

THE HANDMAID'S TALE

Margaret Atwood

BACKGROUND

- Author: Margaret Atwood
- When Written: Early 1980s
- Where Written: West Berlin
- Published: 1985
- Title alludes to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, a medieval collection of stories about religious pilgrims on way to Canterbury
 - Suggests the novel's place within a longstanding tradition of storytelling, as well as its role in revealing the hypocrisy, foolishness, and sinfulness of supposedly "religious" people

PLOT

- Beginning with a staged terrorist attack (blamed on Islamic extremists) that kills the President and most of Congress, a movement calling itself the “Sons of Jacob” launches a revolution and suspends the Constitution under the pretext of restoring order
- This new regime—a theocratic military dictatorship—moves quickly to strip women of their rights and reorganize society under rigidly hierarchical, patriarchal, and Old Testament-inspired religious and social classes

GENRE

- Speculative Fiction/Dystopian
- Setting: Cambridge Massachusetts, under the government of the Republic of Gilead, which has replaced the U.S.
- Though subtle (and rather deep into the novel), significant future technology is present; however, it is the absence of science and technology that makes this book a frightening *science fiction* story. It begs the question:
 - What might a society *void* of science look like?

THEMES

- Religion and Politics
 - Hypocrisy, Moralization, Justification, Purpose
- Rebellion and Politics
 - Complacency, Radicalism, Privilege, Purpose
- Language and Politics
 - Censorship, Context, Manipulation, Power, Purpose
- Memory, Storytelling, and History
 - Rationalization, Manipulation, Justification, Preservation

THEMES

- Gender Roles
 - Position, Power, Individualism, Fear, Objectification
- Caste and Class
 - Race, Creed, Ethnicity, Tribalism, Xenophobia
- Love
 - Complacency, Jealousy, Strength, Escape, Motivation
- Freedom
 - Freedom to... vs. Freedom from...

THEMES

- In the end, this is a novel about **control**
 - The tools of control
 - Dogmatism, Tribalism, Demagoguery, Language
 - The willingness to be controlled
 - Complacency, Fear, Love, Self-Preservation
 - The desire to exercise control
 - Power, Prejudice, Insecurity, Desperation

SYMBOLS & MOTIFS

- Cambridge, Massachusetts
 - Puritans, Founding Fathers, Harvard
- Red
 - Life, Death, Fertility, Blood, Sin
- Eyes
 - Surveillance, Privacy, Control
- Makeup
 - Appearance, Vanity, Past

SYMBOLS & MOTIFS

- Gardens
 - Birth, Rebirth, Cultivation
- Drugs
 - Control, Escape, Dehumanization
- Eggs
 - Fertility, Motherhood, Fragility

MEMORY, STORYTELLING, AND HISTORY

- Unconventional Narrative Structure
 - Roman Numerals (I-XV) vs. Arabic numerals (1-46)
 - Quotation Marks
 - Narrative Shifts from Past to Present
- “Night” as a Narrative Motif and Symbol
 - “Pre-Gilead” vs. “Post-Gilead”
 - “Freedom”
- Point of View
 - First Person
 - Fragmented, Disordered, and Incomplete
- 3 Big Questions
 - Who is telling the story?
 - How is she telling her story?
 - To whom is she speaking?

WHERE'S THE SCIENCE?

- Science as *Our* Problem
 - Manipulated, Weaponized, Abused
- Science as *Their* Obstacle
 - Knowledge, Communication, Health and Safety
- The Continuum
 - Renaissance
 - Enlightenment
 - Scientific Revolution
 - Industrial Revolution
 - Technical Revolution
- Reverse Engineering
 - Control

LANGUAGE

- Labels
 - Biblical, Military, and Familial
- Republic of Gilead
 - Ironic Symbolism
- We Crave Order
 - Diet of Misleading Truths, Contradictions, Shifting Realities
 - Paralyzed by Confusion
 - Choose a Stable Lie
- Language = Power
- Power = Control

FREEDOM

- Freedom from... vs. Freedom to...
 - “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.”
- Dynamic Characters and Choice
 - “I must have patience: sooner or later he will get me out.”
 - “someone must be out there, taking care of things”
- Atwood’s Message
 - For a society and a culture to be healthy, freedom to and freedom from must coexist; all things, all ideas, all people—no matter how disagreeable or repugnant others may find them—must be *free to* exist and *free from* persecution.