THE HANDMAID’S TALE

Margaret Atwood
AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

- Born in 1939 in Ottawa, Canada
- Grew up in northern Ontario, Quebec, and Toronto because she traveled with her father who was an entomologist
- Decided to become a career author in high school
- Received her undergraduate degree from the University of Toronto and her master’s from Radcliffe College
- Has held Writer-in-Residence and M.F.A. Chair positions at nine different colleges in both Canada and the United States
Author of more than forty volumes of poetry and many other novels
Her novel *The Blind Assassin* won The Booker Prize in 2000
Her most recent novel series *MaddAdam* was short listed for The Booker Prize and is super weird
Works have been published in over 40 languages and range from science fiction to historical fiction to contemporary fiction
Currently writes fiction, poetry, literary criticism, and essays for a variety of publications
A. BIOGRAPHY

- Her most recent nonfiction collection of essays, *Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth*, was adapted to the screen in 2012
- Currently lives in Toronto with the novelist Graeme Gibson
- Currently 75 years old
Atwood herself said the book was: “...a cognate of *A Clockwork Orange, Brave New World, and Nineteen Eighty-Four*”

“It is an imagined account of what happens when not uncommon pronouncements about women are taken to their logical conclusions”

Atwood labels the book “speculative fiction”; “It’s a matter of truth in labeling. I like there to be some resemblance between what’s promised on the outside and what you get on the inside, and if it says ‘science fiction’, I want there to be something that doesn’t already exist.”
Tries to caution against right-wing fundamentalism, rigid dogmas, and misogynous theosophies that may be currently gaining a deceptive popularity.

Wrests an imperfect present from a horror-ridden future: appeals for vigilance, appreciation for mature values of tolerance and compassion.

Polarized extremes: a decadent present and a totalitarian future that prohibits choice.
Dystopias essentially deal with power. Power as the prohibition or perversion of human potential. Power functions efficiently and mercilessly to its optimal totalitarian limit. War often looms in the background, providing the pretext for internal terror in response to external tension.
Fear-laden horror fiction (how the dream turns into a nightmare)

- Emphasizes horror to accomplish forewarning
- “Allow certain tendencies in modern society to spin forward without the brake of sentiment and humaneness”
- Dramatize the eternal conflict between individual choice and social necessity
- “I do not want anyone to want for me. I want to want for myself.”
- Dualities such as emotion and reason, creative imagination and mathematical logic, intuition and science, tolerance and judgment, kindness and cruelty, spirituality and materialism, love and power, etc.
- Tend to offer two-dimensional character types: pressure of external forces often causes this
- Atmosphere keeps assertive characters who would provide hope from being successful
- Ineffectual when contending with ruthless overwhelming powers
Society is consumed and controlled by repressive dogma which makes the culture appear static.

System resists change and becomes arrested in paralysis.

Underprivileged members of society become mediocre, monotonous, and predictable because they have no “dynamic possibility.”

Associated with fear of the future.
ROMAN À THESE (THESIS NOVEL)

- Ideological novels: engage the reader in a “theoretical discourse”
- A range of thematic possibilities are posited and polarized against each other
- Eventually reveal a definite philosophical and socio-political outlook for which fiction is a convenient medium
First dedicated to Mary Webster, Atwood’s ancestor, who escaped hanging as a witch at the hands of the Massachusetts Puritans. Her execution rope broke and double jeopardy saved her from being tried again, so Webster moved to Nova Scotia, which was more liberal.

Dedicated also to Perry Miller, an American scholar of Puritanism (one of Atwood’s teachers at Harvard).

Juxtaposed dedications show the ironic relationship between the scholars and the texts they misread, historical events and historians who misinterpret them.
EPIGRAPHS

- Begins the novel with a passage from Genesis, an excerpt from *A Modest Proposal*, and a Sufi proverb: all lenses through which we should interpret the book.

- Introduces Biblical referent for the society on which Gilead is built, Swift for a satiric political commentary, and Sufism the wordplay, puns, and multiple meanings of the work itself.

- All lend themselves to introducing pervasive irony to the story itself.

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The Great Gatsby

BY

F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

Then wear the gold hat, if that will move her;
If you can bounce high, bounce for her too,
Till she cry “Lover, gold-hatted, high-bouncing lover,
I must have you!”

—THOMAS PARKE D’INVILLIERS
Published in 1986 when The Moral Majority, Christian Voice, and Religious Roundtable were becoming a stronger voice in politics

Advocated a return to traditional values after the Supreme Court had made progressive decisions on abortion and prayer in schools

Time magazine named 1976 The Year of the Evangelical

Ronald Reagan was President from 1981 to 1989 who ran on a campaign of “peace through strength”

Emphasized by bringing up Puritanism in the book and taking it to the extreme—reasonable conclusion for Atwood
Atwood emphasizes the American Puritan tradition for her representation of Gilead.

- Emphasizes Puritan fear of female sexuality.
- Scarlet Handmaid’s uniform is straight from Hawthorne with the letter missing.
- Modern American culture still celebrates some of these puritan ideals, and models the Puritan intransigence as representative of the American spirit.
- Puritan Studies scholars were known to erase women’s fiction from the “genuine” American literary history, which results in Atwood’s commitment to the trashy feminine world of love and romance.
Atwood publishes an essay in 1987 strongly opposing the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement, regarded by many Canadians as the beginning of the end of Canada’s cultural autonomy.

In the same way that Offred and the Handmaid’s are dominated and oppressed by this oppressive religious culture, so Canada is oppressed by America.
Atwood: “Canada as a separate but dominated country has done about as well under the U.S. as women, worldwide, have done under men; about the only position they’ve ever adopted towards us, country to country, has been the missionary position, and we were not on top.”

America is the male aggressor, its masculine qualities literalized in the Gildeadean patriarchy and the heroine is the “exploited victim”
Atwood advocates for Canada’s cultural autonomy by emphasizing personal autonomy in all areas of society—“good fences make good neighbors”; the men of Gilead literally penetrate and dominate to destroy the Handmaid’s independence and define their identity.

“This is the heart of Gilead, where the war cannot intrude except on television. Where the edges are we aren’t sure, they vary, according to the attacks and counterattacks; but this is the centre, where nothing moves. The Republic of Gilead, said Aunt Lydia, knows no bounds. Gilead is within you.”
Atwood: “The Canadian experience is a circumference with no centre, the American one a centre which is mistaken for the whole thing.”

The moments of crisis and horror in the novel are organized around threats to the internal and bodily structures surrounding the individual, uncharted self.

Demonstrates how political issues are conflated with sexuality and gender issues.
FEMINISM

- Book resonates more as a defense of traditional femininity than insurgent feminism.
- In the attempt to discuss nationalism (this is her only full-scale parody of American society) and defend self-protective autonomy, Atwood eventually focuses more on rescuing female identity than feminist ideals.
- Offred deals with her enslavement in a personal, rather than political way.
hey girl.

let's smash patriarchy.
Offred’s resistance goes on in her head, which reinforces the atypical submissive and passive female behavior.

- Reinforces masochistic themes.
- Many scenes replicate almost a bodice-ripper romance feel—Nick overwhelms Offred with his physical prowess.
- Offred trusts her feminine instinct to overcome her original distrust of Nick.
- Men and women (Commanders, Wives, Aunts) are complicit in allowing this regime to be created and enforcing it, not just men.
ROMANTIC ELEMENTS

- The ambiguous lover turns out to be her savior.
- The more militant females end the story in prison despite the nobility of their resistance, and Offred manages to escape only after she waits for Nick to rescue her.
- Nick enables her to tell her story, when she could not have without his help.
- Romantic conventions provide hope for Offred and are presented as the instruments of escape by Atwood, who offers no other way out of Gilead.
- Seen by critics as an abysmal political lapse and the passive acceptance of Offred and her enslavement.
Gold mine of information and comparisons for the novel—every theme is reiterated here

Set after Gilead has crumbled, scholars demonstrate their inability to understand or interpret history correctly or understand the feminine lens of history

Academic conference held at the University of Denay, Nunavit (Deny none of it)
Establishes ideological parallels between Gilead and post-Gilead society, which makes it seem as though little progress in cultural ideals has been made.

Professor Pieixoto has actually rearranged and edited Offred’s tapes to create the narrative, which adds another narrative voice and irony to the shaping of the female’s story by a male academic.

Pieixoto ridicules the other contents of Offred’s tapes: Elvis, the Twisted Sisters, etc, and wishes he could just have a printout of the Commander’s computer contents instead.

Official discourse is unable to articulate love, hope, or resistance effectively.
Frames the narrative in a way that makes the story seem more relatable and realistic; pushes the reader to actually make change, rather than observing a story they don’t connect to.

Shows us the “crisis of interpretation”: we can see the story through Offred’s eyes or through Pieixoto’s.

Offred: we must become complicit in the sexual and political violence of Gilead and rectify the romance plot that allows escape.

Pieixoto: we must acquiesce to moral relativism and patriarchal sexism.
Pieixoto prides himself on his “antiseptic distance” from Gilead, which removes the horror of the events that happened there.

This distanced, safe reading perpetuates the dystopia of Gilead in Nunavit because it removes the discomfort which leads to change.

Direct commentary on academic and cultural inability to enact needed change.

Mimics the Gileadean dogmatism, categorizing mental structures, and speech types.

Accuses academics of being complicit in the formation of authoritarian institutions.
Whenever someone chooses not to act or take a stance on such an important issue, they inevitably become an apologist for evil.
Narrative structure shifts back and forth between past and present to develop the narrative as the main character reaches moral and personal conclusions about Gilead and herself.

Atwood administers doses of the dystopian nightmare through the shifts in the novel to build suspense and show that no matter how seductive the teaching, misogynist dogma will eventually reveal its ruthlessly tyrannical nature.