

Seeing Tomorrow in Today:
A closer look at the accuracy of Margaret
Atwood's literary predictions

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Crack cocaine, heavy metal and taboo sexual promiscuity. These are the three essential components of what has become one of the most infamous decades in America's history, the 1980s. It was a time of radical change, flamboyant promiscuity, but most of all, a time of a turbulent societal dichotomy; the choice between change and equality and traditional values finally presented itself. Through the mediums of literature, music and television the tumultuous conditions of America were depicted, forces that proved to be powerfully revolutionary. In fact, many authors of the time used their work to implicitly send future warnings or societal criticisms to the public. Margaret Atwood uses The Handmaid's Tale as a medium for both cultural and social analysis of the 1980s, as well as an urgent warning for the future. Today, more than 20 years later, contemporary readers can witness the failure to heed those warnings, as our present 21st century conditions fundamentally mirror those of Gilead.

The multiple conditions in Atwood's narrative, in essence her fears and warnings for the future, will be given context from the social and political climate of the 1980s. For as the York Press' York Notes wrote in a 1992 review of Margaret Atwood's novels:

They need to be read with some knowledge of the context of their own time to enable the reader to see the particularities of the society in which they were produced...*The Handmaid's Tale* is warning against threats of environmental pollution, religious fundamentalism and state surveillance in that same New World which has become the United States of America (York Press, 50).

The context for The Handmaid's Tale is imperative to its meaning and future warnings. Pollution, Reagan's regime and dominant religious and moral presence should therefore be analyzed both in the text itself, 80s society and currently as well.

One critique that Atwood presents in her text is the abysmal state of the environment and high rate of pollution. Atwood describes the main character Offred shopping in the main market:

Loaves and Fishes is hardly ever open. Why bother opening when there's nothing to sell? The sea fisheries were defunct several years ago; the few fish they have now are from fish farms, and taste muddy. The news says the coastal areas are being "rested"...Could they all be extinct, like the whales? (Atwood, 164).

Here Atwood both criticizes the environmental state of the 1980's, what began to be called 'green issues,' and poses a future warning of what could become of pollution and the environmental disregard that became prevalent in that time. In an oral interview with the leader of the EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) Alvin L. Alm about his leadership during the early 80s, Alm said, "Over time, environmental concerns seeped into the educational system and received constant press attention. By the late 1980s, there was a recognition that environmental problems were global in nature" (Alm). Here Alm draws attention to the seriousness of global issues, and their rise in popularity during the 1980s. As the 80s became a time of opulence and superfluous belongings, the environment began to heavily pay the price, a trend that Atwood tried to unveil in her prose. One of the potential consequences of this pollution and environmental disintegration, at least through Atwood's eyes, is the threat of male sterility. Offred talks with a doctor who exposes this secret to her, "'Most of those old guys can't make it anymore,' he says. 'or they're sterile'" (Atwood, 79). This was the first time when America truly began to make connections between environmental conditions and human health, a phenomenon that Atwood definitely attributed to in her prose as she continually provided examples of the monotonous and depressing 'concrete garden' that characterized Gilead. This state of environmental decline gives reason for Atwood's critique and future warning in The Handmaid's Tale.

In terms of pollution the 21st century seems no better than Gilead, in fact, far worse, making Atwood's cautionary efforts completely futile. Bush Greenwatch, an organization that tracks the current administration's environmental policy, writes, "The Bush administration is applying new levels of secrecy to public information, using the excuse of "national security risks" to undercut the public's right to know about contamination of the environment, transport of hazardous materials, pipeline routes, and more—putting public health at risk and chilling community activism" (Greenwatch). Our waters are filthy, our atmosphere is thoroughly contaminated with obtuse levels of carbon dioxide, and oil and radiation accidents contaminate American's daily, but still, countless people, including those who lead our nation, pay as little attention as possible. Although Atwood gave warning through her implications of male sterility and water pollution, our society is as bad as or even worse than Gilead, proving her warnings ineffective.

In The Handmaid's Tale Atwood references Reagan's return to traditionalism, prominently the tangible potential of lost liberties and shattered rights that his conservative administration posed in the 1980's. A strong example presents itself in Offred's description of the deprived rights in Gilead:

They were doctors, then, in the time before, when such things were legal...No woman in her right mind, these days, would seek to prevent a birth, should she be so lucky to conceive (Atwood, 32).

Here Offred describes the right of abortion that was taken away, one of the rights that Reagan was attempting to abolish in the 1980s as well. As Reagan said in his *Evil Empire Speech* written in 1983:

Is all of Judeo-Christian tradition wrong? Are we to believe that something so sacred can be looked upon as a purely physical thing with no potential for emotional and psychological harm?... More than a decade ago, a Supreme Court decision literally wiped off the books of fifty states statutes protecting the rights of unborn children. Abortion on demand now takes the lives of up to one and a half million unborn children a year. Human life legislation ending this tragedy will someday pass the Congress, and you and I must never rest until it does. (Reagan).

Reagan's desire was to blatantly infringe upon both the religious and moral beliefs of America in the 1980s. Abortion was only one potential casualty of the Judeo-Christian/family rights seeds that Reagan attempted to plant in America. The deprivation of abortion that the Gileadan women experienced is yet another warning that that Atwood articulated for the future, a caution that will be deemed ineffective later on.

Overall Reagan desired a return to 'good old America,' a nation filled with passive women, hard work and values. Atwood insinuates this traditional image in Offred's narrative, "like the window on a Christmas card, an old one, night and ice outside, and within a candle, a shining tree, a family, I can hear the bells even, sleigh bells, from the radio, old music..." (Atwood, 75). Here Atwood slyly fits in an image of the traditional America that Reagan was so desperately trying to reinforce. Reagan said "Now, I'm sure that you must get discouraged at times, but you've done better than you know, perhaps. There's a great spiritual awakening in America, a renewal of the traditional values that have been the bedrock of America's goodness and greatness" (Reagan, 75). Here Reagan clearly outlines what he once desired for America, a

return to traditional values, a Christian state, and most of all, the well being of the family, otherwise known as the docility of women. Reagan truly believed that if America went back to that traditional familial structure than the new issues of drug abuse, AIDS, sexual promiscuity and other taboo problems in the 1980s would subside. Reagan felt that in pushing the nation backward, to a place of traditionalism and early Americanism, than the issues that characterized the 80s would be quelled. This belief was very tempting and convincing to large portions of American society, but because old-fashioned beliefs happened to be infused with sexism, racism and oppression, other parts of America became livid. Atwood loudly rebels against this concept in her writing, clearly showing how religion and moral beliefs should not, and cannot, pervade the inner-structure of America's government. America should be a place of equality and prosperity for each individual, not for large groups or dominant genders. This 'exclusionary' trend is incredibly important, as Atwood, in her future Gileadian society, truly reflects the beginning of this departure from individuality and equality in the 1980s, and creates a society that shows what would happen if this trend continued. Not only are women completely isolated and societally ostracized from men within Gilead, but possibly every method is taken to make sure that they stay this way. Medical sedatives are given to women daily ensuring their calm and peaceful existence that excludes retaliation and protest. Offred narrates, "We were tired there, a lot of the time. We were on some kind of pill or drug I think, they put it in the food, to keep us calm" (Atwood, 91). This trend of exclusion has continued throughout history, presently affecting race and socio-economic relations in this country. It is clear why Atwood would use The Handmaid's Tale as a medium for warning, as Reagan's adamant desires posed terrifying threats.

Fast-forwarding to today, gay rights, stem cell research and abortion were all the main debates in the 2004 presidential election. Once again, the war between progressive and accepting vs. traditionally conservative America had taken hold of this nation. Neither foreign policy, the war in Iraq or environmental policy were critically important in the election, as religion and morals took center stage in the media and public polls. Is this not exactly what Atwood was warning against? Reagan said that 'family rights' should take precedent over all else, well haven't they? If our society continues on its current path abortion will

soon be illegal, as President Bush has secured the Supreme Court with extremely conservative judges. Free sexual rights will also be taken away as gay marriage has been deemed illegal in most states along with the use of stem cell research. As literary critic Amin Malak wrote about Atwood and the The Handmaid's Tale, "She tries to caution against right-wing fundamentalism, rigid dogmas, and misogynous theosophies" (Malak, 134). Our current society is religiously fundamentalist to a *deceptive* extent, in that there are no public hangings of doctors and the bible is not read aloud to all women, but it no less real. There are 11 states in this nation that ban oral sex between consenting adults, and 5 more that completely ban homosexual activity between consenting adults (Painter). Many don't even know about the existence of sodomy laws, but they are a clear production of the dominant moral and religious force in this country; a centralized presence that reflects traces of Atwood's warnings.

Our society continues to infuse religion into medicine, politics and most importantly, into the decision of who should lead this country, an enormous problem emerges. No longer do democrats and republicans debate over critical wars in which people are dying, but rather whether stem cell research is an anti-abortionist belief. As religion takes the main stage thousands are dying, let alone in Iraq, but on our soil as well. The necessary focus and determination to better our security and our well-being as a country-close to 37 million U.S. citizens live in poverty, approximately 12%- is rated second to dominant religion or group of people, a trend that mirrors the events and societal forces Atwood warned against in Gilead (Greenwatch).

The Handmaid's Tale was a complex combination of political, social and environmental analysis. Margaret Atwood wrote the novel as an analysis of the 1980s, and used it as a medium for future warnings, ones that America did not listen to or take seriously. Through analysis of pollution, Reagan's regime and religious and moral dominance in the 80s and then today, we can see how Atwood used her text for cultural analysis and future caution. As a society we have to realize the important role history plays in our future, for if we don't, our present society will form into something far worse than Gilead ever was.

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