

McKenna Lanter

McKennaLanter2022@u.northwestern.edu

School of Communication

The Versatility Of Cow Fat

I like a smear of butter on my dinner rolls. I enjoy creaming butter and sugar together as the foundation of any scrumptious baked good I desire. If I need to grease a pan or ensure that my food does not stick to a surface I'd rather not scrub, butter tends to do the trick.

I know I'm not alone when drooling over an ooey-goey pot of macaroni and cheese or a decadent chocolate cake. Butter is certainly a prominent staple in daily American life—in what other nation would a misspelled butter cow make the nightly news? The American fascination with butter, with its rich history spanning far back into the United States' founding days with the revolutionary butter churn, has expanded our flavor profiles and waistlines. With the ingenuity of the American people, the various uses of butter will continue to circulate around society—from practical to humorous—as smoothly and freely as a knife spreads it onto a piece of toast.

On the darker note, however, trusting that that butter will be favored by the majority forever or that its beneficial purposes will be shared continually among Americans could guide my knife from my bread onto my hand. Though butter plays a minor role in Margaret Atwood's novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, its unfamiliar uses should shock and unnerve American readers. In a dystopian society where fertile women, or Handmaids, are forced to engage in intercourse with high-ranking male Commanders to procreate, Handmaids are stripped of their personal identities and possessions in order to reduce them to sexual property. Therefore, as readers learn from the protagonist, Offred, the Commanders have banned lotion to appease their jealous Wives. Because their husbands must copulate with Handmaids, the Wives fear anything that might strengthen the inhumane relationship; thus, beauty products are considered a threat, so the Wives forbid hand lotion. As a result, Offred utilizes butter as a moisturizing agent, especially after evenings of mandatory sex. However, butter's versatility in this sense extends beyond a simple lotion product.

Within her narration, Offred equates butter with hope and freedom. She states, "As long as we do this, butter our skin to keep it soft, we can believe that we will some day get out, that we will be touched again, in love or desire" (96-97; ch. 17). As this quotation reveals, butter presents a lick of freedom both in the present and future. As stated earlier, butter is used to grease pans to stop food from sticking; thus, it allows items to "loosen" and break free from their containers. This purpose can be noted in Offred's present. In the Republic of Gilead, Offred cannot break any laws without facing abuse, death, or worse. She cannot speak out against the evils of Gilead, stop the Commander from deflowering her monthly, read, walk alone in the streets, or show affection for anyone. With all of these personal freedoms revoked, spreading butter on her skin literally and figuratively loosens Offred from societal expectations.

In addition, while privately buttering herself, Offred enjoys a secret freedom of controlling one minute aspect of her body. Though Offred's physical being is restrained by harsh statues and tainted through the sexual Ceremony, she consciously controls what dirties her body with butter, allowing her a rebellious liberty that gives her hope for future freedom. If she can keep butter hidden and utilize it as an illegal moisturizer, what else can Offred get away with under her Commander's nose? Learning about an insurgent movement against Gilead? Hiding a match in a slit in her mattress? Having sex with another man? Perhaps butter loosened my tongue, because these instances are all spoilers of Offred's defiant endeavors throughout *The Handmaid's Tale*. With one pat of butter, Offred realizes that she might become loose enough to break free of her hellish life. Therefore, butter serves as a symbol of hope for Offred's future, allowing her to slip through the iron grasp of Gilead, one greasy finger at a time.

But why must Americans' beloved butter become a shining beacon of hope in such a dismal world? After all, it seems highly unappetizing to become a human piece of toast. However, this might be precisely why Atwood chose a household culinary staple to undermine the horrific society of Gilead. With unfamiliar terms like "Commander", "Handmaid", "Soul Scrolls", and other foreign vocabulary, it can be hard to fully understand and digest the futuristic Republic. While one can perceive underlying themes of sexism, religious persecution, and totalitarianism within the text, coming to terms with Gileadean culture can upset even the strongest stomach. By introducing a familiar comfort as a way to escape Atwood's hellish world, readers can see that even in most abysmal conditions, there is a way to fight back, no matter how seemingly inconsequential. In modern American society, finding and utilizing a source of hope to bring about change appears out of reach, especially when the government fails to operate due to obstinacy and corruption, racial and socioeconomic prejudices proliferate, drug addiction soars, and news headlines tell of endlessly depressing events. Nevertheless, Atwood shows us that despite the United States' shortcomings, we are not so far gone as the Republic of Gilead, and even in that world, an object as simple as butter can serve as an instrument of rebellion. This translates into a significant conduit for social change, as readers in America will find Offred's buttering an appetizing metaphor for recognizing injustice and seeking ways to rectify it. As readers draw parallels between *The Handmaid's Tale* and the current culture of the United States, seeing butter as a pathway to freedom leaves the audience hungry for correcting the evils of our world. Complacency allowed the rise of Gilead, and if readers fail to heed Atwood's warnings, we as Americans may find ourselves more familiar with another versatile and more terrifying use of cow fat.