

Example Quotation Sheet for An Essay

Title/Focus: Desire

Thesis: Atwood is saying that desire is an essential part of what it means to be human and cannot be suppressed

Segment 1:

Ways in which Atwood shows Offred is hungry for language and, by extension, knowledge.

"We learned to lip-read, our heads flat on the beds, turned sideways, watching each other's mouths. In this way we exchanged names from bed to bed:"

This highlights just how important names are in constructing our identities. The women in the centre feel it important enough to know each others' names to risk being disciplined to do so.

"The door of the room – not my room, I refuse to say my – is not locked."

The very fact that Offred is so pedantic and precise with language – refusing to call her room "my" – underlines just how important naming things through language is. Offred is denied her actual name – something so important to her identity – and refuses to be tricked into identifying herself with the objects and places of the Gilead regime. Her desire to maintain her identity through her use of language is highlighted here.

"Tell, rather than write, because I have nothing to write with and writing is in any case forbidden. But if it's a story, even in my head, I must be telling it to someone. You don't tell a story only to yourself. There's always someone else."

This suggests that the desire to express oneself through language is overwhelming. Even though Offred realises that no one may hear her story, she still has to tell it. It is likely that her desire to tell a story and to use language has only been heightened by Gilead's attempts to suppress language and offer women an alternative, official and limited language in order to control them. The desire for language in the novel is strongly linked to the desire for freedom and identity.

Segment 2:

No character is immune from desire: not even the Commander, who helped construct the state.

It's not the husbands you have to watch out for, said Aunt Lydia, it's the Wives. You should always try to imagine what they must be feeling. Of course they will resent you. It is only natural. Try to feel for them.

Aunt Lydia's comments suggest that even the state of Gilead recognises, to an extent, that people will feel desire. The wives' envy of the Handmaids and their roles as concubines is alluded to here. The very fact that, even in official language, there is a recognition of the wives' desire for their husbands to be exclusively theirs underscores that desire is something that is inherently human. No matter how much the state tries to suppress desire to create order and to control, it will remain.

Can I be blamed for wanting a real body, to put my arms around? Without it I too am disembodied. [...] I can stroke myself, under the dry white sheets, in the dark, but I too am dry and white, hard, granular; it's like running my hand over a plateful of dried rice; it's like snow. [...] I am like a room where things once happened and now nothing does, except the pollen of the weeds that grow up outside the window, blowing in as dust across the floor.

Offred often makes allusions to her sexual needs in the novel. The imagery of this passage suggests decay and decomposition. There is a sense, in this passage, that without desire we "dry-up" and rot. There is no clearer indication in the novel of the idea that sex and sexual desire are central to our identities as humans and that sex, as it is attempted in the state of Gilead, cannot be reduced to a simple, desire-free act.

The problem wasn't only with the women, he (Commander) says. The main problem was with the men. There was nothing for them anymore . . . I'm not talking about sex, he says. That was part of it, the sex was too easy . . . You know what they were complaining about the most? Inability to feel. Men were turning off on sex, even. They were turning off on marriage. Do they feel now? I say. Yes, he says, looking at me. They do.

This passage demonstrates that The Commander, one of the chief architects of the rules and culture of Gilead, is himself not immune from acting on desire. His simple answer, "They do" even suggests that men's feelings of desire may have been heightened since the advent of Gilead. The oppression and control of women in the state, far from freeing women from men's lust and protecting them, has frustrated men to the extent that their desire for sex has been sharpened. The fact that The Commander admits this, yet cannot see the problem with or the inherent hypocrisy in his position is a disquieting aspect of the novel. He also goes on to take Offred to "Jezebel's", a brothel, – something officially banned in the State of Gilead – which further underlines the utter hypocrisy of those who expect others to be in command of and control their desires, yet see no issue in acting upon them themselves. They regard desire as natural for them – just not the "lower orders", who need it controlled and regulated.

Etc.

What “Segment” would you chose to explore next in an essay on “Desire”, or would you still want to continue with more quotations on the previous one? Might you want to go on and explore a “Segment” on how experiencing desire helps Offred feel a sense of freedom – whether it is sexual desire or desire for possessions/identity/language.