

# Finding the middle ground in order for society to advance in year of the flood

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## **Middle Ground**

Although humans often fantasize about a glorious and magical future, what if this same progress led to the destruction of society? In the novel *The Year of the Flood*, author Margaret Atwood illustrates the consequences of human greed by following the lives of two characters, Ren and Toby, in a dystopian society. This society is marked by separation, as the highly technological and pristine corporations stand in stark contrast to the earthly environment of the religious Gardeners' cult. Atwood sets her novel in a heavily polarized society in order to argue that society must find middle ground in order to truly progress.

Atwood depicts the corporations as overwhelmingly destructive and corrupt with power to critique the heavy human dependence on technology. When Ren returns to her home at the HelthWyzer Compound, she describes the house with “all that faux marble, and the reproduction antique furniture, and the carpets” (Atwood 209). In this highly technological corporation, the people's obsession with production has created a sense of artificiality; the ornate construction and decoration of the houses reflect a desire for modernization and sophistication, moving away from the disappearing natural world around them. Atwood critiques this materialistic fascination and the association of satisfaction with materialistic gain. Amidst this apparent technological progression, it is revealed that technology is used with corrupt measures. For example, Pilar, the respected medicinal expert in the Gardeners cult, warns Toby to “never take any pill made by a Corporation...They'll produce data and scientists; they'll produce doctors –

worthless, they've all been bought'" (Atwood 105). In her warning, Pilar addresses the poisonous pills that the HelthWyzer Compound have given people as a part of their experimentation, diminishing the citizens to guinea pigs that those in power can manipulate. This creates an ironic situation in which technological progression is accompanied by a simultaneous regression in the people's morality. Pilar notes that the corporations "produce" scientists and "produce" doctors, essentially dehumanizing the people and describing them as mechanical entities. In the corporations, doctors and scientists are no longer specialized experts in their fields but rather results of the society's production. The people here are molded by those in power to advance their technological goals, illustrating the precedence that technology now takes over human lives. In describing the corrupt corporations, Atwood warns against heavy reliance on technology and critiques the belief that technological progression reflects overall societal progression.

On the other hand, Atwood illustrates the regressive and almost primitive lifestyle of the Gardeners to satirize the effects of stubborn faith in the face of change. The Gardeners Christian cult foresees a waterless flood sent by God to wipe away the humans who have corrupted the Earth. Due to their fierce belief in purity, the Gardeners claim to reject much production of society, which has destroyed nature for materialistic gains. For example, when Ren finds a cell phone on the streets, the Gardeners immediately warn her that "' such a thing can hurt you! It can burn your brain! Don't even look at it: if you can see it, it can see you'" (Atwood 67). Although a cell phone

can indeed cause bodily harm in the long run, the Gardener's fierce rejection of this pivotal technological invention highlights how reason can be blinded by faith. While some technological inventions have little purpose other than for show, the cell phone has proven to be an important communicative invention. With a cell phone, the Gardeners' problems with tracking their people during trips would be solved, effectively getting rid of the cult's increasing anxiety as the members are separated. However, they remain strict in their belief that God made them to exist only in the natural world. At the same time, Toby reveals the Gardeners' hypocrisy upon learning that the top members the "Adams and Eves had a laptop [as]...wasn't such a device in direct contravention of Gardener principles?" (Atwood 188). The fact that the Gardeners have a laptop despite their disapproval of society's inventions shows even they concede that some forms of technology are essential. The Gardeners scramble to explain their ownership of the laptop by altering their faith to allow the use of technology for crucial, confidential information, highlighting that keeping a stubborn faith in an evolving society is hardly possible. Though the Gardeners have created an idealized society which strives to return to the natural world before human corruption, the clash of the cult's regressive nature against the society's technologically progressive environment reveals the necessity of faith to cope with change.

Atwood sets her novel in a dystopian society filled with heavily polarized groups to show that society must find middle ground in order to truly progress. Even Adam One acknowledges this when he says "' Too much God and you overdose. God needs to be filtered,'" arguing that a balance must

be found between religious faith and reason (Atwood 327). The Gardeners' regressive Christian faith leads them to shy away from the developing society around them, which ultimately hurts the members as they struggle to survive independent of most technological inventions. In contrast, the people working for the corporations are described to have fallen "from instinct into reason, and thus into technology... [and] into the anxious contemplation of the vanished past and the distant future" (Atwood 188). The acknowledgement that the past has disappeared and the future approaches essentially traps the people as they have little choice but continue moving forward. In this case, corporations cope with the evolving society by constantly inventing new material, which moves the society further into the destructive future. As Toby recounts from Adam One's words, people "could only plummet, learning more and more, but not getting any happier," illustrating the ironic situation where receiving more leads to a greater desire to receive and subsequently diminished happiness (Atwood 188). The fact that neither the Gardeners nor the corporate people survive the waterless flood in their entirety highlights that neither group has truly helped society progress enough to survive God's waterless flood. Both groups' failure to survive the purification of earth illustrates Atwood's argument that neither rejection of all advancements nor satisfaction only by advancements will lead to genuine societal progression.

The parallels that Atwood draws to contemporary society in *The Year of the Flood* serves as her warning that our society must find that middle ground before we follow the destructive path of her novel's dystopian society. Since

the Industrial Revolution, America has climbed quickly in terms of production and technological advancements. For example in the space race during the Cold War, America showcased its powerful ability to quickly and efficiently create different space machines, eventually rising above all other countries in production might with Russia. Additionally, although corruption of power is not new in American history such as with historical figures like Boss Tweed, corporate corruption continues to prevail today from prominent businesses to Congress and Wall Street. The unceasing technological inventions like Apple's new iPhones once a year mirror the many inventions of the HelthWyzer Compound in the novel. Although the inventions in America today serve crucial roles for the citizens, Atwood's corporations are shocking images of what America could become if technological value took precedence over human lives. On the other hand like the Gardeners in the novel, the Regressive Party in modern society is an extremely conservative party which strongly opposes progress or liberalism. Using the past as its example, the Regressive Party seeks to return American society to its past, centering on the Christian religion. This is reflected in Atwood's Gardeners who are strongly religious and seek to return their destroyed society to how it was before technological obsession. Despite the party's fierce belief in their policies, it has not taken a prominent position in America and has not gained the momentum to match the strength of their ideas. Although Atwood's society is an extreme version of contemporary American society, her message is a clear warning to modern society as to what consequences may result from rule of either extreme.

In her novel *The Year of the Flood*, Margaret Atwood creates a dystopian society characterized by heavily polarized groups to argue that society must strive to achieve middle ground in order to truly progress. Atwood creates overwhelmingly destructive and corrupt corporations to critique the heavy human dependence on technology and illustrates the regressive Gardeners as almost primitive to satirize the consequences of stubborn faith in a changing society. As neither the corporate people nor the Gardeners survive the God's waterless flood, Atwood addresses the failure of either group to truly help society in God's eyes. In comparing the polarized groups, Atwood warns against the dangers of society following the rule of either extreme. With the similarities between Atwood's society and contemporary society, Atwood extends her message to modern America. Essentially, Atwood's message in *The Year of the Flood* can be pessimistically interpreted to show that middle ground is unlikely to be achieved and society is destined for doom. Or, it can also be interpreted that although middle ground is hard to achieve, society can still progress when it strives to move away from being characterized by the two extremes.