

Margaret atwood and dystopian novels: the handmaid's tale

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



Introduction

What does the future look like? A question almost everyone has already asked themselves; well, 3 adjectives can define what humans already know: unpredictable, intimidating and frightening. The reason? Because it is presented as something farfetched in novels and movies making it appear as unadaptable. The only glimpse of future an individual may be laid out to are those through literature or cinema, most often in the form of dystopia. Thus, making it reasonable for humans to be scared. Dystopias can be identified as “ a story about survival, their primary theme is oppression and rebellion” (Utopia & Dystopia, 2018). There are multiple elements that make up this genre, of which there is a lay out of a false utopia, a major event, a sort of totalitarian regime, a resistance, a result, and most often a futuristic setting with restricting technological regulations (Novel Publicity, 2016).

It has also well known that the author’s environment plays a decisive role in the dystopian depiction, whereas vivid imagery is used to emphasize the oppressing struggle experienced by the characters in the novel. The controversies occurring in the dystopian are often contemporary features from reality exaggerated and applied to a modernized and totalitarianism regime. It can be said that “ Dystopias take place in the future, but they are about today and sometimes about yesterday. ” (Utopia & Dystopia, 2018)

The dystopian genre began with the publication of “ We” by Yevgeny Zamyatin in 1924, subsequently many more renowned novels of this type followed, including: 1984, Brave New World, Fahrenheit 451, The Giver, The Handmaid’s Tale, Oryx & Crake, only to name a few.

The last two were written by Margaret Atwood, a well-regarded author with an array of remarkable and acclaimed novels, in which only a couple fell right into the Dystopian category. Through time, she has acquired a title as “the prophet of dystopia” due to her significant contribution to the genre with two noteworthy and influential novels (Mead, 2017). Margaret Atwood, a famous Canadian novelist herself, born on November 18, 1939, played a key role in literature by publishing sixteen novels, ten non-fiction novels, seventeen books of poetry, eight collections of short fiction, eight children’s book, and one graphic novel (Dystopian Prophet, 2017). Particularly within her sixteen novels stand two honorable dystopias, *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Oryx & Crake*, those analyzed throughout the essay. The first novel, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, published in 1985, takes place in a land known as New England where a totalitarian Christian regime dominates the soul of society. The novel follows the steps of the main character, Offred, through her life as a Handmaid, a woman under the control of the commander whose objective is to bear a child. A common way of interpreting this novel is that of a double narrative, meaning, that the readers look at Offred’s tale and the Handmaids tale as two different stories, despite it being the same individual.

Accordingly, the series of events within the novel can be divided into two parts, the night and the other diversified events during the day.

Subsequently, the night appears to be the story of Offred, meanwhile the other events, including duties, shopping, sexual obligations and other are the actions most likely taken by all the Handmaids in the Republic of Gilead. The author makes careful usage of different literary devices such as tone and

tense with respect to Offred's position, either as herself or as the Handmaid. Thus, giving a reason for the multiple changes in tense, from past to present, leading up to the life she currently lives. The second novel, *Oryx & Crake*, originally published in 2003, is a type of adventure romance as it addresses aspects beyond our understanding with respect to the main characters' emotional desires. Briefly, the plot covers the life of the main character, Snowman, living in a post-apocalyptic environment with genetically modified organisms called Crackers. However, this situation did not come out of thin air, hence, part of the novel covers the events that led up to this situation. This part of the novel is generally depicted as flashbacks whereas the reader is informed about Snowman's previous life; that being a very modernized and scientifically progressed society when Snowman was a child by the name of Jimmy. However, why *Oryx & Crake*? Firstly, Crake is one of Jimmy's old friends, a very intelligent high school student who soon became a mad-scientist. In the meantime, Oryx is the woman Jimmy fell in love with despite her objectionable past activity in pornography and her relation with Crake. (Dystopian Prophet, 2017)

Both these books have covered very different aspects of imagination and ultimately convey distinct messages. Reasonably, they were written almost 20 years apart, hence many things have changed in Atwood's life. Along with that, the environment she lived in has changed drastically, thus significantly impacting her perspective about society and people. Consequently, what she dreads about life has changed, allowing for contrasting ideas about a societal decline in the future. (Flack, 2010) To identify how things have changed for

Atwood through the years, one must have a bit a context regarding Atwood's life as an author. She was born Ottawa, Ontario Canada, being raised in middle class family she realized she wanted to write professionally when she was 16. She later studied in the University of Toronto and ended up living there for a large part of her life. Despite having moved to West Berlin for a brief period in her mid-40s. In this manner, she was living in Berlin upon writing *The Handmaid's Tale* however she moved back to Toronto soon after, and was living there for already quite some time when writing *Oryx & Crake* (Biography, n. d.) Thus, making it reasonable to assume that her lifestyle endured radical changes in 18 years, likely altering changing Atwood's perception about the future as well.

The Handmaid's Tale

1985, the year Margaret Atwood published her well acclaimed novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. (Dystopian Prophet, 2017) This debuted her fame as world-class novelist, with a disturbing yet alarmingly-near dystopian story. It gathered a startling amount of attention, sparked many concerns about how accurate it was and as a result people started to raise their voices claiming that's Atwood predictions were not so fictional after all. Which explains why the Guardian magazine commented on *The Handmaid's Tale* saying, " It has been banned from schools, made into a film and an opera, and the title has become a shorthand for repressive regimes against woman" (Guardian, 2012)

Upon writing this novel in her mid-40s, Margaret Atwood was living in West Berlin, a place enduring political adversity and division with East Berlin. Back

in the 80s, West-Berlin was encircled by the Iron Curtain, at this point the Soviet Union remained firm and was not going to crumble for another 5 years. The presence of an enemy so close made it impossible to avoid the hostility occurring behind the wall. The tensions present at every street corner became inevitable, and Margaret Atwood particularly said, " I experienced the wariness, the feeling of being spied on, the silences, the changes of subject the oblique ways in which people might convey information, and these had an influence in what I was writing. " (Atwood, Guardian, 2012) Since Berlin was at unrest during this period, the way people acted changed drastically and abnormality filled the air. However, Atwood's novel does not derive from specific issues taking place in West Berlin, but about undesirable trends, tendencies and the inclination of society throughout the globe.

The 80s was a period of industrialization and high human population growth rate with many inequalities between classes, religions, gender and race. This speculative novel took contemporary issues and exaggerated them to give a frightening yet plausible glimpse of the future. (Liminal Pages, 2016) The author does this perfectly with the story of Offred, a Handmaid in the Republic of Gilead, a totalitarian regime where women have been stripped of their natural rights and are used in service of the regime. In an age of declining birth rate, women are valued by their fertility as they are solely tasked to bear a child. That, and only that. Under the control of the Commander and his Wife, Offred is confined to very strict rules with very little action. The Handmaid's lives are mundane, and their only hope is to

become pregnant from the Commander, whom they only see once a month to conduct their sexual duties. The Handmaid women have been degraded to one thing: a child bearer. Offred may not speak as she will and can only leave the house once a month to carry out daily food errands.

The food stores are now characterized by pictures not words, as women are not allowed to read. Things have changed drastically and Offred remembers of her past when she had husband, a daughter, her own money and most importantly access to knowledge. But that is the past, and it is all far gone now. The novel undoubtedly characterizes as a dystopia because of the decline of society Atwood presents. The undesirable theocratic and totalitarian regime founded on strict Puritan principles and the disempowerment of women in *The Handmaid's Tale* is the glimpse Margaret Atwood gives the reader about the future. (Guardian, 2012) Atwood exploited current vulnerabilities within the government and societal progression to show how such a power could undertake society. Many themes and aspects singled out within the novel turn out to be extrapolated contemporary issues Atwood experienced in the 80s. She was envisioning dreadful endings to some of society's weaknesses and how conditions would deteriorate through time. (LitCharts, *The Handmaid's Tale*) The reader learns that the Republic of Gilead was founded by revolutionaries after the fall of Congress from terrorist organizations. Suddenly after, women are stripped of their fundamental rights as they are getting fired from their jobs, they're bank accounts are getting drained, leaving them desperate and meaningless.

At first, Offred's husband, along to other men, was not so furious about what had just happened, in fact, he felt empowered and unlike before, she was his. The message by the author here is clear, it emphasizes that even good men may carry misogynistic attitudes. Offred showed this by saying, " He doesn't mind this, I thought. He doesn't mind it at all. Maybe he even likes it. We are not each other's anymore. Instead, I am his. " (The Handmaid's Tale, Ch 28) Margaret Atwood as a feminist herself, points out the fact that most men are still corrupt with a mindset of superiority, regardless of how they appear. This ultimately brings the reader to theme of gender inequality portrayed in the book, it is noticeable in the Republic of Gilead where women are stripped of almost all their rights regardless of the various positions they may hold. Whether it is a Wife, Martha, Aunt, EconoWife, or a Handmaid, they hold little authority and are in subjugation to men. There is also a visible critique made by the author about sexuality, as in the novel women are valued by their ovaries and conduct sexual duties in hope to get pregnant. The concept of sexual subjugation of women in the form of Ceremonies shows that the author believing that women are treated unfairly and sometimes subject to sexual activities against their will. Indeed, Atwood likely believes that woman may sometimes feel used, which is exactly what she depicts through the Handmaids. The feminist appeal in the novel is visible through the re-incarnation of women carrying out tasks in favor of men, not only sexual but in multiple other manners as well. They would perform exhausting tasks such as: cleaning, cooking, running errands, chores, and bear children; while on the other hand, men either serve as Guard of the Republic or Commanders of houses. Evidently this is a

reinforcement of outdated stereotypes regarding genders, where Atwood predicts that society will deteriorate from nearly gender-equal in the late 20th century to how it was back in the middle ages. Another lively theme expressed in *The Handmaid's Tale* is the concept of the Eye. "Quote" (*Handmaid's Tale*, Ch). The Eyes can be interpreted as the under covered secret police in Republic of Gilead, it is unknown of whom they really, what they do and who works for them.

Consequently, it creates a feeling of paranoia and terror. The risk of treachery and betrayal filling the air made everyone extreme careful about their approaches and whom they talked to. Offred along to the many others in the rebellious organizations needed to be wary for their own safety; they were being listened to all the time. Everyone could be an Eye, which made the Handmaid's live quietly and suspicious of each other. Atwood likely added this concept in her novel because of the lack of privacy she might have experienced in the late 20th century. With the phenomenal progress in technology (surveillance cameras, auditory microphones, blood and fingerprint recognition, etc.), the growth of governmental undercover police associations (such as CIA, FBI, NSA, Mossad etc.), and the disclosure of personal information to the public, Atwood started to experience an absence of privacy and the perception of being surveilled continually.

Additionally, upon writing *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood was living in West Berlin and had visited Eastern countries several times, she then claimed that when crossing the Iron Curtain, she felt a sense of being listened to and that her every move was being monitored. (Guardian, 2012)

Finally, the many objections she felt against society's trends and progress impacted the entirety of the novel; seemingly many themes derive from what the author saw as obstacles to society.