

ISSN 1751-8229

Volume Nine, Number Two

Anamorphosis: Symbolic Orders in *The Handmaid's Tale*

Abdol Hossein Joodaki and Yaser Jafari, Faculty of Letters and Humanities, Department of English Language and Literature, University of Lorestan, Khorramabad, Iran

Abstract

Margaret Atwood's most distinguishing novel is *The Handmaid's tale*. The novel has two narrators. First, the story is told in the first person through the eyes of a protagonist and ostensible narrator called Offred. Atwood describes the course of Offred's daily life under the oppressive regime of a patriarchal theocracy governed by religious fundamentalists. Second, the entire meaning of Offred's story is altered by the thirteen-page appendix 'Historical notes on *The Handmaid's Tale*' narrated by Professor Pieixoto. He shocks and disorients the reader who encounters it after having spent nearly 300 affecting pages with Offred and her narration. In this regard, two possible worlds are constructed in *The Handmaid's Tale* as the results of Offred's narration and Pieixoto's narration. This paper aims to study these two worlds from the viewpoint of Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek. Following Lacan, Žižek argues that fantasy provides a framework through which we see reality. They are anamorphic so that they presuppose a point of view, denying us an objective account of the world. Accordingly, there are two anamorphic symbolic orders, or two anamorphic levels, in the novel: the first phase of anamorphic perspective attributes to the handmaids' fantasy and the second phase relates to readers of the novel.

Key Terms: *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood, Žižek, Anamorphosis, Fantasy, symbolic order.

Introduction

With the inception of deconstruction in Jacques Derrida's poststructural view of the world in the mid-1960s modern understanding of the world challenged and turned on its head by postmodernism (Bressler, p. 99). Postmodernism defines a worldview that rejects the possibility of empirical or valid universal description and highlights the existence of different worldviews and concepts of reality. While we are on the subject a literary work as a comprehensive world, it seems reasonable as Atwood argues, "Novels are not slogans, if I wanted to say just one thing I would hire a billboard. If I wanted to say just one thing to one person, I would write a letter. Novels are something else. They are not just political messages. I'm sure we all know this, but when it's a book like this you have to keep on saying it." (Rothstein, p. 6). In this regard, Atwood paves ways for the possibility of multiple interpretations of her novels.

Margaret Atwood's most distinguishing novel is *The Handmaid's tale*. Set in a future in the Republic of Gilead, a country formed within the borders of what was formerly the United States of America, the novel consists of two narrative layers. The story is told in the first person by Offred. She is one of a class of individuals kept as handmaids for reproductive purposes by the ruling class in an era of declining births. Through the eyes of protagonist and ostensible narrator, Atwood "describes the course of her daily existence under the oppressive regime of a patriarchal theocracy governed by religious fundamentalists" (Porfert, p.1). In this regard, the novel "explores an alternate reality, which provides Atwood the space to explore issues of humanity while still remaining removed and keeping a broader perspective in relation to the current reality" (Guthrie, p. 28). While the reader understands Offred's story has an audience, "the entire meaning of Offred's story is altered by the thirteen-page appendix '*Historical notes on The Handmaid's Tale*'" (Shaffer, p. 152). The appendix is a "transcription of a Symposium on Gileadean Studies written some time in the distant future" the keynote speaker, Professor Pieixoto, "shocks and disorients the reader who encounters it after having spent nearly 300 affecting pages with Offred and her narrative" (Howell, 328). In *Historical Notes*, Pieixoto rereads Offred's story according to his own "prejudices and his suspense of moral judgment in studying