

New Sexual Ethics, Same Old Gender Constructs

Lori C. Livesay, English 436

Science fiction allows us to imagine a whole new world, or re-imagine our own in a whole new way. Both *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood and *Stranger in a Strange Land* by Robert Heinlein accomplish the latter. They allow the reader to glimpse into the future and re-imagine our culture in a different paradigm. The stories and characters are vastly different, but each represents a futuristic view of what we could become. But how far outside of our own dominant paradigm can an author step when imagining a whole new world? The cultures represented in these two novels present extreme and contradictory views of sexual ethics. Yet, they differ very little from our present society in terms of gender construction and identification, in some ways reflecting the most oppressive forms of gender inequality.

In *A Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood introduces the reader to a future where all sexual expression, save for that between a man and wife or for procreation, has been explicitly banned. Romance, love and sexual pleasure are no longer a focus of human endeavor. They have been relegated to a ceremonial act wherein a handmaid, a servant, is used by her master specifically for breeding purposes. The mere hint of sexuality in any form is forbidden in this culture; the showing of an ankle by a woman, or a man with his hand in his pocket, is thought to be acting against the sexual mores. Sexuality is repressed in every possible way. The handmaids are forced to watch videos of old porn movies and view violent images of women being murdered and abused to show the evils of free sexual expression. They are indoctrinated into believing that the repression and lack of freedom they experience now is better compared to what life was like before - when sexuality ran rampant and women were just objects of seduction and desire.

But even in the repressive culture presented in *The Handmaid's Tale*, sexual expression purely for pleasure does find a means by which to sustain itself. The powerful men of the culture have "clubs" staffed by women who are there purely for their sexual pleasure. In explaining the existence of these secret clubs, the commander in the story tells his handmaid "you can't cheat Nature. Nature demands variety, for men. It stands to reason. It's part of the procreational strategy. It's Nature's plan" (Atwood 237). So, in Atwood's dystopian society, the suppression of all sexual expression of women and lesser men is acceptable, and even necessary as a means of control. Powerful men, however, are not only allowed to indulge in sexual pleasures, it is considered their nature to do so.

Stranger in a Strange Land invites the reader into a society with a completely different conceptualization of sexuality. It is not forbidden. It is not repressed. Again, as in Atwood's tale, the religious faithful and powerful seem to have the most unconventional sex lives, but society as a whole is presented with much the same sexual mores that we live by in our present society. Heinlein, however, re-imagines a better, happier way of living through the sexual innocence of his main character Michael, the Man from Mars.

Since Mike was not raised with any of the human emotions of guilt, jealousy, envy, or fear of open sexual expression that most humans have, he sees in sexuality a way of "growing closer" with his human friends. Through the course of the novel, he comes to believe that sexual intercourse is the greatest attribute our planet has in the universe. Mike refers to sex as the source of "all that makes this planet so rich and wonderful" (Heinlein 391). He treasures our ability to share ourselves, both physically and emotionally, through a sexual union, but only with those we are already in a position to "cherish and trust" (Heinlein 392). Indeed, Heinlein gives us an entire core character group who "cherish and trust" each other as often as possible throughout the final third of the novel, and all seem happier and more content beings for having done so.

While these two novels proffer vastly different sexual attitudes, gender inequalities and construction are much the same and closely parallel the most oppressive patterns in our own society. The women in both novels are subservient to men. In *Handmaid*, it is by force and through threat of death. The men have all the power, all the wealth, make all the decisions, and control the culture in every way. The women have no choice but to serve. In *Stranger*, it is by happy choice that the women are subservient. Jubal's secretaries wait on him hand and foot, and adore him despite his grumpy demeanor. The women of the novel, every single one of them, do the same for

Mike. They never question him, they just obey. In both novels, women feed, bathe, and serve their men sexually. Even in our society, such subservient roles seem extreme.

Perhaps the most disturbing shared aspect of the future visions of these two novels is the acceptance of violence against women as the norm. In *Handmaid*, the character Janine is forced to tell her story of being gang raped by a group of boys when she was fourteen, and even worse, is forced to say it was her own fault, she led them on, she deserved it. In *Stranger*, there is a scene where Jill tells Mike that “Nine times out of ten, if a girl gets raped, it’s partly her fault” (Heinlein 287). Despite having contradictory attitudes towards sexuality, both societies view rape as a failure on the part of the victim, the woman.

Both novels indicate that the future clearly still objectifies women, as is evidenced by the immediate follow-up to this exchange in which Jill poses in “naughty” positions for Mike just because he expresses a casual interest in it. There are several sections of the book that extol the pleasures of women’s naked or barely dressed bodies, and even the women get a chance to see themselves as men do, and they enjoy giving men this pleasure. We are led to believe they enjoy being seen as nothing but a body, a source of sexual stimulation. The women in the “clubs” of *The Handmaid’s Tale* are no different. Although selecting the lesser of evils, most of the women at Jezebels have chosen to be there rather than one of the other assignments for unmarried women. They are kept at a certain weight, dressed to seduce, and made up. They exist solely for man’s pleasure. Although these two novels appear to tell totally different stories, in many ways, they make the same points. They both seem to be saying that sexual repression leads to collective unhappiness, while open, honest, and free sexual expression leads to individual happiness. While this stance on freedom of sexual expression is progressive, the visions of a more gender equal future are apparently bleak. Men will be the recipients of wealth and power, even in the future. Women will still be blamed for their abuse at the hands of men, and will still, either happily or bitterly, call them “boss.”

Works Cited

Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid’s Tale*. 1985. New York: Anchor Books, 1998. Print.

Heinlein, Robert A. *Stranger in a Strange Land*. 1961. New York: Ace, 1987. Print.