Women Proving Their Authority

Since the Fall of Eve in the Garden of Eden, women have struggled for respect and freedom in society. In the last century, women have come a long way towards equality, especially in America, and now have the same legal rights as men. But even today, the harsh memories of the challenges that women have had to overcome still linger, and the battle for equality is still being fought around the world. Women are often oppressed because of their lack of credibility. They have no power because men are believed to be smarter, and therefore better. Women have to prove that they are as capable as men in society in every aspect. The female heroines in the play *Proof* and the novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* represent the struggle to overcome this oppression from the men around them. Catherine in the play *Proof* and Offred in the novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* show that even in America authority is still in the power of the men, and through their struggles in their different circumstances, they represent women’s fight for freedom against the world around them. *Can the women succeed?*

In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Offred has lost all of her freedom, and she must sacrifice her own authority and submit to the greater authority to stay alive. In the novel, the government is overturned by Christian Radicals, and she is forced into submission after her family is taken...
from her. Women in this society have no rights and the men rule over them. She is sent to be handmaid, and her one goal was to become pregnant with the married man she was living with. Her life is at stake every moment, so she programs herself to live a life in submission, saying “I have learned to do without a lot of things,” (Atwood pp. 76). She is, actually, forced to live without because breaking the rules would mean death or a life in a slave camp exposed to deadly chemicals. Women in this society are to “learn in silence with all subjection,” and “not to teach, nor usurp authority over the man” (Atwood pp. 251). She loses all sense of empowerment and authority when she is stripped from her family and forced to obey the rules that the men in charge set. Although The Handmaid’s Tale depicts a fictional government, the idea comes from a motif that has been common through history; that men have more authority in the world than women do. Offred was extremely oppressed in this world of religious laws and conditions, and she had to learn to submit in order to stay alive.

Catherine in the play Proof lacks authority as well, but this is due to the fact that the people around her thought she was insane. Her father was a brilliant mathematician, but he lost his mind, and she took it upon herself to care for him. While her father was alive, she had authority over him and the house they lived in. She was not, however, able to make her own decisions. She had to quit school to care for him. Once he died, she lost all of the authority she once knew, because she claimed to have written a groundbreaking mathematical proof but no one believed her. Hal, her father’s previous student, and her sister Claire, thought she, like her father, was losing her mind. Hal tells her about a doctor she should talk to and Claire insists she moves to New York to live with her and her new fiancé. Hal, upon reading a part of the proof, says, “It doesn’t matter, it’s too advanced. I don’t even understand most of it [...] you could not
have done this work” (Auburn 64). Hal believes himself to be a better mathematician than Catherine. Hal and Claire want to accredit the proof to her father, because men are thought to be better at mathematics than women. Catherine is finally accredited for creating the proof, but not before her new found relationship with Hal is over. She tells Hal, “You blew it [...] you should have trusted me,” (Auburn pp. 81) She is still thought to be insane, by the other characters and the audience, even after proving herself to be as capable as her father. Like she had authority over her father once he had lost his mind, Claire takes authority of Catherine at the end of the play. Catherine’s role seems to switch through the play, first she is the caregiver to her mentally unstable father, and after his death her sister takes on the role of caregiver to Catherine when she seems to lose her mental stability. The audience is left to wonder if she does indeed lose her mind. She tells Hal, “I’m...afraid I’m like my dad,” and Hal replies, “You’re not him” (Auburn pp.82). Since her father was a genius and also a madman, Catherine thinks since she has the genius that she will also inherit the madness. She finds a sense of her own authority once Hal becomes convinced that she created the proof, but her future is left in question at the end of the play.

Offred learns to survive alone after she loses all sense of freedom and credibility, and although in her current situation she is stripped of integrity, she does not lose her moral values. She seems to be brainwashed by all of the regulations she must follow, because she performs her duties while reciting what she has been taught by the Aunts. She states matter-of-factly, “That is what we are now. The circumstances have been reduced [for women]; for those of us who still have circumstances,” (Atwood pp.14). She does not, however, truly believe any of it. She is left to find simple pleasures in breaking the small rules. She says, “There is something
powerful in the whispering of obscenities, about those in power” (Atwood 253). She must put on a front of quiet piousness, but she does not lose herself in it completely, especially around the other women who condone such behavior. Most of the time, however, she is alone and powerless, left to smear butter on her face. As Offred says, “We are containers, it’s only the insides of our bodies that are important,” (Atwood 113). Although she is clearly aware of the regulations in her situation, she still must try to envision getting her life and her integrity back, even if it means breaking the rules. She has lost her rank in society as all women have in The Handmaid’s Tale. Her story illustrates her fight to hold onto herself even though she has lost her standing in the world.

Catherine also feels that her integrity and credibility have been questioned in Proof. She has to struggle to compare to the men around her. Men who are mathematically brilliant are allowed to be insane in society. Einstein, one of the greatest mathematicians of all time, was thought to be insane. Also, the story of Frankenstein is a classic literature piece emphasizing the ‘mad scientist.’ However, women are not thought of in society as capable of accomplishing such tasks, and since there is no background in history for such, Catherine’s proof did not hold credibility with Hal and Claire. They believed her mental health was in question, so they did not think she was trustworthy. But, Hal and Claire knew Robert’s mental health was questionable when he was alive, but to them the knowledge of him creating the proof was more believable than that of Catherine creating it. From this, one can assume that men are allowed to be genius and at the same time somewhat insane, but this does not extend to women. Women with mental health issues are not trustworthy or credible in society. Men do not have to undergo the
scrutiny of success that women must endure, and this is shown through Catherine’s attempt to convince her sister and Hal that she created the proof.

Both Offred and Catherine embody the struggle for equality, both in a literal sense and in an academic sense. Offred, a college educated woman, cannot read or write in the new religious society she is forced to adapt to, because women are not allowed to be as intelligent as men. Catherine, on the other hand, cannot convince those around her that she is as brilliant at mathematics as her father. She created a mathematical proof that had never before been attempted, but also inherited her father’s madness, which is not acceptable for her because she is a woman. Offred and Catherine are both determined women stuck in a world in which life is easier on men.

These two characters represent a long-standing idea that women are intellectually inferior to men. This idea has come about from a religious belief that women were should serve men, and women were created from men so they are less than them physically and intellectually. Since the first woman, Eve, undermined God and fell into temptation from Satan, women have taken the blame, and suffered in gender inequalities. Women are slowly gaining their freedoms, however, and their stories are painful but inspiring. Offred and Catherine strive for their own sense of power, authority, and credibility as women born into a society that favors men. In each of their unfair circumstances, they prove that they will not blindly follow the ideas of a patriarchal society, but instead follow their own paths.
Works Cited

Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Everyman’s Library. 2006