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Mistaking a Mouse for a Rat:

A Commentary on *The Handmaid's Tale* through the Lens of Hannah Arendt's Concept of the Banality of Evil

Good and evil are simple concepts assigned to complex scenarios. It is natural, for instance, to demonize all Nazis and portray them as an intelligent, conniving unit of prejudiced fiends. This generalization is common both in history and literature because creating a villain lessens how troublesome the reality is. The reality of Adolf Eichmann, a Nazi, did not serve the purpose the people needed for revenge. In actuality, Eichmann was an unspecial, unintelligent man following orders for his personal goals of career growth. Executing an anti-Semitic murderer, however, felt more just than adhering to the truth. This disturbing regularity is what Hannah Arendt refers to as “the banality of evil.” In essence, one figure can be taken and used as a personification for all evil when they are actually easily manipulated and obedient individuals¹. Margaret Atwood shares the same phenomenon in her novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, where women themselves support their gender's own lack of freedom². Through her female characters, Margaret Atwood's portrait of life in Gilead in *The Handmaid's Tale* substantiates Hannah Arendt's theory of “the banality of evil” that she developed in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.

The Handmaid's Tale is set in the fictional republic of Gilead, a Neo-Puritan society in what was once the eastern coast of the United States. In Gilead, women are divided into factions,

¹ Arendt, Hannah. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: a Report on the Banality of Evil*. London: Penguin, 2006.

² Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. New York, NY: Random House Inc, 2017.

each with a different role in maintaining the power of the patriarchal society. Offred, the protagonist, is a handmaid, a woman whose sole purpose is to produce children. The Aunts are those who assimilate new women into Gilead's structure through shame and discipline. Dividing women into separate groups creates an inherent inequality, and where there is inequality, there is animosity. When women are pitted against other women, the patriarchy thrives.

One of these Aunts, Lydia, is the personification of sexism. Her personality is practically vacant, and her primary function of the story is to reiterate the rules of Gilead like a speaking book. While Offred is walking alongside another handmaid on the street, she recalls a lesson from Lydia: "Now we walk along the same street, in red pairs, and no man shouts obscenities at us, speaks to us, touches us. No one whistles. There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it" (Atwood 24). This statement implies that women are to blame for a man's decision to behave in a sexist manner, so it is only natural to despise Lydia. This response, though, is clearly scripted, as are every other absurd line Lydia emits from what Offred describes as a mouse-like mouth.

The teaching of hatred starts with the Aunts, but it is the other women that reinforce the structure by remaining complicit in the system of internal sexism. Offred is assigned to the house of the Commander, and his wife, Serena Joy, is reasonably bitter towards her household's handmaid. After a "ceremony," a ritual in which Serena Joy watches her husband attempt to impregnate the handmaid, Offred wonders, "Which of us is it worse for, her or me?" (95). This tension is what contributes to the strength of the patriarchy; handmaids are whores to the wives of the wealthier men, and the handmaids feel uncomfortable towards the wives due to their role in the household. When one of the other handmaids, Janine, goes into labor, all of the wives talk

about her behind her back: “Little whores, all of them, but still you can’t be choosy. You take what they hand out, right, girls?” (115). The wives loathe the handmaids, yet they can still differentiate between the handmaid herself and the child she produces for the households. Looking at Gilead as a whole, it is astonishing to believe that this entire system founded upon hatred begins with the enforcement of the rules from a simple, uninteresting woman named Lydia³.

Adolf Eichmann is the historical version of Atwood’s Aunt Lydia. He is a forgetful man who grew up struggling in school and somehow ended up climbing the ladder up to a leadership position in the Nazi regime. This banal character’s image is not one to be conjured up at the mention of the title “Nazi,” and Hannah Arendt points this out early on in her book: “If the audience at the trial was to be the world and the play the huge panorama of Jewish sufferings, the reality was falling short of expectations and purposes” (Arendt 8). There he was, a man who was complicit in unspeakable crimes against humanity, but about as intimidating as a mouse. Although mice can carry disease, it is difficult to paint a mouse out to be a rat, and this was precisely what the court was trying to do with Eichmann; “The prosecution wasted much time in an unsuccessful effort to prove that Eichmann had once, at least, killed with his own hands” (22). If the prosecution could prove that Adolf Eichmann had directly killed someone, it would be significantly easier to paint him as a crucial cog in the murderous machine that was Nazi Germany and punish him as such, to see that mouse disposed of like the larger, much more hideous rat; but not all rodents are the same⁴.

³ Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid’s Tale*. New York, NY: Random House Inc, 2017.

⁴ Arendt, Hannah. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: a Report on the Banality of Evil*. London: Penguin, 2006.

The existence of these two mice, fictional and nonfictional, is as irritating as it is commonplace. In order for a regime to thrive, there must be a strict agenda created by truly evil people, and lackeys who will adhere to the rules of true masterminds. Without the network of yes-men, it is unlikely that the villains would succeed in their pursuit of domination. With the help of men like Eichmann and women like Lydia, the evil geniuses spearheading these movements of hatred can march on and spread their influence. Eichmann is obviously a bad person because of his crimes, but he is not an evil genius. He did not have clear hatred towards the Jewish people that inspired him to be complicit in their torture and death, and although that does not reprove him of his extensive list of sins, it is proof that he died a mouse and not a rat⁵. Lydia, too, falls under the mouse category. She relays an evil message, but she is not the founder of this evil, nor is she conniving enough to create the republic of Gilead all by herself⁶.

When a furry little creature scurries by, it is natural that one would assume that there is a rat in their midst, but when caught, it can be disappointing-- to a certain extent-- to find that the intruder is just a mouse. The metaphorical mice presented by Margaret Atwood and Hannah Arendt cannot hide behind their complicity as an excuse, but they also should not be seen as the evil masterminds they could be painted out to be. It is understandable to want to believe that every member of a regime is a cruel, heartless individual; but that is simply not the case. Of course, it takes the wrong kind of person to be complicit in an evil system, but not everyone complicit in an evil system believes firmly in the message they are spreading. Hannah Arendt's concept of the banality of evil is substantiated by Margaret Atwood's portrait of life in Gilead in *The Handmaid's Tale* because Lydia and Eichmann are vermin of the same kind: disgusting little mice.

⁵ Arendt, Hannah. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: a Report on the Banality of Evil*. London: Penguin, 2006.

⁶ Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. New York, NY: Random House Inc, 2017.