

The Handmaid's Tale

Margaret Atwood

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Born 1939 in Canada

Atwood is one of the most recognised authors in recent history

Atwood's fiction is often symbolic.

One of her rules was that she *couldn't actually put anything into the novel that human beings hadn't actually done*

The novel is presented in the first-person narrative as told by Handmaid Offred.

Background to writing the novel

Atwood had studied the American Puritans and the theocratic society they founded in America. She was also alarmed by frequent statements made by US religious leaders. Then there was a variety of events from around the world, such as the rising fanaticism of the Iranian monotheocracy.

There were falling birth rates due to infertility, divorce, contraception, abortion, sterilisation and women's freedom to choose.

Pornography was increasingly available, women continue/d to be subjected to sexual harassment and discrimination.

History proves that what we have been in the past we could be again.

Speculative Fiction

Atwood was concerned about 1980's debates about feminist attitudes, specifically toward sexuality and pornography. Feminists protesting against the demeaning nature of pornography were unnerved by religious groups seeking to ban pornography in order to "protect women." This idea of religious zealots restricting women's freedom for "protective" reasons is quite prominent in Atwood's work.

Atwood calls the novel speculative fiction - what could occur if society closes its eyes to what is going on in the world. If people are not paying attention, they may experience loss of freedoms. In the worst case scenario, they become slaves.

Dystopian Literature

Dystopian literature

presents fictional worlds or societies that are depicted by authorities as utopias, but under closer scrutiny illustrate terrifying and restrictive regimes in which individual freedoms are often suppressed for the greater 'good'.

- Oppression
- Violence
- disease/pollution
- Human misery

Gilead depicts a society in which religious extremists have taken over and reversed the progress of the sexual revolution.

Recent examples

- Anti-feminism (Offred's mother burnt porn magazines)
- Jewish procreation
- Women in Muslim countries
- Yazidi women and slavery by ISIS
- Media and control
- Fake News
- Russia/North Korea cyberterrorism
- Language as control
- September 11th - civil liberties have shrunk with increased homeland security

Fear

Totalitarianism is a form of government in which there are no rival parties permitted. Total submission to the state is required.

Atwood illustrates how fear guarantees collusion - the individual is afraid to speak up or to rebel.

Through fear, a totalitarian regime is able to police itself. Its members - even the extremely oppressed - police each other as agents of the state. Friendship, and even family, becomes obsolete as no one can be trusted.

Control

Gilead, as in other dystopian fiction, is under the total control of the government.

Control is exerted through:

- Language - names, titles, neologisms (new words), religious greetings
- Clothing
- Prohibition of reading or any form of free communication
- State-controlled media
- Fear of violence - hanging on the wall, being sent to the colonies, salvagings
- Fear of The Eyes - “Big Brother” is always watching (as in Orwell’s 1984)
- Individual identities have been stripped away

Control Through Language

- Enforced religious sayings...
- Neologisms (new words) - Compubite...
- Titles...see next slide

Oppression

- Social hierarchies

Women - Wives, Aunts, Handmaids, Econowives, Marthas, Unwomen

Men - Commanders of the Faithful, Eyes, Angels, Guardians, Gender Traitors (m/f)

Un-Persons

- Handmaids' only purpose is to reproduce, they are mere breeders. Offred knows she is a natural resource
- Inability to retaliate - the women fear the government's punishment and are jealous of each other. They fail to unite and overcome the republic

Disease and Pollution

- The lands have been polluted by radioactive and toxic waste from the previous US society, causing illness and infertility.. Women are sent to the colonies as punishment
- Sexually transmitted diseases have caused infertility
- Unwomen - women who are unable to conceive
- Unbabies - with birth defects “the chances are one in four”. The government euthanises and takes them away
- The Solution - Handmaids are considered the solution as they will repopulate Gilead.

Violence

- Salvagings - public hangings (priests, doctors, gender traitors). They are “like scarecrows...since they are meant to scare.”
- Injury to hands and feet “They don’t care what they do to your feet or your hands, even if it was permanent...for our purposes they are not essential”
- Particutions - Participatory Executions. Punishment for rape - a man being torn to bits by a mob of women.

Human Misery

- Lack of fulfillment - women cannot have jobs, own property, vote, etc
- Loneliness and lack of human relationships - families are separated (Offred from Luke and their daughter).
- Husband and wife relationships are difficult to maintain (the Commander and Serena Joy)
- Isolation and fear

Symbolism

- Costumes (status and to hide individuality). Compare Handmaids' clothing to nuns or women in Islam
- Eyes (the symbol of police 'The Eyes of God' - are always watching. 'Under His Eye", as in George Orwell's 1984, Big Brother is watching
- Red (fertility, sin, violence)
- Mirrors (a source of identity but are removed for safety)
- Flowers (fertility and beauty. The tulip and the handmaid = colour, death ad function)
- Cambridge Massachusetts (settled by the Puritans)
- Harvard University (the centre of US knowledge now used for torture)
- Scrabble game (control over language and words)

Allusion

Allusions in the text add layers of meaning to the narrative by evoking the associations that go with the original

- suggest the way the mind works, with sights and events triggering memories of literature, art, pop culture, etc (Red Riding Hood, Tennyson, Tarzan, Weight Watchers, magazine titles)
- Historical - Beethoven, Nazis, Queen Victoria. The Red Centre similar to a concentration camp.
- show how literate Offred is – emphasising how much she must suffer from being deprived of books
- Biblical texts are distorted and corrupted by the Gilead government
- Biblical names - Jezebels, Marthas, Angels, Milk and Honey, All Flesh, Loaves and Fishes (shops), Behemouth, Whirlwind, Chariot (cars)
- Rachel and Leah Genesis 29:31 - 30:24

Feminism in The Handmaid's Tale

'You can't work here any more, it's the law' - Women are dismissed from their jobs when the regime takes over. Women are no longer allowed bank accounts, or to hold property - it has to be handed over to the control of a male relative. Offred is aware how this affects her relationship with Luke: 'We are not each other's, any more. Instead, I am his.'

Offred recalls her mother, an ardent feminist, who took part in the feminist marches against pornography and in favour of abortion. The attitudes of these earlier feminists are explored by Atwood through Offred's recollections of her mother, and through the Aunts' showing documentaries (see chapter 20) of those they call Unwomen. The fact that these 'Unwomen' were demonstrating against violent sexual attacks on women and calling for greater safety on the streets, makes Offred - and us - aware of the dilemma that enjoying sexual and moral freedom may come at a price.

Atwood may well be asking us to consider whether such aggressive feminism may contribute to an equally aggressive male reaction such as we see in Gilead.

Feminism and Language

Even before Gilead came into being, language had for centuries been dominated by male-oriented choices (for example, 'man' and 'he' being used for people in general).

Atwood shows the power of language and of being aware of subtleties of meaning (of which Atwood makes us particularly aware through her use of puns.) During her games of Scrabble with the Commander, Offred tastes words as a sensuous experience (chapter 23), and when she writes out, 'Nolite te bastardes carborundum' (chapter 29), she becomes very conscious of the power of writing - an activity usually forbidden to her:

'The pen between my fingers is sensuous, alive almost, I can feel its power, the power of the words it contains. Pen Is Envy...'

Re-working Freud's idea that women feel 'penis envy', Atwood sees the ability to communicate through language as the really desirable power.

Women in Society

The former society included rape and pornography. On the other hand, women had some degree of control over their fertility via contraception and abortion; they were free to enjoy their sexuality, and their lives in general.

In Gilead, women are physically safe but no longer have freedom to enjoy their sexuality or control their own fertility. They are wombs on legs. Their entire lives are controlled and they are in constant fear of betraying themselves.

Aunt Lydia says, “There is more than one kind of freedom...Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don’t underrate it.”

- Explain how Atwood uses the development of literary elements, such as point of view, character, and setting, to propel the plot and reveal its themes
- Analyze the social stratification of women, explaining specifically the roles, duties, and significance of each of the various "types" of women
- Evaluate the impact of historic feminism on the novel
- Examine Atwood's use of ambiguity, particularly as it relates to language, the narrator's identity, and the narrator's acceptance of her role in the Gilead regime.