Between Ethics and Survival: A Kohlbergian Reading of Margaret Atwood's *Marrying the Hangman*

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Abstract
This paper explores Margaret Atwood's Marrying the Hangman through the ethical framework of Lawrence Kohlberg's stages of moral development, using the Heinz Dilemma as a reference point for interpreting moral choice under pressure. This study aims to examine how Atwood re-configures this dilemma by placing a woman at its centre—one who must choose between death and survival through an act that defies conventional morality: marrying the executioner appointed to kill her. Methodologically, the poem is read through each stage of Kohlberg's model to trace the protagonist's psychological movement from fear, coercion, and dependence to a conscious assertion of life, however compromised. These findings suggest that while Heinz's dilemma fore-grounds justice, law, and rational judgment, Atwood introduces a parallel moral universe shaped by vulnerability, gendered power, and the instinct to live. This study also engages with Carol Gilli-gan's critique of Kohlberg in In a Different Voice, highlighting how women often reason ethically through care, responsibility, and relational survival rather than abstract rules. Atwood's poem reinforces this view, showing that moral action may emerge not from ideal choices, but from the only choices available. In conclusion, the analysis reveals that Marrying the Hangman challenges traditional definitions of morality by demonstrating how survival itself can be a moral act in an oppressive world. This reading invites further research into how women's ethical decisions are represented in literature, particularly when power, autonomy, and survival intersect. The poem ultimately asks whether morality can remain intact when life must be negotiated at the intersection of power and death.

Keywords: Kohlberg's Moral Development, Heinz Dilemma, Carol Gilligan, Feminist Ethics, Survival and Morality, Patriarchy, Moral Choice, Gender and Power

Introduction

Literature frequently confronts readers with situations in which moral decisions are suspended between right and wrong, especially when characters are placed in conditions of threat, injustice, or coercion. Modern writers often use such dilemmas to question rigid moral structures and expose the tensions between ethical ideals and human survival. Margaret Atwood's poem *Marrying the Hangman*, included in her collection *Two-Headed Poems* (1978), narrates the story of a woman imprisoned within a legal and patriarchal system where her continued existence depends upon an unsettling bargain—marriage to the very man appointed to execute her. What begins as a historical circumstance evolves into a profound inquiry into autonomy, power, and the price of survival (Atwood 1978).

The research problem central to this study is the conflict between ethical integrity and the instinct to live. This study applies Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development as a framework for examining the woman's decision-making process. Kohlberg's six-stage model—first outlined in his doctoral work (1958) and later expanded in *The Philosophy of Moral Development* (1981)—traces the evolution of moral thought from obedience to universal ethical principles. The famous Heinz Dilemma, in which a man considers stealing medicine to save his dying wife, is a foundational example through which Kohlberg investigates how individuals justify their moral choices (Kohlberg 1981). Although Marrying the Hangman differs in circumstance, its ethical structure parallels this dilemma: survival demands a transgression of law and moral convention.

However, the study recognises that Kohlberg's justice-based theory alone cannot sufficiently explain women's reasoning. Carol Gilligan, in her seminal work *In a Different Voice* (1982), critiques Kohlberg for presenting a male-centred, rule-oriented model of ethics. According to Gilligan, women often reason morally through care, relational responsibility, and emotional negotiation rather than through abstract justice (Gilligan, 1982). Atwood's poem resonates with this argument, portraying a woman whose decisions are shaped not by law or logic but by vulnerability, fear, and the desire to remain alive. Thus, the theoretical justification of this study lies in integrating Kohlberg's moral stages with Gilligan's ethic of care, allowing space for both justice reasoning and survival-centred morality.

The scope of this paper is limited to a close textual reading of *Marrying the Hangman* through this combined moral-philosophical and feminist lens. Rather than tracing historical context or biographical influences, the discussion focuses on the psychological progression of the woman's choice, examining how Atwood transforms a fragment of recorded history into a study of ethics, power, and endurance.

Margaret Atwood: Her Literary Significance and Women-Centric Vision

Margaret Atwood stands today as one of the most distinctive voices in contemporary world literature. Though firmly rooted in the Canadian literary tradition, her works travel beyond national boundaries, speaking to readers across continents with remarkable immediacy. What makes Atwood compelling is not simply her prolific output across genres—poetry, fiction, essays, criticism—but the clarity with which she interprets the world. Her writing is alert to power, to the ways institutions shape individual lives, and to the fragile balance between freedom and control. She approaches society with a sharp eye and a sharper pen, dissecting relationships, authority, language, and the human psyche with rare precision.

Atwood's association with feminism arises naturally from her thematic concerns. She does not write to idealise or glorify women; instead, she places them in situations where survival requires intelligence, compromise, and, often, quiet rebellion. Her female characters frequently encounter worlds that limit their voice and their bodies, yet these women resist in ways both subtle and fierce. Atwood allows them dignity—not by removing their suffering, but by acknowledging their endurance and agency within systems designed to silence them.

Many of her major works bear witness to this concern. *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) imagines a theocratic regime that strips women of autonomy and reduces them to reproductive instruments. It remains one of the most unsettling warnings of how easily religion, law, and power can merge to erase personal freedom. *Alias Grace* (1996), based on a real nineteenth-century murder case, investigates how society constructs guilt around women without ever hearing their stories. *Surfacing* (1972) follows a woman's return to her childhood landscape, using memory and the natural world to explore identity, trauma, and rebirth. Taken together, these texts chart Atwood's long engagement with the emotional and ethical landscapes of women's lives.

Her poetry mirrors these concerns, though often with greater economy and symbolic force. She writes of silence, the body, captivity, and the desire to speak. Historical incidents and myths surface repeatedly in her poems, transformed into metaphors for contemporary anxieties. *Marrying the Hangman*, published in *Two-Headed Poems* (1978), is one such instance. Atwood traces a simple historical record

but reshapes it into a narrative of survival—a woman bargaining with mortality itself, choosing life in a system where choice barely exists.

What ultimately secures Atwood's place in modern literature is her ability to combine social critique with narrative intensity. She writes with clarity, but also with shadow; with simplicity of language, but complexity of meaning. Her poems and novels compel readers to look critically at the world they inhabit—its power structures, its moral codes, and the quiet negotiations individuals make to endure within them. Atwood remains relevant not because history repeats itself, but because the questions she raises—about freedom, identity, and human dignity—refuse to disappear.

The Story Behind *Marrying The Hangman*

Marrying the Hangman has its origin in a startling historical custom: a woman facing execution could escape death only by agreeing to marry the very man assigned to hang her. Atwood takes this stark fact—almost unbelievable in its simplicity—and transforms it into a poem that feels both historical and urgently contemporary. She does not narrate the story in a straight line. Instead, she circles around it, weaving between what is recorded and what remains unsaid, creating a narrative shaped as much by absence as by memory. Through this shifting structure, Atwood reminds us of something history rarely acknowledges—those countless women lived, suffered, and made impossible choices, yet their names dissolved into silence.

The poem opens with a striking observation: documents preserve laws, procedures, officials, and the hangman, but the woman herself slips into anonymity. Only the terms of her survival remain. In pointing this out, Atwood exposes the blind spots of historical record-keeping, where the voices of women are often lost beneath the weight of legal machinery. She reimagines the woman's world—a cell, a sentence, a life on the edge of erasure. Her choice is less a choice than a corner she is pushed into: marry or die. It is survival at cost, not freedom.

The hangman, too, is drawn with complexity. Although he wields authority over her fate, he is also trapped within the same punitive system, bound by rules he did not create. His agreement to marry the condemned woman becomes a knot of power, obedience, and something like pity. Atwood does not romanticise him; instead, she shows how power can shift strangely between people when both are caged by the same order.

What gives the poem its tension is the quietness at its centre—the woman's voice, never directly spoken, yet felt in the gaps between lines. Her terror, hesitation, and reluctant acceptance shape the poem without ever being explicitly declared. Atwood leaves this silence intact, not as absence but as presence, asking readers to imagine the emotional weight of choosing a life tied to the hand that could end it.

By the poem's final movement, survival itself is revealed to be morally tangled. The woman lives, yes, but the terms of that life demand reflection. What does freedom mean when the only path to it is through submission? What does agency look like when choices are reduced to endurance? Atwood's poem lingers on these questions, suggesting that survival under patriarchy is not triumph alone—it is negotiation, compromise, and a story history rarely pauses to tell.

Framing the Moral Question

Atwood's *Marrying the Hangman* revolves around one unsettling and deeply human inquiry: *what becomes of morality when life itself hangs in the balance?* The woman at the centre of the poem does not choose her path freely. Her decision is born not from desire or agency, but from a cornered body and a life threatened by extinction. Faced with the terrifying knowledge that refusal means certain death, she accepts the only option offered to her. Through this, Atwood reminds us that morality is not always shaped in calm spaces or under fair conditions—sometimes it is forged in fear, desperation, and unequal power.

The poem repeatedly shows that the woman's consent is not consent in the true sense. The prison, the law, the hangman—all form a structure that leaves little room for personal will. This forces us to rethink how we evaluate actions. Do we have the right to measure her decision using the same moral scale we apply to people who stand on equal ground with choice and dignity? Atwood suggests that when

survival is at stake, choosing life—even at a cost—may become a quiet form of resistance rather than moral failure.

This conflict recalls the ethical tension embedded in Kohlberg's Heinz Dilemma, where a man debates stealing medicine to save his dying wife. Like Heinz, the woman's decision rests between law and life. But there is a crucial difference that shifts the moral ground. Heinz deliberates as a free agent—he weighs consequences, considers options, and moves toward action. Atwood's woman, in contrast, must endure rather than decide. Her world is shaped not by agency but by enclosure, by the authority of men, and by silence. Her survival comes not from breaking a rule, but from yielding to a system that denies her alternatives.

This shift exposes a broader truth about gendered ethics. Traditional moral frameworks often equate morality with heroic action or rational choice—standards that echo a male-centred worldview. Atwood complicates this view by presenting a woman whose moral strength lies not in dramatic rebellion, but in the steadiness of survival. In her endurance, patience, and muted defiance, the poem reveals a different kind of moral bravery—one that persists quietly beneath the weight of power.

Thus, the moral question expands beyond right or wrong. It stretches into deeper territories: *How much freedom does one possess when making a choice under captivity? Is survival itself a moral achievement when the world offers no other route?* These questions prepare the ground for reading the poem through Kohlberg's stages of moral development, while simultaneously pointing to the blind spots within his theory—particularly when it comes to women who survive not by acting freely, but by negotiating life within the confines of power.

Theoretical Framework and Relevance

The moral tension in *Marrying the Hangman* becomes more comprehensible when placed within the structure of Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development. Kohlberg proposed that human beings do not simply *possess* morality; they **grow into it**, progressing through stages that reflect increasing maturity of thought. At the lower levels, moral behaviour is tied to obedience, fear of punishment, or the desire for approval. At the higher stages, individuals make decisions based on self-evaluated principles, justice, and personal responsibility. Moral judgement, therefore, is not fixed; it evolves.

Kohlberg illustrated this progression through the now-well-known ***Heinz Dilemma***. In the dilemma, Heinz's wife is gravely ill, and the only medicine that could save her is sold at a cost far beyond his reach. The pharmacist refuses to lower the price. Heinz is then forced into a difficult decision: follow the law and let his wife die, or steal the drug and save her life. Kohlberg was less concerned with whether Heinz ultimately stole the medicine or not; his focus was on *why* Heinz chose what he did. The reasoning behind the decision, he argued, reveals the stage of moral development more accurately than the action alone.

Kohlberg's framework becomes relevant to Atwood's poem because both situations turn on a similar axis—**moral choice forged under extreme conditions**. In the poem, the woman faces a consequence as severe as death, much like Heinz's wife. However, while Heinz engages in active moral deliberation, the woman is offered only one exit from death. This contrast forms the foundation for applying Kohlberg's theory to the poem, not to judge the woman's choice, but to understand how morality functions when freedom collapses.

From the responses to the Heinz Dilemma, Kohlberg developed his **six-stage model**, grouped into three levels:

Level I: Pre-Conventional Morality

Stage 1: Obedience and Punishment Orientation

At this stage, decisions are based on fear of punishment. A person may say Heinz should not steal the drug because he will be caught and jailed.

Stage 2: Individualism and Exchange

Here people focus on personal benefit. They may argue Heinz should steal because he wants his wife to survive and it is useful for him.

Level Ii: Conventional Morality

Stage 3: Good Interpersonal Relationships

A person at this stage tries to act in a way that others will approve. They may justify Heinz's action because a loving husband is expected to save his wife.

Stage 4: Maintaining Social Order

The focus is now on the law, duty, and maintaining social stability. Someone at this stage may say Heinz must not steal, because breaking the law will create disorder.

Level Iii: Post-Conventional Morality

Stage 5: Social Contract and Individual Rights

Individuals now see that laws exist for the good of society, but human life is more valuable. A person may support Heinz stealing the drug because saving a life outweighs the rules.

Stage 6: Universal Ethical Principles

This highest stage is based on personal moral principles such as justice, equality, and human dignity. Here, a person may argue Heinz must save his wife because protecting life is a universal moral duty.

Applying Kohlberg's Six Stages to *Marrying The Hangman*

Kohlberg's six stages help us trace how the poem represents moral reasoning under coercion. The woman's "choice" is never free; it is shaped by law, fear, and survival. Yet Atwood's language still lets us see a movement from punishment-driven obedience toward a fragile, self-aware ethics of life.

Stage 1: Obedience and Punishment Orientation

Kohlberg's first stage rests on a simple foundation—people obey out of fear. Morality, at this level, does not grow from conscience or empathy but from the instinct for self-preservation. Atwood opens *Marrying the Hangman* inside exactly such a climate of dread. The woman's life is already decided for her: *"She has been condemned to death by hanging"* (Atwood). No argument, no plea, no moral weighing of circumstances—just the cold announcement of a sentence. A few lines later, Atwood reinforces the stark reality of this world: *"There is only a death, indefinitely postponed. / This is not fantasy, it is history"* (Atwood). The tone is clipped, almost documentary, as though the poem begins not with a voice, but with a verdict.

In such a space, morality cannot breathe. The woman is not choosing, she is waiting. Fear governs every imagined possibility, and fear admits no alternative. Atwood makes this psychological suffocation painfully clear when she writes, *"To live in prison is to live without mirrors. / To live without mirrors is to live without the self"* (*Marrying the Hangman*). Without a sense of self, there is no interiority to consult—no inner voice to frame a question, let alone an ethical one. A person must first know who they are before they can consider what is right.

At this first moral stage, the woman cannot move beyond the instinctive wish to survive. Her entire reasoning—if one can call it reasoning—is simply the refusal of death. She behaves because she is trapped; she complies because punishment stands like a blade at her throat. In Kohlberg's terms, she remains in Stage One, where the fear of consequences replaces moral thought altogether.

Her world offers nothing beyond endurance, and so her first moral position is not a decision, but a reaction.

Stage 2: Individualism and Exchange

Kohlberg's second stage introduces a different moral atmosphere—one shaped not by fear alone, but by the logic of exchange. Decisions are guided by self-interest: *if I do this, I receive that*. In Atwood's poem, this stage appears not through emotional deliberation but through the legal loophole that transforms survival into a bargain. The law sets the terms bluntly: *"A man may escape this death by becoming the hangman, / a woman by marrying the hangman"* (Atwood). The woman's life is no longer sacred or inviolable—it is currency.

Here, survival becomes transactional. To live, she must accept the system's price. Atwood writes, *"In order to avoid her death she must— / marry the hangman"* (*Marrying the Hangman*). The decision is not rooted in moral reasoning, dignity, or desire. It is strategy—bare, desperate, and necessary. In Kohlberg's framework, this reflects Stage Two thinking, where the outcome matters more than the ethical fabric behind it. The woman chooses marriage not because she wills it, but because life depends on it.

Atwood complicates this exchange with another unsettling detail: the hangman is not yet a hangman.

He must be made. The poem states, *"There is no hangman; first she must create him, / by persuading a man / to renounce his face, to put on the mask of death"* (Atwood). The woman survives by recruiting someone else into the machinery that was meant to kill her. She must convince a man to surrender his identity, to become executioner so that she may continue breathing. One life is preserved, but another is altered forever.

Stage Two exposes the complex economy of existence. The woman reasons in relation to benefit—life itself—and the law benefits in return by reproducing its own authority. There is no moral elevation here, only negotiation. Ethics shrink to exchange, to transaction, to what each party stands to gain.

In this moment, Kohlberg's second stage is clearly visible: morality measured not by principle, but by outcome—*I live if I agree.*

Stage 3: Good Interpersonal Relationships

Kohlberg's third stage shifts the focus from fear and barter to something far more human: the desire to belong, to be accepted, to be seen as good. It is at this point in *Marrying the Hangman* that Atwood moves beyond legal authority and survival bargains, directing attention instead to the emotional realities shaping the woman's choice.

Before she forms any connection, the poem discloses the reason for her sentence—a detail that reveals more about the society judging her than about the woman herself. Atwood writes, *"You wonder about her crime. She was condemned / to death for stealing clothes from her employer, from / the wife of her employer. She wished to make herself / more beautiful. This desire in servants was not legal"* (Atwood). Her crime is not violent, not immoral, but aspirational. She is punished for wanting beauty, for wishing to rise beyond the station assigned to her. Society does not simply sentence her body; it disowns her identity.

Stage Three emerges from the collapse of social acceptance. To survive—not only physically but psychically—she must rebuild a place for herself through relationship. Atwood describes this subtle reconstruction: *"She uses her voice like a hand, / touching and stroking"* (*Marrying the Hangman*). Her voice becomes tactile, almost corporeal. Words replace touch, conversation substitutes freedom. In a world without mirrors, without identity, she reaches out to another prisoner, and in that reaching she begins to exist again

The poem continues, *"The voice becomes her mirror"* (Atwood), a line that reveals the heart of Stage Three. Since the prison deprives her of reflection, another person becomes the surface through which she recognises herself. She finds selfhood not in law, not in independence, but in relation. Morality now grows from connection, empathy, mutual recognition—qualities Kohlberg associates with Stage Three reasoning.

Even potential husbands are drawn into this relational logic. Atwood imagines his motive gently, perhaps even sympathetically: *"Perhaps he wanted to live with a woman whose life he had saved. / It was his only chance to be a hero, / to one person at least"* (Atwood). His decisions are shaped not by rules or rewards but by the yearning to be valued, admired, and even loved. He does not become hangman out of duty or ambition, but out of a need to matter to someone.

In this stage, morality no longer lives in law or exchange. It rests in the fragile bond forming between two people abandoned by the world. Approval, tenderness, and shared humanity create a moral space the legal system refused to offer. Kohlberg's third stage—morality shaped by relationships and the longing for acceptance—is fully realized here, not through theory but through the quiet rebuilding of two fractured selves.

Stage 4: Maintaining Social Order

Kohlberg's fourth stage values law, authority, and the machinery of social order above individual need or compassion. In *Marrying the Hangman*, Atwood exposes how such a system defines morality not by fairness, but by obedience to structure. When the poem revisits the woman's crime, it becomes clear that she is being punished not for harm, but for transgression of class hierarchy. Atwood writes, *"You wonder about her crime. She was condemned / to death for stealing clothes from her employer, from / the wife of her employer. She wished to make herself / more beautiful. This desire in servants was*

not legal" (*Marrying the Hangman*). Her offence is not theft in the moral sense; it is aspiration. Wanting beauty—wanting to step momentarily out of her class—becomes the real danger. The law disciplines her not to preserve justice, but to guard social boundaries.

Earlier, the poem merely stated that she stole clothes. The reasoning behind this sentence is chillingly transparent. The severity of the punishment had little to do with what she took and everything to do with *who she was*. Stage Four morality, in this context, defends a rigid social structure even when it crushes the individual beneath it. Atwood's critique emerges quietly but unmistakably: the law protects order, not humanity.

The same logic underlies the legal loophole that offers her escape. The requirement that she must *marry the hangman* is not presented as extraordinary—Atwood notes that the clause *"existed on the books, among the other laws"* (Atwood). The casual phrasing underscores the normalisation of such violence. A rule that binds a woman's life to the man meant to kill her sits among legislation as though it were simply administrative. The system does not ask whether it is moral—it only asks whether it is enforceable.

Even the hangman embodies this culture of unquestioned authority. He is created by the law, not by choice. As Atwood writes, *"There is no hangman; first she must create him, / by persuading a man / to renounce his face, to put on the mask of death"* (*Marrying the Hangman*). The "mask" is not figurative—it is the erasure of the man beneath the role. Stage Four morality demands conformity, not conscience. The hangman is dutiful, but duty here is weaponized.

Atwood goes further, unsettling the reader by describing him in gentle domestic imagery: *"The hangman is not such a bad fellow… he wants only the simple things: / a chair, a table, a bed, / someone to pull off his shoes"* (Atwood). These lines soften him while leaving his violence intact. He becomes ordinary because he does what the law expects. The poem exposes how easily brutality hides beneath routine, how an executioner can be rendered harmless simply by surrounding him with common comforts.

The woman's story, meanwhile, is almost lost. As the poem notes, *"Most of the story is not told… the woman's story is left out"* (Atwood). Stage Four morality silences the victim to preserve the authority that condemned her. By erasing her voice, the system insists that its version of the truth is the only one that matters.

In Kohlberg's terms, Stage Four upholds law as the highest moral standard. Atwood complicates this by showing that obedience to law can itself be a form of violence. When authority is unjust, compliance becomes indistinguishable from cruelty, and morality collapses into administration.

Stage 5: Social Contract and Individual Rights

Kohlberg's fifth stage marks an important moral transition—one in which law is no longer regarded as absolute, but as a human construction that can be challenged when it conflicts with basic dignity. At this level, the value of life takes precedence over blind obedience, and justice is measured not by legality but by fairness. In *Marrying the Hangman*, this shift becomes visible when the woman begins to see her existence as something worth defending, even if doing so means negotiating with the same system that condemned her.

Atwood makes the injustice of her sentence painfully clear: the woman is not executed for violence or betrayal, but for desire. *"She wished to make herself / more beautiful. This desire in servants was not legal"* (*Marrying the Hangman*). The law punishes her not for wrongdoing but for daring to imagine herself differently. In Stage Five reasoning, this discrepancy becomes morally significant. The woman's so-called crime reveals a gulf between what the law protects and what is ethically defensible. The legal system guards hierarchy; the moral imagination recoils.

The loophole that offers her life—marriage to the executioner—becomes the point at which she begins to think beyond pure obedience. As Atwood bluntly states, *"In order to avoid her death she must— / marry the hangman"* (Atwood). She accepts not because the law is wise or right, but because survival asserts a truth that the legal structure has denied: that her life possesses value. In doing so, she reclaims a fragment of autonomy inside a space designed to erase it. This decision reflects Stage Five thinking,

wherein individuals recognise that laws exist to serve humanity—not the other way around.

Atwood reinforces this tension through silence: *"Most of the story is not told… the woman's story is left out"* (Atwood). Stage Five morality notices this erasure. The fact that her voice is absent from the record demonstrates that the law does not protect human experience—it overwrites it. By choosing to survive, the woman resists this erasure. She insists, quietly but firmly, on the right to exist even when the state denies that right.

Historical evidence strengthens this reading: Atwood notes that the couple had to petition the authorities before they could marry, meaning even survival required bureaucratic permission (Atwood). In a Stage Five framework, such control is ethically troubling. When life must be negotiated through paperwork, the law has lost sight of what it was meant to protect.

Stage Five therefore emerges not as obedience, nor as self-interested exchange, but as recognition—recognition that the woman's life carries moral weight beyond statute, and that oppressive legality can be challenged by the simple, unheroic act of living.

Her choice is not compliance; it is resistance in its most human form.

Stage 6: Universal Ethical Principles

In Kohlberg's sixth and highest stage, morality is guided not by rules or approval but by ethical principles an individual chooses for themselves—principles rooted in justice, dignity, and the intrinsic value of life. In *Marrying the Hangman*, this level does not appear through grand rebellion or dramatic defiance. Instead, it emerges quietly, through the woman's decision to live. Her act may seem small, even compromised, yet it rests on a profound ethical truth: that life, however limited, is worth protecting.

Atwood captures this moment of transformation with one spare, haunting line: *"She had left one locked room for another"* (*Marrying the Hangman*). The woman knows she is not stepping into freedom. She understands that survival will not grant her autonomy, power, or voice. But she chooses life despite the confinement that awaits her. This is not naïve hope, nor resignation—it is the moral clarity of someone who believes that existence itself carries meaning. In Kohlberg's terms, she reasons at Stage Six, where universal human worth outweighs the authority that condemns her.

The poem's closing imagery deepens this ethical shift. Atwood writes:

"He promised foot, boot, order, city, fist, roads, time, knife. She promised water, night, willow, rope hair, earth belly, breeze, breath, hand, blood." (Atwood)

The exchange is almost ritualistic. His promise is built of control, order, structure—the lexicon of power. Hers belongs to the body, to breath, to earth, to the slow continuance of living. When Atwood concludes, *"They both kept their promises"*, it suggests not harmony but coexistence. They do not transcend the system, but they carve a space inside it—a space defined by endurance rather than dominance. The woman does not survive because the law allows it; she survives because she asserts, quietly and steadily, that life has value even when society refuses to see it.

Stage Six here is neither legal reform nor heroic rebellion. It is the ethical refusal to consent to erasure. The woman rejects death not out of terror (Stage One), not as a bargain (Stage Two), not to be accepted (Stage Three), and not out of duty to the law (Stage Four). She lives because living is moral. Because her body, her breath, her being, matter. Atwood reframes Kohlberg's highest stage from the perspective of the oppressed—where universal ethics are not abstract principles, but the insistence that one's life is worth continuing, even inside the cage.

Through her survival, she claims a truth the legal system attempts to deny: that humanity persists, even inside history's silences.

Feminist Ethical Perspective: Gilligan's *Ethics Of Care* (1982) and Atwood's Challenge To Kohlberg

Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice* (1982) famously questioned the authority of moral frameworks like Kohlberg's, arguing that they reflect a particularly male style of ethical reasoning—abstract, rule-oriented, and grounded in the logic of justice. Gilligan proposes that many women approach moral dilemmas differently, through relationships,

empathy, responsiveness, and lived context rather than through universal principles alone. *Marrying the Hangman* enacts this difference vividly. The choice that structures the poem—marriage in exchange for continued life—cannot be explained through law or duty alone. It must be understood as a decision made under threat, isolation, and asymmetrical power, where survival itself becomes a moral gesture.

Gilligan insists that moral evaluation must account for vulnerability and circumstance. Heinz, in Kohlberg's experiment, debates whether to steal a drug—a question framed around choice and agency. Atwood entirely removes such freedom. Her protagonist is already sentenced to die: *"She has been condemned to death by hanging"* (Atwood). Her environment destroys selfhood itself, for *"To live in prison is to live without mirrors. / To live without mirrors is to live without the self"* (Atwood). A justice-model may measure obedience or disobedience, but a care-model asks: What does morality look like when the subject is already erased? Here, the ethical question is not about rule-breaking; it is about how a life can still be protected when the capacity to choose has nearly vanished.

Gilligan also places relationship at the centre of moral meaning. Atwood mirrors this when the woman begins rebuilding her identity not through principle but through connection: *"She uses her voice like a hand, / touching and stroking"* and *"The voice becomes her mirror"* (Atwood). Recognition becomes morality's starting point. In a system that has stripped her of name, agency, and reflection, being heard—being *reflected back*—is the first act of ethical restoration. Gilligan would say that this is not emotional indulgence but a moral orientation grounded in responsibility to oneself and others.

Responsibility becomes even more visible when we look again at the crime: *"She wished to make herself / more beautiful. This desire in servants was not legal"* (Atwood). A justice-only lens risks accepting the punishment simply because law has spoken. An ethics of care insists we ask the human question first: Who is harmed? What power is being protected? What response supports life? Atwood's poem answers plainly—survival is the ethical path because the punishment does not fit the crime; the law protects hierarchy, not justice.

Voice and silence then become moral facts in their own right. *"Most of the story is not told… the woman's story is left out"* (Atwood). A system that values order over empathy erases the lived narrative of the oppressed. Gilligan's framework insists that morality cannot be judged without hearing the silenced voice. Atwood's poem performs this hearing. It returns language to the woman and forces the reader to listen—to imagine what was never recorded.

Even the legal mechanism offered as "mercy" reveals how care ethics and justice ethics diverge. The marriage statute exists "on the books, among the other laws," ordinary on paper yet coercive in practice. Kohlberg's ladder can identify whether obeying or breaking such a law is the "higher stage." Gilligan instead asks: What choice sustains life? What response protects a vulnerable human being in real time? Atwood's ending dramatizes this with two vocabularies held side by side: the hangman's world of structure—*"foot, boot, order, city, fist, roads, time, knife"*—and the woman's world of elemental survival—*"water, night, willow, rope hair, earth belly, / breeze, breath, hand, blood"* (Atwood). When the poem says *"They both kept their promises,"* the conclusion is not harmonious but painfully pragmatic. They survive, simply because nothing better was permitted.

Gilligan also redefines moral courage—and Atwood echoes her. In traditional moral reasoning, courage looks like decisive rule-breaking in the name of principle, like Heinz stealing the drug. But here courage is quieter: *"She had left one locked room for another"* (Atwood). Her freedom does not come through rebellion but through endurance, clarity, and the refusal to disappear. Under Gilligan's lens, this is not moral weakness—it is moral strength calibrated to the conditions of oppression. She chooses the only life the world allows, and in doing so she insists that her existence carries value even when the law denies it.

In essence, Gilligan enables us to read Atwood's poem on its own ethical terms. The woman's decision is relational rather than abstract, embodied rather than judicial. *Marrying the Hangman* therefore does not merely fit into Kohlberg's framework—it corrects its blind spots. It shows that under patriarchy, morality

does not move neatly upward through reason, but sideways through care, survival, responsibility, and the stubborn continuation of a life that refuses to be extinguished.

Feminist Reconfiguration of a Male-Defined Moral Paradigm

Marrying the Hangman ultimately serves as a feminist re-imagining of a moral structure historically defined by male experience. Kohlberg's model assumes that the highest ethical reasoning rises above context, emotion, and personal need, operating instead on impartial principles of justice. Such a model presumes agency, voice, and the freedom to deliberate—conditions that Atwood's protagonist does not possess. In the world of the poem, the woman's ability to choose is already dismantled by the law that sentences her and by the patriarchal system that regulates her body, identity, and future. For her, morality cannot float in abstraction; it is grounded in fear, confinement, and the hunger to live.

Atwood shifts the terms of moral evaluation by foregrounding experience rather than idealism. The woman's decisions develop not from universal rules, but from the immediate ground of her existence—her terror, her isolation, her brief connection with another prisoner, and her recognition that survival is the only form of agency left to her. What Kohlberg dismisses as "lower-stage" reasoning appears here not as ethical immaturity but as a rational and deeply human response to conditions of powerlessness. Gilligan's *ethic of care* helps illuminate this shift. Her model validates moral thinking shaped by relationship, responsiveness, and lived context, showing that the woman's reasoning is not inferior to Heinz's—it is simply shaped by a different world.

In Atwood's hands, morality becomes not an ascent toward abstraction but a negotiation of real bodies and real limits. Ethical action is measured by what preserves life and dignity within oppression, not by how well one applies theoretical principles. The poem therefore does more than critique the justice-centred moral ladder—it repositions care, interdependence, and survival as legitimate moral frameworks. Through this reorientation, *Marrying the Hangman* challenges the assumptions of traditional moral philosophy and asserts that under patriarchy, the most ethical act may be the refusal to disappear.

Atwood thus reframes moral reasoning through experience rather than detachment. In doing so, she makes visible an ethical world that Kohlberg's model could not account for—a world in which choosing to live is itself a profound moral act.

Positioning the Study

This study situates *Marrying the Hangman* at the intersection of literary ethics, feminist moral philosophy, and cognitive moral psychology—fields that rarely speak together but illuminate each other when they do. Atwood's poem is not only a representation of survival under law; it is a text that invites the reader into the space of ethical deliberation. By placing Kohlberg's theory of moral development alongside Gilligan's *ethics of care*, the analysis illustrates how literature becomes a site for testing and expanding psychological models. The poem, in effect, functions as an ethical laboratory, showing how moral reasoning shifts when gendered power restricts voice, agency, and choice.

The comparison with Heinz's Dilemma allows the study to foreground this shift. Heinz's moral problem is hypothetical and agent-centred: he contemplates theft to save his wife, armed with the capacity to decide. Atwood rewrites this dilemma by removing this privilege. Her protagonist faces not a conceptual question but the immediate threat of extinction—die under the law, or live through marriage to her executioner. This contrast exposes the limitations of moral models built around freedom and rational choice. Atwood demonstrates that when decision-making occurs under coercion, morality becomes embodied, relational, and urgent rather than abstract.

The woman in the poem undergoes a gradual moral movement that supports this reading. Though imprisoned and silenced, she does not remain fixed in fear. Her reasoning shifts from compliance dictated by punishment to a fragile form of post-conventional insight—choosing life not because the law authorises it, but because life itself holds value. Yet even this autonomy differs from Kohlberg's vision of principled reasoning. It is interwoven with

dependence, with the need for recognition, and with the emotional labour of survival—traits central to Gilligan's critique of male-centred ethics. Atwood, therefore, reveals how moral thought evolves even in captivity, though its logic is shaped by vulnerability rather than abstract justice.

By bringing these perspectives into dialogue, the study argues for a broader understanding of moral reasoning—one that does not privilege detached universality over embodied context. *Marrying the Hangman* challenges us to reconsider morality as an act of endurance and moral sensibility forged under pressure. When law enforces silence, ethics must emerge from the lived world—from connection, care, fear, compromise, and the refusal to disappear. In this sense, Atwood's poem expands the discourse on moral development by showing that ethical agency persists even in the smallest, most precarious forms of survival.

Conclusion

This study began with the objective of reading *Marrying the Hangman* through the dual ethical lens of Kohlberg's moral development theory and Carol Gilligan's ethic of care to understand how Atwood represents moral reasoning within conditions of extreme powerlessness. By placing the woman's situation alongside Heinz's Dilemma, the analysis sought to investigate how moral choice changes when the chooser is denied agency, voice, and social value. The comparison reveals that while Heinz acts as a moral agent deliberating over law and compassion, Atwood's protagonist confronts a far narrower space in which life itself hangs on a single coercive alternative.

These findings indicate that Atwood exposes the shortcomings of a justice-centred moral framework. Through the woman's movement across Kohlberg's stages—from fear-driven obedience to a fragile post-conventional awareness—the poem shows that morality under patriarchy is not abstract or disembodied. It is relational, pressured, and deeply tied to survival. Gilligan's perspective becomes essential here: the woman's decision cannot be classified as morally lower or less evolved simply because it is grounded in care, vulnerability, and the instinct to live. Instead, the poem demonstrates that, under oppression, these very qualities form the basis of ethical reasoning.

The study contributes to existing scholarship by positioning Atwood's poem as a site where feminist moral philosophy actively revises male-defined ethical paradigms. It highlights the need to evaluate moral decisions not only by outcome or principle, but by acknowledging the lived conditions that shape them. *Marrying the Hangman* ultimately reframes morality as a negotiation within power structures rather than as ascent through idealised reason. By doing so, Atwood reminds us that survival may itself be an ethical achievement when the world offers no humane choice.

Therefore, this study reinforces the need to expand moral understanding beyond justice and rule-based logic to include care, context, and the right to continue living. Atwood's voice remains sharply relevant because it forces us to ask—not what morality looks like in freedom—but what morality becomes when survival is the only form of resistance left.

This research therefore reinforces that moral understanding must expand beyond justice and rule-based logic to include care, context, and the right to continue living. Atwood's voice remains sharply relevant because it forces us to ask—not what morality looks like in freedom—but what morality becomes when survival is the only form of resistance left.

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