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Beating Around the Bush

I hate being left out. It's like there's gossip traveling around a high school and it hasn't reached me yet. I know it's there, and it will come— but only with time. Probably the most frustrating thing for me is lack of knowledge; I like to be fully aware of what's going on. Though in reading, lack of knowledge is commonly used to create suspense, making me want to read more and more. Within the novel *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood, probably the most drawn-out scene is when the "Ceremony" is first fully described. Thus far, the reader has been somewhat kept in the dark to the gruesome and repulsive reality of the Handmaids. And so within this scene, the use of a nonlinear timeline, extensive detail, and long yet choppy sentences are used to draw out time and build up the suspense in revealing the truth.

Looking at the sentence length, there are two noticeable characteristics. For one, they seem to be longer than normal. Though in looking closer, they contain an abundant amount of commas. For example, in describing the Commander when his wife is crying, Atwood writes that he "opens his eyes, notices, frowns, ceases to notice" (90). This very choppy way of writing seems to almost speed things up, as if trying to cram in all of the information to bring us to the final reveal. Though at the same time, it almost slows

down the reader, as each comma implies a pause. Both of these techniques seem to counteract each other, as the reading of one long sentence makes us want to rush through it for answers. Yet with Atwood including these pauses, it is almost like torture, as if she is forcing us to slow down just a bit and taunt us with our lack of knowledge.

Another example of this sentence structure is when the Commander is first making his appearance, Offred describes that his “manner is mild, his hands large, with thick fingers and acquisitive thumbs, his blue eyes uncommunicative” (86). Within this example, it seems to represent Offred’s anxiousness, as if she can’t get a full sentence out in proper form. In addition to that, this structure once again lengthens our narrative story, as this run-on sentence is plagued with commas and pauses. Though Atwood is intentionally including every little thought and detail like this to tease us, as the information we are slowly receiving does not answer our main questions.

Another technique Atwood uses to raise suspense is in-depth descriptions. These moments of intense details are scattered throughout the chapter, and not just about obvious things like the Commander and her surroundings, but about trivial things too. In looking closer at these descriptions, Atwood tends to use a lot of comparisons. These comparisons give us a connection, which then prompts further understanding and consideration in our minds. For example, when describing the Commander, she says he looks “like a museum guard”, “like a midwestern banker”, and later “like a shoemaker” (86-87). In giving us this information, we then create mental pictures of how we interpret these descriptions— slowing down our intake of information which then slows down the narrative overall. In addition, these details not only provide us with exposition, but also represents Offred’s view of the world and her attempt to pass the

time. Though in Offred's attempt to distract herself and pass time, it is sort of ironic because it works to draw out our relative time of the story. After all, an event in real time that only takes five minutes can be slowed down immensely in narrative time with thorough explanations of every thought, action, and flashback. And although this works to build up our knowledge extensively, it distracts us from the answers that we are desperate for.

Looking at some of the more trivial details, there is a very in-depth description of Serena's canopy above her bed. In doing this, Atwood compares it to a "sagging cloud" and describes the flowers on it as "tiny drops of silver rain" (91). In talking about the canopy as a "sagging cloud", it seems to represent Offred's current situation— as if she is about to be consumed by a storm. Though in going on and describing the flower pattern as "silver rain", it counteracts the negativity, highlighting that this event could be her way out— a silver lining (91). These details come with the starting of a new chapter, and we can feel that we are on the final edge of the climax. Within this scene, tension is then further created because Atwood goes on describing the canopy, comparing it to a "big-bellied sail" (91). In referencing a ship, it seems to represent her will power, as Offred is enduring this event in hopes of a better future.

In focusing on the canopy above her, it works to show us that Offred is trying to distract herself. In addition to that, these descriptions emphasize the fact that Offred is averting her eyes from Serena and the Commander and focusing on her surroundings. In drawing out this one object, it also gives us one last hint, which is not so subtle if you have pieced everything together already. This is because it highlights the fact that Offred is in Serena's bed, which seems unheard of in the context given before this

scene. Though the truth has not yet been stated bluntly, and so we soak up these details, trying to piece together what they could possibly mean. And because Offred has not described an object in so much detail thus far, it pulls the tension of the situation as far as it can go.

And lastly within this scene, it does not follow a linear timeline. The events of the present time seem to spark memories of the Red Center for Offred, though they stray off into other memories that have nothing to do with the present. The first analepsis is sparked when the Commander is reading the bible, reminding Offred of the times they learned this same information from the Aunts. Though in thinking of this, she starts describing her encounter with Moira, in which she is plotting her escape: "I've got to get out of here, I'm going bats" (89). This information is completely irrelevant to the current situation, though this straying of thoughts is not uncommon for a human brain to do— a word/object reminds us of something that then reminds us of something else. Though in Atwood's choice to include this, it is building up exposition at random intervals to leave you hanging until later, a Checkov's gun scenario if you will. Meanwhile, this technique totally distracts us from the current situation, as it extends the amount of information we are taking in. In addition to that, the load of information about past and present is stretching out the narrative time because of the intake of more details.

All of these techniques done to create suspense are obliterated by one simple sentence: "Below it the Commander is fucking" (94) Atwood phrases it so blatantly, as if it ought to have been obvious. This is Offred's way of disconnecting herself, because in describing it bluntly, she can take all of the feeling and pain out and just focus on the facts. Personally, this is the part within the scene that astonished me the most when I

read it the first time. Though I couldn't put my finger on why until now— Atwood is utilizing everything that she can to build up information and distract us, keeping the truth away from us for as long as humanly possible. This strategy had us begging for answers, as we were being loaded with information but none of it pertained to what we wanted. And then, when it is finally stated, it is blunt and to the point, taking us off guard. And this, perhaps, is the key to the strategy Atwood takes advantage of— making us so desperate for answers that when we finally discover them, we are astonished and beyond excited to finally be in the loop.

Work Cited

Atwood, Margaret. *Handmaid's Tale*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1998.