Sociological Perspectives on Gender and Sexual Violence in *The Handmaid’s Tale*

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Abstract

This essay aims to highlight and explain the gender inequality, the sexual assault and the rape in Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* from a feminist perspective, using the theory of the individualist, interactionist and institutional approach to gender found in Wharton’s *The Sociology of Gender*. Research questions: How does gender inequality shape the characters in the novel? What does it mean for them? How can the gender inequalities seen in Gilead society, as well as the sexual violence in the novel, be explained using sociological perspectives on gender? Gender inequality, which is what leads to the sexual violence, is produced on every level of society, and especially at the institutional level of society, that is, the culture of the society.

**Keywords**: feminism, gender, gender shaping, sexual violence, *The Handmaid’s Tale*
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1 Introduction

Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) is a novel that takes place in a dystopian future, where the United States of America has become Gilead, a society where women have little to no rights at all. Because of radiation amongst other things, much of the female population has become sterile, and therefore, the elite of the Gilead society has decided to forcefully appoint the few women who are still able to carry children as Handmaids in order to repopulate the nation. The women who are still able to bear children are given the option of becoming Handmaids or suffer a much worse fate; death or being sent to live among the Unwomen, which is what Gilead society calls women who are not able to become pregnant anymore. The Unwomen are forced to live under slave-like conditions while they clean up toxic wastes that will ultimately poison them and kill them. Furthermore, the threat of violence constantly hangs over Gilead’s citizens, especially the Handmaids.

In the novel, the reader follows the present and the past life of a Handmaid called Offred. Her name is not her own; every Handmaid is given a name starting with the preposition “of”, then followed by their Commander’s name, that is, the elite, male person of Gilead whom they have been assigned to serve. Once a month, the Handmaids have a ceremony with their Commander and his Wife in attempt to become pregnant, where they are raped.

Before the USA became Gilead, Offred was married to a man named Luke, and together, they had a daughter. She does not know if her husband and her child are even alive.

What Gilead aimed to do was create a very conservative society. Women were not to work but take care of the household. Gilead also meant to desexualize society, burning not only pornographic movies and magazines, but also less sexual items such as women’s magazines. They wanted people to “fulfill their biological destinies” and meant to “return things to Nature’s norm” (Atwood 220), meaning that they wanted people to focus on repopulating the nation. The ideas of Gilead are fundamentally very
patriarchal, which is seen by connecting passive and submissive women to “Nature’s norm” (220). It is a very violent, totalitarian society, that surveils its population.

1.1 Previous Research

The Handmaid’s Tale is a novel that contains several aspects that are fruitful to approach from a gender point of view, seeing as the women in the novel are treated so poorly and have so few rights, and that the society as a whole is extremely hierarchical and patriarchal. Therefore, there is a lot of research on this novel regarding gender. Pamela Cooper writes about the sexual surveillance in The Handmaid’s Tale and how it connects to gender, symbolism and sexual violence. Jana Diemer Llewellyn and Heather J. Hicks writes extensively about the issue of rape and gender under the Gilead regime. Suzette Chapman and Craig H. White writes about the sexual redefinition of women by institutionalizing means to turn women into “tools as procreation” (Chapman & White 118). I will use this work and these theses to substantiate my claims further.

However important as the institution or the society is to form gender, lacking in Chapman’s and White’s analysis is how gender is created in interaction and on the individual level as well. I have yet to find any critical study that specifically deals with the sexual assault and rape that occurs in this novel and that sufficiently brings to light that the creation of gender that enables the sexual violence occurs at multiple levels, which I believe is necessary to fully understand both gender and the sexual violence in the novel. To do so, I will use sociological perspectives on gender taken from The Sociology of Gender written by Amy Wharton.

1.2 Main Argument and Method

In The Handmaid’s Tale, sexual violence is a result of creating and forming gender, creating an environment in which women are preyed upon, sexually assaulted and raped. What it means to be a woman is decided not by women themselves, but by the totalitarian rule and society, in the interactions between men and women and the gender
expectations that are placed on women, as well as individual women’s interpretation of the world around them and their own place in it. Forming gender and gender meanings is a complex and multilayered issue that needs extensive investigation. Therefore, I am using three sociological perspectives on gender to show precisely how this takes form; the institutional perspective on gender, the interactional perspective on gender and the individual perspective on gender. I will close read different episodes of the novel to show how gender, the forming of gender and the sexual violence in the novel are all interconnected, on every level of society. Due to the limited scope of this essay, I have chosen to focus on the forming of the female gender, as women are the ones who are the victims of the sexual violence.

In what follows, I will begin by explaining the term gender as it is understood by Wharton, as the term will be central to my following chapters. In chapter two, I will present the theory of gendered institutions, followed by a close reading and analysis of extracts from the novel that show how society plays a key part in forming gender and how it is responsible for sexual violence. In chapter three, I am going to present the interactional perspective on gender, followed by a close reading and analysis of other extracts with focus on how women are shaped to be submissive, obedient and quiet, the doctor’s expectancy on Handmaids to be such women, and what part that plays in women being sexually assaulted. In chapter four, the individual perspective will be presented, which will also be followed by a close reading and analysis, that will focus on how Handmaids come to understand what it means to be women in the new society of Gilead through two different perspectives on socialization, examining how they are brainwashed at the Red Centre into thinking that they cannot be victims of sexual violence, as well as how they realize that they can only get power by using their sexuality. All three perspectives on gender are provided by Wharton (2005). Being the complex issue that it is, using all three perspectives is necessary to understand gender in Gilead and the instances of sexual violence. The essay will then be concluded in chapter five.
1.3 Wharton’s definition of gender

Wharton, examining gender from a sociological perspective, defines gender as a “system of social practices” that creates and maintains gender distinctions, a system that also “organizes relations of inequality” (Wharton 7) based on the distinctions between sexes. Thus, gender involves the creation of differences and inequalities between sexes (7). Wharton further stresses that three features of the definition of the term gender is important. First, that gender is not simply a fixed state, that it is a process as well, meaning that gender is continually being produced and reproduced (7). Second, gender is not only a characteristic of individuals; gender occurs “at all levels of the social structure” (7). Gender is found not only in institutions but is found it in interaction and in individuals as well, “all of which embody and reproduce gender” (7). Third, gender refers to “its importance in organizing relations of inequality” (7). For instance, raising boys and girls differently, the former with posters of action figures and fast cars and the latter with posters of Disney princesses that await their Prince Charming to come and swoop them off their feet, will likely result in a more action-minded boy and a more passive girl, features that will influence their adult lives as well.

Wharton argues that one framework is not enough to understand “a topic as complex as gender” (8). For Wharton, gender is a multilevel system whose effects can be seen at every level of social life (8).

2

2.1 Theory - The institutional perspective on gender

The institutional perspective on gender uses the term institution as an abstract and an almost all-encompassing term. Sociologists define the term, in the simplest terms, as “an organized, established pattern” (Wharton 65) which permeates the society as a whole, or large institutions within a society, for example organizations such as schools
Institutions are those features of society and life that seem so ordinary, so ongoing and so permanent that they are accepted as “the way things are” (65). As a result of institutional gender inequality persisting without conscious intervention and effort, they do not require coercion to sustain themselves, which makes participation appear voluntary and easily justifiable (220). Crucially, the “dominant group’s vested interest in perpetuating inequality, together with the subordinate group’s lack of alternatives, shape the ways both groups make sense of their relationship” (221).

The institutional perspective on gender focus on how gender is created and maintained in organizations and culture and is thus aimed at examining the practices and policies of cultures, societies and organizations. As these practices and ideas of culture and society are at a macro-level, they “play a central role in the perpetuation of gender distinctions and inequalities”, and beliefs about what men and women are and should be are “conditioned by these institutions” (70). I will use the perspective of gendered institutions to examine the build up to and the ceremony itself, where Offred is forced to have sex with her Commander and his wife Serena.

2.2 Analysis

Offred, being a Handmaid, is systematically raped by her Commander on behalf of the society she lives in, during the ceremonies that they have once every month. Her society does not deem her qualified for anything else, as they have stripped women’s right to work; like Diemer Llewellyn and Hicks say “the power structure refuses to see women as human” (Diemer Llewellyn & Hicks 52). This is in accordance with the role given to Offred by society, which needs her to give life to a new generation. Before the ceremony begins, the Commander reads a passage from the Bible to Offred, his wife Serena and to the household’s two Aunts, who are overseers of the Handmaids. As they gather around him, Offred says that he looks over them “as if taking inventory” (Atwood 86), which shows that the Commander holds so much power over them that rather than being people to him, they become something closer to items or objects. As
he is to begin to read from the Bible, Offred notes that it is like him reading them a “bedtime story” (87), but they are not to sleep; they are to have sex. However, in order to bear the ceremony, Offred has to be taken out of mind and out of place, let go of her consciousness, very similar to one she is in when sleeping, which further shows that it is a matter of rape, as sex with an unconscious person always is. She then thinks to herself that it is a strange thing, being a man who is being “watched by women”, to make them flinch when he moves, even if he is only reaching for an ashtray (87). He decides their fate, something that Offred reflects about in a conversation with herself in her own mind, cautioning the Commander to be careful, for “One false move and I’m dead” (87). She has had plenty of time and reason to watch him and he has given “no evidence, of softness” (87); he is a seemingly very cold, hard man.

During the reading, his wife Serena Joy begins to cry, something that she always does during the ceremony (90), which reveals that while Offred’s fate is much grimmer, Serena also suffers. There seems to be no women in Gilead who does not suffer at the hands of the new regime. In hearing her attempt to silence her crying, Offred thinks that Serena “must hate me” (90). This is going to have consequences for Offred, too, seeing as Serena Joy is part of the ceremony that is about to take place. Offred then recalls an episode where her friend Moira was punished for misbehaving at the Red Center (91). Despite trying to pray, Offred cannot help but see Moira’s mangled feet, which “looked like lungs” when they brought her back from her punishment (91), a reminder to her of what might happen, should she be unwilling to go through with the ceremony that is about to take place. Furthermore, Moira was punished due to not following the female gender norms of Gilead; she is not submissive, but rebellious and a rule breaker. Finally, the Commander dismisses the women (92), once again proving the discrepancy in power.

Once the ceremony finally begins, Offred is clothed except for her lack of underwear. Offred lies between Serena Joy’s legs, Offred’s head resting on Serena’s stomach, Serena’s thighs on either side of Offred, and she too is fully clothed. Offred as well as Serena being clothed can be seen to simulate the typical scenario of a woman being grabbed by a man on the street and getting raped. Furthermore, Offred arms are raised,
Serena “holds” them (93), which she relates to the reader is meant to signify that she and Serena “are one flesh, one being” (94), but notes that what it really means is that Serena “is in control” (94), meaning that Offred is not. In holding Offred in place, Serena can be seen to help her husband rape Offred, even though Offred herself says that it is not rape, as this is what she signed up for, noting that she could have made another choice (94); Diemer Llewellyn explains Offred not calling the ceremony rape by stating that “Offred thinks that because there are two choices in this oppressive system - forced labor or forced intercourse - that she has some control over her fate, and that she is partly to blame for the violation committed against her” (Dimer Llewellyn & Hicks 57). However, what Offred sees as a choice is no real choice at all; her only other option is to be sent away to the Colonies, cleaning up toxic waste that will kill her. Additionally, what does point to this being an instance of rape and nothing else is that Offred not only wishes that “he would hurry up” (Atwood 94), she also feels the need for therapy so that she “could feel better and this would go away” (94). Furthermore, as Serena Joy holds Offred’s hands, her rings cut into her Offred’s finger, and Offred notes that “It may or not be revenge” (94) for what her husband is doing to her, which of course Offred has no say in. The unwanted pain that Serena is causing her further proves that what the Commander and Serena are doing is raping Offred.

In describing what is happening in the room, Offred says that “It has nothing to do with passion or love or romance… It has nothing to do with sexual desire, at least for me” (94). After the ceremony is over, the Commander leaves, and Offred is supposed to lie and rest for ten minutes to increase the chances of her getting pregnant, something that Serena Joy does not let her do (95).

Before Offred turns around and leaves Serena, she sees that Serena Joy is clenching “her legs together”, lying “stiff and straight” on the bed (95). Here, Serena’s body language simulates the body language of someone who has been raped. This could be seen as Serena sympathizing with Offred, feeling what she thinks that Offred must be feeling, which is further evidence for not seeing the ceremony as anything else but systematic rape of an unwilling participant, who ultimately had no choice in ending up where she did, having to suffer what she suffers.
From an institutional perspective on gender, there are some important things to note about the lead up to the ceremony and the ceremony itself. To begin with, the ceremony is designed and put in place by the state, that is, it is not a creation of the Commander himself. This can be seen by Offred noting that the Commander “too, is doing his duty” (95). It is the Commander’s duty to have sex with Offred against her will, in order to father children. Furthermore, as Diemer Llewellyn and Hicks point out, “Gilead uses religion to disguise the institutionalized rape that occurs monthly between Commanders and Handmaids” (Diemer Llewellyn & Hicks 57) in the reading before the ceremony.

The reason that the Commander has so much more power than the women of the household, and particularly over Offred, can also be explained by what happens on a state or societal level. The state is the body that strips women of their rights and their ability to work and make the male of the household the Commander of the household. It is also the state that decides that men who have wives who are infertile are to be given a Handmaid, her sole purpose being to give them a child. Thus, the state is the agent that forces Offred into becoming a sex slave. Serena, who enjoyed a career as a public spokesperson for change before Gilead came into power, has her value as a human being stripped completely, as the state takes away her career. The state also deems her useless to society by one of the pillars of Gilead society being for men and women to “fulfill their biological destinies” (Atwood 220), meaning reproduce, which is something that Serena cannot do.

On a deeper level, Serena crying during the lead up to the ceremony is because Fred, her husband, is going to sleep with another woman (90), which again is his duty to the state. In that sense, it is the state that causes Serena that pain, and seeing as she cannot take out her anger out on her husband, him merely doing his duty to society, Serena takes her anger out on Offred, hurting her during the ceremony. Serena’s anger ultimately arises because of the rules of Gilead, which leads to Offred being kicked out of the room, reducing Offred’s chance of becoming pregnant, making the systematic rape prolonged. Thus, Offred being raped by the Commander and Serena Joy is, from a state level, due to the state deeming her only useful as a child vessel, the state’s implementation of the
Ceremony and the threat of violence should she disobey leaves her no choice but to go through with it. Diemer Llewellyn and Hicks say that “Offred does not resist the Commander and Serena Joy; she is held in place by fear of the Colonies” (Diemer Llewellyn & Hicks 63). Hence, the institutional perspective on gender is central to the creation and forming of gender in Gilead, and to explain why the rape and sexual violence in the novel occurs.

3

3.1 Theory – The interactional perspective on gender

The interactionist view on gender means that gender is more about the “social context within which individuals interact” (Wharton 54), than it is about the individuals themselves, that gender is not inherent in people, but that it is something that is created and maintained in interactions. Interactionist views on gender means that “people's reactions and behaviors vary in response to the social context” (54), and this has very grave consequences for Offred. According to this theory, “a woman might be more nurturant when interacting with others who expect women to behave this way” (54), as opposed to how she would act if she were in a social context where the other people involved had fewer “gender expectations” (54). In other words, in relation to gender, people will act and behave in accordance with how they are expected to act and behave by others, based on the others’ gender expectations. In Gilead, people have very extreme gender expectations, and with those gender expectations that are put on women, and in particular women who are Handmaids, Offred is forced to adapt her behavior to these extreme views.

3.2 Analysis
Offred is not only raped by her Commander during the Ceremony, she is also sexually assaulted in other situations. However, the sexual assault that she suffers cannot solely be explained by what happens on an institutional level; it must also be understood by the shaping of gender through gender expectations in interaction between people.

Having become a Handmaid, Offred’s physical health is of great importance to the regime and state, the task at hand being to repopulate the nation. Therefore, she goes through medical check-ups once every month, which she says are “the same as before, except now it’s obligatory” (Atwood 59), so she has no choice in this matter. However, the medical check-ups, although having certain things in common, are in fact not the same as before. The doctor, who is “a specialist” for Handmaids (59), is “wearing his pistol in the shoulder holster” (59), something that an ordinary doctor in the former United States of course would not be armed with. It functions as an ominous presence, reminding Offred and the other Handmaids of the consequences that would come to them, should they act out in one way or the other; execution. The doctor’s “role is routinely to inspect and monitor the republic’s most precious resource: the uteri and ovaries of its official childbearers” (Cooper 52).

Offred undresses and lies down on the examination table, then a sheet that is “suspended from the ceiling” (Atwood 60) intersects Offred at neck level, so that the doctor will not see her face; the doctor “deals with a torso only” (60). This part of the examination is, as far as one can tell, not decided by the doctor himself, but is a procedure that has been put in place by the regime, likely to make the interaction between Handmaid and doctor as impersonal as possible. However, the doctor does not follow the medical procedure as it has been setup by society, does not adhere to the rules.

Essentially, the doctor, because of the impersonal nature of the interaction, is a complete stranger to the Handmaids; they cannot see him, cannot make eye contact with him, cannot ensure that he acts professionally; they can only feel what he does to their bodies. Furthermore, as the doctor is seemingly also a former military man and soldier, based on the fact that he has “a diagonal scar across his cheek” (59) and that he is “still”
wearing his pistol, shows a discrepancy in power. A pistol is something that only a man is allowed to have in Gilead. The doctor has a lethal weapon when he interacts with Offred; she has nothing. As Cooper puts it “this single meeting, on his territory and his terms, perfectly encapsulates the power dynamics of Gilead” (Cooper 52).

Once the doctor comes into the room, which he does not do until she is fully naked and has her face sectioned out by the sheet of paper, what happens to Offred is revealed by her wording of the event. She is not examined. Instead, she is “poked and prodded” (Atwood 60); she feels sexually assaulted and abused; the doctor inserts a “patriarchal gaze of totalitarianism into the most private of all spheres, the inner spaces of the human body” (Cooper 52), thus in his role as a doctor his “clinical eye becomes the predatory eye of desire” (55). Offred relates something that makes her uncomfortable: “He calls me honey” (Atwood 60), putting emphasis on the final word that she finds inappropriate. This doctor “isn’t supposed to speak to me except when absolutely necessary” (60). The doctor then fingers her breasts and whispers “I could help you” (60). When Offred reacts with surprise and alarm, he silences her by saying “Shh… I’ve helped others” (60). In silencing her, he is attempting to deny her the chance to oppose his proposal, and the reader also learns that the doctor has done this to other Handmaids. When Offred asks how he would help her, he slides his hand up her leg and Offred notes that “He’s taken off the glove” (60). Thus, before any consent or approval has been given to his advances by Offred, he is touching her body in a way that he has no right to, that is, without a medical glove on his hand. He then tells Offred that “They’ll never know it isn’t his” (60), puts his hand between her legs and tells her that most of the Commanders are incapable of impregnating a woman (61), trying to persuade her, knowing that becoming pregnant is her only hope to survive in the new regime.

He then asks, in a leading way, if she wants a baby, to which her answer is yes (61), and here, Offred reflects on why she wants a baby: “Give me children, or else I die” (61), and she notes that there is a difference between wanting to have a child and wanting to have a child in order not to die (61), highlighting that she has no real choice. Once again, the doctor calls Offred “honey” (61), and she reflects upon the fact that “it’s a generic term. We are all honey” (61), which proves that the doctor, who later expresses
empathy for what she is going through (61), really only cares about using her for her body’s sake and about his own pleasure. Offred tells the military doctor “No. I can’t”, to which he responds that he has seen her medical charts, knows that she has little time left before she is shipped off, then says “But it’s your life” (61), reminding her that the consequences, which she would face if she were not to become pregnant soon, are life-threatening. Once again, he tries to persuade her, or perhaps, given the incredibly vulnerable position that Offred is in, tries to manipulate her into reaching a different decision about his proposal. Cooper notes that this highly sexualized observation “becomes an act of political domination” (Cooper 51).

In spite of the sexual assault that the doctor has put her through, Offred thanks the doctor, noting that she “must leave the impression that I’m not offended” (Atwood 61), that despite her answer to his proposal being perfectly clear and one of negation, “this is not the last word as far as he’s concerned” (61). Offred knows that the doctor could fake her medical test, report her for cancer or for infertility, which would have her sent off to the Colonies with the Unwomen, and while none of this is said out loud, “his power hangs nevertheless in the air” (61). This proves the obvious; that the doctor holds so much power over her in this situation, that any act of outrage, distaste towards him, or her showing him any signs of being offended is completely ruled out, as it may mean her death or her severe suffering at the Colonies. Finally, the doctor proves her suspicion that he would not take her “No” for a final answer, saying “Next month” (61), showing that he does not think that the saying that is so incredibly relevant to this context ‘no means no’ applies to him.

What allows the doctor to pursue and violate Offred the way he does is from an interactional perspective on gender the gender expectations that people have on women who are Handmaids. For example, they are essentially prisoners in the houses that they live in, not being allowed to leave the house except for when they have expressed permission to do so, which takes away any and all opportunities for them to create bonds with other human beings, making them socially starved and isolated, or as Chapman and White put it “isolates them in an atmosphere of fear and suspicion” (Chapman & White 118). That makes preying on a person less of a dangerous thing, as
it is less likely to have consequences. Even when they leave the house, for example on their shopping trips, they are forced to walk in pairs, so that they have someone else with them to keep an eye on them, so that even though it is another Handmaid, they function as one another’s spy (Atwood 19); should any one of them act out or act in a way that is not appropriate according to the state, “the other will be accountable” (19). Not only are they socially starved, the fear of someone reporting them to the state of Gilead is always present, and thus they are expected to be submissive and obedient, quiet and reserved, and easily manipulated by people who are in a position of power in relation to them. Seeing as they are not seen as human beings but as human vessels for other peoples’ children, they are, except for perhaps the Unwomen, of the lowest rank in Gilead society, resulting in them having less power than almost everyone in society and are therefore very vulnerable to be preyed upon.

Furthermore, as mentioned in the introduction, the women who are forced to become Handmaids are also stripped of their name, and instead given a name created with the preposition “Of” (which means belonging to) followed by their commander’s name. Their names thus signify that they are not individuals, not human beings, but instead someone else’s property; they are items and objects. This has very grave consequences for the gender expectations that people (and the doctor) have on these women, because items and objects cannot be raped, sexually assaulted or violated, so instead of the horrible crimes that the Handmaids are being subjected to be seen for what they really are, they are rather seen as taking something that does not belong to you. Thus, the subjugation of the Handmaids arguably leads to the men of Gilead society to not see what it really is that they are doing to them, but seeing it as doing something that is wrong but much less horrific.

Additionally, shown by that the doctor’s power over her “hangs in the air” (61), the doctor knows that he can write a false report about Offred that states that she cannot become pregnant and she would be shipped off to the Colonies. Knowing that, the doctor will assume Offred to be submissive, quiet and to be fearful of rocking the boat. As the theory of the interactionist perspective on gender illustrates, the doctor assuming these characteristics of Offred is also going to make her act according to his gender
expectations (Wharton 54), shaping her into something that she would not be in a less patriarchal and marginalizing society.

What this episode shows is that while societal shaping of gender always plays a part in the situations of sexual violence that can be seen throughout the novel, it cannot by itself fully explain why it occurs, as the doctor also has free will. While the gender expectations that the doctor has on Offred as a woman and a Handmaid is at least partially formed by society’s restriction on women, making them into submissive, quiet and obedient people, the doctor, based on his gender expectations on Offred as a woman knows that he breaks the rules by his own free will, knowing that he is likely to get away with it. As Chapman and White say, Gilead is “A ruthless patriarchy…” that “achieves and sustains power primarily through the institutionalized subjugation of women” (Chapman & White 118), however the doctor interacts with Offred and uses the gender expectations on her to use her for his own personal pleasure, which strictly goes against the rules of society. Thus, while Chapman is right in her assessment that Gilead is a patriarchy that institutionally subjugates women, that alone cannot fully explain the sexual violence of the novel. In this case, it is a combination of society and interaction based on gender expectations.

4

4.1 Theory – The individualist approach to gender

Proponents of the individualist view of gender all agree that “individuals are one site where gender can be examined” (Wharton 23), that gender is “an attribute – or characteristic – of people” (23). Therefore, the individualist approach to gender focus their attention on individuals, rather than the social context and situations or institutions (23). To give a better understanding of the individualist approach to gender, I will mention two examples of important perspectives within this approach. One perspective, that falls within the framework of the individualist approach, view gender as a set of “individual traits, abilities, or behavioral dispositions” (24) and tries to understand why men and women differ in those areas. Another perspective of the same framework
explores how women and men become gendered, that is exhibit stereotypically feminine and masculine behavior, and focuses on the social processes that produce gender (24).

While a lot of researchers believe that some sex differences may have biological or genetic causes, most sociologists and others who study sex differences insist that “the impact of these biological or genetic contributions depends upon the environment or culture in which they emerge” (29), meaning that the culture and environment in which someone lives is going to heavily influence the differences between men and women. In a society that is so patriarchal as Gilead is, where women have almost no rights at all, the differences between men and women are going to be very substantial, which almost always mean unequal treatment (28).

4.1.1 Gender socialization

An important aspect of the individualist approach to gender is the theory of gender socialization. Gender socialization is a theory within the individualist perspective that attempts to answer questions such as: How do society’s message about what appropriate female and male behavior is get transmitted to its members? How do people learn how to be feminine and masculine? (Wharton 31). “Socialization refers to the processes through which individuals take on gendered qualities and characteristics and acquire a sense of self” (31). Additionally, through socialization, people learn the expectations that society has of them as male and female (31), or in other words, what is appropriate masculine and feminine behavior. Through socialization, people learn that “they will be held accountable” to the expectations society has on them to behave “appropriately” masculine or feminine (31).

Gender socialization is a two-sided coin, where on one side is “the target of socialization”, that is, the person that is being taught the expectations on them as male and female and the traits and characteristics that they learn to adhere to these expectations (31). This starts with newborns, through interactions with parents and caretakers. On the other side of the coin “are the agents of socialization”, that is, the individuals, groups and organizations who pass on this cultural information (31). This is
particularly relevant to the Handmaids, as they have been introduced to a new society, with new rules and with different expectations of them as women, and they are being schooled into this society’s ways of thinking about these things at the Red Center.

In my analysis, I will use two different theories of socialization. The first one is called social learning theory. The social learning theory asserts that people learn gender roles through both positive and negative reinforcements, that are received for acting in gender-appropriate and gender-inappropriate behavior (32). The theory also acknowledges “that learning takes place through observation and modeling” (32), meaning that the individual looks at society and people in order to understand what is appropriate and what is not, and models themselves after those behaviors. According to this theory, reinforcements, whether experienced directly through rewards and punishments or vicariously through observation, “are the primary means” through which people adopt gender appropriate behavior (32). An example of gender appropriate behavior is for example that it is okay for women to cry, but that it is not okay for men to cry.

The second theory is called the cognitive approach to socialization. In terms of gender acquisition, questions arise such as “How is being male or female expressed in people’s understandings of themselves as masculine or feminine?” (33). The cognitive approach to gender answers this question by examining how people internalize gender meanings “from the outside world” (33), and then use those meanings to construct an identity that is consistent with them (33). Thus, this approach looks at the connections between membership of a sex and the “meanings that people attach to that membership”, and those meanings guide and help explain individual behavior (33). In contrast to social learning, the cognitive approach focuses on how the individual, that is, what in socialization is called the target of socialization, “actively seek to understand themselves and their world” (33).

Using these two approaches to socialization, I will show how the Handmaids acquire their gender roles in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, how they understand what it means for them as individuals and what gender appropriate behavior that they learn from observing
people and their world. In this section, I aim to answer what it means to be a Handmaid in terms of gender roles and how that is expressed and learned by analyzing two episodes that are particularly interesting from an individual perspective on gender.

4.2 Analysis

The forming of gender that lies behind the sexual violence in the novel is also shaped on the individual level, through socialization. In chapter 13, Offred and the other Handmaids must testify about their own life at the Red Centre, the place that they are taken to when it has been determined that they are going to be Handmaids and are to be re-schooled into the new regime’s way of thinking, signified not the least by the Red Centre being a former school. One of the Handmaids, named Janine, shares with the Aunts and the other Handmaids that she was gangraped at the age of 14. After she is finished telling her story, the Aunts, that is the overseers of the Handmaids, ask the group who was to blame for what happened to Janine, to which the Handmaids chant together “Her fault” (Atwood 72). When Janine then breaks down and cry, they call her a crybaby. Seeing as Janine is only 14 at the time, and thus a child, and that the Aunts and the other Handmaids place the blame on Janine, claiming that she wanted them to have sex with her, makes this the most clear and undeniable case of rape throughout the novel. By denying that Janine was raped, despite being underaged and despite there being multiple offenders means in practice that the Aunts teach or brainwash the Handmaids into thinking that they cannot be raped under any circumstance, that it is always their fault, something that they either wanted or could have stopped. It is at the “Red Center, where she [Offred] learns the rituals of reproducing for the regime” (Diemer Llewellyn & Hicks 53), and these “domination tactics of the Aunts… fulfill regulations of gender behavior set by the leaders of the Gilead regime further perpetuate the dehumanization and abuse of women, both physically, spiritually, and emotionally” (54). Diemer Llewellyn and Hicks also note that the Aunts “propagandizing techniques of brainwashing the Handmaids to believe they are cherished and protected more in Gilead than they would be in a democratic, liberal society” (54-55), noting too that Offred to some extent “internalize this idea of protection” (55)
Analyzing this episode of the novel by using the individual perspective on gender, through the theory of socialization, what this means for the Handmaids and their understanding of themselves as women based on what the negative reinforcements that they receive from the Aunts, is that if they bare witness to a crime that someone has committed against them, especially crimes of sexual violence, they will not only not be believed, but will also be horribly shamed. Diemer Llewellyn and Hicks assess that Janine is made an example of to make the Handmaids adhere to the idea that they must “must maintain a leash on men’s sexual desire” (56). As a consequence of this, any Handmaid that faces sexual abuse is likely going to keep quiet about it, like Offred was when she was abused by the doctor during her examination. This shows that the schooling the Handmaids get at the Red Center is not without reason. The Aunts creates an image of a woman who always want what is coming to her instead of being the victims of crime that they are, and this helps the state of Gilead to freely commit repeated sexual violence towards the Handmaids.

The other episode of the novel that shows how the Handmaids learn about what it is to be a woman in the new society depicts one of Offred’s first walks with her shopping partner. When the two women are to pass a barrier, they have to show their passes, and when Offred shows her pass, she sees one of the Guardians, who “aren’t real soldiers” (Atwood 20) but are “used for routine policing and other menial functions, digging up the Commander’s Wife’s garden” (20). He tries to get a look at Offred. Offred raises her head a little to help him see her and reflects that such a thing is “an event, a small defiance of rule… but such moments are the rewards I hold out for myself” (21). The attention that she gets from the young Guardian is something enticing to Offred, as it is one of very few instances in the novel that she receives any positive reinforcement. She wonders if he thinks about her when he stands alone on guard duty (21). As Offred and her shopping partner pass through the gate, she knows that “they’re watching, these two men who aren’t yet permitted to touch women” (22). Instead of touching her, “They touch with their eyes” (22) and Offred moves her hips a little, swaying her skirt about her, and notes that it is like “teasing a dog with a bone held out of reach” (22). At first, she feels ashamed of herself for teasing the two guards, but then immediately changes
her mind, reflecting that she is not ashamed at all. “I enjoy the power; power of a dog bone” (22). Offred hopes that “they get hard at the sight of us and have to rub themselves against the painted barriers” and knows that “They will suffer, later, at night” (22).

From a cognitive approach to gender socialization, that is how someone actively seeks to understand themselves and their world, Offred finds that she can gain power by using her physical body to cause the guards physical desire for her. However, this is the only way that Offred can gain any kind of power. In a society where she is not allowed to read, where she is not allowed to leave the house without permission, where she is not allowed to have a say in her destiny, it is only by using her female sexuality that she can gain any kind of power over someone else. Chapman and White note that women are “Destabilized, lacking political recourse, and denied information, the women of Gilead become dependent upon males for survival and are thus rendered powerless by any orthodox measures” (Chapman & White 120). Thus, in the society of Gilead, a Handmaid’s only means of gaining any control and power is by using her female body and her gendered garb which “efficiently and deliberately activates the potential violence of the gaze [...] the objectifying and possessive male gaze” (Cooper 50). To be a woman with any power also comes with becoming an object to the eyes of possessive males of the society that she lives in, which helps in “wrenching women’s energies away from themselves and from female values” (Chapman & White 118), that they can have value and importance beyond sexual or procreational purposes. The schooling into the new society’s line of thinking and that Offred’s only way of getting power is to use her female sexuality, which Cooper correctly assesses will turn objectifying and possessive male gazes towards her, shows that gender is also shaped at an individual level, through both the theories of socialization presented in 4.1

5 Conclusion

I have given a brief introduction to the plot of the novel, followed by a presentation of the previous research done on the novel The Handmaid’s Tale that I have used to
support my claims, as well as the gap in research that I attempt to fill with this essay. Connected to this, I have argued that the creating and forming of gender in the novel is too complexed to only be explained by society as a whole, that it is crucial to also look at how gender is created on an interactional and individual level.

To fully explain how and why the sexual assault and rape happens to the Handmaids, as well as what it means to be a Handmaid in relation to gender, I have consequently looked at the institutional, interactional and individual perspectives of gender. In doing so, I have both examined gender inequality and gender roles in connection to the sexual assault and rape that can be seen in the novel. The reasons why sexual assault and rape occurs is multilayered, and therefore, using all three of these perspectives have been crucial.

Using the institutional approach to gender, I have showed society’s role in shaping gender and in the rape that Offred faces during the ceremony, where she and the Commander attempts to make a child. Even though the Commander has a lot more power than the women of the household, Offred in particular, and is guilty of raping her, he is in a sense an agent of society, for as Offred notes herself, he “too, is doing his duty” (Atwood 95). Indeed, the idea and the process of the ceremony is made up by the regime of Gilead, not the Commander himself. Most importantly, it is the society, the culture, that demands of women that they either become subjected to systematic rape in a household with a Commander in charge, or be shipped off to die in the colonies, which is no choice at all.

I have used the interactionist approach to explain how the extreme gender expectations of the people of Gilead society make the Handmaids adapt and change their behavior in accordance with those expectations. Being such a vulnerable category of characters, through marginalization and the ever-looming threat that they might be shipped off to the colonies to die, the Handmaids are quiet and submissive women who are easily preyed upon without any consequence to the predator. The traits of being quiet and submissive women are assumed by the others in society; the society is set up in a way that they must be that to survive and not get shipped off. Using this perspective, I have
explained and examined the scene where Offred is sexually assaulted by her doctor. Since her examination is mandatory, due to her being a woman who can still become pregnant, she has no choice in being put in the situation where she is sexually assaulted. However, it is also due to the doctor’s free will, breaking the rules of the society, knowing that he will likely get away with it, based on the gender expectations that he has towards Offred as a Handmaid.

Finally, I have used the individualist perspective on gender to explain that the Handmaids learn what is gender appropriate behavior by observing the people and the culture around them, and how they understand themselves as female, as well as the meanings that are attached to that category of people. They are taught that they are to be held responsible for any sexual violence that they suffer at the Red Center, when the Aunts and the other Handmaids shame Janine after she tells the group about the gangrape she suffered at the age of 14. The shaming is also likely what causes Handmaids, as can be seen by Offred’s encounter with the doctor, to keep quiet about any such instances. Furthermore, by being deprived of any and all power from society, Offred learns that the only way for her to gain power for herself is by using her feminine sexuality.

By using all three of these perspectives, I have shown that the creation and forming of gender in *The Handmaid’s Tale* cannot be fully explained looking only at society as a whole, that it is necessary to break it down into smaller components and look at additional levels to gain a better understanding of the shaping of gender and the sexual violence in Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale.*
6 Works Cited


