

# The Handmaid's Tale

## Background Lecture

Upon the release of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* in 1986, it received both literary and political acclaim, evidenced in the weeks the book spent on best-seller lists, and its adaptation into a major motion picture. Reasons for its success are its literary strengths and the truths so easily recognized in its text. *The Handmaid's Tale* is a harrowing account of a future that doesn't seem too far out of the way, but it is simple, almost prose-poetry in nature. The narrator, Offred, is an easily identifiable every-woman trapped in a non-identity that is a nonchoice. The setting is one that is familiar to the reader—it is a once-upon-a-time-cityscape that many people have once been a part of, and may feel the loss of.

*The Handmaid's Tale* falls into the categories of “dystopian” or “speculative” fiction, and has been, for the most part, favorably compared to contemporary works such as *Brave New World* and *1984*. Evidence of a dystopia, an imaginary place where everything is as bad as it can possibly be, is omnipresent throughout the novel.

Set in Massachusetts near the former Harvard University, Gilead is Atwood's vision of the United States after extensive war, ecological, and chemical damage here been wrought. Gilead is actually based on similar practices in cultures around the world, including some in the United States. Polygamy, for example, has been practiced by many cultures around the world as have theocracies. Polygamy has its basis in Biblical culture, taking its justification from the story of Rachel and her servant Bilhah. Rachel, not having borne any children, had the idea of having her husband Jacob impregnate Bilhah in her stead. Thus, the idea for the Handmaids was born, since only one in four children survive at this time in Gilead and very few women are even capable of conceiving.

A key, and often overlooked aspect of this novel, is Atwood's concern with the early 1980s debate about feminist attitudes toward sexuality in general, and pornography in particular. Whether or not this debate inspired *The Handmaid's Tale* is controversial, but it definitely makes its presence known throughout the story, in Offred's memories of her mother (who pickets on such things, and burns books), in Offred's girlfriend Moira, a lesbian, in the references to Pornomarts, the references to the black market sex club, etc. Essentially, during the early 1980s, many feminists railed against pornography in general as a demeaning force against women. They were deeply disturbed by another group that was also lobbying against it, a powerful religious rights group. The latter were zealots who, by allying themselves with the feminist group to join the anti-porn movement, could slip easily into a “no freedom” for women movement simply by using the justification of providing “protection” for women.

This “protection of women” theme is one that makes an appearance in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Another important theme is the presence of and manipulation of power. Gilead is a theocratic dictatorship, meaning that the power washes down from the top ranks of the government. There is, as is a necessity with any such government, a great deal of armed surveillance, which creates distance and isolation between people. Despite this, the citizens manage to seize their own power in various ways. Some commit suicide. Some find and use a black market for various things, such as cigarettes. The Commander plays forbidden board games. Some doctors impregnate their Handmaid patients when their Commanders are not being successful creating offspring. Offred eventually learns that she possesses great power, albeit in very small and subtle ways—such as sexual manipulation. Another theme, in fact, centers on sexuality. The Gilead regime attempts to control and separate sex from sexuality, and ultimately underestimates both.

*The Handmaid's Tale* was published in 1986, and is one of more than thirty of Atwood's works of fiction, poetry, and essays.

Note: All references come from the Anchor Books edition of *The Handmaid's Tale* published in 1998.