

# [Social commentary in margaret atwood’s the handmaid’s tale](https://assignbuster.com/social-commentary-in-margaret-atwoods-the-handmaids-tale/)

This novel is an account of the near future, a dystopia, wherepollution and radiation has rendered countless women sterile, and the birthrates of North America are dangerously declining. A puritan theocracy nowcontrols the former United States called the Republic of Gilead andHandmaids are recruited to repopulate the state. This novel containsAtwood’s strong sense of social awareness, as seen in the use of satire tocomment on different social conditions in the novel. The Handmaid’sTale is a warning to young women of the ‘ post-feminist’ 1980s and after, who began taking for granted the rights that had been secured for womenby the women before them. The environmental danger of pollution and radiation run off from powerplants is commented on in the novel. Atwood is voicing her concernsabout the destruction of the environment here, and warns us of thepossibilities if the destruction continues in our world. Her view is extremeof course, made to shock people into thinking about the potentialdanger. In the novel, pollution and radiation had overwhelmed thepopulation causing sterility in both men and women. Babies were often borndeformed, (these were called ‘ Unbabies’) or died during pregnancy orshortly after birth. At one point in the novel, a funeral is described bythe main character Offred, she said “ the first one is bereaved, themother; she carries a small black jar. From the size of the jar you cantell how old it was when it foundered, inside her, flowed to its death. Two or three months, too early to tell whether or not it was an Unbaby”(Atwood, 55). The infertile women, rebels and feminists were sent tothe ‘ colonies’ to clean toxic waste, where of course they die of eitherdisease or radiation. Atwood incorporated the environmental disasterinto her novel as a warning, her point being that it could happen, andif it did, here is what might happen; mankind could go to an extreme, religious, totalitarian state: the Republic of Gilead. Gilead, the ultra religious military regime is a reaction to thedramatic drop in birth rate. In the novel, Aunt Lydia, one of the women incharge of the Red Centre where handmaids are trained described Gilead; she said “ the republic of Gilead knows no bounds. Gilead is withinyou.” (Atwood, 29). Offred, replied inwardly “ doctors lived here once, lawyers, university professors. There are no lawyers anymore, and theuniversity is closed” (Atwood, 29). Here, Offred’s comment says muchabout the social conditions in Gilead. Since the university is closed, secular learning is no longer allowed, the only studying is done on theBible, and not by women because they are forbidden to read and write. TheBible had a huge impact on Gilead’s policies. The idea of handmaidscame from the story of Jacob and Rachel. Jacob’s wife could notconceive, so Jacob and the servant had a child, which became Jacob andRachel’s. It is obvious that Gilead is a very repressive place. Later, inOffred’s taped recordings about Gilead she said “ it’s also a story I’mtelling, in my head, as I go along. Tell rather than write because I havenothing to write with and writing in any case is forbidden (Atwood 50). It is the Handmaids who must do the daily grocery shopping, and sincethey are not permitted to read, the store names are pictures, a lambchop for All Flesh, the butcher shop, for example. The domination ofwomen is astonishing in this state. It is almost insulting for thesewomen, who used to have jobs, their own money, and freedom to do anythingthey wanted to have to stoop to this level. These women remember what itused to be like, and they want it to be like that again, but are afraidto rebel because of the wall, and the salvagings. The wall is whereOffred and her companion Ofglen pass every day. It is where they hangthe enemies of the state. Any people who are suspected of betrayal arekilled. When a man is accused of rape, or a similar crime against women, they are sent into a circle of angry Handmaids, who are expected totear him apart. In the novel, during the salvaging Ofglen appears toreact extremely violently towards an accused man, she ran up to him andkicked him in the head until he was unconscious. She explained later toOffred that he was no rapist, only a member of the undergroundrebellion. She wanted to end his suffering. Due to the lack open rebellion, Offred’s society is faced with thecomplete loss of freedom. Women are now forbidden any kind ofcommunication. They have to lead a life of servitude and are stripped of allpersonal possessions, of their families, and finally their identities. Theyare all replaceable, categorized objects, Handmaids who are deemedinfertile are sent to the colonies to die. The women are also made to wearuniforms and are named to be defined in their relation to men, forexample Offred serves Fred, and his wife is known only as Wife. Theuniforms in Gilead categorize each group by colour, this serves to segregatethem, like the Jews during World War II. The Wives, who are the higheston the list, wear only light blue. The Handmaids must wear red and theMarthas wear brown. The men all wear similar military uniforms. TheHandmaid’s uniform is reminiscent of women in the Middle East, becausethey are made to hide the women’s bodies and prevent them from beingseen:” I get up out of the chair, advance my feet into the sunlight, in theirred shoes, flat-heeled to save the spine and not for dancing. The redgloves are lying on the bed. I pick them up, pull them onto my hands, finger by finger. Everything except the wings around my face is red: the colour of blood, which defines us. The skirt is ankle length, fulland gathered to a flat yoke that extends over the breasts, the sleevesare full. The white wings too are prescribed issue; they keep us fromseeing, but also from being seen. I never looked good in red, it’s notmy colour” (Atwood, 9). The bulky red dress is designed to hide the Handmaid’s bodies and thewings are made to keep the women from being seen. The women are taughtto bow their heads when they walk so that their faces can not be seen. This is a further example of the domination of women in this novel. Atwood’s point in demonstrating the oppression of women is not to beultra feminist or to put down men, but to show the dangers of such a regimeas Gilead, because it became such a patriarchal state, and in its wake, women were utterly repressed. It happened so fast, that women did nothave time to revolt, and after Gilead came to power, if women did speakup they would be sent to the colonies. Social commentary is rampant in this novel. Margaret Atwood purposelywrote this shocking and absurd tale to shock people into thinking aboutsuch problems as toxic waste, pollution and radiation. Not onlyenvironmental concerns were voiced in this novel, but social ills such asfemale repression and the dangers of a theocracy as well. Reading thisnovel was a wake up call, and I have since taken up recycling. Work CitedAtwood, Margaret. The Handmaid’s Tale. Seal Books: Canada, 1985