

# The handmaids tale essay



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### The Handmaid's Tale Fact or Fiction

The Handmaid's Tale is a dystopian novel in which Atwood creates a world which seems absurd and near impossible. Women being kept in slavery only to create babies, cult like religious control over the population, and the deportation of an entire race, these things all seem like fiction. However Atwood's novel is closer to fact than fiction; all the events which take place in the story have a base in the real world as well as a historical precedent. Atwood establishes the world of Gilead on historical events as well as the social and political trends which were taking place during her life time in the 1980's. Atwood shows her audience through political and historical reference that Gilead was and is closer than most people realize.

Atwood closely scrutinizes Colonial America, back in the 1700's it was a society founded on religion and ran as a theocratic order. Puritans who had just fled Europe for religious freedom settled in the Americas where they could run their society in the way they saw fit. Especially in New England, religious freedom was not allowed, and people were punished by the courts for failing to uphold the common religious requirements. Those who were not of a specific type of Christianity were considered heathens. Men who controlled the society enforced rules on others based on their interpretations of the bible. They believed that " as God's elect, had the duty to direct national affairs according to God's will as revealed in the Bible." (3) Later on puritanical control faded but in the South there was the enslavement and resulting racism toward blacks. Again so called male leaders of society

promote injustice and oppression in order to benefit themselves. Atwood also uses her novel to comment briefly on the issues of race, those not of a specific type of Christianity or skin color were sent away to the colonies, or killed. The “ children of Ham”, which in the bible represent the descendants of the black race, are relocated outside of Gilead. Even the location in which she places Gilead is reminiscent of early American for Boston, Massachusetts was a puritan center. The world of Gilead which Atwood is a society controlled by power hungry men who use religion as a means of control.

Atwood also references the oppression of Jew's during the holocaust in her novel. Under Hitler's rule 6 million Jews were killed, and many more sent to concentration camps where they were mistreated by their captors. In The Handmaid's Tale Jews were sent to live outside of Gilead. The Gilead colonies were themselves are similar to the concentration camps of WWII, where those who either chose to or were forced to live were forced to live under horrible conditions. Homosexuals were also treated as subhuman in the two societies. In the fictional Republic of Gilead, homosexuals were often killed and hung on the Wall. In WWII, Hitler ordered all homosexuals to be killed. By placing the references in her book Atwood is showing us that these extreme examples of oppression are all too common. It is warning to the reader of what can be and is possible.

The Handmaid's Tale was written right in the middle of the Reagan era and his influence on America can be seen in the novel as it is alluded to by Atwood. When Reagan took office in 1981 he began to head the country in a more conservative direction. (1) Reagan wanted families to return to their traditional roles, he was not afraid to preach his religious beliefs to

Americans, " The time has come for this Congress to give a majority of American families what they want for their children — the firm assurance that children can hold voluntary prayers in their schools just as the Congress, itself, begins each of its daily sessions with an opening prayer." (5) Reagan was backed by the religious right, who wanted to see change after the morally " loose" times in the 60's and 70's. These members of society wanted a traditional faith based society such as in the early puritanical days of American history. Conservatives in the Republican party even went so far as to lobby against legislation which would great equality among the sexes. In 1980 the Equal Rights Amendment failed to be ratified because of opposition and it lost support from the Republican party.(4) Reagan believed that religion and morals should be the foundation for a great nation. In Gideon the commanders believe the religion can be used to suppress women and build a better society under their control.

Also taking place during this time was the united states's on going involvement in the middle east. At this time the world was beginning to see the conditions present in many of those countries such as Afghanistan, Iran, and Saudi Arabia

. The treatment of women in these countries were finally being noticed by women worldwide." In September, 1996, a court in Pakistan issued a decision that a woman does not have the right to marry the man of her choice, and that her guardian must approve her marriage." In Saudi Arabia women aren't allowed to drive cars much less participate in government. In these countries religion is again used as means of oppression, this can be seen in the words of one Religius cleric, " Attacking men's guardianship of <https://assignbuster.com/the-handmaids-tale-essay-essay-samples/>

women is an objection to God and an attack on His Book and on His prudent law. This is great infidelity (Kufr akbar) by the consensus of Islam's ' ulama ... It is absolutely necessary that the newspaper be publically punished by stopping its publication. The woman who wrote and the editor-in-chief must be tried and disciplined in a deterring manner.”(6) Atwood was aware of the thing women in some of the countries have to face. In many of the countries women are only valued as child bearers. In the society of Gilead, the most highly valued aspect of life is giving birth to a healthy child without deformities. In a conversation Offred overhears the reader is made more aware of the situation these women were in, “ Go to the colonies, Rita said. They have the choice. With the unwomen , and starve to death and Lord know what all? Said Cora.”(pg13) Women who could not bear children were not even considered women and were sent away to live in horrible conditions.

The situations which take place in the book parallel this period of time uncannily. The assassination attempt on Reagan and the assassination of all the government in the book are meant to show us how close we really are to a Gilead like society and how easy is for things to drastically change. Reagan wanted prayer brought back into the schools because he felt it would strength the nation under god, “ Prayer has sustained our people in crisis, strengthened us in times of challenge, and guided us through our daily lives since the first settlers came to this continent. Our forbearers came not for gold, but mainly in search of God and the freedom to worship in their own way.”(5) The handmaids had mandatory prayers as well as prayvaganzas, ceremonies in which the women got married. Religion was forced upon these

women and used to keep them submissive. Atwood wants all to see what extreme conservative beliefs could create if nothing is done to promote equality.

Through analysis of the book and the time in which it was written as well as the present society, the negative social trends upon which Atwood comments become apparent. Atwood wrote in this way to make it plain to her audience that change needs to be made. The world is not as far from Gilead as many would want to believe, hence it is left up to the reader to decide what role he or she has in making sure these conditions never reach that state and what's more that they are reversed.

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