

Creative Project

LIT 301 - WiSe 2024/25

Comparison between Romanticism and *The Handmaid's Tale*

Romantic Poetry is a literary movement that emerged in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, emphasising emotion, individualism, and a deep connection to nature. It arose as a reaction against the rationalism and order of the enlightenment and the industrialisation of society. Romantic poets sought to explore the human spirit, imagination, and the sublime—experiences that inspire awe, wonder, and sometimes terror. Romantic poets saw nature as a source of inspiration, beauty, and emotional healing. Nature is often symbolised purity and truth, in contrast to the artificiality and corruption of industrial society. Romantic poetry celebrates intense emotions, such as love, sorrow, joy, and awe. Imagination is prioritised over reason, allowing poets to explore dreams, myths, and the fantastical.

The focus of *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood revolves around themes of power, control, identity, and resistance in a dystopian society. It explores the subjugation of women under the theocratic regime of Gilead, where reproductive rights are controlled by the state and women are stripped of autonomy. Gilead enforces strict hierarchies, using religion as a tool to justify control over women's bodies and lives. Handmaids, like Offred, are reduced to their reproductive capabilities, symbolising the loss of agency. Women in Gilead are ripped of their names, roles, and individuality. Offred's struggle to remember her past highlights the erasure of personal identity. Ultimately, *The Handmaid's Tale* examines how totalitarian systems dehumanize individuals while highlighting the enduring human desire for freedom, connection, and hope.

Comparing Romanticism with the content of *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood reveals strong contrasts in worldview and thematic focus but also some intriguing intersections. Romanticism, as a literary and artistic movement, emphasised emotion, individuality, and nature, often as a response to societal and industrial constraints. In contrast, *The Handmaid's Tale* critiques a dystopian society where individuality, freedom, and nature are strictly controlled or perverted by authoritarian power. Romantic poets saw nature as a source of inspiration, healing, and emotional freedom. They celebrated its wild, untamed beauty as a symbol of liberation and truth. For example, in Wordsworth's works, nature serves as a refuge from societal constraints and a place to reconnect with the self. In Gilead, nature is appropriated and manipulated. Gardens, flowers, and fertility are symbols of control over women's reproductive roles. While Offred occasionally finds solace in observing nature (like Serena Joy's garden), it is often tinged with sadness or irony, as even natural processes are used to reinforce Gilead's power structure. Romanticism glorifies nature as a source of freedom and individualism, whereas in *The Handmaid's Tale*, nature is commodified and controlled, reflecting humanity's estrangement from it. Romantic literature places high value on individual emotion and experience. Poets like Byron, Shelley, and Keats explore the inner self, celebrating personal freedom and rebellion against societal norms. Gilead systematically erases individuality, particularly for women. Offred is stripped of her name and identity, reduced to her reproductive function. Her internal monologue reveals her quiet rebellion and yearning for selfhood, but this is constantly suppressed by the regime. Romanticism champions the individual as a source of power and creativity, whereas *The Handmaid's Tale* highlights the consequences of suppressing individuality in favour of rigid societal roles. The Romantic movement was rebellious, often challenging political oppression, industrialisation, and religious orthodoxy. Poets like Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote about revolution and the potential for societal change. Rebellion in Gilead is often quiet and personal. Offred's acts of resistance—maintaining memories of her past, illicit relationships, and storytelling—are subtle but meaningful. Open rebellion, as seen with Mayday or Ofglen, is risky and often ends in punishment or death. Romanticism glorifies rebellion as noble and transformative, while *The Handmaid's Tale* portrays rebellion as dangerous and often tragic,

reflecting the harsh realities of living under authoritarian control. Romantic poets embrace raw, unfiltered emotion. Feelings of love, sorrow, and joy are explored with great intensity, often as a path to understanding deeper truths. For instance, Keats' "*Ode to a Nightingale*" conveys the profound beauty and pain of life. In Gilead, emotions are tightly controlled. Displays of grief, love, or anger can result in punishment. Offred's emotional life is confined to her inner thoughts and memories, and even her relationship with Nick is fraught with secrecy and fear. Romanticism sees emotion as a guiding force for truth and creativity, while *The Handmaid's Tale* presents a world where emotions are suppressed to maintain societal order. Storytelling in Romantic literature often serves as a vehicle for emotional expression and universal truths. Poems like Coleridge's "*The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*" blend myth and memory to convey moral and spiritual lessons. Storytelling is central to Offred's survival. Her narrative, told retrospectively, is an act of resistance, preserving her humanity in a society that denies her identity. Memory, for her, is a painful but vital connection to the past. While Romanticism uses storytelling to evoke universal emotions and ideals, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, it becomes a deeply personal act of defiance and self-preservation. Romantic poets sought freedom from societal constraints, celebrating the boundless potential of the human spirit. They often idealised nature and emotion as spaces of liberty. Gilead represents the antithesis of Romantic ideals—freedom is systematically denied, and human potential is reduced to mechanical roles. Yet, Offred's quiet resistance and imagination echo Romanticism's belief in the indomitable human spirit. Romanticism emphasises liberation and transcendence, while *The Handmaid's Tale* starkly critiques systems of oppression and the fragile endurance of human freedom under such conditions. While Romanticism celebrates individuality, nature, and emotional expression as means of liberation, *The Handmaid's Tale* explores the consequences of suppressing those same ideals. However, both share a belief in the power of the human spirit—Romanticism in its celebration of personal freedom and imagination, and *The Handmaid's Tale* in its portrayal of quiet, resilient resistance even in the face of totalitarian control.

Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey (Excerpt)

Once again I see
These hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows, little lines
Of sportive wood run wild; these pastoral farms,
Green to the very door; and wreaths of smoke
Sent up, in silence, from among the trees!
With some uncertain notice, as might seem
Of vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods,
Or of some Hermit's cave, where by his fire
The Hermit sits alone.

This excerpt is from William Wordsworth's poem *Lines Composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey*, which was published on the 13th of July in 1789. It embodies the Romantic focus on nature's beauty and its spiritual connection to humanity. Wordsworth reflects on the harmony between humans and the natural world, emphasising solitude, freedom, and a deeper emotional experience. The title of Wordsworth's *Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey* evokes a serene, reflective moment in nature, rooted in Romantic ideals of personal experience and spiritual renewal. *The Handmaid's Tale* is set in a dystopian world where personal reflection is often stifled, and nature is repurposed for control. The primary themes of the poem are nature's restorative power, memory, and individual growth. Wordsworth portrays nature as a source of freedom and emotional solace. Similarly, *The Handmaid's Tale* explores memory and its connection to identity,

but nature becomes a site of oppression in Gilead, as fertility and reproduction are exploited. Where Wordsworth celebrates freedom, Atwood critiques its absence. Wordsworth's tone is meditative and reverent, creating a mood of peace and introspection. He views nature as a moral and spiritual guide. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the tone is often somber and tense, with moments of quiet rebellion. While Wordsworth's speaker feels empowered by nature, Offred's observations of Serena Joy's garden evoke a bittersweet longing for freedom. Wordsworth uses vivid imagery to depict nature's beauty: "pastoral farms, green to the very door; and wreaths of smoke." These images create a sense of harmony and timelessness. Atwood, too, employs rich imagery, such as the blooming flowers in Serena's garden, but they symbolise the rigid control of women's reproductive roles, twisting nature's beauty into a tool of oppression. In the poem, the "green pastoral farms" symbolise innocence and spiritual renewal. Nature becomes a metaphor for untainted freedom. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, gardens symbolise fertility and control, reflecting the Handmaids' confinement within their reproductive roles. Wordsworth's poem is written in blank verse, allowing for a flowing, conversational tone that mirrors natural thought. The structure emphasises a seamless connection between humanity and nature. *The Handmaid's Tale* is fragmented in structure, reflecting Offred's fractured reality and her struggle to piece together her identity, memories, and hopes. Analysing Wordsworth's *Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey* highlights Romanticism's emphasis on nature, individuality, and emotional depth. These elements sharply contrast with the themes in *The Handmaid's Tale*, where individuality is suppressed, and nature is manipulated. Yet, both works underscore the importance of memory and introspection as acts of resistance and survival. Wordsworth's speaker and Offred, despite their vastly different circumstances, find solace and strength in reflection.

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