

Context of production: the handmaid's tale as a work of its time



Texts are, by nature, cultural artefacts, intrinsically influenced by the societies from which they emerge. Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) offers a "twist of today's society" – the phallogentric Gileadean dictatorship, as seen through the eyes of narrator Offred. Set in a totalitarian and repressive theocracy, Atwood warns of the danger of fundamentalist religion ideology – likely influenced by the global resurgence of totalitarianism in the late 1970s and early 1980s. She offers a warning, particularly to female readers, of the need for feminism – due to the subversive nature of the patriarchy (written in the shadow of the 1980s anti-feminist backlash), as well as the need for women to work together rather than against each other. With the founding of the UN Environment Program in 1972, as well as the publication of Rachel Carson's 1962 *Silent Spring*, global concern over environmental degradation was evident during the 1980s – influencing Atwood's dystopian warning of the need to preserve our environment. Hence Atwood's contextual concerns arise in the novel.

The 1980s featured environmental concerns, influencing *The Handmaid's Tale's* dystopian depiction of a ravaged environment, and its suggestion of the need to preserve our environment 'before it is too late'. 1980's environmental concerns were evident from the 1983 UN World Commission on Environment and Development (the Brundtland Report), the founding of the UN Environment Program and the Union Carbide Bhopal gas leak disaster India – which sparked immense protest and worldwide rage. Offred describes "an Unbaby, with a pinhead, or two body's, or a snout...or webbed feet". This disturbing dystopic image evokes Greek notions of half-man half-beast creatures – implying a need to avoid this scenario of environmental

destruction. On numerous occasions, Offred observes the character of Serena Joy in the garden “ positioning her shears” “ like a kamikaze intent on the seedpods”. The seedpods are a plants reproductive organs, so on a figurative level, this could be read as humankind, ‘ suicide bombers’ destroying the future of the planet and killing ourselves in doing so. Writing from the vanguard of the 1980s environmental movement, Atwood emphasises the importance of environmental preservation.

Atwood submits an indictment against fundamentalist religion, likely influenced by her fears surrounding the resurgence of the American New Right such as the 1979 Moral Majority, figures such as Pat Robertson, as well as the rise of the 1979 Iran theocracy and Sharia law under Ayatollah Khomeini. The Gileadean regime forces its ‘ Handmaids’ to undertake daily prayer. Offred states that “ what we prayed for was emptiness, so we would be worthy to be filled: with grace, with self-denial, semen and babies”. This highly sardonic, yet humorous, statement highlights the emptiness and hypocrisy of the regime -perverting what should be a meaningful religious act. Offred also humorously states that “ the Bible is kept locked up, the way people once kept tea locked up”. To a modern reader, the concept of locking tea up seems absurd, and through the juxtaposition of these two actions Atwood highlights the absurd extent to which the regime has perverted religious worship. This is also seen in the Gileadean slogan that “ God is a national resource” as well as the purchase of ‘ prayers’- highlighting the regimes commercialisation and bastardisation of worship, and in turn discouraging fundamentalist religion.

Atwood criticises a world in which females are complicit in their own subjugation, emphasising the need for feminism. The character of Serena Joy acts as the regimes mouthpiece for anti-feminism - " her speeches were about...how women should stay home", drawing a parallel with 1980s Christian televangelist Tammy Faye Bakker's similar speeches. However, Offred's extremely unsavoury portrayal of Serena perhaps indicates Atwood's disapproval of the actions of female anti-feminists. For example, Offred introduces Serena with a ring on her finger " like an ironic smile" " like something mocking her", depicting her actions as hypocritical. " Her lips were thin", her chin is " clenched like a fist" and " her eyes flat hostile blue" - evocative of Serena's unhappiness and ' fury' at having been " taken at her word". The increasingly popularity during the 1980s of televangelists, in particular the " Praise the Lord Club" with 13 million viewers, likely influenced Atwood's concern surrounding women who have a role in oppressing other women. After the second wave of feminism of the 1960s-1980s, pioneered by figures such as Germaine Greer, a conservative backlash was evident in America - for example, the 1982 failure of the Equal Rights Amendment (granting equal rights for women) to pass Congress - likely influencing Atwood's portrayal of the inevitability of the filtration of patriarchal ideology into society, and the need for feminism. The society which follows Gilead in the ' historical notes' appears to have progressed with regard to gender equality- with a female " Professor Maryann Crescent Moon" chairing a historical convention. However, Professor Pieixoto then states that they are ' enjoying' the female chair " in two distinct senses, precluding, of course, the obsolete third" (sexual enjoyment). This is met with audience " laughter" - showing their acceptance of his belittlement of

<https://assignbuster.com/context-of-production-the-handmaids-tale-as-a-work-of-its-time/>

the chair. He regards her in terms of her sexuality, not her intellectual ability - drawing sharp parallels with the overtly patriarchal antecedent Gileadean society, and warning a reader of underlying patriarchal ideologies.

As readers, we are isolated from Pieixoto's thought process, positioning us against him immediately. However, his sexual puns, acting in jarring contrast to Offred's first person and deeply personal narrative, alienate us from him even further - condemning the patriarchal values he embodies. Pieixoto refers to the "Underground Femaleroad" - a resistance organisation rescuing women - as "the Underground Frailroad" - espousing the patriarchal notion that this organisation, and women, were weak and ineffectual. This is again met with "laughter" - and implicit audience approval. He refers to the Commanders as "gentlemen" - a subtle indication of the esteem in which he holds them, despite their creation of a phallogentric system of institutionalised rape, conformity and terror. In the light of the anti-abortion riots (after the the 1973 Supreme Court Roe vs Wade judgement legalising abortion) and the anti-feminist backlash which could be said to have characterised the 1980s, Atwoods concern with the pervasiveness of patriarchal ideas, and hence the need for feminism, is made clear.

Texts cannot be separated from their time periods, and *The Handmaid's Tale* is no exception to the rule. Fundamentalist religion during the 1980s saw rising popularity, influencing the novels key concern with this trend. Figures such as Phyllis Schlafly and Tammy Faye Bakker, openly opposing feminism, emerged during the 1980s - an arrival Atwood discourages through her characterisation of Serena Joy. With the 1980s came a sentiment that <https://assignbuster.com/context-of-production-the-handmaids-tale-as-a-work-of-its-time/>

feminism was 'over' and equality had been achieved – a sentiment arguably still existing today – a complacency which Atwood warns against – by depicting patriarchal systems as invasive and ever-present, thus an ever-present need for feminism. Another 'zeitgeist' of the period encapsulated by Atwood is that of environmental concern – seen through events such as UN actions and the Bhopal gas leak protests. Dystopias, by nature, extrapolate existing social trends to their worst possible circumstantial outcomes, indicating that they are fundamentally intertwined with their production context.