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Symbolism and Loss of Identity in The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood

In Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred recounts the story of her life and that of others in Gilead, but she does not do so alone. The symbolic meanings found in the dress code of the women, the names/titles of characters, the absence of the mirror, and the smell and hunger imagery aid her in telling of the repugnant conditions in the Republic of Gilead. The symbols speak with a voice of their own and in decibels louder than Offred can ever dare to use. They convey the social structure of Gileadean society and carry the theme of the individual's loss of [identity](#).

All the women in Gilead [wear](#) color-coded uniforms. The colors parade their social status and/or role in the reproductive process. The 'Aunts' who run the Rachel and Leah Re-Education Center wear brown; they are responsible for the indoctrination of the handmaids. The 'Marthas,' who wear green, are the servants. The 'Wives' wear a type of Virgin-Mary blue, which signifies their inability to bear children. The handmaids wear red robes and white peaked hats which resemble nuns' habits. Thus, they personify a religious

sacrifice; they are like "temple prostitutes doomed to a kind of purdah in perpetuity" (Rigney 117). In addition, the red color of their clothing symbolizes their fertility.

The color-coded uniforms that the women wear does more than just signify their functions. Along with the names/titles of characters, they symbolize the individual's loss of identity. No distinguishing mark of a woman is considered; rather, she is lumped with a group in which she is defined only by her social and reproductive function. Essentially, the color-coded uniforms strip each woman of her i...

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...litical enemies. The foul and suffocating air of Gilead symbolizes the claustrophobia as well as oppression of its inhabitants (Rubenstein 109-110).

In The Handmaid's [Tale](#) some symbolic tools such as dress codes and characters' names reflect the social standings of individuals in the Gilead society. These same symbols and others such as the mirror draw attention to the loss of individual identity, a theme present throughout the novel. Still others like smell or hunger convey the atmosphere—both physical and psychological—in Gilead. Whatever their different purposes may be, the symbolic devices achieve the same result: they enlighten the reader on dangerous social tendencies and compel him/her to take action in order to prevent the outcomes they depict.

Works Cited

Atwood, Margaret. The Handmaid's Tale. Anchor Books: New York, New York, 1985.

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