action; the feminist ‘sisterhood’ of the past, in which Offred’s mother played a significant role, is no more” (82). Gilead breeds distrust among its women in order to further isolate them from each other, which continuously keeps them from working together to resist Gilead’s horrific sexism. Outside of weekly shopping trips with another Handmaid, a Handmaid has limited interactions with the other women (Wives, Marthas, Econowives, etc.), but in a different way. These women from separate classes are able to live under the same roof and cohabit, but they are not encouraged to become friends or seek comfort in one another. If anything, the class system between the women is further isolating because the Marthas work as housekeepers and cooks and serve the Wife and Commander without much respect in return. Additionally, although Marthas are supposed to mainly take care of the Handmaids, Offred experiences nothing but severity and disapproval from the Marthas working in her home.

Competition Between Classes of People

Although the women are mostly isolated from one another, the conceiving ceremony is an uncomfortably intimate moment between a Handmaid and a Wife. This moment creates a great deal of female-female competition between the women. Female-female competition occurs between females when there are limited males to choose as mates. In a situation like Gilead, there are a limited number of resource-rich mates available (i.e. Commanders), but there are many women who, although they are from different classes, are all in desperate need of resources for survival. Although in this situation they may not desire the Commander, they desire the resources that come with being with him. Since these women have had all of their previous independent resources taken from them, they have to rely on a man to take care of them in this new world.

Again, the conceiving ceremony comes from the Bible story of Jacob, Rachel, and Bilhah which Gilead fundamentally interprets as a three-person sexual experience. When in the ceremony, the Commander is having sex with the lower half of the Handmaid while the Handmaid rests her head on the Wife's pelvic bone. While this occurs, the Wife has no other option but to watch. She cannot stop the action, but must remain mute. Even though there is not any romance in this interaction, and the Wife knows that the Handmaid does not have a choice, there is, at least, a primitive form of female-female competition happening. The Wife has to observe her husband (i.e. mate/ access to resources) having intercourse (i.e. supplying resources) with another woman to conceive a child. Moreover, once the child is born, the Wife has to take care of a baby with whom she has not had nine months to bond. The Wife is not part of the genetic process whatsoever, which is somewhat similar to an adoption. Additionally, by Gilead standards, the Wife is not valuable because she cannot fulfill what Gilead believes is her destiny: producing a child. It is evident in the narrative that neither Offred or the Wife enjoy this ceremonial practice, as Offred often wonders which of them has the worse part of the process.

The Handmaids also experience their own form of envy and female-female competition. Between the Handmaids there are moments of competition if one Handmaid has gotten pregnant and the others have not. While on a walk into town for the weekly groceries, Offred and Ofglen see a pregnant Handmaid come inside the store. Offred observes, "...her belly, under her loose garment, swells triumphantly. There is shifting in the room, a murmur, an escape of breath; despite ourselves we turn out heads, blatantly, to see better; our fingers itch to touch her. She's a magic presence to us, an object of envy and desire, we covet her. She's a flag on a hilltop, showing us what can still be done: we too can be saved" (26). The Red Center taught the Handmaids that their one purpose is to produce children, so they have all been groomed to

believe that if they are not producing a child, they are failing as being a woman and are sent away to do deathly, hard labor as their punishment. However, if a Handmaid is able to produce a child, she is rewarded with never having to go through the process again. So, when Offred sees this pregnant Handmaid, she is envious, but it also gives her hope that it is still possible to be freed.

Another one of Barbara Smuts' hypotheses for evolution of patriarchy is the formation of male hierarchies. Over history, there has been a growth in the gap between men who have a wealth of resources and men who lack the same access to those resources. This caused women to become vulnerable and dependent on a smaller number of powerful men. Smuts argues, "Male attempts to dominate and control females are likely to be successful only to the extent that males can also dominate and control other males. If no male is capable of dominating any other male (an idealized situation only approximated in nature), then coercing females into mating will not work because other males will always have the power to intervene and they will do so because intervention will simultaneously reduce a rival's reproductive success and increase the intervener's own chances of gaining sexual access to the female" (17). According to evolutionary psychology, high-status males, or more resource-rich males, are the ones who are most likely going to have the highest reproductive fitness as they have more "wealth" to offer females and offspring. Low-status males are less likely to have a high reproductive fitness because they do not have as much to offer.

Similar to the situation in Gilead, the Commanders have ultimate control over the rest of the men and all the women because everyone understands that they are the high-status males. The non-Commander, or low-status, men are either medical doctors, Guardians, or Eyes and they have other jobs that keep them in a lower class than the Commanders. Notably, the medical

doctors are solely used to make sure that the Handmaids are healthy and able to have the medical care they need should they get pregnant. The Guardians, according to Offred, “aren’t real soldiers. They’re used for routine policing and other menial functions...and they’re either stupid or older or disabled or very young, apart from the ones that are Eyes incognito” (20). Offred understands that there is a class system within the male population; the Commanders, although they can be older men, are likely chosen because they are intelligent, confident, and able-bodied. The Eyes are placed around the town in order to monitor all actions taking place. They make sure there are not any disturbances or riots. Although they have their own kind of power, these non-Commander men are unable to be with a woman. They cannot have Wives, so they do not need a Handmaid. While referring to Nick, a Guardian who works in Offred’s Commander’s house, she says, “He lives here, in the household, over the garage. Low status: he hasn’t been issued a woman, not even one. He doesn’t rate: some defect, lack of connections” (18). According to Darwin’s studies, the Commanders would be one of the fittest species to survive in this environment.

Alliances and Cooperation

Although humans compete with one another for the best resources and opportunities, humans are also extremely cooperative. Often times, strengthening a person’s inclusive fitness can come from cooperating with other individuals in the environment. Herbert Gintis, a writer from *The Evolution Institute*, says, “We came to these ‘moral sentiments’ because our ancestors lived in environments, both natural and socially constructed, in which groups of individuals who were predisposed to cooperate and uphold ethical norms tended to survive and expand relative to other groups, thereby allowing those prosocial motivations to proliferate” (Gintis). Although Gilead is nowhere near a perfect system, the people understand that if they want to survive this

system, they will have to cooperate with each other. Specifically, there are various moments when the women begin making female alliances in order to increase their chances of survival. Even though the gestures are small, it is a way for the women to regain control over themselves rather than allowing the Commanders to keep mandating their choices. Offred finds out from her shopping partner, Ofglen, that there is a resistance working undercover to fight against Gilead's repressive society. Ofglen, hoping Offred will want to be part of the resistance, begs Offred to share any damning information about her Commander. Unfortunately, Offred does not give any information, but this exchange gives evidence that there are multiple Handmaids who are working together to start a revolution.

It is additionally evident that the Wives plan with the Handmaids to disobey the rules for the sake of both women's survival. One way they accomplish this is through mate switching. In evolutionary psychology, mate switching entails that the female mates with multiple males around the same time. By doing this, the female will not know who the father of her offspring will be, but it will allow her to reproduce and glean various resources from multiple males (without either of the males knowing about each other). Serena Joy makes a secret deal with Offred to periodically have sex with Nick, a Guardian working in their household, in order to strengthen Offred's chances of getting pregnant. Serena alludes to Offred that it is a possibility that the Commander is unable to conceive, and being determined to have a child, she insists that she and Offred take this alternative approach. In Offred's situation, sleeping with Nick while she is periodically having intercourse with the Commander will ensure that Offred can get pregnant without the Commander finding out or eliminating her for being infertile.

Outside of Offred, there are hints amongst the Handmaids and Wives that there are other Handmaids who are seeking outside help to get pregnant as well. Oftentimes, the outside sexual

alliances come from the doctors, since they are the only males in the society who are allowed to be alone with the Handmaids without direct supervision. Offred writes about her experience going to her monthly checkup. She says,

“My breasts are fingered in their turn, a search for ripeness, rot. The breathing comes nearer. I smell old smoke, aftershave, tobacco dust on hair, Then the voice, very soft, close to my head: that’s him, bulging the sheet.

‘I could help you,’ he says. Whispers.

‘What?’ I say.

‘Shh,’ he says. ‘I could help you. I’ve helped others.’

‘Help me?’ I say, my voice as low as his. ‘How?’

‘How do you think?’ he says, still barely breathing it.

Is that his hand, sliding up my leg? He’s taken off the glove.

‘The door’s locked. No one will come in. They’ll never know it isn’t his’” (60).

Notably, Handmaids are made to see the doctor once a month in order to make sure they are staying healthy and check if they are pregnant. This allows for multiple chances for the women to conceive while simultaneously having their monthly intercourse with their Commanders.

Ideally, no one other than the doctor and the Handmaid would know, thus allowing for the Commander to rest assured that the conceived child is his and for the Handmaid to stay alive.

However, just as the women are cooperating and creating alliances to work against the system, there are Commanders who are bending the system as well. The Commanders have created a secret club called Jezebel’s, which is a place where Commanders can go to be with prostitutes. In Smuts’ observations of some primate groups, she notes that male monkeys will have a harem of female monkeys that belong to them; it is part of his responsibility to keep the

females away from the other “bachelor” males because he does not want to relinquish his mating access. In relation to Gilead, the Commanders have created their own harem similar to the primates Smuts studied. This club is completely off-limits to any other men other than Commanders. Once Fred brings Offred to Jezebel’s, he disguises her as a prostitute and smuggles her into the club. For the night, Fred slaps a wristband on Offred to denote her as a “rental” and to signal to the other Commanders that she is off-limits to anyone other than himself. Ironically, part of the reason Gilead was created was to eliminate the amount of sexual desire and dangerous actions toward women like rape and sexual assault. The men who made Gilead’s laws and denounced promiscuity are the same men who have created their own club where they can reap the benefits of the illegal activity without consequences.

According to evolutionary psychology, men, more than women, tend to have a mixed mating strategy. Especially in a repressive, hierarchal social environment, men are more likely to pursue a variety of females in order to maximize their reproductive possibilities. Fred’s defense for the Jezebel club coincides with evolutionary psychology’s analysis of male mating strategies. Offred tells Fred that this club is illegal by Gilead standards, and he answers, “‘Well, officially,’ he says. ‘Nature demands variety, for men. It stands to reason, it’s part of the procreational strategy. It’s Nature’s plan...Women know that instinctively. Why did they buy so many different clothes, in the old days? To trick the men into thinking they were several different women. A new one each day’” (237). However, in this scenario, the Commanders’ intent is not to have children, but to expand their sexual control to various prostitutes. These prostitutes are not being paid for their labor; a Commander can “rent” them for a night, and he can do what he wants with them. The promiscuity before Gilead can continue, but only for the Commanders; the women do not have a choice to partake unless being “rented” as a Jezebel.

Concluding Thoughts

Although Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is a work of fiction, it is important to understand that the patriarchal themes present in Gilead resemble real, human actions. Using a Darwinian feminist theory to analyze *The Handmaid's Tale* shows the evolutionary root of the creation of Gilead's patriarchy. Margaret Atwood states in the introduction to *The Handmaid's Tale* that the details she included in the narrative were all inspired from real events that had happened across the world and from various points in history. She created the unique compilation that would become *The Handmaid's Tale*, but it is important to understand that reality is not far removed from this fictional story. Offred, as mentioned earlier, was meant to be an average woman who was complacently living her life before Gilead; she did not concern herself with considering the sexist changes happening to women around her. She took for granted the rights that her mother's generation fought hard to gain. These human rights can be taken away, if we become lackadaisical and engulfed in our own experiences; we must remain vigilant in challenging oppression and sexism for all.

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