

Social commentary in margaret atwood's the handmaid's tale



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This novel is an account of the near future, a dystopia, where pollution and radiation has rendered countless women sterile, and the birth rates of North America are dangerously declining. A puritan theocracy now controls the former United States called the Republic of Gilead and Handmaids are recruited to repopulate the state. This novel contains Atwood's strong sense of social awareness, as seen in the use of satire to comment on different social conditions in the novel. *The Handmaid's Tale* 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 women by the women before them. The environmental danger of pollution and radiation run off from power plants is commented on in the novel. Atwood is voicing her concerns about the destruction of the environment here, and warns us of the possibilities if the destruction continues in our world. Her view is extreme of course, made to shock people into thinking about the potential danger. In the novel, pollution and radiation had overwhelmed the population causing sterility in both men and women. Babies were often born deformed, (these were called 'Unbabies') or died during pregnancy or shortly after birth. At one point in the novel, a funeral is described by the main character Offred, she said "the first one is bereaved, the mother; she carries a small black jar. From the size of the jar you can tell 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 to the 'colonies' to clean toxic waste, where of course they die of either disease or radiation. Atwood incorporated the environmental disaster into her novel as a warning, her point being that it could happen, and if it did, here is what might happen; mankind could go to an extreme, <https://assignbuster.com/social-commentary-in-margaret-atwoods-the-handmaids-tale/>

religious, totalitarian state: the Republic of Gilead. Gilead, the ultra religious military regime is a reaction to the dramatic drop in birth rate. In the novel, Aunt Lydia, one of the women in charge of the Red Centre where handmaids are trained described Gilead; she said “ the republic of Gilead knows no bounds. Gilead is within you.” (Atwood, 29). Offred, replied inwardly “ doctors lived here once, lawyers, university professors. There are no lawyers anymore, and the university is closed” (Atwood, 29). Here, Offred’s comment says much about the social conditions in Gilead. Since the university is closed, secular learning is no longer allowed, the only studying is done on the Bible, and not by women because they are forbidden to read and write. The Bible had a huge impact on Gilead’s policies. The idea of handmaids came from the story of Jacob and Rachel. Jacob’s wife could not conceive, so Jacob and the servant had a child, which became Jacob and Rachel’s. It is obvious that Gilead is a very repressive place. Later, in Offred’s taped recordings about Gilead she said “ it’s also a story I’m telling, in my head, as I go along. Tell rather than write because I have nothing to write with and writing in any case is forbidden (Atwood 50). It is the Handmaids who must do the daily grocery shopping, and since they are not permitted to read, the store names are pictures, a lamb chop for All Flesh, the butcher shop, for example. The domination of women is astonishing in this state. It is almost insulting for these women, who used to have jobs, their own money, and freedom to do anything they wanted to have to stoop to this level. These women remember what it used to be like, and they want it to be like that again, but are afraid to rebel because of the wall, and the salvagings. The wall is where Offred and her companion Ofglen pass every day. It is where they hang the enemies of the state. Any people who are suspected of betrayal are killed. When a man

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is accused of rape, or a similar crime against women, they are sent into a circle of angry Handmaids, who are expected to tear him apart. In the novel, during the salvaging of the fugitive, Offred appears to react extremely violently towards an accused man, she ran up to him and kicked him in the head until he was unconscious. She explained later to Offred that he was no rapist, only a member of the underground rebellion. She wanted to end his suffering. Due to the lack of open rebellion, Offred's society is faced with the complete loss of freedom. Women are now forbidden any kind of communication. They have to lead a life of servitude and are stripped of all personal possessions, of their families, and finally their identities. They are all replaceable, categorized objects, Handmaids who are deemed infertile are sent to the colonies to die. The women are also made to wear uniforms and are named to be defined in their relation to men, for example Offred serves Fred, and his wife is known only as Wife. The uniforms in Gilead categorize each group by colour, this serves to segregate them, like the Jews during World War II. The Wives, who are the highest on the list, wear only light blue. The Handmaids must wear red and the Marthas wear brown. The men all wear similar military uniforms. The Handmaid's uniform is reminiscent of women in the Middle East, because they are made to hide the women's bodies and prevent them from being seen: "I get up out of the chair, advance my feet into the sunlight, in their red shoes, flat-heeled to save the spine and not for dancing. The red gloves 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, full and gathered to a flat yoke that extends over the breasts, the sleeves are full. The white wings too are prescribed issue; they keep us from seeing, but also from being

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seen. I never looked good in red, it's not my colour" (Atwood, 9). The bulky red dress is designed to hide the Handmaid's bodies and the wings are made to keep the women from being seen. The women are taught to 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 be ultra feminist or to put down men, but to show the dangers of such a regime as Gilead, because it became such a patriarchal state, and in its wake, women were utterly repressed. It happened so fast, that women did not have time to revolt, and after Gilead came to power, if women did speak up they would be sent to the colonies. Social commentary is rampant in this novel. Margaret Atwood purposely wrote this shocking and absurd tale to shock people into thinking about such problems as toxic waste, pollution and radiation. Not only environmental concerns were voiced in this novel, but social ills such as female repression and the dangers of a theocracy as well. Reading this novel was a wake up call, and I have since taken up recycling. Work Cited Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. Seal Books: Canada, 1985