

Flowers in *The Handmaids Tale*: A symbol of female oppression

In the novel, “The Handmaids Tale” by Margaret Atwood readers are introduced to a dystopian society named Gilead. Throughout the novel, it becomes clear that Gilead is male-dominated. The male characters in the story are put in charge of the women who are associated with them. In the story, however, the female characters are prominent. The novel dwells into the lives of these women and the struggles they have to live with in this world. These struggles are symbolized by the flower throughout the novel. By showcasing the different types of flowers in *The Handmaid's Tale* readers can witness the female oppression that incurs in a male-dominated society.

The flowers show up in many shapes and sizes throughout the novel. One of the forms they show up in is as the red tulips. Red tulips are used to represent how women are only given respect in this society based on their reproductive health. In the novel, the only women who wear red are the handmaids. The handmaids are also the only women who are able to have children. In a society that values reproduction so much, they are considered the country's prized possessions. Like the red tulips who, “ had been cut and are beginning to heal,”(Atwood, 13) the handmaids have been through a lot during their time in Gilead. They are constantly raped by their commanders and are stripped of their entire identities. The cut flowers and the handmaids are groomed for their owners and when they are at their most fertile moments, they get used and forgotten. When the handmaids were taken by the government of Gilead they lost their old lives. Now the only thing they are left with is their bodies. It doesn't matter how smart or kind they are, their physicality is the only thing that defines them. Once the handmaids serve their purpose

they no longer matter to the society. Their only job in life is to give birth to children, and if they aren't able to complete the task, they are killed. Gilead doesn't actually care about the handmaids, it only wants to use them for their own selfish needs despite what is in the handmaid's best interest. Tulips are treated the same way, once they, "[become] old they turn themselves inside out, then explode slowly, the[ir] petals thrown out like shards."(Atwood, 49) Tulips are only valuable to humans when their physique is at its prime, after they begin to wilt, they are tossed aside. The handmaids, like the tulips, are used for their bodies and once their duties are complete they no longer matter to the society and are stripped of the little status they possess.

Serena Joy's garden is used to showcase how even women in higher social classes are silenced and disregarded in Gilead. The garden is a subtle nuance that shows up throughout the novel, and Serena is constantly seen gardening throughout Offred's time in the Commander's home. During some of these gardening sessions Serena "snip[s] the seed pods with a pair of shears...[like a] blitzkrieg, some kamikaze, committed on the swelling genitalia of the flowers."(Atwood, 175) Serena is infertile, and in a society like Gilead where fertility is given such great importance, this proves to be detrimental to her self-esteem. Seed pods are what make the flower fertile. Serena cutting the seed pods showcases how much she resents her own infertility. Both "Blitzkrieg" and "Kamikaze" are ruthless war tactics. By using such language Serena's resentment is further exaggerated. In Gilead women who are unable to produce children are labeled as "unwoman" (Atwood, 137), and sent to the colonies to die. Serena is lucky that she was able to marry a man with high status but the scrutiny against infertile women is still very present in this society. This scrutiny can lead to hatred between the wives and the handmaids.

Even though in Gilead the wives have more “power” than the handmaids, it doesn’t amount to anything since they aren’t able to produce what this society values most. A woman like Serena Joy who was so talented and vocal in the past is now put into such a submissive and inglorious role. That's what Gilead did; it took away all the power women had not only over society but of themselves. Women are made to feel ashamed over their own bodies, and existence. Gilead created such animosity between the women that their disunity is what keeps them subdued. The flowers in Serena’s garden, “breathe[e]”(Atwood, 175) they have life, but to her, they are nothing more than a representation of her shortcomings and reinstates how trapped and breathless she really feels in this world. She cuts the seed pods with such anger because they just remind her that in this world she has no purpose since she can’t fulfill the only role Gilead expects of its female citizens.

Blue flowers are used to convey how dependent women have become on the men in Gilead. Throughout the Waterford residence, there are “small blue flowers.”(Atwood, 70) Serena Joy likes to decorate her home using these flowers which are also called “forget-me-nots.”(Atwood, 70) By using these specific flowers there is a connection made between Serena and the flowers. Like the name of the flower, Serena does not want to be forgotten by the commander. Her existence in Gilead is based solely on the fact that she is married to a high ranking government official. She knows that if she wants to survive in this world she has to conform to the role that is expected of her. If she decides to disobey the commander, life in Gilead will become much harder than what she was currently going through. Like the flowers, she must become an object of beauty not voice. She is only there to be on the sidelines and not get in the commanders' way. Serena is more than a pretty face, she has thoughts and opinions of

her own but she isn't allowed to voice them. The commander chooses when and where she can talk. Her husband is no longer her equal but her owner, her life revolves around him. Forget-me-nots are a symbol of hope, and for Serena, she sees her survival in the form of accepting the fate that has been handed to her by Gilead and letting the commander control her.

The dried daffodils are used as a representation of the hope women in Gilead continue to keep despite their current circumstances. When Offred sees the "withered daffodil" (Atwood, 112) she decides to preserve it and "leave it there, for the next woman." (Atwood, 112) According to the Bible, Daffodils symbolize rebirth and new beginnings. By using the dried daffodil, readers can witness how even though the women in Gilead are stripped of their identities and freedoms there is still hope for them. The daffodil is not completely dead, Offred is going to preserve it for years to come, this is what creates a connection to the women in the novel. All of the women who are still alive, keep hope then maybe they will be able to revive their old lives, and escape from the horrors they currently live in. Hope is important in situations like this, it often is the only thing that can help people survive the toughest ordeals.

Flowers are used throughout the novel to show a glimpse into the lives of the oppressed women in Gilead. The red tulips and blue flowers showcase how the women are belittled to just physical attributes and reproductive health. Personality and intelligence are no longer associated with any of the women's identities. Serena's garden shines light on how the state has done a great job at keeping the women oppressed by creating animosity between themselves so they don't rise up against their real enemy. The men in this society are the ones in power but it doesn't mean that they're any stronger or smarter than the women. Ultimately it is the dried daffodil that manifests how the women have gone through so much throughout their time in Gilead but

continue to keep hope. If they wanted, the women could bring change and improve their lives. But the irony of the whole situation is that even though they are strong they are separated, and because of this they will not be able to go against the men, and ultimately the government of Gilead was able to create the society they wanted.