

The Soul Scrolls - A chapter of ironies

The chapter is significant because it develops not only Offred's character through flashbacks, but through her interactions with Ofglen and The Commander. We begin to observe many ironies in the characterisation of certain individuals. The title of the chapter itself alludes to the Dead Sea Scrolls, the documents that were untouched by the world for thousands of years, and so represent the view of religion before it was corrupted by politics and society. The chapter itself shows this in its nostalgia, and in the revelation of the true character of certain individuals.

One of these characters that we discover more about is the character of Serena Joy, who was a famous gospel singer and actress in a right-wing conservative religious programme (similar to praise be). She was a Christian fundamentalist, very evangelical. She is not, however, happy in her new life that is based entirely on religious fundamentalism. This is one of Atwood's ironies - Serena Joy has lost her husband and her pride to the Handmaid. As a result, she is bitter and manipulative - she is driven by her emotions and her hatred for the system that she helped to enforce. She was proactively part of creating Gilead, and so she is the proof that Gilead is not a utopia even for the people who believe it is one. She has power over Offred, another example of control over women by women (which we see also in the idea of the Aunts). This is a contributing factor to the women in Gilead being unable to rebel against the patriarchy - because they are divided by the upper echelon of women who maintain control over the lower levels of society. These women are unwilling to give up the small amount of power that they have. Serena Joy also links closely to the motif of fertility, something that she resents in Offred. Cora drops eggs when she finds Offred lying on the ground, a metaphor for the destruction of fertility. Metaphors also occur in the descriptions of flowers. Often Offred describes the flowers in the gardens and trees - an allusion to the new life that she is supposed to be bringing into the house. For her, Serena Joy is an enemy of Offred's fertility - the words *blitzkrieg* (lightning war) and *kamikaze* (suicide bomber) are used to describe her, an allusion to Serena's role as a "Nazi" and Offred's as an "oppressed Jew".

We also find out more about The Commander. He is a collection of contrasts. He was one of the founders of Gilead, so it is his vision of reality, yet he is still not happy (like Serena Joy). He is another irony, it would appear that he would enjoy this perfect society that he had created, but his freedom has also been restricted. Even though he is part of the patriarchy, he still does not benefit. Some of his ironies appear as motifs within the novel. Historically, magazines were burned (even by the commander), but now he is hoarding a stash of them. He also forces Offred to play scrabble, which requires her to read, even though he has forbidden reading. He views himself to be someone with whom knowledge and power is in "safe hands", and *graciously* extends this to Offred. He constantly contradicts the ideals of Gilead that he himself has established. Offred herself exhibits the cliché "He has no choice" when she is considering the nature of her affair with the Commander. She believes his wife isn't giving him what he needs, so she has a "responsibility" to provide what is lacking. Nevertheless, he still maintains the power in the relationship because of the fact that he is a male and has tailored society to suit himself.

The Soul Scrolls themselves exist only for the purpose of power. The Soul Scrolls are indulgences, people use them to "save their souls" and show how dedicated you were to the new regime. Yet, they are purely ceremonial, and exist just to enforce religion and to show the impoverished masses how devout and pious the higher echelons of society are. It suggests that those in power are very shallow, and the wives who use the Soul Scrolls are desperately trying to hold onto some form of social status by showing everyone who passes how they rank in society. The society itself is built on a hypocrisy, because the people enforcing the laws don't truly believe them.

The notion of "Big Brother" is a very 'divide and conquer' idea. When the man is taken, Offred is relieved instead of being pitying or indignant. They have divided humanity, and forced people to