

# Sex, Gender and Class in Margaret Atwood's Literary Works

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Diplomski rad

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Zadar, 2020.



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## Table of Contents

1.	Introduction.....	6
2.	Theoretical background.....	7
2.1.	Concepts of Sex & Gender: Sex as a Biological Trait and Gender as a Performance .....	7
2.2.	The Concept of Class – The Ruling and The Ruled .....	13
2.3.	The Relationship between Class and Gender .....	16
2.4.	The Patriarchy Theories .....	20
3.	The Handmaid’s Tale .....	23
3.1.	The Gender Trouble and Performance.....	24
3.2.	The Class Oppression and Segregation.....	29
4.	Alias Grace.....	34
4.1.	The Gender Performance and Inequality .....	34
4.2.	The Issue of Class Distinction.....	39
5.	Brief Comparison of The Handmaid’s Tale and Alias Grace.....	43
6.	Conclusion .....	46
7.	Works cited .....	48
8.	Sex, Gender and Class in Margaret Atwood’s Literary Works: Summary and key words .....	52

9. Spol, rod i stalež u književnim djelima Margaret Atwood: Sažetak i ključne riječi..... 52

## 1. Introduction

Since the beginning of the world, people have been in a race of winning supremacy and a dominant position over their contemporaries. Those who are in possession of power, in most cases men, direct the way people are expected to lead their lives. In order to achieve their non-questionable dominance, they impose rules that must be obeyed by every member of a particular society with which they also ensure the continuance of their government. With the creation of these rules, they set standards that have caused the segregation of people according to their appearance, possession and behaviour; in other words, they created the classification of the world according to class, sex and gender.

This work deals with concepts of sex, gender and class and investigates their representation in two works of Margaret Atwood – *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Alias Grace*. Margaret Atwood is a feminist, famous for her fight against discrimination against women, class categorization and world injustices, the topics that can be found in majority of her literary works, where besides *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Alias Grace*, there are also *Oryx and Crake*, *The Edible Woman*, *Cat's Eye* and many others.

The first part of this thesis is dedicated to the theoretical background where an extensive research of how these three concepts are understood by many sociologists is displayed. The first subchapter is mostly based on the Judith Butler's view of what sex and gender represent, but it also employs the reflections of Simone de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray and Monique Wittig. The second subchapter introduces three basic class theories, including explanations of the Marxist theory, the power elite theory and the multiple interest group ideas where most prominent figures are Max Weber and Karl Marx. The third subchapter presents the

relationship between class and gender, showing how different gender appearances and behaviours are expected of every class. Since it is believed that we are living in a patriarchal society, it is the fourth explained concept since the worlds Atwood depicts are extremely patriarchal.

The second part of the book is dedicated to the analysis of sex, gender and class in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Alias Grace*. Each book is put in a separate chapter and is divided into two subchapters where the first subchapter in both of them depicts gender performances and issues found in the book, while the second one is dedicated to class categorization and inequalities that people from different social strata suffer. The thesis ends with a brief comparison between the two books, delineating similarities and differences found throughout the paper.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Concepts of Sex & Gender: Sex as a Biological Trait and Gender as a Performance

Nowadays, there are many debates about whether there is an actual distinction between the concepts of sex and gender, or if these two represent the same phenomenon. Anyhow, many social scientists that deal with these topics commence the classification with the simple differentiation of the two mentioned notions where they argue that the notion of sex should be understood and explained as a biological trait, while the notion of gender as a culturally constructed feature (Worthman 594). If that classification were true, it would mean that when someone uses the word “sex“, that person refers to the natural traits received upon birth

(biological and physiological), while when the word “gender“ is used, then the reference is made towards the social representation of those traits (Fausto-Sterling 3).

In the social sciences, it is rather challenging to describe completely what the notion of “sex“ signifies without putting it in the contrastive analysis with the notion of “gender”. However, before that comparison is further presented in the paper, it should be mentioned that the division of sex falls into two subcategories: the male sex and the female sex. This binary separation of sexes is based upon the reproductive function of the species (De Beauvoir 33). Although it seems as the segregation of the sexes into two is designated according to general principles, in Luce Irigaray’s opinion, that division is actually based upon masculine criteria (23). Her theory is based on the fact that the masculine reproductive organ is always depicted as the active one, while the feminine organ is seen as the passive one. Anyhow, Simone De Beauvoir is conscious of that assumption regarding female passivity and continues the debate with the explanation of egg fertilization. As it is already proven by many scientists, it always takes two sets of chromosomes – one being produced by a female and the other by a male in order to get a final product – the fertilized egg. It is impossible to produce the fertilized egg with only one set of chromosomes, signifying that neither of the two sets of chromosomes is superior to the other one, but both are equally necessary and important in egg fertilization (De Beauvoir 40). Having said that, we can conclude that none of the two sexes is superior to the other one despite having some biologically inherited differences.

Furthermore, as it can be seen from the paragraph above, the description of what is meant by sex is established by inherited biological features, while, on the other hand, the description of what is meant by gender is based on outside traits – from societal influences (Butler 1). Those traits include learned behaviours as well as different roles that are acquired



during life. Consequently, it can be deduced that since gender is perceived as culturally constructed, in its nature, gender is not as inflexible as sex and cannot be viewed as an outcome of sex, but rather as a result of immediate surroundings (Butler 10).

Simone de Beauvoir agrees with this division between sex and gender, where sex is biologically inherited and gender culturally constructed and she corroborates it with her famous statement: “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman” (273). This means that in order to be marked by a certain gender, one needs to acquire a variety of different characteristics and habits that are associated with that gender, i.e. that person needs to be recognized by society to have them (Butler 2).

A sociological theory known as “symbolic interactionism” (Holmes 48) argues that in order for the society to classify a person into a particular gendered category, that person needs to be associated with certain habits. To be associated with those habits, the person in association needs to repetitively demonstrate the possession of such habits in interaction with other people. Thus, it could be said that gender is of performative nature as gender itself is a process that is, due to its repetitiveness, in everlasting construction (Butler 43). In other words, gender is a doing or a repeated action (143). What we mean by that can be compared with the relationship between mother and daughter and father and son. Every female child most usually wants to resemble her mother, while a male child wants to resemble the father and acquire their habits and behaviours. In order to become like their parents, children need to observe their parents' doings and mimic them. Hence, with the observation of their parents, children start to partially subconsciously, and on the other hand, partially consciously repeat their parents' behaviours and acts. In time, these repeated behaviours become fixed and people start identifying themselves through them, i.e. they establish their identity via them. Thus, they



identify themselves either as males (masculine gender) or as females (feminine gender) (Butler 23).

Furthermore, it should not be forgotten that an identity cannot be constructed before certain standards are established, i.e. certain rules that need to be conformed. Therefore, in order for a person to become associated with a particular gender, feminine or masculine, it should be clearly stated what features are expected from each of the two mentioned genders (23). Moreover, in contemplation of what features refer to each of the two genders, people immediately use the biological traits of the sex that is its paragon. Thus, the masculine gender instantaneously becomes related with the male sex, while the feminine gender becomes connected with the female sex. As both sexes have more or less established expected norms regarding physical appearances, in that case, women are expected to be more gentle, more fragile, smaller and more nurturing than men; while on the other hand men are expected to be physically and psychologically stronger, more aggressive and taller (among many other traits) than women. The immediate and spontaneous connection between female sex and feminine gender and male sex and male gender is known as “gender-linked traits” (Unger and Crawford 122).

Nonetheless, explaining feminine and masculine or female and male, in both cases the comparison is based upon the sex/gender binary and as both of these concepts are represented through body – either by appearance or by the way someone behaves (talks, moves etc.) - the problem arises when sex and gender do not coincide the way society expects them to coincide. Then, those beings are considered to be “incoherent” (Butler 23) or “discontinuous gendered beings” (23). Those people are known today as “transsexual” (Butler, 6) or “transgendered” (6) persons. Transsexuals or transgendered persons live a life identifying

themselves with the gender that is opposite to the sex that they are born with – thus, they can classify and represent themselves as males while having organs usually identified with females and vice versa (6).

Contrary to the belief presented in this chapter by now, Wittig holds that the category of sex is not natural, but it is actually the category of nature that is used for the scope of reproductive sexuality and is created by politics in order to justify the establishment of heterosexuality as being natural, otherwise there would be no need for the separation of sexes (Butler 143). In other words, from when we are born, we are constantly being persuaded into what features are esteemed to be natural, until those features become adopted, albeit they are socially produced. Hence, it is civilization that creates expectations that human beings start accepting as natural (Wittig 103). Furthermore, Wittig also believes that there is no distinction between sex and gender and that sex should be considered solely as “a gendered category” (qtd. in Butler 143). This view can be seen in her article *The Point of View: Universal or particular*, where she explains that gender is the so-called linguistic index that is used to depict the political contrast between the two sexes. What is more, according to her statements, there are not actually two genders, but only one – the feminine gender, considering that the masculine should not be perceived as a gender, but as a general. Thus, there are the feminine gender and the general (Wittig 2).

Nonetheless, Wittig agrees with the statement of Simone de Beauvoir that one is not destined to become a woman only because they are born with the female reproductive system, but every person has their right to choose what he or she wants to become and how to declare themselves. Besides that belief, Wittig also denies the existence of gender binarity. She firmly believes that one does not have to choose to become neither female nor male, i.e. neither

woman nor man, but they can become somethings else – i.e. a lesbian (Wittig 104). Lesbians do not conform neither to the expectations related to the female gender, nor to the ones related to the male gender, but they share some traits with males and some with females. In addition, with the rejection of femaleness, lesbians also reject political and economic power of men (Wittig 105). Ergo, besides transsexuals and transgendered persons, lesbians are also considered to be discontinuous gendered beings as they, just as transsexuals and transgendered persons, do not conform to standards imposed by society.

In addition to that, there is another standpoint, the one of the Vatican. Vatican completely denounces the concept of gender as, according to them, it is either a secret code for homosexuality or it simply creates a way where homosexuality could be understood as a gender amongst the typical masculine and feminine genders and the recently formed (in the previous century) bisexual and transsexual genders, both of which are understood to be gendered categories (Butler 183). Moreover, they support the view that homosexuality serves as indication to the gender proliferation (183). According to the magazine *La Repubblica*, there are now 5 different genders: “masculine, feminine, homosexual, transgender and lesbian” (183.) This view partially correlates with the one of Wittig, as if homosexuality is understood as a separate gender, then those who see themselves as homosexuals are neither men nor women. Hence, considering homosexuality to be its own gender displaces the theory of the binary opposition (183).

To sum it all up, despite many different discussions and beliefs, it seems as the majority of researchers agree that views and comprehension regarding sex and gender are greatly influenced by society and politics. However, what distinguishes their beliefs is the extent of

how much they want to acknowledge the importance of biology, i.e. the importance of nature in the creation of those views, and how much that of society.

## 2.2. The Concept of Class – The Ruling and The Ruled

There are various attributes and features that could be utilized in order to describe what is meant by class. One way to depict class is to say that people who share similar or the same casual components regarding their life chances could be said to belong to the same class. Those casual components are usually understood through the economic prism, i.e. they demonstrate a certain possession of economic goods or lack of it as well as favourable circumstances for income (Weber 115). To put it simply, the term “class” indicates any group of people that share a similar amount of different economic resources and position within a particular society (Holmes 10). There are 3 fundamental theories explaining the way classes are established and the way power is distributed within society. These theories are: numerous versions of the Marxist theory regarding the governing and governed classes, various ideas about power elites, and finally there are multiple variants of the interest group theory (Wesolowski 22). Each of these three theories has its own way of interpreting the way power is distributed and divided within society and albeit it seems as they are in conflict, all of them are actually explaining a different facet of the same concept (22).

One of the prominent figures in the theory of classes is certainly Karl Marx, with his Marxist theory, according to whom the modern world is divided into two main classes where the first group consists of capitalists, or in other words bourgeoisie, who are in charge of



factories and many other businesses, i.e. they are the class in charge, and the other of the workers known also as proletariat, who trade their work in order to survive (Marx 79). According to the Marxist theory, our history is abundant in examples of class conflicts which led to the rotation of various systems and of the class in charge. Hence, Karl Marx infers that every history is in fact a history of class struggles (80).

On the other hand, Max Weber disagrees with Karl Marx as he holds that it is not the economic means that determine the leading class, but the extent of power that one possesses (Weber 114). For example, history is replete with examples where certain aristocrats were left with no money, but their positions were still highly regarded and significant within society. However there are certain careers, such as prostitution, that may help one to quickly gain money, and despite being wealthy, that person is still not considered to be a respected member of society (Holmes 10).

At present, both segments, economic means and power, are used as key factors in determining a person's class position since most often a personal occupation is used as the primary indicator of belonging to a certain class. More prestige occupations ensure people better payments (for example being manager in a company) and consequently they ensure them more power inside the society (Pilcher & Whelehan 13). Nevertheless, there are still some differences between solely possessing the power, i.e. belonging to the power elite, and having the economic means, albeit, as said above, one theory does not necessarily exclude the other.

First of all, Marxism relies completely on the idea that every governing class is de facto a direct result of the economic structure of society (Wesolowski 23). People who constitute the governing class are all individuals who differ in the extent of how much they are connected to the instruments of production. Simply put, this theory holds that being dominantly in charge

of the instruments of production guarantees a superior political and ideological domination whereas without the possession of certain economic goods, the political and ideological domination would not be realizable (23).

Secondly, as mentioned above, besides the Marxist's theory whose concept is primarily based upon the economic system, the power elite theory is founded on the idea that all power within society is an outcome of the political system where it is not important to possess economic goods to obtain and maintain power (Wesolowski 23). As well as in the Marxist theory, the power elite is also composed of individuals where half of those individuals are responsible for creation and formation of state decisions, while the other half have an immediate influence on the first group, thus being the cardinal decision creators (23). Nonetheless, the basic distinction between these two state decision groups is that those who are in power of shaping state decisions have a legislative and a political right to do so, while the second group cannot make any direct state decisions, but can only influence people who have the right to make those decisions.

When speaking of influence over people, the theory of interest groups should not be neglected since their primary function is to shape people's opinions in a desired direction from the perspective of a particular group, i.e. they offer solutions for various community or national problems (Mosler 36). The issue they are advocating locates them into certain categories; hence, they are differentiated by the function or the subject matter they are promoting. Not all interest groups possess the same amount of power and the political scene is not concerned with the interest groups that do not hold a lot of power over people. The extent of the held power of the interest group depends upon the importance of a function that that group has within a particular society. For example, church, in societies that are in their core devout, plays an

enormous role in shaping people's minds and decisions. Therefore, in devout societies, church possesses great power over people and its power is attractive to the government since it could influence people's decisions in the government representative structure election (De Grazia 115).

All in all, the best way to epitomize everything said about the idea of structuring classes is to make a conclusion with the employment of the Gaetano Mosca's suggestion about the existence of only two classes in the world – the one that rules and possesses all power and the one that is being ruled and powerless. Logically, the ruling class is always less numerous than the one that is ruled (Mosca 268). All those ruling classes, despite the governing system, are de facto the governing ideas that create and keep alive the perception about the dominance of the ruling class consistently ensuring their supremacy and power over the ruled class (268). At the end, it is not solely economic goods, or, on the other hand, power alone that ensures a high class position within society, but all those elements mixed together.

### 2.3. The Relationship between Class and Gender

In the previous two subchapters the concepts of class and gender are thoroughly explained from different points of view. Howbeit, in reality, these two concepts cannot be completely dissected from one another as both of them are somewhat essential in the creation of all societies.

Firstly, in order that one becomes a part of a particular society, and therefore of a particular class, one must pass the process of socialization that will prepare one to behave according to the established norms of that society (Holmes 10). The process most often requires

different manners of behaviour for girls and women in comparison to boys and men. Secondly, besides socialization, another important societal phenomenon is the social structure or the manner in which certain society is structured politically, economically or in other ways. What is important for the social structure is that it represents a crucial role in determining people's actions in gendered ways with the help of agents of socialization (i.e. schools), and they are essential for people to perform certain gender (Holmes 10).

Anyhow, as aforesaid, the class is immensely important in shaping people's opinions in regard to appropriate and acceptable, either masculine or feminine, behaviours and appearances. Many sociologists adopted the Pierre Bourdieu's term "habitus" (qtd. in Holmes 43) which is in this context used to point out that acquired habits within a specific class environment shape and establish our identities. The established identities partially distinguish us from other people and partially connect us to certain groups of people, indicating either lower or higher position within class hierarchy. Nevertheless, the class habitus also includes specific manners of doing gender where middle- and upper-class behaviours of doing gender are more esteemed within societies than lower-class manners (43). For example, the experience of one woman who worked for a middle-class family as a nanny proved to her that people belonging to middle-class look down on people belonging to lower classes.

According to Goldthorpe, in order to define to which class a certain individual belongs, it is not the individual that is examined, but the family that that individual belongs to (465). Goldthorpe is not alone in his belief as most of the writers on class active in the 1960s and 1970s neglected gender relations and generally used all-male samples as a unit of measure in their research. The reason for the use of all-male samples was due to the belief that predominantly men were wage earners where the amount of earned wage determined the



position of the family within society (Walby 8). Goldthorpe even continued to advocate his standpoint claiming that women's occupations are infrequent and dependent on domestic events (such as birth of a child) and as such are rather insignificant to influence the position of the family within society (qtd. in Walby 9).

The above presented idea of class stratification advocated by Goldthorpe came across numerous critiques. First of all, the presented belief relies heavily on the concept of the traditional nuclear families whereas in real life the number of traditional nuclear households is in decline and is replaced by either households that consist of a single parent, in which mainly women are heads of households. In the enumeration of different types of households, married households where only women are working should be mentioned as well as households that contain only 1 person. Nevertheless, there are also households where all members are unemployed and the breadwinner is missing (Walby 9).

The change in the structure of families created two major issues in the conventional approach to family classifications. Firstly, as in most non-conventional families men are no longer the principal wage earners, due to their nonexistence or inability to work, hence, women became an acceptable replacement for them as decisive factors for family placements within society. Secondly, according to Delphy, another issue for the conventional approach arises in the class categorization of women where they can be classified either according to their current employment or according to the husband's employment (in the cases when they are married) (Delphy 32).

On the other hand, researches conveyed by Lockwood, Goldthorpe and other scientists revealed that there is no reason that women should not be taken as an important factor for the family class categorization as according to the sample they employed, women's wages in the

white-collar families are higher than men's (qtd. in Walby 9). This belief is also supported by Britain and Heath who advocate that women's employment is equally important for households as men's, and as thus, women can be taken as one of the indicators for the class position of family (qtd. In Walby 10). What is more, they defend their opinion stating that both women and men should be taken in the equation for defining the correct class position of a particular family as in some families partners have jobs belonging to different classes. With this belief, they introduced a new concept in the family class segregation known as *cross-class families* (Walby 10) where, for example, the woman could be a white-collar worker and the man a blue-collar worker. The issue with the Britain and Heath's theory is that, once again, they could not depart from the fact that not all families live in traditional households.

Furthermore, in an attempt to more vividly depict gender inequality, Delphy decided to apply class theory to explain gender relations. She holds that in married homes, housewives belong to one class and men in their role of husbands belong to another one simply due to their distinctive connection to the patriarchal way of manufacturing, where women are seen as the producing class and men as non-producing one (qtd. in Pilcher & Whelehan 14). On the other hand, Firestone places men and women into diverse classes according to their sex and their role in the process of reproduction. She sees women as being underprivileged in employment opportunities due to pregnancy, breast feeding, child care etc. (qtd. in Walby 12).

Both of these attempts to show gender inequality using the theory of class were harshly criticized. The first problem with Delphy's theory is that not all women are housewives and the other that she ignores other aspects of our lives, such as cultural or sexual, and includes only the economic perspective (Walby 12). On the other hand, Firestone's theory is blamed for relying exclusively on biological traits. However, her theory is still partially acknowledged

as she admits that with the power over the means of production women can ameliorate their position (12).

To sum it up, it could be concluded that for family class segregation, women and men are equally relevant and as such both genders should be employed in the statistics. The emergence of various types of households supports this theory even more as in most of these newly created households, men are most often non-existent or unemployed, and primarily women are the breadwinners.

#### 2.4. The Patriarchy Theories

Lewis Henry Morgan categorizes social evolution into three main periods: “savagery, barbarism and civilisation” (5). During the whole savagery period, until the Stone Age (the barbarism epoch), women were held on a high position in the society, i.e. they were seen as central players in the development of social collaboration as they contributed to society and their families as much as men (Brewer 15; De Beauvoir 80). In addition to that, they are also offspring carriers and are always certain that the offspring is theirs, while men can be manipulated into that role, despite not being blood-related to the child, especially in that period as there were no tests to prove otherwise. To put it simply, it could be said that in that period people were living in the matriarchy system, which was thereafter, with the production of first tools, replaced by the system of patriarchy.

As matriarchy indicates that the chief of a particular social group (for instance of a clan or family) is a woman, patriarchy is its complete opposite having a man as its leader. In the previous century, many feminists have amended the patriarchal original meaning and

veered it into the representative symbol of social organization where men dominate over women (Pilcher & Whelehan 93). There are many theories that deal with the notion of patriarchy, however, the following three have patriarchy as a core concept: “the radical feminist” (93), “Marxist feminist” (93) and “dual systems theory” (93).

The radical feminist theories hold that the concept of patriarchy is the main cause of social segregation. There are several varieties of these theories, where one holds that in the patriarchal system the structure of family is used as an instrument in accomplishing the supreme dominance of men over women (Millet qtd. in Pilcher & Whelehan 93), while the other, more radical, theories hold that male dominance over females is achieved through masculine’s violent control of female’s bodies (Pilcher & Whelehan 94).

In the second grouping of these theories, titled as “Marxist feminism”, patriarchy is understood to derive from the labour of the capitalist industrial system. According to them, the new approach to business management benefited on women’s unsalaried home work (94). For this reason Marxist feminists concluded that just as women’s unsalaried labour is subordinated to men’s profitable work, women as human beings are in the same manner subordinated to men. Also these theories assert that class inequality produces gender inequality and is a fundamental characteristic of society (Barret qtd. in Pilcher & Whelehan 94).

The last grouping of the patriarchy approaches are basically a combination of beliefs expressed in the Marxist and radical feminist theories. This grouping has arisen as an outcome of critiques addressed towards the first two groupings, stating that the first grouping exaggerates the concept of patriarchy as well as biology, while the second grouping, in their opinion, exaggerates the importance of class and capitalism (94). For the reason of the mixture of two diverse theories, where capitalism and patriarchy are considered to be symbiotic and



where both of them are seen to advance from women's subordination to men, this approach is named "dual systems theory" (94).

All these theories have been widely criticized for their shortcomings including: ahistoricism (inability to recognize and admit alterations in gender relations), reductionism (lessening explanations on only one or two characteristics), neglect of other type of relations except for the ones between women and men, and for universalism (they do not include cultural diversity into explanations assuming that relationships between women and men are the same all over the world) (Pilcher & Whelehan 95). However, Walby in her work *Theorizing Patriarchy*, argues to have overcome the issues attributed to previous theorizations of patriarchy.

Walby comprehends patriarchy as an arrangement that consists of various social structures where she includes: paid labour, the establishment of countries, domestic production, all kind of male violence, sexuality and the cultural representations of feminine and masculine gender, that enable processes which assure men's subordination of women (Walby). In her comprehension of patriarchy, she acknowledges alterations and modifications in its structure that occur over time. Moreover, she has also introduced two new concepts to theorize about: the public and the private patriarchy (Walby 201). Private patriarchy is focused on the domestic exploitation of women, while the public one deals with women's inequalities and injustices in the public sphere. Howbeit, public patriarchy does not exclude the private one and in those cases women are exploited in both structures (201).

As is the circumstance with all theories, even Walby's patriarchy theory met many critiques. Pollert accuses Walby's theory of being overly explanatory, whereas instead of deciphering the original source of patriarchy, it only provides us with a more detailed and

elaborate explanation of what patriarchy represents (qtd. in Pilcher & Whelehan 95). Hence, even Walby did not succeed in overcoming the shortcomings of the previous theories.

For the reasons outlined, the number of supporters who argue for abandoning patriarchy as an explanatory theory is in constant augmentation. In their opinion, gender theories should completely abandon the concept of patriarchy as a social system theory, and instead, the concept of patriarchy should be used exclusively as a descriptive feature for situations and relationships where men domineer over women (95).

### 3. The Handmaid's Tale

In the words of Harold Bloom, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is a feminist gothic dystopia which serves both as a warning and a criticism towards the American political system and towards the distribution of power within society (9). Atwood rejects the idea of classification of her work as "a feminist dystopia" claiming that it is not sufficient for a certain literary work to become "feminist" only because it was written by a woman (Kouhestani 610). However, despite her critique over this classification, it is already a common belief that *The Handmaid's Tale* should be classified as a feminist work which is supported even further by the fact that the majority of this book is built upon the abuse of women's rights which are understood as inviolable in the Western culture and as such are taken for granted.

This chapter is divided into two parts and the first subchapter deals with the gender inequality presented in the book, while the second subchapter is dedicated to the examination

of the book's class segregation and the oppression performed over the citizens of the Republic of Gilead and especially over the social stratum of handmaids.

### 3.1. The Gender Trouble and Performance

The book opens in the old gymnasium when the main sexually-enslaved female protagonist, Offred, wakes up. The old gymnasium is a place that is in the newly-imposed Gileadean system transformed into the recruitment center for young fertile women who are being groomed and prepared for bearing children to wealthy and powerful men whose wives became barren due to the toxic and polluted air. In order to gain reader's trust, Margaret Atwood commences the story with Offred's description of her immediate surroundings intertwined with the reminiscence of the past, demonstrating to all readers that Offred is a sharp and an intelligent character capable of strong opinions. All those traits are unacceptable in the current intolerant, chauvinist, enslaving and patriarchal government of the Republic of Gilead that is modelled according to the 17<sup>th</sup> century Puritan roots (Atwood 11). The government uses certain quotations from the Old Testament, censoring the unfavourable sections, as a foundation for the newly imposed laws that abolish all freedom to the citizens of Gilead and bring benefit only to the wealthy males.

In the Gileadean system, women are completely dishonoured and oppressed, and the handmaids who are nothing but sexual slaves whose only function is to reproduce and bring children into the world, bear the brunt of the oppression. An example of disappreciation towards them is shown in the composition of their new names; the prefix "Of" is attached to the name of the handmaid's male possessor, thus the maid belonging for example to Glen is

re-named Ofglen, Offred, Ofglen, Ofwarren and so forth. The name of the main protagonist, Offred, bears more than one meaning. Firstly it means that our main character belongs to a man named Fred, while secondly it also stands for “offered” (Bloom, 13) or “afraid” (13). It is probably not by a coincidence that Atwood named Offred’s possessor Fred, since in this case, her name can also be divided into “Off Red” that covertly points toward the menstrual bleeding from a uterus which secretly hints that her womb is fertile and usable for bearing children (Crockford 6). This way, once again, women’s true value is diminished to the sole purpose of bearing children. What is more, since the elitist men can change more than one handmaid during their lives, whereas all of these women share the same name that marks them as their possession, it undervalues women even further as it shows how women are in fact, easily dispensable and can be quickly and effortlessly replaced. In other words, the handmaids here are merely socio-political tools that can break down and when the damage is unfixable, the old broken tools are replaced with the fresh ones. The example of this replacement happens when new Ofglen appears once the previous one is caught for her illegal underground work with the secret organization established for freeing people of the Gileadean society:

I wait at the corner for Ofglen. [...] Then, as she comes nearer, I think that there must be something wrong with her. She looks wrong. She is altered in some indefinable way; she’s not injured, she’s not limping. It’s as if she has shrunk. Then when she’s nearer still I see what it is. She isn’t Ofglen.

[...]

Has Ofglen been transferred, so soon?” I ask, but I know she hasn’t. I saw her only this morning. She would have said. “I am Ofglen,” the woman says. Word perfect.



And of course she is, the new one, and Ofglen, wherever she is, is no longer Ofglen. I never did know her real name. That is how you can get lost, in a sea of names. It wouldn't be easy to find her, now. (Atwood 267-268)

Furthermore, as Judith Butler asserts, gender is something that is created and imposed from the outside, from the society, which includes certain expectations of people's behaviours and appearances (1). The expected behaviours and appearances need to be repetitively performed in order to become associated with one of the two acknowledged genders (43). In the *Handmaid's Tale*, in the Kirkvirk words, gender is primarily expressed through the exterior (26). All rules and expectations for the citizens of the Republic of Gilead are determined in advance. Specific behaviours and appearances are always repeated and they only differ according to the role that each citizen has within the society. For this reason, Handmaids always wear red, Wives blue, Marthas green, Aunts brown and Econowives multi-coloured stripes. This way, the individuality and identities are lost. It fits perfectly into Judith Butler's idea of how "woman" basically indicates a common identity (6). An interesting assumption can be drawn from the transcript when the doctor addresses Offred as "honey" (Atwood 70), to which she infers "What he called his wife, once; maybe still does, but really it's a generic term. We are all honey" (70). What can be observed here is once again the loss of identity, where "I" or "me" becomes "we", where "we" stands as a replacement for all women. The same loss of identity happens even to men when the Aunts address all male population as "them" (Kirkvik, 36). This way Atwood highlights and criticizes the idea of the gender binary, the existence of only two genders, female and male, where all members of the same category are supposedly the same (36).

To get back to performing the gender, there is a particular scene at the beginning of the book when Offred describes herself getting dressed. She describes each cloth item as she puts it on, from her shoes, skirt, veil, gloves and a little basket, emphasising the act itself. Her final look with the red attire combined with the basket resembles the one of the Little Red Riding Hood, and the whole scene reminds of an actress portraying a given role (Kirkvik 41).

In addition to clothes highlighting the repeated gender performances, the dialogues are also used as a tool, especially the ones between the handmaids. The conversations are strictly scripted and any attempt of deviation could be harshly punished as any experiment on or alteration of the conversation seems suspicious and poses a threat to the stability of the Gileadean system. The appearances together with the scripted dialogues present the handmaids as repetitious patterns (42). The example of such a repeated conversation is shown here:

Blessed be the fruit,” [Ofglen] says to me, the accepted greeting among us. “May the Lord open,” I answer, the accepted response. [...] “The war is going well, I hear,” she says. “Praise be,” I reply. “We’ve been sent good weather.” “Which I receive with joy. (Atwood 32)

As mentioned above, the main unit used for the “measure” of a woman’s worth is through her fertility. Every woman that is not capable of having children is considered to be an “unwoman” and unworthy of living, except for Wives who, albeit infertile, substitute their infertility with their motherly function of raising children born of the handmaids. Offred is aware of the oppression imposed over them which can be noticed in her description of her and the other handmaids as “two-legged wombs” (Atwood 137). Moreover, it is essentially

intriguing how the imparity of men and women in the Gileadean society extends even further where the women are always blamed for infertility while, in their belief, it is impossible for men to be sterile; or as Offred concludes:

I almost gasp: he's said a forbidden word. Sterile. There is no such thing as a sterile man any more, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that's the law. (Atwood 69)

However, it is not very simple to convince people into agreeing to the women's sexual exploitation without having any sort of evidence to justify and rationalize the presented idea. In order to do so, the government of Republic of Gilead, which is constituted solely of men, uses the story of Rachel and Jacob as a precedent for creating the social stratum of the handmaids. Every time before the ceremony commences, Commander reads the story of Rachel and Jacob to people that attend the Ceremony. Ceremony is just an embellished name for the intercourse between the handmaid and the Commander that sounds more sacred and validated than sex. The name helps Wives to accept the deed more easily. Anyhow, there are two times in the book that the reading from the Bible is mentioned, where the second time Offred remembers how, every morning, this story was read to her and the other handmaid while they were at the Red Centre, or as she says it: "drummed into it at the Centre" (Atwood 94). The choice of the words shows to the reader that Offred is still conscious of the situation surrounding her and that she is not indoctrinated into the Gileadean values yet. The fact that the story is repeatedly read to Offred and the other handmaids, demonstrates the consistent

pressure created by society. That way, with the constant pressure, society implants their belief of the appropriate way to exhibit gender, which when repeated, becomes a habit.

People are designed to rapidly become adapted to the new life conditions, where the old habits seem erroneous, or as Offred speculates silently in her mind when she and her walking partner Ofglen encounter Japanese tourists: "We are fascinated, but also repelled. They seem undressed. It has taken so little time to change our minds, about things like this." (Atwood 41). Hence, the way we live, the way the Gileadean citizens lived prior to this system, is neither normal nor not-normal, but it is only a habit that has been woven for generations before it became socially acceptable; or as Aunt Lydia says to the women in the Red Center: "Ordinary, said Aunt Lydia, is what you are used to. This may not seem ordinary to you now, but after a time it will. It will become ordinary." (Atwood 47).

### 3.2. The Class Oppression and Segregation

It is impossible to separate politics from power and avoid mentioning both concepts when discussing class and class segregation, as these two phenomena are one of the fundamental generators of world inequalities, and the way the world is divided. Margaret Atwood states that politics "is everything that involves who gets to do what to whom" (qtd. in Brans 149). Or, to put it more simply, it could be said that politics is responsible for people arranging their societies, for helping them to decide who should have the power and for giving them the invisible confines of what is acceptable to speak out loud and what is not (149).

*The Handmaid's Tale* perfectly illustrates the just-described methods of people's manipulation by politics and the society's power elite. As Karl Marx asserts, every established



leading system is de facto the consequence of the class struggle (80) in which the winning party always imposes their rules and doctrines. The Republic of Gilead, which represents the worst example of a patriarchal totalitarian autocratic leadership a country could have, modelled according to the 17<sup>th</sup> century Puritan society (Atwood, 11), was founded in the same manner when the self-named Sons of Jacob murdered the President of the USA together with some important figures in the Congress and several Justices of the Supreme Court. In their dictatorial system, the class segregation is overtly expressed through the external appearances, prohibitions of the rights to freely speech, read or voluntarily walk out of their homes whenever they wish. However, regardless of rigorously defined class segregation, the most conspicuous class division is between what Mosca delineates as the class that rules and the class that is being ruled (268).

The members of the ruling class are exclusively elitist white men who enforced their beliefs onto the inhabitants of the land that was previously known as Cambridge, Massachusetts, presenting themselves as the saviours of the world, which in the book is gravely endangered due to the extremely polluted air that consequently provoked the infertility among humans. In this case, even their wives do not belong to the ruling class, but are a member of the class that is being ruled.

Anyhow, as mentioned afore, the new government enforced ridiculously harsh measures, including violence and deprivation of right to freedom of speech which is specific for all theocratic governments (Malak 9), that as a consequence have the creation of several different social strata. The social strata in the book differentiate according to the assigned functions and can be further categorized into the widely accepted three-level hierarchical class structure consisting of upper, middle and low classes.

In the Handmaid's tale, the upper class is reserved for the elitist men of Caucasian race, known in the book as Commanders, and for their Wives. Goldthorpe asserts that class categorization is based on the examination of family to which a certain individual belongs to, rather than on examination of every individual separately, where primarily men are used as key factors for the family placements as mostly they are the family breadwinners (465). This principle of categorization can be observed in the Handmaid's Tale considering that Wives receive a right to belong to the upper class solely due to their marital status and not because of their worth as an individual human. In addition, Goldthorpe continues advocating this standpoint claiming that women's occupation is overly susceptible to the household occurrences such as bearing children (qtd in Walby 9). Yet, since the Wives in the book are infertile (or their husbands, but that standpoint is forbidden), their function of bearing children is replaced with that of grooming them once the assigned handmaid conceives them with their husbands – the Commanders. Nevertheless, despite belonging to the elite, they still do not inherit the same right to belong to the ruling class.

The middle class in the book is secured for the Aunts and the Handmaids. The central focus in the book is on the handmaids' stratum as the story is being retold by Offred who is a part of that class. Their function is to serve as surrogate mothers to the Commanders' families. Once they bring a child into the world for one family, they move further onto "helping" the next one. Handmaids are a perfect example of how systematic oppression eventually develops into internal oppression. The systematic oppression, or in other words, oppression produced by any institution, is generated in *The Handmaid's Tale* by the new government and it manifests through the handmaids' obligation to engage in the Ceremony. Nonetheless, according to Rita, all handmaids "have the choice" (Atwood 25) to become handmaids.

However, Cora disagrees with Rita, explaining what happens and where go women who reject to become the handmaids: “With the Unwomen, and starve to death and Lord knows what all?” (25), the statement with which she implies that being a handmaid is an impossible choice. Nonetheless, after some time, all systematic oppressions evolve into the internal oppressions, i.e. into turning against ourselves (Lipsky 6) or as David and Derthick describe it, into “devaluation and inferiorization of one’s self” (2). Said process is displayed in the book via Offred’s thoughts when she silently contemplates about her indulgence in the Ceremony, sharing Rita’s opinion and thinking to herself “Nor does rape cover it: nothing is going on here that I haven’t signed up for. There wasn’t a lot of choice but there was some, and this is what I chose” (Atwood 99). The other example of the internal oppression in the book can be observed from the Ofglen’s comment about Ofwarren’s (Janine’s) thoughts on her allegedly conceived baby with a doctor (instead of with a Commander to whom she was assigned to), that dies almost immediately after birth, where she states: “She thinks it’s her fault. [...] Two in a row. For being sinful” (Atwood 206).

On the other hand, Aunts are a part of a legal “military” body where even their brown attire reminds of armed forces (Crockford 4). They are entrusted with preparing young fruitful women for their future role of being handmaids. Their presence sows fear amongst unfortunate young girls and in order to have those poor creatures controlled, they use the electric cattle prods, that are shaped as phallus, which “slung on thongs from their leather belts” (Atwood 18). The prods are used as a substitute for the missing masculine authority. In any case, albeit it seems as Aunts possess a certain power, that power is only specious considering that they, in the Offred’s words, “could not be trusted with guns. Guns were for the guards” (18). Hence, they are permitted with only a restrictive amount of power.



The final, low class, is constituted of Marthas, Unwomen, Econowives and Guardians. Perhaps Unwomen could be considered to be on the lowest position on this scale considering that they are completely rejected from the society and are placed in the deadly polluted zones known as “Colonies” where the Gileadean authorities exploit them for agricultural production until they are killed by the deadly air. Anyone can become an “Unwoman”, even a handmaid that fails to accomplish her purpose after a few years of trying. Other members of this strata include lesbians, female protesters, female gender traitors, widows and many other unessential members and/or society opponents. The second lowest position is dedicated to Econowives, a class of married women whose husbands do not belong to the Elite, i.e. are not Commanders. As pointed out by Holmes, middle and upper class people most frequently look down upon lower classes (43) believing that they are not equally worthy and that they do not deserve equal rights. Hence, due to their low status and “unworthiness”, it is decided that Econowives should do everything by themselves, including cooking, cleaning, bearing and raising children and in the case of infertility of the Econowife, the econocouple is not privileged with the handmaid. Their husbands are very often the Guardians, males who are at service to Commanders and whose main role is to keep the elitist families safe, serve them and do for them everything requested, from gardening, driving them or observing the streets from various menaces. The last belonging to the low class are Marthas, servants in the Commanders’ homes responsible for house chores. Since these women are unable to have their own children, they are grateful for receiving an opportunity to live instead of being sent to the Colonies despite their “unworthiness”. Also, Marthas are satisfied with their position within society. The content they feel turns them into passive society members and simultaneously shields the government from their possible rebellion. In other words, their passivity provided power to those belonging to



higher ranks, turning them into passive accomplices of crimes produced in the Republic of Gilead.

#### 4. Alias Grace

Alias Grace is a book inspired by true events that happened in the 1843. The plot follows the story of a young servant, Grace Marks, who presumably murdered her master Thomas Kinnear, and his main housemaid and mistress Nancy Montgomery. Due to her feminine weakness, it was presumed that she was not able to convey a murder alone, but only with a help of her male colleague servant, James Mcdermott. The book is classified as a historical fiction due to the merge of real events with fictional characters like Dr. Simon Jordan who helped Atwood in the narration of Grace Marks' story.

This chapter is divided into two subchapters where the first presents gender issues suffered by the females of the Victorian period, whereas the second one vocalizes the inequality and class differences within the Victorian society.

##### 4.1. The Gender Performance and Inequality

Alias Grace is the 19<sup>th</sup> century novel depicting Victorian society through the events experienced by the novel's main character - Grace Marks. Grace Marks is a young girl, only 16 years old, of Irish roots whose story Atwood utilizes in order to illustrate the conditions and the maltreatment of women in the Victorian period. The perfect example of underestimation

of female sex in that period is shown through the convicts' sentences where Grace Marks manages to stay alive and receives a life imprisonment because of "the weakness of her sex, and her supposed witlessness" (Atwood 506), and eventually is released from prison, while James McDermott is immediately punished to death in front of an audience.

In that time, it was almost impossible to imagine a woman strong enough to defeat and murder, not only one person, but two. That act, unusual for women, resulted in the high popularity of Grace's story within the Victorian society and the public discourse. According to Xiaoxiao, the public discourse is relatively similar to the Victorian gender ideology, perceiving women as "the angel of the house" (173) who are supposed to adhere to the "cult of true womanhood" (173); or in other words, their only life role is to get married, have children and take care of their domesticity. However, with the presumable murder, Grace defies the common belief of a woman as an innocent and gentle angel and starts being seen as its complete opposite, a demon. In Adamo's opinion, Grace is depicted in regard to the patriarchal characters of the soul, where there is no grey, but one can be either "saint or whore" (148) or "innocent or guilty" (148).

Furthermore, Victorians believed that women are without a doubt a weaker gender, with minds that are fragile, easily shaken and thus effortlessly broken. For this reason, Victorian women had no real right of speech, just like Grace who, while others are deciding of her future, sits silently at her trial thinking to herself:

I said, and what the others said I must have said, for there are always those that will supply you with speeches of their own, and put them right into your mouth for you too; and that sort are like the magicians who can throw their voice, at fairs and shows,

and you are just their wooden doll. And that's what it was like at the trial, I was there in the box of the dock but I might as well have been made of cloth, and stuffed, with a china head; and I was shut up inside that doll of myself, and my true voice could not get out. (Atwood 326)

Although Grace feels powerless and voiceless, her situation is not completely as such. As Seidman states, Atwood employs literary means in order to empower Grace and give her her rightfully belonging voice (qtd. In Xiaoxiao 174). Hence, Grace's genuine thoughts can be observed throughout the book from her dialogue with the psychologist Dr. Simon Jordan. Dr. Jordan's job is to discover the accurate condition of Grace's mental health as she, prior to being incarcerated, was held in a mental institution due to her alleged insanity. According to Elaine Showalter, in the social construct, men are always depicted as rational and stable beings, whereas women, due to their frailty, are prone to irrationality and instability (qtd. in Pauly 137). On that account, lunacy is most often figuratively illustrated as a feminine characteristic and exclusively a female illness (qtd. in Pauly 137). The depiction of that belief can be found in the *Alias Grace* when Grace recalls a memory of a woman who pretended to be insane in order to get in the asylum, where Grace says: "One of them was in there to get away from her husband, who beat her black and blue, he was the mad one but nobody would lock him up" (Atwood 31). Through that statement it becomes obvious that in Grace's time only women could have been insane, while men were spared of that malady, despite their actions proving otherwise. In addition, the cultural belief of that time in regard to the women's weakness is shown through another comment of Dr. Jordan, where he says: "Women should not attend such grisly spectacles," he says. "They pose a danger to their refined natures." (Atwood 93). Dr.

Jordan here implies that public executions are extremely brutal in their nature and that fragile creatures like women cannot endure watching them without possible mental breakdown.

Besides women being recognized as a weaker, passive gender, as opposed to strong and stable men, they are also disrespected and seen as creatures without any real merit, whose only value resides in their fruitfulness and ability to sexually satisfy men; or as one of Grace's guards says to her in an attempt of a sexual assault towards her:

[...] you know why God made women with skirts, it's so they can be pulled up over their heads and tied at the top, that way you don't get so much noise out of them, I hate a screeching slut, women should be born without mouths on them, the only thing of use in them is below the waist. (Atwood 263)

Women's value is generally perceived through their possibility of reproduction, and a fertile woman is usually a cherished one; however, the said possibility could create a completely different destiny for them and could turn them into despised members of society. In the book there are two women who experience unwanted pregnancies since both of them conceived illegitimately, i.e. out of wedlock. The first is Mary, a servant just like Grace, who aware of her undesirable situation made an abortion that led her to losing her life, whereas the second is Nancy, the main housekeeper and the Mr. Kinnear's mistress. Nancy, conscious of her possible future and of an imminent threat that now other women, in the first place Grace, present to her still ongoing relationship with Mr. Kinnear, she decides to dispose of Grace. Grace comments this as: "[...] they'll change from a woman in that condition to one who is not, and it's the same with cows and horses; and if that happened, she'd be out on the road, her



and her bastard. (Atwood 344). With “they” in this allegation, Grace refers to men, describing their behaviour toward women who are in their perception, dispensable toys with which they can play as long as it pleases them. The injustice where men can easily avoid any consequence of their act can simply be criticized with Grace’s question: “Why should the one be rewarded and the other punished, for the same sin?” (Atwood 308).

In addition to the demonstration of society’s social construct of seeing women as fragile creatures whose worthiness can be accomplished only through marriage, the opinion that can be observed from Grace’s words: “she should end up a respectable married lady” (Atwood 308), Atwood once again manages to prove Butler’s notion of gender as a performative act (43) through Grace’s changeable appearances that Grace adjusts according to people’s expectations around her. For instance, when Grace’s turn to defend herself on trial comes, she presents herself as a: “poor motherless child. [...] cast out upon the world with nobody to teach [her] any better” (Atwood 401). With the presentation of herself as an unfortunate being, she pushes people to commiserate with her instead of to blame her. She repeatedly continues to perform the developed identity of an innocent creature because the impression of guiltiness is expected from convicts thrown into prison or asylum (Irshad & Gaur 122). Her performance goes so far that she: “learns how to keep [her] face still, [she] makes [her] eyes wide and flat, like an owl’s in torchlight” (Atwood 25). On the other hand, the media presents Grace as a monster capable of monstrous deeds, to which she decisively responds: “If they want a monster so badly they ought to be provided with one.” (Atwood 33). Thus, Grace once again constructs her behaviour according to what the society expects from her. However, the most important identity that Grace takes is the one of Mary Whitney. Once Dr. Jordan decides to terminate with his further efforts of discovering whether Grace fakes madness or truly is mad, he is

replaced by the peddler Jeremiah who presents himself as a Dr. DuPont, the neuro-hypnosis specialist. Under hypnosis, Grace imitates Mary Whitney's voice and pretends to be possessed by her spirit. Presumably suffering from double consciousness, Grace obtains power over people and ultimately has a chance to release her true inner and a long time oppressed voice that she uses wisely to have all accusations of her as a murderess abolished. Thus, spending 28 years in the penitentiary Grace is released and taken in by the Warden family. The Wardens become her saviours, which forces Grace to construct a new identity for herself, i.e. now she "must act like someone who has been rescued" (Atwood 482).

At the end it can be concluded that once Grace learns from her lawyer how to shrewdly manipulate with people, instead of a passive victim, she becomes an active participant in the narration of her story that she shapes according to her needs and wishes. This way Grace manages to deconstruct the idea of identity as something unbreakable, definite and coherent and proves that identity, together with gender, is formed through performance and through "performativity in discourse" (Ingersoll qtd. in Irshad & Gaur 124).

#### 4.2. The Issue of Class Distinction

The Victorian Era in which Grace Marks lived is very famous for its rigorous class and race segregation where the distinction between powerful and wealthy people from the powerless and poor is significant. Grace Marks herself is an Irish immigrant who together with her family came to Canada in a search for a better life. In that period, the Irish nation, according to Anthony S. Wohl, was perceived as racially inferior in contrast to other nations such as the British or the Canadians or any other European nation (qtd. in Hind). Since the Irish were

regarded as one of the inferior races, Grace could have been convicted as guilty simply because of her Irish roots due to which she was placed very low on the social rank (Hind). However, although that was not the case, newspapers still accentuated her origins and described her as having “red hair of an ogre” (Atwood 33), which is, according to the Victorians’ standards, an abominable feature of a “wild beast” (33) and a “monster” (33).

In the Alexandra Grimm’s opinion, Atwood’s criticism of the Victorian’s strict class segregation in the *Alias Grace* can be seen from her broad analysis and constant repetition of what Victorians perceived as appropriate and acceptable behaviour. She employs Grace’s narration as an instrument to convince the reader of how intensely Victorians believed in the importance of proper manners which they used as a tool for the class categorization (Grimm). Moreover, Atwood also successfully presents the idea that the proper comportment is an essential element in creation of an upper class identity. The belief which agrees with Holmes’ concept of how one must pass the process of socialization, which is, as she states, utilized for the development of adequate behaviours and appearances according to the currently established norms (10). These acquired behaviours and appearances are used further for the placement of people within class hierarchy (43). The perfect example of how deeply imbued the belief that only people belonging to an upper class could behave properly can be seen from Dr. Jordan’s observation of Grace’s behaviour where he compares it with the comportment of a royalty:

But thus far she has manifested a composure that a duchess might envy. I have never known any woman to be so thoroughly self-contained. [...] Her voice is low and

melodious, and more cultivated than is usual in a servant—a trick she has learned no doubt through her long service in the house of her social superiors. (Atwood 143-144)

Aside from a constant repetition of what the proper behaviour looks like, and what manners one should have in order to belong to the upper class, the difference in the class position between characters can also be noticed from their relations with one another. The relationships that stand out the most are the one between middle or upper class men and their female servants. The servants are most usually aware of their low position on the hierarchical scale, but hope to have their situation ameliorated with getting married, hopefully with someone from higher class than theirs. Grace does not share their dreams and, despite being preyed upon by men, successfully manages to avoid getting involved with them, whereas both of her maidservant colleagues find themselves fallen for the illusion of having a better life once they get married. Anyhow, due to her deeply ingrained awareness of class distinction, she disapproves of these relationships and especially of the relationship between Nancy and Mr. Kinnear, as she feels that their involvement contravenes the class distinction. On the one hand, Nancy is, as Grimm's states, "above her station" simply by romanticizing about her master, while on the other hand, she is way below it for doing house chores meant for maids as "the housekeeper would never have thought of carrying a tea tray up the stairs" (Atwood 241).

Nonetheless, despite having the idea of class distinction deeply rooted in her system, Grace is still wise enough to notice imperfections and weaknesses of that system, which can be seen from her comment where she states: "People dressed in a certain kind of clothing are never wrong" (Atwood 33). With that assertion Atwood suggests that upper class people enjoy power which enables them to effortlessly impose their beliefs over other people and to easily



avoid the deserved punishments because of the economic means they possess and the social position they enjoy (Grimm). That belief concords with Marx's idea of how possession of economic goods empowers certain people to belong to the ruling (upper) class (Marx 80), but it also agrees with Weber's notion that it is the extent of power that ensures people to be a member of the leading class (Weber 114).

Furthermore, Atwood's critique of the upper class can also very often be observed from Mary Whitney's statements uttered in dialogues between her and Grace. Perhaps the most striking discussion is the one where Atwood uses Mary to destroy the deception of the superiority of upper class in comparison with lower classes where Mary says:

[...] and if I was ever to be a chambermaid, I would have to learn to carry a bucket full of filth as if it was a bowl of roses, for the thing these people hated the most was to be reminded that they too had bodies, and their shit stank as much as anyone's, if not worse. (Atwood 171)

In addition to equalizing upper class with the rest of the humankind, Atwood also diminishes their superiority by illustrating them as incapable of taking care of themselves without the help of servants. For example, once Dr. Jordan goes shopping to buy some food for Mrs. Humphrey, he finds himself lost on the street as "this is a universe he has never explored, having had no curiosity about where his food came from, as long as it did come" (Atwood 154). Finding himself lost on the street and being encircled by other servants, Dr. Jordan feels humiliated and like people "are laughing behind his back" (Atwood 154). Atwood on purpose deprives Dr. Jordan of power and gives it to the low class servants to show that the

power of the supposedly upper class is, as Mosca suggests, nothing but an idea and an illusion created primarily by themselves (Mosca 268).

At the end, it can be concluded that people's behaviour and manners, of all classes, alongside gender, are an outcome produced by socio-cultural constructs that encircle them. They are learnt through discourse with the people from immediate surroundings and are most definitely not inherited by birth or passed down through genes.

## 5. Brief Comparison of *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Alias Grace*

*The Handmaid's Tale* and *Alias Grace* are both literary works used as a critique against sex, gender and class inequalities. The most basic distinction between these two stories is that *Alias Grace* is based on the true historical event, whereas the plot of *The Handmaid's Tale* is only inspired by the historical conditions and is entirely constructed by Atwood's creative mind. In both books the leading roles are given to women, Grace Marks in *Alias Grace* and Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale* who are used as pioneers in fight against the discrimination between men and women. It is not by accident that both of the leading characters are assigned a role of a servant as that could be understood as an initial critique of Atwood towards men's exploitation of women, who, in men's opinion, exist only to serve them throughout life.

As demonstrated in this work, *The Handmaid's Tale* depicts the development of the rigid governmental system in which women are neglected and sexually exploited under false pretences of demonstrating their exploitation as benefiting the entire society, when in fact only a small certain group of people enjoy its advantages. With the idea of a woman as only a two-

legged womb, or at the most a housewife, that bears its roots from the beliefs of the patriarchal Puritan society who celebrated only male population, Atwood on purpose exaggerates women's reproductive role in order to criticize the inequalities between women and men and to show the maltreatment and the blame they suffer even when they are not guilty, such as in the case of infertility that is always attributed to them and never to men.

Similarly to *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Alias Grace* also explores inequalities between women and men and the injustices projected by the patriarchal system they live in. Although the Victorian system is not as rigid as the Puritan, women still have less possibilities and less rights than men, and in most cases are highly dependent on them. Moreover, just as women are always inculpated for the infertility in *The Handmaid's Tale*, they are in the same manner always blamed for madness in *Alias Grace*, even in circumstances when the situation implies the opposite.

Furthermore, there is a slight difference in the representation of pregnancies as they are not as glorified in *Alias Grace* as they are in *The Handmaid's Tale* and are assigned with a completely different role since all pregnancies delineated in *Alias Grace* are the undesired outcomes of out of wedlock relationships. In addition it should also be said that "illegitimate" pregnancies in *Alias Grace* are generally always blamed upon women who, after getting pregnant, become marked with the so-called "Madonna/whore dichotomy" (Xiaoxiao 175), while men avoid any possible consequence connected to it.

In regard to the class segregation, in *The Handmaid's Tale* Atwood has created a unique rigid system of class categorization that locates people into certain social stratum according to the social functions that oblige each and every individual to behave following the predetermined manners. Having created exclusive appearances, allowed discourses and

behaviours for every social stratum separately, Atwood demonstrates how behaviours and appearances are indeed learned customs that become essential elements in the identity construction. She also uses that classification as a critique towards the ruling elite who successfully manage to orient people's mind into the desired directions which causes the deprivation of individuality and miscellaneous identities and secures the stability of their throne.

On the other hand, the case of class in *Alias Grace* is somewhat different as the situation in the book relies on the true event, hence the represented class segregation perfectly mirrors the classification of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Victorian period. From characters' discourses can be noted that the three-level class hierarchical categorization was immensely important and respected in those times, albeit the women are equally neglected and disrespected in both books and are not part of the ruling class as belonging to it is ensured exclusively for men in both works. The class critique in *Alias Grace* also proves that all identities are an outcome of learned behaviours and depend on the social conditions that encircle people.

Thus, although one book describes a dystopian society and the other accurately reflects true beliefs and conditions of the Victorian society, both of them are exquisite in its, sometimes covert and sometimes overt, criticism toward worlds' injustices and inequalities between women and men. Also, both books depict extremely well the way power is distributed within society and how only a small number of people enjoy it who with the given power further ensure the ostensible supremacy over other people.



## 6. Conclusion

As Judith Butler, among other sociologists, asserts, gender is indeed the concept that is socially constructed with the use of the discourse. It is used as the physical representation of the sex, the notion that is used to depict the biologically inherited traits. Alongside gender, class is also the phenomenon that is primarily socially constructed and it has been developing following the development of civilization. The possibility of development of gender and class shows to us that they have been altering throughout history, and what enables that alteration is the fact that they are created by performance which is adjusted according to what the currently ruling elite considers as being appropriate and acceptable.

Margaret Atwood in both of her works, *Alias Grace* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, succeeds in delineating how gender and class are performed and established in the society. In her work she shows how even in different societies, the ruling class oppresses its members, especially those belonging to the lower class. However, not only does she depict how the lower class society members are maltreated, but she also extends that delineation onto more specific representation, demonstrating the women's exploitation generated in the first place from the man's hand. These society representations in the books are in fact used as a critique towards current society conditions, which albeit having ameliorated since the times that are being shown in her works, are still not satisfying enough as the world is still segregated into lower, middle and upper classes and women are still suffering the men's oppression and do not share the same privileges.

At the end, we can only hope that her warning presented in *The Handmaid's Tale* will not be realized and that eventually women will finally receive the same status and privileges within society.

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## 8. Sex, Gender and Class in Margaret Atwood's Literary Works: Summary and key words

This thesis is focused on investigating the concepts of sex, gender and class and their occurrences and representations in the Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Alias Grace*. Sex and gender are sociological concepts where sex is interpreted as a biological feature, while gender is a notion understood as being socially constructed. The third concept surveyed in the thesis is class, which alongside gender is also socially constructed and their manifestation can be observed from people's appearances and repeated performances. Albeit the presented societies in both books belong to different periods, both of them are patriarchal and due to that reason that is the 4<sup>th</sup> explained concept in this thesis. Margaret Atwood uses these concepts in the presented two literary works as a critique toward current societal issues such as class inequalities and the dominance of men over women.

Key words: sex, gender, class, patriarchy, Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Alias Grace*

## 9. Spol, rod i stalež u književnim djelima Margaret Atwood: Sažetak i ključne riječi

Ovaj diplomski rad se bazira na istraživanju pojmova spola, roda i staleža te njihovog pojavljivanja i prikazivanja u djelima *Sluškinjina priča* i *Alias Grace* koje je napisala Margaret Atwood. Rod i spol su sociološki pojmovi gdje se pod spol predstavlja biološke osobine, dok je rod pojam koji je društveno stvoren. Treći pojam kojeg ova teza istražuje je stalež, koja je uz pojam roda također društveno stvoreno te se manifestacija ova dva pojma očituje kroz izgled

društva te ponavljanja ponašanja. Premda predstavljena društva u obje knjige pripadaju različitom vremenskom periodu, obje knjige prikazuju patrijarhalna društva te je zbog toga to i četvrti pojam objašnjen u ovom diplomskom radu. Margaret Atwood koristi te pojmove u predstavljena dva književna djela kao kritiku usmjerenu prema trenutnim društvenim problemima poput staležne nejednakosti i dominacije muškaraca nad ženama.

Ključne riječi: spol, rod, stalež, patrijarhat, Margaret Atwood, Sluškinjina priča, Alias Grace