

To what extent can the handmaid's essay



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The definition of Dystopia is an imaginary place where the inhabitants are exploited and control is maintained through oppression. Both "The Scarlet Letter" and "The Handmaid's Tale" reflect characteristics of a dystopian novel. A dystopian novel is usually fictional and futuristic to the time in which it was written. The characters are made to worship a concept or figure as a way of control.

Characters are subject to an irrational fear of what is outside their environment and the issues raised in the novel are commentaries on contemporary society at the time. Dystopian fiction depicts characters that live in a dystopian society, where often propaganda is used as a way of control. In both novels strict religious rules are used to manipulate inhabitants, revealing the hypocrisy of people in power. In "The Handmaid's Tale", the Gileadian society claims to be Christian, yet religion has become a commodity, "Soul scrolls, It's a franchise... it must make a lot of profit. The inhabitants are aware that the church has become an article of trade. Not only does this reveal the corruption of the society but it also reveals the hypocrisy of the people in power; the rules that the people are forced to abide by do not reflect the values of a Christian society at all. Similarly, in "The Scarlet Letter" people appear to be very religious; however elements of hypocrisy in the puritan way of life are exemplified. There is a strict hierarchy in a society that advocates equality, at the top are men like Governor Bellingham, who himself is very materialistic. Hester Prynne went, one day, to the mansion of Governor Bellingham, with a pair of gloves, which she had fringed and embroidered to his order. "Because "she hath good skill at her needle" he orders her to make them for him, to show "he still

held an honourable and influential place among the colonial magistracy. " The Puritans are meant to live simple lives, yet he lives in a mansion, the settlers are opposed to any luxury and yet he is ordering gloves that are hand embroidered to show off to other magistrates.

These passages exemplify that religious propaganda is being used to justify the irreligious actions of the people in power. A dystopian society is often corrupt and oppressive to its inhabitants; this can be seen clearly in both novels. As well as propaganda, fear is often used as a way to maintain order in dystopian society. Fear of the outside world is the main cause of worry in " The Scarlet Letter. " The inhabitants are apprehensive to leave the settlement and venture into the woods.

This was common in the 1600s when " The Scarlet Letter" was set as people had a genuine trepidation of witchcraft and the forest was often thought to be a place where evil gathered. " The black man" that dwells in the forest is likely to be a metaphor for the devil, " I hear... the noise of one putting aside the branches"... " Is it the Black Man? " The character " Mistress Hibbins" also helps to add to the towns fear as she is the only person who openly ventures out into the forest and " a few years later, [is] executed as a witch. " Wilt thou go with us to-night? There will be a merry company in the forest; and I well nigh promised the Black Man that comely Hester Prynne should make one. " Mistress Hibbins is thought to be named after Ann Hibbins who was the first innocent victim to be hanged as a witch on Boston Common. Fear of the outside world is abstractly present in " The Handmaid's Tale" as the Handmaids are kept from knowing what's happening outside the walls of Gilead, " This is the heart of Gilead, where the war cannot intrude. They are <https://assignbuster.com/to-what-extent-can-the-handmaids-essay/>

only told stories to make them feel that they are the lucky ones; creating a feeling of apprehension towards what is outside, " They're very clean minded these days. Sometimes it's just [clearing up] bodies after a battle. The ones in the city ghettos are the worst, they're left round longer, they get rottener. " The main cause of fear in the novel is fear of violence and capital punishment, which is said to be supported by the Bible, " They can hit us, there's scriptural precedent," " the penalty... as you know, is death.

Deuteronomy 22: 23-29.

" The " particution" of these violent acts remind the Handmaids of what will happen to them if they break the rules. " I've leaned forward to touch the rope in front of me, in time with the others, both hands on it... I have seen the kicking feet and the two in black seize hold of them and drag downwards with all their weight. " There is also the " threat of the colonies": " I saw your mother... it was in that film they showed us, about the Colonies. ... Thank God, I said... I thought she was dead.... She might as well be, said Moira.

You should wish it for her. " The Gileadian society attempts to brain wash the Handmaid's into thinking that the outside world is more violent and unsafe in order to stop them from attempting escape, yet they also procure harsh punishments to maintain order. Both societies provoke irrational fear in their inhabitants in order to maintain control and stop people from attempting to leave, further exemplifying that they are dystopian civilisations. A dystopian novel raises issues and fears of the society in which it was written.

In an interview regarding " The Handmaid's Tale" Margaret Atwood said; " there isn't anything in the book not based on something that has actually

happened in history or in another country. " The novel exaggerates many attitudes advocated by religious conservatives whose views were popular during the time of writing. Many extreme rightwing views are reflected in the novel such as hostility towards abortion, homosexuality and women's rights. In Gilead the people who performed abortions or " gender treachery" are subject to violent capital punishment and hanged on " The Wall".

The controversial element that women be given no power is also an exaggeration of the conservative religious view that women should serve a man by staying at home and raising his children. " This is a book about what happens when certain casually held attitudes about women are taken to their logical conclusions...such as a women's place is in the home. " In " The Handmaid's Tale" women are not allowed to own money, have a job or be able to read and write. The only way for a woman to gain status is by serving her husband in becoming a " Wife" or producing children for the state by becoming a " Handmaid. The control of women is also based on the beliefs of the early Puritan settlers. The demure clothing that hides women's faces and hair resembles forms of dress where women are subordinate to men. Atwood used her writing to exaggerate issues of the time and demonstrate the effect they would have on people. The book is an example of dystopian fiction in the way that it criticises the political system at the time. Nathaniel Hawthorne used his novel to exemplify the tendency to extremism in American culture.

Using the Puritan settlers as the main characters, Hawthorne brings attention to the fact that these people are the founders of American civilisation, yet they are oppressive, extremist and hypocritical. A critical

reading of the novel states; " The founding of a Puritan society in the new world was the result of a group's desire to escape persecution in England and to create a religious citadel removed from the contagion of sin... ironically, once in a position of authority, the persecuted assumed the role of the persecutor, eventually attacking those who deviated from their moral codes of conduct and forms of spiritual worship. " By writing a novel about the rules and regulations of the early settlers in America the novel leads the reader to question how much has really changed. Often Hawthorne deviates from following the key elements of dystopian fiction. For example, the story is not set in the future and the characters in the novel believe they have reached utopia, however the dysfunctionality of this utopia makes the book worth exploring as a dystopian novel.

Both novels would have caused readers at the time to realise similarities between the book and their lives, perhaps causing them to question elements of their society and realise the negatives. Another key element of dystopian fiction is the " dystopian protagonist": an individual who resists the society in which they live. With the help of this character the reader recognises the negatives in the society. Instead of feeling isolated by the stigma of the scarlet letter Hester Prynne spends time alone, allowing her to question the puritan way of life.

After spending time away from the propaganda of the church she realises that she does not agree with the Puritan teachings. In the Puritan society it is supposed to be the men in power that teach others about god yet Hester rebels by teaching Pearl herself. " Hester Prynne, the daughter of a pious home, very soon after her talk with the child about her Heavenly Father, had

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begun to inform her of those truths. " She teaches Pearl about a God who is forgiving and does not allow, " that [Pearl] be taken out of [her] charge" as she believes "[she] can teach [her] little Pearl what she has learned from [the scarlet letter]. She does not view herself as inferior to the people in power and when entering the governor's house she gives the impression " that she [is] a great lady of the land" " judging from the decision of her air. " Hester has been so humiliated that she is no longer scared of revolting, she decides " nevertheless, I will enter" when " his honourable worship... hath a godly minister or two with him. " Hester is a prime example of a dystopian protagonist; she questions the existing religious system and takes it upon herself to initiate change.

Because Offred's resistance is internalised it could be easy to believe that she isn't an example of a dystopian protagonist. Offred does not do anything bold like Hester Prynne, but instead she takes pleasure in achieving " small victories" by breaking the rules. " I find I am not ashamed at all. I enjoy the power; power of a dog bone, passive but there. " The " historical notes," reveal that her story was her outward way of rebelling. By making the novel from the point of view of a Handmaid rather than a commander, the audience is supplied with a gritty and truthful view of the society; Offred also includes her own personal views.

The fact that " this item... was unearthed on the site of what was once.... The Under Ground Female Road," hints that Offred's became part of the resistance and her story was important to others. The fact that, " the item in its pristine state consisted of a metal foot locker" illustrates it was protected. In recording her views, Offred reveals accounts of other women such as

Moirra, Ofglen and Serena joy, this gives a power to her story that the "Gileadian society" cannot control. Both women have their own individual way of revolting, for Hester her defiance is public, but for Offred her resistance is internalised.

They are prime examples of dystopian protagonists in the way that they rebel and disagree with the rules of society in which they live. Both writers have used their novels to raise awareness of controversial elements in their contemporary societies. The novels also reflect characteristics of dystopian societies: people are controlled through religious propaganda, the Puritans fear god and the Handmaids fear the violent physical punishments.

Dystopian fiction always contains a dystopian protagonist who rebels against political the systems of the society in which they live.

Hester Prynne resists by rejecting the Puritan teachings. Offred refuses to give in to the Gileadian regime by recording her negative views and experiences to share with the rest of society. Both books are examples of dystopian fiction; however the genre of "the scarlet letter" sometimes deviates from dystopian fiction, for example, the book was not set futuristically to the time of writing. Both "The Scarlet Letter" and "The Handmaid's Tale" demonstrate the extreme consequences people face when they refuse to submit to a totalitarian view of the world. [Word count: 2000]