

Light v. Dark

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"I believe in the resistance as I believe there can be no light without shadow; or rather, no shadow unless there is also light" (105).
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In the Handmaid's Tale there is a constant comparison of opposite sides of the scale: good and bad, dead and alive, past and present, remembering and forgetting. All central themes that drive the book along, carrying the audience with it. As of late (Chapter 35-36), the biggest comparison has been the theme of light and dark. As demonstrated in the quote above, and with all of these different scales, Offred believes that one cannot exist without the other. This realization reassures her that Gilead is not all that there is. It grounds her pain and loss in reality, salvaging her sanity. At the same time Offred feels this about Gilead, the whole structure of the world and the hierarchy (Commanders, Eyes, whoever is running the whole show) wants this darkness in the Handmaids so that they can be fulfilled with light.

On pages 225-228, Offred draws parallels between darkness and women, describing herself as "empty", "blank", "space between parentheses", "between other people". These gapping blocks of nothingness resemble the nothingness we see at night. These adjectives insinuates the ability to be filled with something-words, paint, emotion, feelings, babies, men. The "freedom" the Handmaids seek in the shadows, at night, in the darkness of their mind, their escape from their unbearable reality, is what actually enables the treatment of them. On page 194, Offred even says, "We prayed for emptiness, so we would be worthy to be filled." Gilead is tempting the women to dissociate from themselves and their bodies (creating these empty vessels) so that they have the capacity for enlightenment (babies).

What ties into the theme of darkness v. light is safety of women. In the real world, it is a well known fact amongst women the do's and dont's of life as a woman: don't walk alone at night, let men pass in front of you, etc. The same question of safety can be applied to the freedom of the Handmaid's escape: Is being enlightened safer or is existing in the shadows safer? Nevermind the question of how to define "safe" in Gilead. In the before times, Offred reflected on women's lack of protection from men in the unassuming daylight, "All of this was pertinent only in the night, and had nothing to do with the man you loved, at least in daylight" (226). The real threat against women was not from the creepy men at night, but from the men they trusted.

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Is existing in an evil world with armour worse than living in a world where the evil is so hidden that you don't even know you need armour?
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It's hard to fully know where the best space for Handmaids to be is; fully embracing the light, or staying hidden between the shadows.

In Chapter 35, Offred reemphasizes the word “falling” when reminiscing on female behavior before Gilead saying, “We were falling women. We believed in it, this downward motion: so lovely, like flying...yet so tired, extreme, unlikely” (225). *Falling* alludes to the night fall described on page 191, further connecting Offred’s ties to the night. This repetition also can symbolize Offred feeling like she is losing control, as “falling” in the most general sense, is not something you do on purpose and can be dangerous. Another thing to note is the contradiction of “downward motion” and “flying”. I would consider these two words opposites of each other which made me really think why she connected the action of falling to something so freeing and hopeful as flying. I believe it has to do with the carelessness that Offred misses. The ability to fall and be allowed to fall in love is something she doesn’t get to experience anymore. The possibility of doing something that is as dangerous as falling in love is completely eliminated as a Handmaid. Which is why I think Offred is so drawn to the Commander. He offers danger and excitement which are feelings that she hasn’t felt in a long time. She wants to be reckless and “fall” just like she did back then, in hopes of being caught by the right person. A person that maybe could help her escape.