

On page 153 of *The Handmaid's Tale* Offred watches Serena Joy as she works in her garden. We see the author, Margaret Atwood, using motifs and metaphors of flowers and gardens in this passage. To begin this passage, Offred thinks "That was in May. Spring has now been undergone. The tulips have had their moment and are done, shedding their petals one by one, like teeth." On the surface level this sentence is about the passage of time and how it affects the petals of the tulips. However, through close reading we realize that this could be a metaphor for the way that the passage of time affects Offred's fertility. Spring has undergone, meaning her prime years for making babies has passed, and slowly the petals are being shed one by one. She is slowly yet consistently losing her fertility, the way that tulips are slowly yet consistently losing their petals. We know that Offred is reaching the end of her peak years of fertility from her visit with the doctor, so Offred may have her worries about failing to produce children in the back of her mind, and is projecting it onto the flowers.

This type of language is similar to when our narrator is describing looking at tulips earlier in the book on page 12. "The tulips are red, a darker crimson towards the stem, as if they have been cut and are beginning to heal there." Describing the tulips' red color also compares them to Offred, as the handmaids are required to wear red clothing at all times. Additionally, she describes the way color makes it look as though the tulips "have been cut and are beginning to heal there." Given the fact that the flowers have been established as a metaphor for Offred, we can apply this sentence as a metaphor for the way Offred has been hurt, as her child was taken away from her, and she is beginning to heal. This is another example of the recurring motif of flowers and gardens in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

A few lines later, we see Serena cutting off the seed pods. This is again using the flowers as metaphors for women, yet this time it applies to Serena Joy. Serena has had her seed pods, or fertility, cut off, and her jealousy and vengeance makes her want to do the same to other women. But society will not let her, so the best she can do is take fertility away from the plants in her

garden. Offred also thinks something similar to this a few lines later, as she says “Saint Serena, on her knees, doing penance.” Much like in Gilead, controlling which plants, or women, create offspring which don’t is meant to keep order. In this way, Serena Joy’s garden is a metaphor for Gilead.

A few lines into the second section of the page Offred thinks “There is something subversive about this garden of Serena’s, a sense of buried things bursting upwards, wordlessly, into the light, as if to point, to say: Whatever is silenced will clamor to be heard, though silently.” This has multiple meanings in the fabric of the story. The first is that Serena is using this garden as a way to express herself and rebel against the authority of Gilead. She doesn’t have the same freedoms she had in the before times and she is unhappy with the way things are. This is ironic because we know that Serena Joy was one of the women calling for a society like this where women’s roles are diminished.

The second meaning that can be taken from this sentence is the way that it applies to the actions of Offred in this society. Offred is also subtly rebelling against the ways of Gilead, because much like Serena Joy she is unhappy with her new life. However, Offred does not have a garden to do this, so instead she does so through her own thoughts and small infringements on the rules. She steals the butter and margarine like the other handmaids and we frequently get insights into her day dreams. Specifically when she is meant to be resting for greater health and fertility, she stays awake recounting old memories, holding out hope for things to change, and envisioning violently attacking the aunts. These are examples of the way she will “clamor to be heard, though silently.”

The Handmaid’s Tale is littered with metaphors and motifs for the way that Offred and the other women feel about Gilead. This passage is just one example of Margaret Atwood using these literary devices in the book. We see that the motif of tulips and a garden is used multiple times as a metaphor for the expression of rebellion and a longing for the before times. This

makes the reader think about the way that the characters express their emotions. The reader can then apply this thinking to their own life, to try and understand how people in real life express suppressed or forbidden emotions or feelings. In this way, Margaret Atwood is influencing the way readers think about the book and their own lives with her use of metaphors and motifs.