

Analysis of the main themes in the handmaid's tale by margaret atwood

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



A structure The Handmaids Tale is a dystopian novel written by Margaret Atwood. It is set in “near-future” New England where a group of religious extremist that call themselves the Republic of Gilead overthrow the United States Government. This novel is not only dystopian but it very much speculative fiction. Commanders and their wives use biblical references to support what they do. Dystopian’s are books set in the future. They aim to mimic the way the world is and thus make you think and try to change the way your world is. Or they are just romanticized books where the world went wrong but hey lets base this around romance.

In the previous world of dystopian futures in books you have 1984 which is told from the perspective of a man, but in The Handmaids Tale is told from a women; excluding the ending where a professor reads it to his class “The Majority of dystopias - Orwells included- have been written by men and the point of view have been male. When women have appeared in them they have been either sexless automation or rebels who’ve defined the sex rules of the regime”. Meaning they have either been the wife of the male protagonist or the mistress. In this text I will use Junes name “June” when talking about her as she present the past before Gilead. When she is referring to the now she will be “Offread” as she is a handmaid at the time. Though Offread will never be her real name in the events that take place in Gilead and her being a handmaid she will be Offread. June would never willingly be a handmaid; she never had a choice so I am using names to show this; but they are the same person. There are three main parts in this story. First we have the Pre-Gilead when June tells the reader about her life before being a handmaid and the events that led up to it happening. The

part where she was actually becoming a handmaid and being the handmaid. Lastly when the professor is reading the story out.

The main themes of *The Handmaids Tale* which I shall discuss are issues of gender and aspects of feminism because they are relevant to current social. In this book the 'Handmaids' are owned by the commanders. These women are forbidden to use their real names and once they are placed in a house they become the property of the Commander of their house; so the women become "Ofglen, Ofwarren, Offred" etc. They are no longer their own person and are owned by the commander. Women lose their jobs and their right to have their own money and property when the Republic of Gilead takes over. The first sign of this happening was when June went to her local convenience store to buy some cigarettes; this is when she noticed the woman who usually works there has been replaced by a younger man. When June asked about where she was the man replied saying she didn't work here in a rude manner. This was when she learned her card no longer worked but she knew that she should have money on it. She later learnt that women could no longer own money or property that they were only able to access their own funds through their husbands or a male next of kin 'we are no longer each other's, anymore instead I am his'. June shortly lost her job too when the director said to all the female employees 'you can't work here anymore it's the law' - the law was enforced by the religious extremists that took over; there were men with machine gun outside too to help aid in enforcing this law.

June's mother is a feminist; in chapter 28 she recalls a time when her mother that marches against pornography and burns it. She is also in favour of abortion; this is especially interesting because abortion was such a taboo subject as it still is today. The way June's mother and other women's attitudes are explored through is through recollections of the past documentaries of the feminists they call "unwomen" in chapter 20. These 'unwomen' were protesting violence against women, sexual attacks on women and were protesting for safety on the streets; bringing to light the similarities of today. Atwood also shows the negative impacts that some feminism can have on the world and people involved. June recalls a time when she was raised by a single mother because her mother did not want to be in a relationship with a man. Atwood in a way warns us against aggressive feminism; as this could pave away equally aggressive retaliation from men. She shows us a way this could be possible when she shares the world of Gilead with us. In chapter 37 the commander points out where they visit Jezebels which is a strip club, which points out one of the many times men have more right than women. The men can have the right to go the strip club even though it is biblically immoral and wrong in the Christian light for them to do so. The commander points out the women's old jobs "that one was a lawyer..." (in this bring up the what they wear in the strip club, talk about what everyone wears (ladies) then bring it to how wearing these clothes now some women are hurt etc. - cut this?)

In the world of Gilead, thanks to nuclear pollution (find stuff on this) fertility is at an alarmingly low rate. The babies that are born are at a higher risk of

birth defects than ever before because of the high exposure of radiation the mothers have. As a result the women who are able to have babies are considered valuable and if they aren't married or a number of other implementing issues they are forced to become handmaids. In America around about 1 in 6 women experience infertility (source) and the number of birth rates continue to lower each year. This also effects men in Gilead; some of the men are sterile though they'd never say so. This is very notable through the chapters of Offred. The handmaids have a certain amount of time to become pregnant or they are sent off, some women even killing themselves as they could not become pregnant. However, the reader comes to learn that the commander could be sterile. This becomes clearer as when Offred is having her check-up the doctor said he could help her become pregnant; that a lot of women do it showing that a lot of commanders could actually be sterile. It becomes clear when Serena asks Nick to get Offred pregnant and she then talks Offred when she admits that a lot of handmaids become pregnant through other men. All the blame of being unable to conceive are put on the women. In today's world women are made to feel awful if they are unable to conceive and made to feel as if something is wrong with them. With some women even being questioned of they choose to not have children.

The threat of terrorism is both relevant in the books as well as in the now. Through the sections of June in flashbacks we see the US congress fall down and put on hold because of terror threats. The government is the taken down and over by a group of religious extremists. You can see this in many events

in today's US history mainly in the 9/11 terror attack and how it changed everything for America. Being a quote "gender traitor" in the world of Gilead results in you being hung in a public hanging. There are a couple of female who are lesbian characters in this book; including Moria, June's best friend. Who just so happens to be the walking image of everything Gilead hates and aims to change. She dresses wrongly and loved the wrong people in the eyes of Gilead. Luckily, rather unluckily she is able to bear children so she becomes a handmaid because women who are able to have children will be too valuable to be expendable in their eyes. Another handmaid that is too lesbian is Offreads shopping partner Ofglen. When we first meet Ofglen she says "I was a gender traitor". We soon learn that Ofglen has an affair with a Martha and we learn that even if you are able to have children; even after you are "saved" and become a handmaid if you do wrong by the law you are expendable.

This theme of being in the LGBTQ+ community being against the law is still seen in around 72 countries with punishments of death and beating taking place if you are caught. Women are put into categories depending on what they contribute to society. The handmaids are to have children and wear red. In all cases, no matter the rank of the women. Women are to be covered at all times. And as much as possible. So that they don't "draw attention to the opposite sex" and also eye contact is strictly forbidden this is why the Handmaids are made to wear the "veil". Meanwhile, as the aunts are saying what is enforced is for their own protection and that they are so lucky. But they also say that women who are hurt by men or have abortions must take

full responsibility and are sometimes called sluts. Many people today say women should not wear certain clothes as it attracts men. For example girls can't wear shirts that show their shoulders or low cut shirts as it could distract boys. Another example of women needing to wear clothes to cover up; rather a lot of clothes is in some religions and countries there are dress codes to cover up. But some people who choose to wear hijabs; make it a personal choice as they believe that these things should be kept for their husband some even feel stronger by wearing these covers.