

College English

Ms. Pahomov

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September 30, 2024

I Might've Misinterpreted The Prompt for This Project(?)

I love to draw ballerinas. They're good for anatomical studies. Their bones and muscles are extremely defined, which is preferable for posing because you have to draw from the inside-out. I also love to draw ballerinas for a simpler reason; they're beautiful.

Les Sylphides is the only ballet mentioned in *The Handmaid's Tale*, by Margaret Atwood. It's an abstract ballet that doesn't follow a particular storyline. The only notable characters are the nameless (male) poet, and the sylphs—air spirits.

In *Les Sylphides*, the Sylphs are portrayed as beautiful women dressed in flouncy white dresses clad with flowers in their hair, which is usually pulled into a tight bun.

The ballet is mentioned chapter thirteen, where in the midst of Offred's boredom she simulates giving birth,

“Arms at the sides, knees bent, lift the pelvis, roll the backbone down. Tuck. Again. Breathe into the count of five, hold, expel. We'd do that in what used to be the Domestic Science room, cleared now of sewing machines and washer-dryers; in unison, lying on little Japanese mats, a tape playing, *Les Sylphides*. That's what I hear now, in my head, as I lift, tilt, breathe. Behind my closed eyes thin white dancers flit gracefully among the trees, their legs fluttering like the wings of held birds.” (Pg. 70).

The drawing is in direct reference to the last line.

Les Sylphides is an interesting reference because unlike Giselle—which follows a similar structure—the choreography never involves lifts. Most of the sylphs are either choreographed to dance with/around the poet, or they're stationary on the floor. Offred may feel like she (and the other handmaids) are reflective of the sylphs, and the commander the poet.

Ballet, in general, has such an extensive history that it's an interesting pull from Atwood regardless. During the 19th century, most ballerinas were also sex workers. Not most—only the ballerinas that were employed by the Paris Opera, but an interesting connection nonetheless considering that the handmaids themselves are very similar to sex workers. They're used solely for the purpose of copulating, there is explicitly no romance expressed in these relationships. And like sex work, they have no feasible way out of this arrangement. Offred, herself, feels like the held bird.

There's also the aspect of the prima ballerina. The (female) 'principal dancer.' Which is a dancer at a high rank within a dance company, more than that, ballerinas are also able to be given the title of 'prima ballerina assoluta' from their government. A very famous prima ballerina assoluta, Mathilde Kschessinska, was a mistress of Nicholas II, the last Tsar of Russia.

The ranks and general career of the ballerina closely resembles the societal ranks of the women in *The Handmaid's Tale*. That particular scene held a lot of historical significance, whether Atwood intended it to or not.

There isn't much meaning behind my drawing, I used a reference photo of Filipina prima-ballerina, Lisa Macuja-Elizalde, in *Les Sylphides*. She's sitting with one hand to her face and the other under it. It's a beautiful picture. The dress poofs out, creating many intricate folds and shadows I just don't have the skill to replicate. Out of all the still images of *Les Sylphides*, this one was the most lovely, which is why I chose it. That sounds like a cop-out—it's not, I

promise. There are few lovely moments in *The Handmaid's Tale*, this being one of them, despite the context. And in that sense, it's only beautiful superficially, which is what reading this book felt like.



(This looks better in person, trust.)