

# The handmaid's tale essay



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The handmaid's tale is a dystopia that builds upon the dystopian imagery of feminist texts from 1970s. Atwood's novel was written in direct reaction to the growing political power of the American religious right in the 1980s (Atwood). It projects a nightmare future in which rightwing religious extremists have established control of the government of what was once the United States but has now been transformed into the theocratic Republic of Gilead.

The thesis of this paper is based on three aspects. First is the imposition that women who have virtually no rights and are treated essentially as chattels. The second thesis is based on the role of religion in the society. Religion in Gilead is the similar to that of the current American society especially, the aspect of ambiguity which has been predominant with regard to the rightful application of religious beliefs and principles.

Lastly, language is a powerful tool with regard to formulating of ideologies and addressing issues. This book captures the implications of language with regard to addressing the pitfalls that face the people of Gilead. Similarly, this is the case with the American society where language has been used as an avenue to woo voters and address social issues.

Yet the brutal treatment of women in Gilead, however extreme, clearly serves as an extrapolation of patriarchal conditions that have long prevailed in uptown world and that many say as worsening during the Reagan administration of the 1980s - and that many have seen as worsening again during the Bush administration of the early twenty first century.

The Handmaid's Tale is presented as the secret journal of Offred, beginning with her training for a life of sexual servitude as a "handmaid" in the republic of Gilead. Handmaid, we learn, are assigned to important men in Gilead whose wives have proved unable to bear children, so that those men might still have an opportunity to procreate (Wisker).

Procreation is, in fact, highly problematic in this society, where deteriorating environmental conditions have rendered most women sterile. Most men may be sterile as well, though in Gilead male infertility is officially non-existent, and the infertility of a couple is always attributed to the woman. The officials of Gilead have declared artificial insemination or any other technological intervention in the process of fertilization to be unnatural.

As a result, the handmaids are to be impregnated by ordinary sexual intercourse, though this intercourse occurs as part of a highly ritualized ceremony that is anything but natural: the wife looks on while the husband and handmaid have sex in a manner designed to remove all semblance of sexual pleasure, at least for the handmaid, though one suspects that the husband may take a perverse delight in imposing his power on a subjugated woman (Wisker).

In this book, religion is used as an aspect which is to enhance the fear of God. This is owing to the fact that when one goes against God, there is the likelihood of punishment. This gives a reflection of how things are in the current society.

The fear of God has been used to discourage people off the perceived evils which are going on in the society. Some of the illustrations in this book have

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been borrowed from the book of Genesis, for instance, the case where Rachael insists that her husband Jacob sleeps with the handmaid to conceive. This is a major biblical theme which is pronounced in this book.

Essentially, Atwood depicts how ambiguous the fundamentalists are using the bible to describe or to discuss the social on goings within Gilead. As the case is, currently, we are living in a society where there is a lot of ambiguity with regard to religion. People are using biblical explanations to justify their life styles in an age where there are no clear cut boundaries about what ought to be followed and what ought not to be.

There is an aura of hypocrisy which has bedeviled the society then as it is the case in the current society. This has been illustrated in the case where women's role is defined as child bearing, as described in Atwood's book, "Adam was not deceived, but the women being deceived was in transgression" (Chapter 34, pp 221).

In Atwood's dystopian *Handmaid's Tale*, the power of language is equally evident. Women in the republic of Gilead are not permitted to read. (Judd, one of the architects of the Republic, is credited with saying, "Our big mistake was teaching them to read. We won't do that again" [p. 307]).

The shops are known by their pictorial signs alone, women are expected to keep silent or to utter only approved phrases, and playing scrabble with a woman is indecent. Yet the rebels use a system of manual signs, a silent language to communicate. And the Handmaid finds her closet message in Latin scratched there by the previous, now dead, Handmaid.

This brings to the core the power of using language to shape ideologies. Essentially, the current American society has grappled with this concept.

Individual women, whether they are struggling with discrimination in the workplace, abuse in the home, everyday sexual harassment, the aftereffect of rape, or any of the other isolating conditions so common in patriarchy, can begin to reduce their resulting Societal Stockholm Syndrome by claiming language as their own.

This book indicates the subversive potential of language, not only reminding us how language has been and is used to alienate women from our experience but also inviting us to consider the everyday audacity of private and public language use as a form of mental liberation.

Atwood focuses on women and sexuality as principal targets of the religious totalitarianism of the Republic of Gilead. In this Christian theocracy, marriage is promoted as a social goal, though it is only available to those who have reached a certain social status. Indeed, wives, while they enjoy higher status than handmaids, are literally “ issued” to successful males as rewards for loyal service to the community.

In addition, women in this society exist not as individuals but as members of well defined groups, corresponding almost to brand names (Wisker). Among the upper classes, women function principally either as wives (who serve as domestic managers), domestic servants or handmaids. In the lower classes, however, “ Econowives” have to play all of these roles.

There are also “Aunts” who serve to train and discipline the handmaid and “Jezebels” who are officially though covertly, sanctioned prostitutes used to service foreign dignitaries and important government officials. Women who cannot or will not play one of these roles are labeled “Unwomen” and are exiled to the “colonies,” where they are used for hazardous duties like cleaning up toxic waste, much of the American landscape having been polluted to the point of being inhabitable.

It is worth noting that in this novel, we have a woman protagonist, Offred, with whom we sympathize, as readers, and who invites us to share her perceptions of events and disempowerment in Gilead, a republic controlled entirely by male power or patriarchy and based on the value of reproductive capability. Essentially, women are initially of high value but refused the opportunity to read and make their own decisions, make choices of how to live and who live with and are unable to own their own possessions and move.

This novel has clearly brought out issues which deal with representation of women's roles, constraints, gender, sexuality and power, the management and control of reproductive rights, feminist themes, issues and reading practices (Wisker). In literary terms, it is also interesting to consider how and if women might write differently from men, other than treating different issues or similar issues differently and this leads us to thinking about the use of language and imagery.

The outlook for women in this possible future which has been offered in this book is indeed miserable, reduced to bodily functions and roles of

handmaids, wives, or housemaids doing chores in the formal household system, or in the proletariat outside, as econowives.

In this critique of reproductive technologies and a dehumanizing control over women's power and individuality Atwood imagines a future which has reversed all the equalities and achievements of the twentieth century. These include the achievements of the suffrage movement. Women in the novel are reduced to back to being owned by men rather than being able to own property, their own bodies and futures. In chapter 28 the turning point is seen.

This is a powerful moment and a shocking chapter. Offred and her husband Luke, along with their daughter, are living an ordinary life when, in the course of the week the president is shot, the constitution revoked, and armed bodies of Special Forces - troops of some sort - patrol the streets and control everyone's actions. This position in the future is contrasted with the moments of equality, hard earned in the 1980s, and the beliefs, actions and visions of feminists in that period.

In conclusion, reading the novel in the twenty first century we can have a more distanced perspective on the views of 1980s feminism, on the kind of outcomes they would never have sought, and on the ways in which (while they have many rights in the western and parts of the Eastern world) they are frequently reduced to state disempowerment under extreme or fundamentalist regimes.

Atwood, Margaret. *The handmaid's tale*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1986. Print. Wisker, Gina. *Atwood's the Handmaid's Tale*. Chennai: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010. Print.