

The Dystopian American Hero

How do women find their place in a piece of literature? There is clearly a difference in stories told from a male, versus female perspective. This is particularly evident before the first wave of feminism and the right to vote, as well as through the second wave where women's voices were stepping into the limelight. Fetterley examines male centered stories and how women are portrayed in them, using the American hero as a metaphor for escapism. Using that point of view, I will apply it to "The Handmaid's Tale," and prove how the story told from a female perspective contradicts this patriarchal writing scheme, which in my opinion is a step in the right direction in the fight for equal representation in literature.

Fetterley's "Palpable Designs," uses the view of the American hero in American literature to show how out of touch those stories are when it comes to female representation and inclusion of the female perspective. It examines how patriarchal systems of oppression are used to shape the narrative of what women should be. A number of stories using the American heroes are used to explain how women are essentially a representation of government and responsibilities. They are the antagonists of these stories. This supports the idea of a man finding success by striving for the accumulation of wealth, and him wanting freedom from that system. When Jack brings home magic beans to his wife after trading them for their cow, he literally escapes up a beanstalk and away from his wife. This is the metaphorical version of a nagging wife that knows better. He eventually kills the giant and, of course, comes out the victor.

Using this comparison to American heroes, Fetterley explains that: "She cannot read the story without being assaulted by the negative images of women it presents" (Fetterley 10). We get a very different picture when this point is used to analyze "The Handmaid's Tale." While the dystopian future is blatant and patriarchal, the female perspective is evident. We see how women

can be pinned against each other with the hierarchies of the Martha's and the handmaids. We empathize with the protagonist, whose story we are told through her point of view.

Women can relate to how they are treated in this system because it is a personal story told in an environment that is controlling women through procreation. When asked what was the issue most important to American women that is least understood, Gloria Steinem responded: "The deep anthropological reason for controlling women is to control reproduction. Reproductive freedom, gaining reproductive freedom, is the key to unraveling this structure that has falsely created feminine and masculine, subject/object kind of roles" (Shaw and Lee 40). This is in complete opposition to how the American hero's stories portrayed women as scapegoats or enemies. Fetterley states that: "Yet, finally, to express the consequences for men of their patriarchal system is of limited value of women" (21). In *Handmaid's Tale*, we also get a community of women who want to fight back and band together. This system of unity creates characters that are deep and complicated, not simply plot devices, protagonists or, as Fetterley concludes, shrew antagonists.

The Mid Century Louisa May Alcott took it upon herself during the American Revolution to advocate for multiple women's rights causes, including suffrage, equal pay, and unlimited labor opportunities. It became her life's mission to break through the limitations women had forced upon them. Bethany S. Wester references a letter written by Alcott where Alcott: "in frustration and desperation clearly states her perspective on the Woman question. Self-reliance is the key to the Pandora's Box of women's rights. Given the opportunity, women could hold non-domestic jobs, attend universities, and even vote" (35). Fetterley's analysis of the American hero does not work in *Handmaid's Tale* because women are valuable. They are an integral part, needed for the patriarchal system to function. While in the dystopian future

women's sexualities are repressed to the point of how they dress conservatively, are disposed of to another home against their will, and basically treated as tools for their wombs, the protagonists still have their sexuality. The angels having their hands in their pockets are discussed in reference to how sexually repressed some of the men are. It is almost to the same degree as that women are.

Fetterey's argument of the American hero in literature is accurate for older American fiction. This analysis does not fit into *Handmaid's Tale* to the benefit of furthering a female audience and authentic female driven stories. We can see how this is a step in the right direction for modern literature but considering the competition with predominantly white male authors, we still have a way to go. When we as readers see a name like Nora Roberts on a shelf and assume she writes romance novels, it is clear that we need to further women's stories.

Works Cited

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