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## Reality and The Handmaid's Tale

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## Reality and The Handmaid's Tale

### Abstract

**Overview:** One of the most terrifying aspects of Margaret Atwood's dark, dystopian novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, is that the author was inspired by true events. In an interview, Atwood discussed how her writing was heavily inspired by America's Puritan roots, that is, a society where their laws and gender roles were entirely constructed by rigid religious commandments (Bacci 154). *The Handmaid's Tale* pulls ideas from the modern patriarchy and sexist culture of America, as well as its roots in Puritanism, to create a dystopia that is void of human rights and entirely androcentric. In this way, Atwood's novel serves as a warning and an awakening for the modern public, encouraging them to value and protect their human rights. *The Handmaid's Tale* provides a chilling insight into the United States sexist foundation that is reflected in modern society today. Modern-day America is still influenced by its founding Puritan ideals and that these partially toxic influences have shaped American culture, especially western gender stereotypes and culture-wide androcentrism. Although the novel is an extremist interpretation, it reminds citizens to continue to explore and understand their inalienable human rights.

**Author's reflection:** My name is Theresa VanWormer and I am an English Major with Minors in Marketing and Communication at St. John Fisher College. Reading and writing has always been an interest of mine, leading me to be a managing editor for the creative writing magazine *ANGLES* and a writing tutor on campus. I am also the author of "Understanding the Importance of Statues: Symbols of Racism in Modern Society" which was published in the spring 21 edition of *The Review*. In the Spring of 2022 I will be interning with BOA Publications and hopefully beginning to work on my own creative writing. One day, I hope to write and own my own business as a developmental editor. In my free time I enjoy weight lifting and spending time with my friends and family. I am so grateful for this opportunity, and appreciative of Dr. Uman who led me towards this topic that is so very important to talk about.

Theresa VanWormer

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### Reality and *The Handmaid's Tale*

One of the most terrifying aspects of Margaret Atwood's dark, dystopian novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, is that its author was inspired by true events. In an interview, Atwood discussed how her writing was heavily inspired by America's Puritan roots, that is, a society where their laws and gender roles were entirely constructed by rigid religious commandments (Bacci 154). *The Handmaid's Tale* pulls ideas from the modern patriarchy and sexist culture of America, as well as its roots in Puritanism, to create a dystopia that is void of human rights and entirely androcentric. In this way, Atwood's novel serves as a warning and an awakening for the modern public, encouraging them to value and protect their human rights. *The Handmaid's Tale* provides a chilling insight into the United States sexist foundation that is reflected in modern society today. Modern-day America is still influenced by its founding Puritan ideals and that these partially toxic influences have shaped American culture, especially western gender stereotypes and culture-wide androcentrism. *The Handmaid's Tale* reflects a set of already existing ideas in the US, and is an extremist portrayal of what life would be like if society were to be controlled by them.

Puritanism started as a religious reformation movement in the late 1500s as a response to the belief that the Church of England had not separated itself enough from Catholicism. Puritans have an exceedingly strict worldview that revolves around their religious interpretation of the Bible, a factor that motivated many Puritans to become Colonists in what would become

modern-day United States of America (Morgan 2). These colonists set up their new home as a safe haven where they could practice their religion in all aspects of their life. Their laws were strict and with harsh punishments that a person could be expelled or even executed for dissenting against the law. According to Edmund S. Morgan in his book, *The Puritan Family: Religion & Domestic Relations in Seventeenth-Century New England*, Puritan life was one that was bound by a combination of religion, law, and gender roles. Women were bound to the household, children, and the rules of their husband. They could not educate themselves beyond secondary school or read other than the Bible, and they were to stray away from any sort of sexual thought or desire. Despite this however, their husbands were to treat them with respect and some women even handled their family's financial affairs (Morgan 5). These gender constructed ideas are rooted in the foundation of the United States of America. Within the country, these ideas have grown and changed into stereotypes within modern society.

Colonial Puritanism is the real-world archetype of Gilead, the religious extremist society set up within *The Handmaid's Tale* dystopia. Within the world of the novel, men hold all the power, and women have their place in the household as Marthas (servants), Wives, or Handmaids. Women hold no economic standing, little status, and no control over their situations, similar to the female Puritan experience. Most women have lost the ability to reproduce, so the few who are fertile are captured and trained by a strict religious process to become Handmaidens, or women who will try to bear children for the men of high government society. There is to be no intimacy or expression of sexuality, but just sex for procreation in alignment with their Biblical texts. The Government has placed strict religious law and constant surveillance over its people, forcing them to conform in ways that colonial Puritans also had to. Individuals born into Gilead are only allowed to practice the religion chosen by their

Government, and must speak only in alignment with religious phrases. They have no freedom to go where they choose or to marry who they choose but women are either traded around for reproduction or sold in arranged marriages. Those who go against any part of the law are beaten, humiliated, or executed. Others, including those who express different religious beliefs, are hung in the public to make a spectacle. In Puritan times, public humiliation or driving someone out of the colony was much more common, but the extreme still happened.

Despite its roots in Puritanism, Atwood's dystopia is far worse than Colonial America in many ways, and not all the happenings within the novel can be directly related to the colonists; however, the structural similarities are significant. Religiously speaking, women were inferior to men, as they interpreted the Bible literally believing that women were made second to man and from man. Eve ate the forbidden fruit and convinced Adam to do the same, so therefore women became the symbol of weakness and temptation in the world. Although sin is committed by men and women alike, it was women who were charged with humanity's Biblical weakness. When Biblical texts are interpreted literally, it often ends up promoting traditional gender roles and sexist behavior instead of valuing the lessons and morals within the scripture. When literal interpretation is put into law, governments often end up forcing entire countries to conform to policies that are detrimental to women's freedom. This then becomes a vehicle for anti-feminist and totalitarian leaders to limit and manipulate their citizens.

Gilead interprets Biblical texts literally to create their new society and to maintain absolutist control over the citizens. They created the job of the Handmaids based on the story of a biblical woman, Rachel, who could not have children. Rachel was so desperate for a child that she forced her handmaid Bilhah to get pregnant for her, "Give me children, or else I die. Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb? Behold my maid Bilhah. She

shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her” (Atwood 88). From this Old Testament passage, Gilead interprets everything literally: if the Handmaid’s can’t bear children then they are killed, during the birthing the Wife mounts a birthing stool so the Handmaid is bearing on her knees, viable women are forced to bear children, and children belong to the Wives despite being birthed by the Handmaids. If interpreted literally, without the lesson or context of the story, the Bible here promotes rape, slavery, prostitution, and the objectification of women. *The Handmaid’s Tale* shows a world where these disrespectful and horrible actions would become legal, as well as revealing that the Bible does not always teach humanity to act with dignity.

As seen from the Biblical story of Rachel and Bilhah, the ability for a woman to be recognized as worthy is in her ability to get pregnant, but that in turn takes away her identity. In some historical Puritan documents, it is mentioned that some of the women had names like Silence, Fear, Prudence, Comfort, Hopestill, and Be Fruitful (Morgan 67). These are names of virtues and expectations of women, not of human beings. Within *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the Handmaid’s names are outlawed and they take the name of their Commander after the title, “Of”. The protagonist describes this on page 84, saying “My name isn’t Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it is forbidden” (Atwood). This given name, Offred, is a title of objectification that shows she is property and the child bearer of Commander Fred. The legal objectification of women as a means of reproduction and models of purity are both allowed by the government’s religious affiliation. While some Puritan beliefs coincide with Gilead, Atwood’s dystopia is much more gruesome with its treatment of women, government rigidity, and lack of any moral guidance. While Puritanism may be the foundation for the novel, it is Gilead’s combination of the worst aspects of Puritanism and its existence within modern society

that make it so tyrannical. In both the novel and in history, women end up lacking in every way of having human rights. The main character Offred describes the shift that occurred in the government, where modern day women were fired from their jobs and their husband or nearest relative would have instant control of their finances. After having difficulties logging online, Offred called her friend Moria who reported that “Women can’t hold property anymore” under the new extremist law (Atwood 178). This changed the dynamic in her marriage as well. After this happened, the protagonist describes feeling like a “doll” of her husband’s, translating to her loss of her personhood as the government reduces her to the likes of an object (182). Atwood’s novel reinforces the importance of human rights, but emphasizes its importance to women, who do not enjoy the same traditional privileges as men.

Some people may say that these ideas associated with Puritanism are dead in modern society in the wake of feminist movements, but authors like Matthew Hutson of the *New York Times* disagree, and see Puritan influences within America’s unwritten cultural standards, especially regarding gender stereotypes. In his opinion article, “Still Puritan After All These Years,” he presents the results of an experiment done by psychologist Eric Luis Uhlmann in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, where people of different cultures and countries outside of the US were asked to respond to questions that were influenced by Puritan attitudes and beliefs. Their answers would be compared to the answers of Americans who would be asked the same questions. In all aspects, whether they pertained to prudishness, self-discipline, and ideas related to predestination, Americans all answered with morals more in tune with Puritan attitudes. The results of this study support my argument that the Puritan foundation of American society has influenced stereotypes and attitudes in the modern-day US. These ideas can sometimes be good, encouraging hard work and honesty, however they can also be damaging,

especially with consideration to female sexuality and gender roles, highlighted by Puritan influences within *The Handmaid's Tale*.

The likelihood of Americans to associate ideas about hard work to God and to judge women more harshly for promiscuity than its compared countries may be in part due to Puritan influences on the Constitution and the foundation of the American Dream. Both promote a family setting where men take most power and control, while women are considered a part of a man's domestic experience. In modern day society, it is unlikely that a person would see prejudiced ideas against women blatantly stated in documents of law. It is very common, however, for individuals to internalize these ideas through the influence of the traditional American patriarchy, a sexist foundation that limits women.

In modern day America, women have the ability to make their own income, hold their own jobs, are allowed to marry as they see fit, and express their sexuality more freely. In this light, it seems like Puritan or Gileadean comparison would be unthinkable; however, all of these mentioned freedoms come with invisible social obstacles. While a woman is technically free to have whatever job she desires, the statistics of her actually obtaining this is very low depending on how important the job may be. According to Rutgers Center for American Women and Politics, currently there are 127 female members of the 535 seats in Congress. Therefore, less than a quarter of the US Congress is female, and this is the highest percentage in American history. This is just one example, but women are significantly underrepresented in the government and other high-ranking titles or companies. Unlike Gilead, women in our modern era do have the ability to hold their own job and property, but the distribution of wealth and job opportunity is far from being considered accessible or fair. This gap creates a structure that is



reflected within *The Handmaid's Tale*, women are excluded from positions of power and are discouraged from filling traditionally male-held positions.

While some would say that this is based on the capability of the individual, I would say that it is engrained sexual inequality. The foundational gender structure of the U.S claims that men are superior to women, and has socially programmed modern America through television, music, language, religion, books, advertisements, pornography, and more, to become blind to the ways women are oppressed in society. Louis Tyson says in her novel *Critical Theory Today*,

patriarchy continually exerts forces that undermine women's self-confidence and assertiveness, and then points to the absence of these qualities as proof that women are naturally, and therefore correctly, self-effacing and submissive. To cite a similar example of patriarchal programming, little girls have been (and some still are) told early in their educational careers that they can't do math... girls are often 'rewarded' for failing at math: they receive ready sympathy, coddling, and other debilitating though entirely enticing payoffs for being feminine... In short, girls are programmed to fail. (82-83)

Stereotypes like these contribute to the numbers provided by Rutgers. Women are still discouraged from positions of power and from striving as high as men are able to, and they are often successfully denied means to these positions. Damaging stereotypes like these are extremified within *The Handmaid's Tale* and show a world where women could hold absolutely no power, however, it is important to acknowledge the warning this novel provides. If something like Gilead were to happen today, how far is it from the patriarchy's sexist constraints and society's objectification of women? The same stereotypes and androcentric intent exists, the only difference is that Gilead shows what would happen if those stereotypes were to become law.

The objectification of women and its effect is one of the novel's most prominent and heartbreaking themes. Pornography and advertising are two of the largest contributors to the modern objectification and sexualization of women. In pornography, women are often degraded and devalued, with no sympathy towards her personhood but entire focus on the attraction of her body parts. In advertising, women in revealing clothing are often portrayed with the merchandise trying to be sold, in order to add desire to the campaign. *The Handmaid's Tale* takes an interesting, but dark, spin on this topic, as the Handmaid's become valued for their ability to produce children and as a human vessel, but loses all of her personhood. Offred muses sorrowfully within the novel, thinking about how before the rise of Gilead she thought of her body as a means of being happy and living, but now she considers her flesh like "a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am" (Atwood 74). Offred's identity as a human being has been lost through the objectification of her body, and within this quote she reveals how her value is based in her ability to be a vessel for the Commander and his Wife. When Janine, another Handmaiden gives birth to a child for a Commander and his wife, she is afterwards instantly discarded. The baby is given to the Wife and soon after Janine will be shipped off to another family to see if she can do it again. There is a parallel between this and modern sexualization, both devalue the person and make them an object of sex. The effects of this are destructive for women in both situations, as Offred says she doesn't even look at her body anymore, "I don't want to look at something that determines me so completely" (Atwood 63). The sexualization of her female body and her ability to become pregnant disassociates Offred from her body, as if it is no longer a vessel of a person with inherent value, but a bunch of body parts.

The objectification and sexualization of women in modern society also contributes to the current sexual assault and rape epidemic that is occurring within the United States. According to the 2019 article, “Criminal Victimization”, by the U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, nearly 1 in 5 women within the United States have experienced rape of any kind at some point in their lives. That startling percentage does not account for the amount of sexual assault, coercion, and violence that happens to women every day. Despite these statistics, modern androcentric culture blames women for the sexual assault they experience. Instead of blaming the objectification of women, women are blamed for wearing revealing clothing and tempting men into taking advantage of them. This stereotype is epitomized within Handmaid Janine’s experience at the Red Center. She confessed that she was gang raped at fourteen years old and aborted the resulting child. Offred remembers how after the confession the Aunts and rest of the Handmaids had to shame Janine, “But *whose* fault was it? Aunt Helena says...*Her* fault, *her* fault, *her* fault, we chant in unison. *Who* led them on? Aunt Helena beams... *She* did. *She* did. *She* did” (Atwood 72). In this sickening part of the novel, the Aunts symbolize what the androcentric patriarchy would like society to believe, and the Handmaids represent how women are forced to take in this information and make it their own. The emphasis of the words “*she*”, “*her*”, “*who*” and “*whose*” in combination with their repetition, put the blame entirely on the victim and away from the male rapists, and show the pressure society puts on victims to blame themselves instead of those who committed the crime against them. This also divides the Handmaids against each other instead of allowing them to lift each other up. Janine is blamed for being forcibly taken advantage of at a young vulnerable age and this experience seems to break her, forcing her to conform to society’s ideals.

There is a duality between the human experience and the socially constructed 'feminine' experience. What I mean by this, is that from their youth, women are often berated by society's construction of gender, encouraging them to desire marriage, modesty, and child-like timidity. In other words, for centuries of human history, women were expected to marry and depend on a man whose ideal masculine characteristics could protect her socially defined feminine weakness. The woman is traditionally defined by her ability to provide a man with his domestic experience, meaning she is to run the household and bear the children, while he is able to be independent, free, and gain economic stability. As Lois Tyson describes in *Critical Theory Today*, the patriarchal society associates femininity with frailty, timidity, and emotional weakness. This contrasts with the same society that considers masculinity the 'good' norm, meaning violence, boldness, and emotional numbness are the stronger option (Tyson 81). This idea of the patriarchal binary thought is apparent within *The Handmaid's Tale*, especially if the novel is read as a critique to modern day anti-feminism.

Shirley Neuman's fantastically written article, "'Just a Backlash': Margaret Atwood, Feminism, and *The Handmaid's Tale*", published in the *University of Toronto Quarterly* discusses what was happening in Atwood's time period that would have influenced the happenings of *The Handmaid's Tale*, and claims that the novel is a response to the backlash on feminism and women's rights in America during the early 1980s and within other countries. Neuman recounts that leading up to the 80's America was heading into a better era of women's rights, where there were government funded programs that supported women, discouraged domestic abuse, promoted the pro-choice movement, and encouraged women to enter into the workplace. Atwood knew how fragile this new state was, and was not surprised to see its coming backlash that influenced her novel. Under a new presidency, feminism and a woman's choice to

have children came under attack, there was media-wide moral shaming, closure of federally funded programs against domestic violence, and women, who would influence the character of Serena Joy and Aunt Lydia, spoke about returning to the home to let the man provide (Neuman). Within the novel, Offred remembers that before the government upheaval, Serena was an extremist conservative speaker, but under the new order it seems as if her opinions backfired, "She doesn't make speeches anymore. She has become speechless. She stays in her home, but it doesn't seem to agree with her. How furious she must be, now that she has been taken at her word" (Atwood 46). Atwood highlights the irony of these female, anti-feminist speakers within Serena Joy's character. They preach the domestication of the female, yet that would take away their own ability to publicly speak. They seem as though they are fighting for women's rights as if they don't understand the value of their own freedom. These anti-feminist ideas instituted by the right-wing conservatives have the power to take control within the government under a leader who supports them. It shows that these ideas are alive and well, but also that these ideas are related to religious roots.

This article, 'The Handmaid's Tale' Author Margaret Atwood Warns that Under Trump 'This might Actually Happen': There's a Reason Why Trump Supporters are Not Looking Forward to Hulu's Adaptation of 'The Handmaid's Tale.' by Wilstein is from *The Daily Beast* and it contains an interview with Margaret Atwood to talk about the resurfacing of her novel around the 2016 election of Donald Trump, a president who is solidly aligned with the Right Wing conservationists. The article prefaces that upon his election, many young people attempted to attack the new president on the behalf of his stance on abortion and women's rights, relating it to the novel and its new television series. Whether Trump supports it or not, his campaign and persona are culturally associated with white and male privilege. Due to this, his

position as president can be seen as a threat to minority rights and his authoritarian personality amplifies this. In the interview, Atwood discusses that she had to point out to the collective that the novel is a few decades old now, has nothing to do with Trump, and has no one within the book who acts like he does. Despite this, she mentions that the book can, during this time in history, be read under a new light. She encourages more people to read the novel and to allow it to inspire them to continue to fight for their rights, especially for women's rights, because there is always more work to be done.

The United States of America, although a progressive and successful country, still has culturally based androcentrism and sexist ideals that do not allow women to be true equals to men. These ideas, such as the objectification of women, the influence of the patriarchy, exclusion of women to the job field, and the sexualization of women, all can find some of their roots in colonial Puritanism. While the Puritans were trying to live good and moral lives to get to heaven, their literal interpretation of the Bible created a gap between the female and male experience. Inequality and oppression have grown into modern issues that the feminist movement works to reveal and correct. *The Handmaid's Tale* is a novel that combines Puritan influence with modern stereotypes to create a dystopian future that has entirely suppressed and objectified women under religious law. Although the novel is an extremist interpretation, it calls attention to current issues of female-male equality and reminds citizens to continue to explore and understand their inalienable human rights.

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