

# Atwood's history: framing text and political context in the handmaid's tale



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The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood is an epistolary fiction whose 300 pages allow the reader to induce the structure of an entire apocalyptic society through the story of one character. The novel explores the author's speculation on how American society will evolve in the next century or two, creating a fictional historical account. The book concludes with a scene of a symposium of historians, set yet further in the future, at which the keynote speaker discusses a "soi-disant manuscript" of The Handmaid's Tale that has been discovered (Atwood 300). This 12-page address allows the author to instigate contemplation of how history as a whole should be documented and studied: are narratives or raw facts, subjectivity or objectivity, more effective for understanding the past? Atwood provokes consideration of the context and significance of the book, the message in the epilogical "Historical Notes" section, and the process of academic research in today's world.

It is important to note that The Handmaid's Tale is itself a symbol. This can be determined by recognizing that every element of the book signifies something else, many of these symbols highlighted and explained by Atwood. For example, to emphasize the importance of female fertility in the future society, Gilead, the narrator describes, "the large white canopy of Serena Joy's outsized colonial-style four-poster bed, suspended like a sagging cloud above us, a cloud sprigged with tiny drops of silver rain, which, if you looked at them closely, would turn about to be four-petaled flowers" (Atwood 93). Further vivid visual imagery leads to the narrator pondering that the canopy of the bed resembles a ship's sail. She continues, "Big-bellied sails, they used to say, in poems. Bellying. Propelled forward by

a swollen belly” (Atwood 93). The character’s train of thought leads the reader from an entrancingly detailed description of a scene to a conspicuously symbolic comment. *The Handmaid’s Tale* is sprinkled with such occurrences; the author makes it apparent throughout the book that almost everything has a second, more intricate meaning.

It can be considered, then, that the novel itself is a symbol. A suspicion grows in the reader that there is some sort of extra meaning in the sometimes bizarre epistolary form of the book, and this is all but conclusively confirmed in the final episode. Atwood doubtless disapproved of many facets of American society, her reproachfulness impelling her to pen a fiction of the dark future toward which she believed the country was heading. Stylized as a narrative, *The Handmaid’s Tale* was likely intended to serve the double purpose of being an engaging speculative piece and the author’s demonstration of a way for history to be written and understood.

At the end of the book, it is clear that the attendees of the symposium have a strong preference for fact-based history, although there seems to be an appreciation for primary sources. The presentation given by the keynote speaker of the event is in itself quite informative, with sentences such as:

There was, too, a negative inducement: childless or infertile or older women who were not married could take service in the Aunts and thereby escape redundancy, and consequent shipment to the infamous Colonies, which were composed of portable populations used mainly as expendable toxic-cleanup squads, though if lucky you could be assigned to less hazardous tasks, such as cotton picking and fruit harvesting. (Atwood 308)

The detail and commentary in this sentence are maintained throughout the speech, confirming that the speaker and, presumably, his audience hold facts and objectivity to be of primary importance.

Toward the end of his presentation, the historian says, “ This is our guesswork. Supposing it to be correct...many gaps remain.” He continues sarcastically, “ However, we must be grateful for any crumbs the Goddess of History has designated to vouchsafe for us” (Atwood 310). The historical convention appears to regard narratives poorly as sources, and this speaker especially undermines the value of the manuscript on which he is presenting by acknowledging the many questions it leaves unanswered. A strong message is conveyed at the end of *The Handmaid's Tale* in the speaker's closing comment:

As all historians know, the past is a great darkness, and filled with echoes. Voices may reach us from it; but what they say to us is imbued with the obscurity of the matrix out of which they come; and, try as we may, we cannot always decipher them precisely in the clearer light of our own day. (Atwood 311)

This powerful conclusion to the address makes a strong case for the type of objective lens that Atwood symbolically opposes with the book.

Perhaps the conflicting historical ideologies presented in *The Handmaid's Tale* are actually Atwood's final piece of meta-symbolism. They deny rest to the question that has been posed, that of the presence of actuality and personality in historical study. Since historians endeavor to compile and organize all that has happened, a mass of information that exists only in <https://assignbuster.com/atwoods-history-framing-text-and-political-context-in-the-handmaids-tale/>

innumerable fragments, their current method is to attempt to use primary sources to infer factual conclusions. For example, the depiction in a textbook of specific events during the American Civil War is that which a group of researchers decided was most likely correct based on the many descriptions that were written by those who personally experienced the time period referenced; a line of best fit, as it were. This notion draws the complaint that this type of history is too objective to accurately report what happened. However, it is no more than the historians' best attempt to accurately summarize what happened. In a trice, more occurs in the world than could possibly be documented in real time; but each instant is insignificant compared to decisions made in hours, wars fought for years, time periods lasting centuries. The purpose of history is not to describe every single event, nor to oversimplify the past, but to provide the most accurate compendium.

The historians at the end of *The Handmaid's Tale* might claim that a summary has no room for the feeble, subjective explanations found in a narrative. Conversely, Atwood may purport that facts about a time or occurrence are not useful without an understanding of the corresponding human sentiment. Due to the conflicting beliefs presented, this provocative piece leaves the reader in a cogitative state—and entirely entertained, moreover.