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Echoes of *Jane Eyre* in the Novels of Margaret Atwood

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Abstract

Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* has had a significant and noteworthy presence in cultural memory and imagination, ever since its publication in the nineteenth century, while the reception of the novel has differed across different temporal contexts. The preponderance of the novel in cultural imagination has led to the writing of a considerable number of inspired works, and as some scholars argue, one can discern traces of *Jane Eyre* in works that do not explicitly establish a literary lineage with the Victorian classic. This paper explores the latter kind of literary nexus with respect to the works of Margaret Atwood.

Keywords

Influence, dystopia, gender, culture, patriarchy, *Jane Eyre*, Margaret Atwood.

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Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* has attracted a profusion of literary criticism and has had an overtly visible cultural impact, as well. While in some cases, the influences are overtly proclaimed, in other cases, upon coming across a particular work, one is invariably reminded of this literary classic. Emmanuela Ann Bean notes how heroines of *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* i.e. Beatrice and Katniss descend "at least in part from" the character of Jane Eyre. In a similar vein, but examining a broader topic, this paper attempts to appraise the similarities the works of Margaret Atwood, an illustrious novelist of the late twentieth and the early twenty-first century bear with *Jane Eyre* and how despite being over a century apart, the two writers seem to present a commonality of themes and situations. The texts chosen for comparison with Jane Eyre happen to be two of Atwood's better-known novels—*The Handmaid's Tale* (1986) and *Alias Grace* (1996).



One of the most stark resemblances between the worlds of *Jane Eyre* and *The Handmaid's Tale* is how similar The Republic of Gilead, the authoritarian state which occupies the former United States and Lowood Institution, the school Jane is trained at, happen to be, as institutions. Both distinctly categorize the people they conduct and control them in similar ways. The teachers at Lowood

exercise a great degree of authority over the girls. However, their authority is not absolute and subordinated to the power exercised by higher-positioned, predominantly male authority figures. At Lowood, the teachers unleash a disciplinary regime over the young girls to create a class of governesses, and yet, their pedagogical and disciplinary control stands disempowered in the face of male, institutionalized authority. An instance would be how Miss Temple's authority is almost invalidated in the presence of Mr. Brocklehurst who declares Jane "a sinner" and also condemns the appearances and behaviour of other girls.

In a more brutal and unabashedly violent version of the same context, the Aunts, who are employed to create a class of handmaids to serve the commanders in Gilead, have great authority over the handmaids in training but this authority is limited by male, institutional power. In the initial portions of the novel, *June or Offred*, the protagonist of *The Handmaid's Tale* reveals how the Aunts are not allowed to carry guns, and how the entire state is monitored by the "Eyes", young armed men obeying the commanders. In both cases, one can discern a limited and subordinated expanse of power exercised by women to create another class of women, which derives from and is inscribed within the larger framework of institutionalized patriarchal authority.

Another similarity is that of the classes these two institutions intend to create. Lowood creates a class of women for a proper, professional need; the women in training are poised to become governesses, classless, desexualized women serving households. These governesses happened to be classless because they were located on an indeterminate point on the spectrum which traverses from master to servant and were deliberately made to appear non-sexual so that they do not pose a threat to the mistress of the house. Very similarly, Gilead trains through mechanisms of extreme brutality, handmaids who are classless, given how they do not find a fixed spot within the household, are there only temporarily and are very distinct from the Marthas, the servant women and the masters.

Furthermore, while they're made to perform their reproductive function, they aren't meant to be sexual or sexually attractive, which is precisely why June's sexual encounters with Commander Fred happen to be gross aberrations in the systemic scheme of things at Gilead, and how this liaison affects the mistress of the household becomes better pronounced in fact, in the television series adaptation of the novel, which capitalizes on it to juxtapose Serena Joy, the wife of the commander and June starkly.

Furthermore, the mechanisms these institutions adopt to manufacture the classes they aim to create are also similar, instruction and dietary control being two striking cases in point. The women-in-training at both Gilead and Lowood are taught to consistently deny their physical existences for the 'greater good' and for moral superiority, in the name of God. Aunt Lydia tells June that where she is, "is not a prison but a privilege" and imparts the notion of finding grace in suffering within a Christian didactic framework. Mr. Brocklehurst similarly emphasizes how being cared for by the institution is a privilege and bristles with advise for the teachers to tell the pupils of the "sufferings of the primitive Christians" to render them "self-denying". The handmaids are consistently examined, which bears an obvious resemblance with the episode where Brocklehurst strictly examines the hair of girls at Lowood.

Another instrument of control the two institutions in comparison unabashedly invest in, happens to be dietary regulation. As June notes, food and everything ingestible that is emblematic of pleasure is not allowed for the handmaids. Kiyomi Sasame notes,

"Boiled eggs, a chicken thigh, a baked potato, green beans, salad, toast, and canned fruit. Or coffee, beer, and cigarettes. Which would one think is a more wholesome diet? Needless to say, the former, what Offred eats in Gilead, is much healthier than the latter, what she used to enjoy in pre- Gilead. Full of "vitamins and minerals," food given to the Handmaid is "good enough . . . though bland"

(65). Since a Handmaid must be “a worthy vessel” (65) to bear a child, coffee, tea, alcohol, and cigarettes are forbidden.”



The Gileadean restrictions on food resemble the ones at Lowood, Brocklehurst's objection to bread and cheese being served to the girls being a case in point. In both cases, food is stripped of its linkage with pleasure, and is reduced to its function of providing specific kinds of nourishment required to shape certain classes of women. Moreover, both these dietary regimes are imposed within a Christian desubjectivising framework and the ones who are controlled can see through the hypocrisy of the agents of imposition. June notes how "real coffee" is still available in the houses of the commanders, and this ties the argument to the larger question of privilege.

While the Brocklehursts and the families of the Commanders both subscribe to and endorse the same Christian framework they use to control other women, the restrictions they impose upon others do not apply to them. Mr. Brocklehurst, as Jane, the narrator notes, is a man with "wealth and family connections"; the Commanders, the highest-ranking members of the society of Gilead, men who brought about the establishment of Gilead itself, are known to break the rules of Gilead to indulge in a variety of forbidden luxuries. An instance would be how Commander Fred goes to Jezebel's, the brothel where

commanders mingle with prostitutes, another instance would be how they procure alcohol and cigarettes through the black market.

Mechanisms of survival in both Gilead and Lowood take the shape of a peculiar form of homosociality. Handmaids learn to read lip movements and to "whisper almost without sound" to communicate. Helen signals to Jane during her punishment. This homosociality not only provides comfort to these women in "reduced circumstances" but also empowers them. While Jane survives the attack by Mr. Brocklehurst on her dignity, women in *The Handmaid's Tale* accomplish certain achievements of freedom, the meeting between June and Moira at Jezebel's being a case in point. Eventually, Gilead falls in the year 2195, and Lowood is reformed as well while Mr. Brocklehurst is removed from his post.

Another striking resemblance between the two texts is similarity between characters. Of course, this similarity becomes more pronounced as one compares *Jane Eyre* to *Alias Grace* but even within *The Handmaid's Tale*, one can find characters resonating with their apparent counterparts in *Jane Eyre*. June, the protagonist of *The Handmaid's Tale*, as well as the character Jane Eyre are both characterized by a concern for self-preservation. June, during her narration says,

"Thinking can hurt your chances, I intend to last."

(The Handmaid's Tale, page 17)

Jane continues to make her desire to preserve herself overt throughout the novel. When Mr. Brocklehurst asks Jane how she intends to avoid hell, she says,

"I must keep in good health, and not die."

(Jane Eyre, page 26)

Both these women not only intend to preserve themselves, but the narratives as well, seem to favour these women, as other women die or are harmed instead of them. Ofglen, who appears to be an ideal handmaid in the beginning, who likes to "pass by the church",

reminds one of Helen Burns; both these women arouse contemplation in the protagonists of the novels. Furthermore, they meet with fates less favourable than the two self-preserving women the narratives in both cases seem to protect. Mr. Brocklehurst in his role as a Christian instructor invariably resembles Aunt Lydia who uses a Christian didactic framework to teach the handmaids that Gilead is "within you".

However, resemblances between characters become all the more visible once one juxtaposes *Jane Eyre* with *Alias Grace*. Grace Marks, the young protagonist of the latter novel, can be compared to both Jane, as well as Bertha Mason. Grace Marks, a servant is convicted at age sixteen for murdering her employer and is imprisoned and then made to work at another rich household, where Doctor Simon Jordan, appears to know her story through her own voice.

It is in Grace's narration of her story against her representation by other people in the novel that leads one to draw a subtle line between Grace, the narrator and Grace, the character, an arrangement one can comfortably discern in *Jane Eyre*. While both Jane and Grace as narrators are indeed anxious to be represented in a way that they find suitable, Jane and Grace, as characters also seem to traverse a somewhat similar telos in their lives. Jane is born in unprivileged circumstances, acquires her training as a governess at Lowood where she makes her first and arguably only intimate friend, Helen Burns, who eventually dies. She is employed at Thornfield Hall by Edward Rochester, a Byronic outsider who has a hidden wife (the element of scandal) and after certain difficulties and some peculiar episodes in the aftermath of what happens at Thornfield Hall, Jane marries Mr. Rochester in the end. Grace undergoes a similar trajectory; she is an underprivileged Irish immigrant who lands in unfavourable circumstances in Canada, acquires her training as a servant at the Parkinson household where she meets her only real friend in the novel, Mary Whitney, who meets with the same fate as Helen Burns. She is then employed by

Thomas Kinnear, a Byronic Scotsman who has an affair with the housekeeper, Nancy and after their murders and a number of intriguing episodes, Grace marries Jamie Walsh, who was a servant to Kinnear.



Apart from the similarities in the progressions of their lives, Jane and Grace also appear similar in terms of what one might term, hysteria. Jane, while growing up is a child characterized by "ungovernable" passions and is seen to engage in a violent act of rebellion when she hits John Reed; her 'animalistic' behaviour is subdued through intense physical punishment and incarceration in the Red Room. When Grace gets scared of the Doctor towards the end of the third chapter of the novel, and starts screaming, something similar ensues.

I was brought round with a glass of cold water dashed in the face, but continued screaming, although the doctor was no longer in sight; so was restrained by two kitchen maids and the gardener's boy, who sat on my legs. The Governor's wife had sent for the Matron from the Penitentiary, who arrived with two of the keepers; and she gave me a brisk slap across the face, at which I stopped. It was not the same doctor in any case, it only looked like him. The same cold and greedy look, and the hate.

Grace's characterization as hysterical also ties her to Bertha Mason. When Grace is imprisoned and declared mad and sent to a lunatic

asylum, the matrons who control the 'madwomen' there happen to be "fat and strong" to resist the bestial behaviour of the women they are in charge of. Grace Poole, the servant who takes care of Bertha, described as "harfalso happens to possess great physical strength. Interestingly, Ellen McWilliams, in *Margaret Atwood and the Female Bildungsroman*, in borrowing from Elaine Showalter, speculates that Bronte's creation of the archetypal Victorian madwoman which influenced medical reporting on female madness also impacted a biographer of the historical person Grace Marks, Susanna Moodie whose description of Grace in the lunatic asylum had "echoes of Bertha Mason's animalism".

Other similarities between characters include similarities between Helen Burns and Mary Whitney, the closest female friends of the protagonists of the two novels, who eventually meet with death. While Helen speaks of ideals of Christianity, Mary Whitney speaks of revolutionary ideals and while they induce deep thinking in the minds of Jane and Grace respectively, the two heroines do not internalize what their closest female friends endorse. The employers of the heroines, Edward Rochester and Thomas Kinnear both happen to be Byronic outsiders and while Rochester is given a full-fledged romance with Jane, Kinnear is shown to show romantic interest in Grace as well.

Despite these resemblances and likenesses, calling *Jane Eyre* a literary ancestor of these two novels would be an oversimplification and in the case of *The Handmaid's Tale*, a bit of a misjudgement as well. *Jane Eyre*, as a fictional autobiography, lets Jane, the narrator control the ebb and flow of the narrative, which may intrigue and disturb occasionally but ultimately presents the triumph of the main character over the predicaments she encounters. *The Handmaid's Tale*, on the other hand, while narrated by a single person, is not an autobiography but the sinister description of a dystopian future and thus, it is not about the individual's response to the society but the society itself. *Alias Grace*, on the other hand, has multiple narratorial voices and while the story happens to be about Grace, it

isn't Grace's story alone and Grace's narratorial presence isn't given unbridled control over the narrative.

Furthermore, these novels are marked by significant departures from and differences with *Jane Eyre* as well; for instance, Grace's description of madness functions as a critique of how madness is represented in *Jane Eyre*. *The Handmaid's Tale*, on the other hand, beyond the similarities listed in this brief paper, visibly differs from *Jane Eyre* in generic and thematic terms. Moreover, the resemblances very often enclose differences as in the case of Ofglen and Mary Whitney being very different from Helen Burns apart from the similarities emphasised in this paper.

Thus, while one can speculate that Atwood was impacted by Jane Eyre's influence and celebrated presence within culture, her novels are not recreations of the literary classic; the resemblances, however, continue to intrigue.

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