## Literary Analysis Award

### Feminist Fears: The Cultural and Historical Context

### of *The Handmaid’s Tale*

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**Writer’s Reflection**

For my cultural and historical analysis paper, I wrote about how the Republic of Gilead in *The Handmaid’s Tale* showed the backlash against feminism in the 1980s and how a literal interpretation of religious texts can lead to the oppression of women. I chose to write about that because it was a theme that caught my attention immediately while I was reading. It also is something that genuinely interests me because I grew up Roman Catholic but don’t agree with much of the literal interpretation of the Bible that characterizes Catholicism. I believe that much of what is written in the Bible can be interpreted the wrong way, causing women and other minority groups to be treated unfairly. Therefore, *The Handmaid’s Tale* really seemed to help me gather my own thoughts and beliefs together*.* It also inspired me to think further about how I can integrate my religious views with what I believe is right—something that I have always struggled with.

In terms of my paper, I felt that I did a pretty good job providing enough background for my topic and how it related to the text. It was actually very surprising how well quotes from my outside sources as well as quotes from *The Handmaid’s Tale* meshed together in my paper. I know that I would not have been able to do this as effectively if I hadn’t worked so hard on my annotated bibliography. Because of this, I now understand more than ever that writing is a process that takes time. Before this paper, I thought that if I paid attention in class, came up with an idea, and executed it, I would produce a quality paper. Now I know that writing is much more complicated than that and involves baby steps. I learned that it is ok to throw ideas out, start over, and drastically revise. However, even more importantly than that, I learned how crucial it is to understand a text in its cultural and historical context. Without thoroughly understanding where an author is coming from or in what time period they are writing, part of the story is missing. From now on, I will try to situate the texts I read in a larger context in order to get the most information out of them. This is a new concept for me, but I know it will be helpful in future courses I take here at Miami University as well as when I graduate.

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Imagine living with the constant fear that decades worth of progress might be taken away. The story told in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* brings life to such fears that feminists had during the 1980s. These fears arose because the 1980s was a time in which religious conservatives gained power and caused many to think that gains women had made in previous decades, such as freedoms of sexual expression, access to contraception, and non-traditional gender roles, would be reversed. *The Handmaid’s Tale*, therefore, mirrors this backlash against the rise of feminism and the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s. In the novel, the Republic of Gilead is a society that shows the consequences of a complete reversal of women’s rights based on literal interpretations of Biblical teachings. Women are no longer allowed to read, write, or think for themselves; instead, their sole purpose is to reproduce. Through the narration of Offred, a handmaid in the novel, I believe Margaret Atwood argued that the rise in Christian fundamentalists during the 1980s undermined some of the progress women had recently gained and showed that a literal interpretation of the Bible can lead to the oppression of women.

 First, I believe Margaret Atwood showed that Christian fundamentalists during the 1980s undermined some of the progress women had recently gained through the creation of the Republic of Gilead in her novel. However, this is hard to understand without the historical context of and leading up to the 1980s. The 1980s was a time when “church-based groups were increasingly involved in debates over reproductive and family issues” (Rindfuss et al. 493). Specifically, religious conservatives took stances that strongly opposed the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, which was characterized by “widespread access to contraception, the legalization of abortion, and more non-traditional gender roles” (Rindfuss et al. 502). While feminists of the time thought that the sexual revolution helped women gain confidence and freedom in their sexuality, many religious groups were opposed and wanted a return to traditional gender roles and family life. Therefore, with the rise in fundamentalist and conservative Christians in the 1980s, feminists obviously had fears that everything they worked for would be undone. Margaret Atwood’s creation of the Republic of Gilead in *The Handmaid’s Tale* was a way that made those fears and insecurities a reality on paper.

In that fictional reality, women are used only as objects for procreation. This is shown in the text when Offred says, “We are for breeding purposes . . . There is supposed to be nothing entertaining about us, no room is to be permitted for the flowering of secret lusts; no special favors are to be wheedled, by them or us, there are to be no toeholds for love. We are two-legged wombs, that’s all sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices” (Atwood 136). Through this quote, Offred explains that her only worth is through being an object for reproduction. This is diametrically opposed to how she viewed herself and her body before the religious extremists created Gilead in the novel. This is shown in the novel when she says, “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. I could use it to run, push buttons of one sort or another, make things happen. There were limits, but my body was nevertheless lithe, single, solid, one with me” (Atwood 73). This quote shows that she could experience sexual pleasures, go where she wanted, and do all of what she desired before Gilead. The contrast between these two quotes, in my opinion, shows that Margaret Atwood argued that women had lost a sense of confidence and respect for their bodies with the new rise of religious conservatives during the 1980s. Although women’s rights in reality were not restricted in exactly the same ways or with the severity that they were in Gilead, the 1980s was still “a time of substantial social and political upheaval that saw the renewed vigor of the antiabortion movement and increasing public discourse about sexual behavior” (Rindfuss et al. 502). This created a lot of anxiety and a loss of momentum for feminists who fought for more sexual freedom, which undoubtedly undermined at least some of their progress. Gilead is a great representation of all of the worst fears of feminists at the time because all sexual freedom and confidence for women was taken away.

In addition to showing that the rise in Christian fundamentalists during the 1980s undermined progress towards equality and freedom of expression for women, Margaret Atwood also showed that a literal interpretation of the Bible can lead to oppression. In the 1980s, there was a large rise in Christian fundamentalists, people who stress that the Bible should be interpreted literally as a historical record and as guidance for faith and morals. Through the Republic of Gilead, Atwood showed how this interpretation of scripture can lead to inequality and even oppression of women. Gilead’s basis of literal Biblical teachings can be seen from the following quote from Offred: “It’s the usual story, the usual stories. God to Adam, God to Noah. *Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth.* Then comes the moldy old Rachel and Leah stuff we had drummed into us at the Center. *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). Through this quote, it is obvious that the Bible is the justification and reason that women are only used for reproductive purposes in Gilead. If a woman is too old to have children or thought to be infertile in Gilead, then a handmaid is used to have children in her place. This is Offred’s role in the story as a handmaid as well as the basis for Gilead in general due to declining birth rates. Offred also says in the novel that “not every Commander had a Handmaid: some of their Wives have children. *From each,* says the slogan, *according to her ability; to each according to his needs*. … It was from the Bible, or so they said” (Atwood 117). This quote shows that women in the novel are used by men and for men. Although these quotes show that Gilead was based off of literal interpretations of the Bible, there are deeper reasons as to why a literal interpretation of scripture leads to the oppression of women.

There are multiple reasons why a literal interpretation of scripture can lead to the oppression of women, but Atwood demonstrated points based in sociology and in the language of scripture. Obviously the details are far more complicated and overreaching than this paper can cover, but overall the idea is that religious ideas and values permeate society just like any other social institution. One sociologist said it very eloquently when she said that “religious worldviews and justifications of social conduct are two sides of the same coin” (Shaffer 792). This applies directly to the text and its historical context because at the time that *The Handmaid’s Tale* was written, as stated previously in this paper, Christian fundamentalists and conservatives were increasing in prominence. By creating the Republic of Gilead, Margaret Atwood addressed the fact that society as a whole was affected by that rise. I believe she specifically focused on Gilead’s control of gender roles and sexuality because “both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament portray God in overwhelmingly masculine terms, such as Lord, King, Father, Judge, Mighty Warrior, and so on” (Burns 424). These masculine concepts of the divine, no doubt, contributed to the justification of the subjugation of women in the text as well as in society in the 1980s. Therefore, it is easy to see that a literal interpretation of scripture can have a negative impact on women because a society’s interpretation of and reaction to a text with masculine bias can and does affect societies who take it literally.

*The Handmaid’s Tale* was a nightmare made into fictional reality for any feminist in the 1980s. Through her creation of the Republic of Gilead, Margaret Atwood expressed that the rise in Christian fundamentalism during that time undermined some of the progress women had recently gained from the recent sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s. She also showed that a literal interpretation of the Bible can lead to the oppression of women. Through these, I believe she argues that religious interpretations and expressions should be used with caution. In the United States, a country celebrated for its diversity and acceptance of people from multiple backgrounds, beliefs, and worldviews, people need to be aware of the fact that religion has played, is playing, and will continue to play “surprisingly strong private, spiritual, and public roles” (Marry 18). Due to this, it is important that people who have strong beliefs try their best to not impose their beliefs on others. Although history has provided many examples of oppression based on extremist views, it is easy to get caught up in present circumstances. Atwood wrote in the historical notes section of the novel the following that sums up what I believe she is trying to say: “As all historians know, the past is a great darkness, and filled with echoes. Voices may reach us from it; but what they say to us is imbued with the obscurity of the matrix out of which they come; and, try as we may, we cannot always decipher them precisely in the clearer light of our own day” (Atwood 311). Therefore, I believe that Margaret Atwood highly encourages her audience to be mindful of others and to not take any interpretation of religion or text to an extreme in order to avoid inequity of people or groups in society.

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Editorial Team's Note

In her literary analysis of Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Maria Grosso demonstrates the fear and anxiety surrounding the rise of Christian fundamentalism in 1980s America through analyzing the rules and regulations of the society found in Atwood’s text. Grosso makes an effective argument through balancing historical and cultural background information with close analysis of the novel.  When reading, pay close attention to how Grosso’s paragraphs build upon each other. She begins by introducing her argument and providing background information, and then uses that information to examine Atwood’s text. And then, as she concludes her essay, she does not just restate everything that she’s already said in the essay, but instead explores the larger implications of Atwood’s work for American society today.  As you write your own essay, consider how you might use your research to inform your own close readings and analysis of your source text. What information is needed for your audience to be able to follow your argument?  What information can be left out? What might the larger implications of your argument be?