

Discuss this  
interpretation of the  
essay



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“ ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’ by Margaret Atwood is a narrative that challenges the absolute authority of Gilead, highlighting the significance of storytelling as an act of resistance against oppression, thereby making a particular kind of individual political statement.” (7) The narrative provides an insight of barbarical chauvinism in an injustice system of oppression towards women. It shows great understanding of conveying human experience and social justice through the art of literature. The story foretells of how women in the Republic of Gilead have been somewhat imprisoned and controlled by authority and power. There is no such space of freedom in this country for women. The first person narration communicates significant emotion towards the law and the lives lived by these beleaguered women. This emphasizes on the readers reaction and understanding the author’s intention more vividly.

Highlighted themes, such as “ control” and “ oppression” (5), create a perception of a ‘ complex narrative of human struggles’ (6). However without any historical context relevant this would simply be a story of entertainment and nothing more. Given the historical circumstances that occurred causing the formation of ‘ The Handmaid’s Tale’, we can see the depths of which Atwood creates to emphasize aspects of colonization. For instance the historical notes suggest that Offred’s story takes place in Maine (pg. 374).” Atwood chose Massachusetts as the setting to signify the similarities between the society of Gilead and the Puritans that settled in the colonial period. The Puritans, like the Gileadians, were Christian fundamentalist who believed in control, obedience, and punishment” (4). The historical notes in the appendix create different perspectives of contradiction.

Atwood invents a character, Professor Pieixoto, who believes that history is all about verification, facts, data, and not figures. However, Atwood's perspective contradicts her own invention and suggests that history is all about the figures in order to understand the past. Pieixoto's single-mindedness disallows him from perceiving Atwood's perspective, ignoring human emotions involved and only seeks the facts. Pieixoto, who approaches *The Handmaid's Tale* as a historical document, is almost exclusively concerned with verification; whereas most readers, who perceive *The Handmaid's Tale* as a fictional novel, are not considered with verification, but instead are interested in Offred's character and the emotional impact of reading the story. Offred's statement, "after all you've been through, you deserve whatever I have left, which is not much but includes the truth" (pg. 334), admits that not Offred's entire story is fact. However, she contends that it does impart the truth because of the understanding that readers can gain from "all they've been through". By acknowledging "all the reader has been through," the quotation highlights the idea that there is an emotional connection between the protagonist and the reader.

Atwood argues that an "emotional" reading actually results in a clearer understanding than a purely objective reading by contrasting the readers' understanding of Offred's story with Pieixoto's misinterpretations." (3)" Pieixoto is not really interested in who Offred is; he only hopes that she will impart information about the Gileadean regime. Pieixoto complains that Offred did not give more details into government and military activities: "she could have told us much about the workings of the Gileadean Empire, had she had the instincts of a reporter or a spy" (pg. 386). The historians are

frustrated that Offred's story cannot be concretely verified and that Offred did not supply tangible evidence, such as a printout from the Commander's computer: " what would we not give, now, for even twenty pages or so of print-out from Waterford's private computer" (pg. 386). He does not consider her important as an individual: " our author, then, was one of many, and must be seen within the broad outlines of the moment in history of which she was a part" (pg. 380).

He only cares about verifiable facts and says that he " hesitates to use the word document" to refer to Offred's story because it is difficult to authenticate (pg. 373). He belittles Offred for describing her personal story instead of imparting conclusive facts, and sarcastically states that " we must be grateful for any crumbs the Goddess of History has deigned to vouchsafe us"(pg. 386)." (2)" The Handmaid's Tale, was written in 1986 during the rise of the opposition to the feminist movement." (8) Atwood says " I'm an artist ...

and in any monolithic regime I would be shot. They always do that to artists. Why? Because the artists are messy. They don't fit. They make squawking noises. They protest. They insist on some kind of standard of humanity which any such regime is going to violate. They will violate it saying that it's for the good of all, or the good of the many, or the better this or better that.

And the artists will always protest and they'll always get shot. Or go into exile." " The writer ... retains three attributes that power-mad regimes cannot tolerate: a human imagination, in the many forms it may take, the power to communicate, and hope." This statement provides a perspective on

first-person narration of Offred. The intention of *Handmaid's Tale* was presumably to highlight the women's freedom being circumscribed and the only method of which Offred was able to express her story was by escaping Gilead and constructs a transcript of recordings.

This emphasizes on the regime demanding total silence which relates to the highlighted themes of control and oppression. Therefore, Atwood was using the art of literature by means of accentuating the demand of total silence and how Offred's story cannot be foretold within the context of Gilead (7).

"[Offred] was boxed in. How do you tell a narrative from the point of view of that person? The more limited -and boxed in you are, the more important details become ... Details, episodes separate themselves from the flow of time in which they're embedded." - Atwood.

The delusion of this narrative being told by simple means of expressing the struggle of women through historical fiction must be understood carefully. Historical context must be considered to understand the true purpose of the author for creating an austere regime of callousness. In 1986, the year which Atwood wrote ' *The Handmaid's Tale*', " there was a rise of opposition to the feminist movement". (8) The battle established of feminist movement and opposition inspired her to write this book. ' *The Handmaid's Tale*' is a warning of what can occur if the feminist movement were to fail. " Atwood envisions a society of extreme changes in governmental, social, and mental oppression to make her point." (8)By reading ' *The Handmaid's Tale*' the reader can tell how the story transitions abruptly from one scene to another and from the present to the past, hence Offred's present occurrence and her past affiliations are gradually unveiled. (7) By reading we can attach the

present and fragments of the past from flashbacks that occur throughout the novel.

The first flashback occurs in Chapter 3 and there are brief references to Luke in Chapters 2 and 5. However, it is in the 'Night' sections that the flashback technique is most obvious and most sustained, for this is Offred's 'time out' when she is free to wander back into her remembered past. It is here that we gain a sense of Offred as a powerful personal presence with a history. The readers come to understand Offred's condition of double vision, for she continually sees and judges the present through her memories of the past. As she says, 'You'll have to forgive me. I'm a refugee from the past, and like other refugees I go over the customs and habits of being I've left or been forced to leave behind me' (Chapter 35). The narrative represents the complex ways that memory works, where the present moment is never self-contained but pervaded by traces of other times and events which are supported with many occurrences such as her feminist mother (chapter 7 and 39), Moira story as a rebel (chapter 38), and Serena Joy (chapter 3 and 8). The complexity of transitions that befalls between the past and present creates a profound and unique structuring of the novel.

The shift to historical notes works "to convince us of the immediacy of Offred's narrative. It is very likely that we will reject the professor's dismissal of Offred as a figure belonging to the vanished past, and given his own sexist attitudes, we might assume that Offred's story about patriarchal attitudes does not belong exclusively to the past but threatens the future as well." (7)" In the "Historical Notes," Atwood illustrates the downfall of a purely objective perspective and the importance of subjectivity and feelings.

Atwood argues that stories are important because they evoke an emotional response that gives us more insight into the complexity of events. We think we can distance ourselves from history because it is in the past, but by bringing events of the past into the future, Atwood shows the importance of recognizing what humans are capable of and judging past and present events from a human perspective. She also demonstrates how stories can be powerful and constructive modes of communicating human history.” (1)