

**Puzzle Piece #2: *The Handmaid's Tale***  
*Critical Thinking in Science Fiction*

**Where's the Science?**

As you read further into this *science* fiction classic, you may ask yourself, “Where’s the science?” That’s a fair question. Margaret Atwood herself prefers the term “speculative” fiction over “science” fiction. That said, science does play a very important role in this story, but not in the way to which we’ve become accustomed in such fiction. In most science fiction, science is the problem. But in *The Handmaid's Tale*, it’s the absence of science that seals the fate of humanity, particularly females.

Control is at the center of this story. Countless novels have explored the ways in which science and technology can be manipulated and marshalled by a government against its people (*Fahrenheit 451*), or the ways in which our overreliance or abuse of science and technology can chip away at our humanity (*Blade Runner*, *The Matrix*) or lead to our own destruction (*Frankenstein*, *Cat's Cradle*). But Atwood’s novel is unusual in that it makes a far more unconventional argument: that the removal of science and technology might be an even easier and more effective way to control a population—and perhaps more likely.

Think about how much we rely on and trust in science and technology. We Google answers. We pay with credit cards. We research through websites. We check our news feeds. We communicate through social media. We watch television, post pics, text one another, microwave food, and remote learn! Doctors, archeologists, anthropologists, and engineers all run lab tests to determine our health, our safety, our ancestry, even our history. Simply removing our smartphone would disorient many of us; removing science altogether might render us virtually helpless. That is where Atwood begins.

What better way to control a population than to remove the very thing that defines the way that population views and engages with the world? Facts, truth, history, even reality itself then becomes compromised. The freethinking of the Renaissance brought humanity out of the Dark Ages. The scholarship of the Enlightenment reordered the political world through a democratic lens and allowed humanity to break free of feudal kingdoms, petty fiefdoms, indentured servitude, and eventually slavery. The Scientific Revolution reoriented the natural world and allowed humanity to break free of superstition. Most science fiction presumes we will proceed along this continuum until we overreach and allow ourselves to fall victim to science and technology. However, Atwood imagines something very different. By removing technology, as is the case in the new Republic of Gilead, the Sons of Jacob are able to exercise a remarkable degree of control over the population. It’s sort of a reverse engineering of social evolution. And it is incredibly, dangerously, frighteningly successful.

Offred, our narrator and protagonist, unintentionally gives the reader clues as to how this transition from democracy to theocracy happened—its origins, the warning signs, the role of the public, etc.—but the full backstory won’t be revealed until Part X (Soul Scrolls). Until then, we can only piece together the mechanics of this new “republic” by watching Offred move through her days, and continually asking the question: Why? Even though we already know the answer: Control.