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## Sexual Overtones and Explicit Sexuality in Margaret Attwood's *A Handmaid's Tale*

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## **A Novel for a Sexually Explicit Society and Times**

*A Handmaid's Tale* by Atwood presents a sexually explicit society of decadence where a handmaid is exclusively hired for the sake of only breeding children. *A Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood is a favourite feminist horror novel projecting the sexual predicament and desperateness of the science-ridden society. The author describes a society in which women become the legal property of men. This happens after a Right-wing Christian extremist coup in the United States.

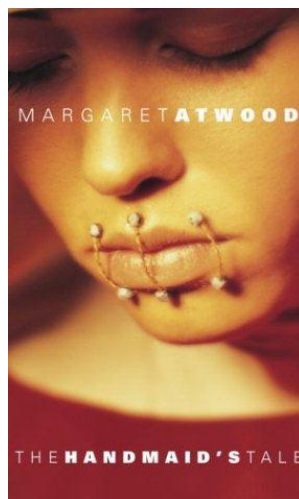
### **The Setting of the Novel**

The novel is a horror story aimed at white middle-class women. The horror derives largely from the setting of the novel. The setting reflects a theocratic society formed with the tenets of the Old Testament of the Bible. The society of the novel and their definition of freedom are described by Atwood in these words: "There is more than one kind of freedom... Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it." (24).

### **A Different Patriarchal Society**

The society is portrayed by the author to as a 'Patriarchy', which literally means the rule of the father. The individuals of this society in which the novel takes place have little or no control over their own lives, and do not seem to benefit from the regime in any manner. The only men who have any authority are the 'Commanders', an elite group of elderly rich men, who constitute only a tiny proportion of the male population. They have to share some of their authority with their wives, as evidenced by the fact that wives are always present while the Commanders have sex with their handmaids. The Handmaid system was intended for the Commanders' sexual gratification and for biological procreation on the other.

### **Gilead of Modern Times**



One of the ideas that clearly play a crucial role in *The Handmaid's Tale* is the importance of understanding and respecting the environment. In Atwood's world, chemicals, pollution, and wars have made much of the country entirely unlivable. Not only has the land itself been destroyed, but human beings have been so damaged by the pollutants and chemicals introduced into the air and water that only one in four babies are born healthy enough to survive for even a short time. Though Gilead still possesses the basic trappings of industrialization - electric lights, flush toilets, cars, etc. - these things have become luxuries. Everyone is deprived of certain foodstuffs that we take for granted, such as fresh fruit and vegetables, fish, and meat. Atwood paints a clear and a reasonably realistic portrait of what life will be like in the future if people continue to ignore the increasingly permanent damage being done to our ecological systems.

### **Handmaid Offred**

The society that Offred lives in is surrounded by stringent Christianity and vanity. Offred goes about her new, restricted life, in which everyone has an assigned place in a certain category- Handmaid. Offred's life is so circumscribed - there is nothing she is allowed to do except follow the stifling routine allocated to her. Her narration revolves around her thoughts and feelings, her reactions to her situation. The detailed descriptions of the small world she inhabits reveals the her plight. The psychological predicament of the Hand Maid and her ennui with her everyday life can be compared to the archetypal London woman during the immoral period of the world wars.

Eliot's description in *The Waste Land* fits in very well here:

The time is now propitious, as he guesses,  
The meal is ended, she is bored and tired,  
Endeavours to engage her in caresses  
Which still are unreproved, if undesired.  
Flushed and decided, he assaults at once;  
Exploring hands encounter no defence;  
His vanity requires no response,  
And makes a welcome of indifference. (97)

### **Commanders and Their Wives**

Sexual violence, against women, pervades *The Handmaid's Tale*. The prevalence of rape and pornography in the pre-Gilead world had themselves justified to the founders, their establishment of the new order. The Commander and the Aunts claim that women are better protected in Gilead, that they are treated with respect and kept safe from violence. The focus of the Gileadean regime is on the control of sex and sexuality. They execute gays and lesbians. They destroy pornography and sexual clothing and kill abortion doctors. Divorce is outlawed and second marriages ritualize bizarre sexual relations which they believe are supported by the Bible.

## **Inevitable Self-Destruction**

Quixotically, at the end of the novel the Gileadean regime eventually destroys itself. In attempting to separate sex from sexuality, the regime demonstrates both its underestimation of and fear of sexuality. The Commander reveals not only that he carried out a series of affairs with his Handmaids, but that there is a more or less secret club where the higher-ups consort with women solely for sexual purposes. These actions demonstrate that the government cannot expunge illicit sexual acts merely by threatening fearful punishments. By destroying the privacy of even condoned sexual acts, the government seems to encourage those in power to act out against these regulations.

## **Taking Bold Risks to Assert Oneself**

Ultimately when Offred takes a series of tremendous risks to continue her affair with Nick, she demonstrates the power of sexual acts. The regime can impose as many punishments as it wants and can force women to watch other women be hung. It can torture and abuse, no matter what it does, ordinary women like Offred will continue to risk everything for acts of sexuality inspired by the possibility of love. The Hand Maid describes the sexual violence manifested over her in the novel as,

I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will . . . Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I'm a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping (62).

## **A Speculative Fiction with Marks of Science Fiction**

Atwood calls *The Handmaid's Tale* "speculative fiction", though the novel possesses many benchmarks of a true science fiction. The new world attempts to alter the relationships of society, but inevitably the relationships reemerge in fundamentally similar ways. Atwood emphasizes that she tried to limit the ideas and practices in *The Handmaid's Tale* to those that have occurred somewhere in the world at some time despite these flights of fancy.

*The Handmaid's Tale* is considered an important novel, largely because of Atwood's clear and precise point of view. Than a story meant for sheer entertainment, *The Handmaid's Tale* is a scathing examination of gender relations, ecological damage, and the dangers of mixing religion and government, and the importance of free speech for retaining a sense of self.

Harold Bloom in his book *An Introduction to Atwood* quotes an interview of Atwood. Atwood said that

This is a book about what happens when certain casually held attitudes about women are taken to their logical conclusions. For example, I explore a number of conservative opinions still held by many - such as a woman's place is in the home. And also certain feminist pronouncements - women prefer the company of other women, for example. Take these beliefs to their logical ends and see what happens. (45).

### **Misguided Idealism**

*The Handmaid's Tale* is an imaginary world gone sour through idealism that fails to correspond to the expectations, principles, and behaviors of real people. In the face of rampant sexual license, gang rape, pornography, venereal disease, abortion protest, and the undermining of traditional values, the fundamentalists who set up Gilead fully expect to improve human life. Some people are fated to fall short of the template within which the new society is shaped, the ethical yardstick by which behavior is measured. "These people are all female, homosexual, underground, and non-fundamentalist victims which are a considerable portion of the U.S. population and can be drawn as an allusion to the contemporary society of The United States.

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