

Elements of political and social protest writing: Text overview – *The Handmaid's Tale*

This resource is an explanation of some of the ways *The Handmaid's Tale* can be considered in relation to the genre of political and social protest writing. This is a starting point for teachers in their thinking and planning, it gives an introductory overview of how the text can be considered through the lens of political and social protest writing. We haven't covered every element of this genre. We hope that it will provide a useful starting point and a springboard for thinking about the text in more detail.

Overview

Given the central political concerns of the text (democracy in the USA has been brutally overthrown and replaced by the totalitarian Republic of Gilead), it should be clear why *The Handmaid's Tale* has been included as it looks at elements of political and social protest writing. The novel was partly written in response to the rise in Christian fundamentalism and the growing right-wing views held in the USA in the 1980s. During this period there was a fear amongst liberal thinkers about the potential repressive treatment of women if the parties that represented these conservative views were to come to power.

It is also important to remember that Atwood was very mindful of restrictive political and religious ideologies across the world and some of her observations are incorporated into the novel, for example the coercive practices of those in power in the Eastern Bloc countries before the fall of the Berlin wall and the ascendancy of the Ayatollahs in Iran who sought to suppress women. Although the USA under Obama is not the same as the USA under Reagan, there are still many in the West who hold extreme right wing values and the political instability across the Middle East can hardly make readers feel more secure in regard to the treatment of the powerless by the powerful. As a consequence, the issues raised in the novel still resonate today.

In a world in which a Pakistani school girl can be shot for wanting an education, where the rights of women in some countries have been completely eroded by the religious laws under which they live, where the right to freedom of speech has come under an intense spotlight and where issues surrounding a government's right to gain access to and control the private lives of its citizens are current and potent, then the study of this text should lead to interesting and thought-provoking debates concerning the contexts of production and reception.

Ultimately the text concerns itself with the consequences of religious extremism and fanaticism, particularly in relation to the rights of women, but it also explores many other issues to do with personal freedom, morality, government control and Orwellian surveillance. *The Handmaid's Tale* is a chilling vision of a world in which the state regulates sexual relations, condones male violence against women, suppresses female sexuality and leaves no place for human love.

Genre and setting

The Handmaid's Tale is clearly identifiable as dystopian fiction, with obvious links to other dystopian texts such as *1984* and *Brave New World*. It is perhaps worth comparing it to these and to more recent publications, such as *The Hunger Games*, in terms of political and social protest writing. *The Handmaid's Tale* is set in a futuristic world where an ultra-conservative Christian movement has seized control in what is now the USA and has imposed on the population a totalitarian regime based on its version of some aspects of the Old Testament. The use and abuse of religious texts for political ends is a key element of the genre. Central to the regime is the adoption of the Old Testament's representation of women, finding in it justification for the legitimising of handmaids in those marriages where women are unable to conceive.

Atwood sets her story in a world, so much like our own, where mismanagement of the planet, industrialisation, the over use of chemicals and birth control in Caucasian societies has affected the ability of many human beings to procreate. The desperation of those with power to reproduce (thereby increasing their power and status) leads them to exploit ordinary women as national resources, to reduce them to no more than 'walking wombs' as a way to consolidate their power.

Power and control

This is a novel about power politics; it is about who has the power to do what to whom. Ultimately Gilead controls its citizens through fear and violence. It has constructed a very strict, segregated social structure with clear rules and expectations and those who do not perform as they should or who break the rules in any way are punished – severely. There are ritual executions of homosexuals, Roman Catholic priests and Quakers and anyone who disobeys the laws of Gilead. Every day male bodies are left hanging on the wall as a way to instill fear into the populace and to remind them of what will happen to transgressors.

All people in Gilead are categorised according to their gender and their social role. They wear clothes that represent that role and every aspect of their lives is dictated by it. Men wear military uniforms to convey their power and physical strength; the women wear colours that identify who they are, most notably in relation to child-bearing and the domestic sphere. Offred's red dress signals that she is fertile and a handmaid belonging to a Commander. The handmaids have no power beyond that of being able to reproduce. Their lives are not their own;

they have no individuality. They are restricted in their movements and their vision is curtailed by their absurd and debilitating costumes, a long red dress with white wings around the face. Handmaids are also deprived of language, prevented from communicating freely with other handmaids and can only use a limited range of empty phrases when they speak to each other. Offred is greeted by Ofglen with the words: 'Blessed be the fruit' to which she offers the stock reply "May the Lord open".

Women in Gilead are subjugated in every way. In the novel's backstory, the narrator tells us that on taking control the regime seized female financial assets, removed their children from second marriages, split up their families and took control of their bodies. In the narrative present women are forbidden to read (with the exception of the aunts who use that privilege to control other women and are in turn used by the men as instruments of control). Even wives have to follow the rules set forth by the regime, not least housing their husbands' handmaids in their home and enduring the indignity of The Ceremony each month.

There is a climate of fear and paranoia in Gilead, created by the regime and perpetuated by its military forces ironically named, the Angels, the Eyes of God and the Guardians of the Faith. Citizens witness and take part in public executions and punishments. When individuals are no longer deemed useful they are shipped to the radioactive Colonies to die an agonizing death.

As well as the social, political and military systems that are in place to control citizens of Gilead, one of the most insidious methods of enforcement practised by the regime is its regulation of language. In a country where certain words are banned, where new words have been invented to describe the rituals and ceremonies in which citizens are forced to participate, where reading and writing are outlawed and where the terrifying practices of social organisation are given names based on biblical language, it becomes clear why the Commander and Offred's rebellion is symbolised by the playing of Scrabble. Offred's ability to own and manipulate language during the game is a rare moment of empowerment within a regime that has not only taken her job, her husband and her daughter but also her name. Her desire to laugh when the Commander first asks her to play Scrabble is telling: "I want to laugh, shriek with laughter, fall off my chair." she loves the game because it is forbidden, something he "can't do with his Wife", something which the regime would punish.

Oppression and the oppressed

Women are the most obviously oppressed group in the novel – they are used for domestic service, reproductive purposes, prostitution, to control other women or are sent to clear up nuclear waste as the regime sees fit. Some women may have a slightly more privileged or powerful position but all have their lives dictated and controlled by the men who run Gilead.

In general, men have more status than women in the world of the novel but their lives are still governed by rules and strict codes of conduct. The ultra-conservative religious laws govern every aspect of life, yet at the heart of the regime is corruption and hypocrisy. The most powerful of the ruling elite have freedom to flaunt the rules but even they can push the boundaries too far. The Historical Notes suggest that the architects of Gilead, of which Offred's Commander was one, were toppled by new pretenders to their thrones in the "Great Purge". Corrupt totalitarian regimes only breed corruption and terror and no-one is ultimately safe.

Rebellion

If oppression and control are key elements of political and social protest writing then so is rebellion. The reader does not witness a whole scale rebellion that brings about the overthrow of Gilead during the main action of the novel, although we do know from the Historical Notes that the regime does come to an end. Nevertheless there are attempts at protest and rebellion throughout the novel. Offred tells us that when the regime took over she had tried to rebel by attempting to escape with her family to Canada and she reports that many others attempted the same. The Commander and Offred rebel against the rules as set down by the regime by engaging in their secret relationship. The brothel where Moira works, although state run, is a rebellion against the lifestyle the Commanders are supposed to be leading. Serena Joy, desperate for Offred to become pregnant, orchestrates her illicit relationship with Nick seemingly suspecting that her husband is infertile. A previous occupant of Offred's room rebelled by scratching the slogan *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum* into the woodwork and in doing so communicates her message of protest to those who follow her. Women, and men, in Gilead break rules to facilitate pregnancy and hope they won't be discovered. There is also the organised rebellion conducted by the Mayday resistance movement and the Underground Femaleroad. Perhaps the most significant rebellion though is Offred's inner rebellion, her refusal to forget the past, her maintaining her power to think and feel, her refusal to be silenced and ultimately her remembering and recording her story on tape.

The politics of feminism

While Atwood is clearly on the side of women in this novel, she is also critical of the feminist movement of North America in the second half of the twentieth century which in some ways she suggests led to the counter movement of the extreme right and the formation of Gilead. Offred's mother and her friends are criticised for their blinkered vision, their pro-abortion stance, their insistence on sexual freedom, their failure to embrace the views of a range of women thereby alienating the pro-life campaigners (whose voices are represented by the aunts who are most savage in their attacks on their fellow women). Although there is some sympathy shown for Offred's mother, the greatest sympathy is for Offred who herself is more open to different views and who cares about men and women. In telling her story, Offred embeds the stories of many women becoming

their unsung champion. She keeps alive her mother and Moira, recreating their voices in her narrative.

Resolution

There is some ambiguity about what happens to Offred after she steps into the van at the end of the main narrative and the ambiguity can lead readers to consider the ending unsatisfying. The Historical Notes can also provoke strong reactions in readers. In the Notes, Atwood implicitly criticises academia and the way in which it processes and reports on events of the past. Having just lived with Offred through her harrowing narrative, readers may well feel that Professor Pieixoto's analysis of her situation lacks the emotion and empathy that her story deserves. In their analysis of history Pieixoto and his colleagues seem detached from human suffering. There is a sense too that history has taught human beings nothing and that the suppression of women goes on, albeit in a covert way. Pieixoto shows little interest in Offred and is critical of her for not revealing more about the Commander. He does not seem interested in her fate and, in renaming her story, he, like the male oppressors of Gilead, attempts to take away her voice.