Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) is set in the near future, after the overthrow of the US government. The Republic of Gilead has restructured society according to an ultra-conservative religious framework. The narrator, a powerless concubine or 'handmaid', tells the story of her life within the household of Commander Fred and his wife Serena Joy. Women's rights have been quickly eroded as the new regime imposes strict moral and social control within the Republic of Gilead. Most people banished there are sent to the colonies to pick over nuclear waste as a punishment. Perhaps only a Canadian, a neighbour as well as an outsider to the United States, could create such an unsettling vision of the American future.

In fleshing out one possible answer to this fundamental question, Atwood asks, 'If a woman’s social and historical contexts

Cultural context

Considering Atwood as a Canadian writer means studying the representation of the unique relationship between the USA and Canada both in real life and as represented in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. David Staines argues that:

"Perhaps only a Canadian, a neighbour as well as an outsider to the United States, could create such an unsettling vision of the American future." 

Staines 2006, p. 2

While some see *The Handmaid’s Tale* as a work of American literature, given that Atwood was living in Massachusetts when she wrote it and its setting and theme reflect the USA of the 1980s, many ‘CanLit’ critics would view such an overwriting of Atwood’s national identity as an act of overt cultural imperialism.

Political and environmental contexts

A politically committed writer, Atwood has worked for Amnesty International and supports the Green Party of Canada. The Handmaid’s Tale is set within a society that has brought environmental disaster upon itself by poisoning the planet to the point of rendering many of its inhabitants sterile, and consequently choosing a sickeningly perverse way of boosting its dwindling population.

Ecocriticism promotes a way of reading texts that looks at how literature treats the subject of nature and the environment. This critical method can be usefully applied to Atwood’s novel, where humankind has defied and defiled Mother Nature through its arrogant overuse of advanced technologies. As the narrator, Offred, comments, ‘Women took medicines, pills, men sprayed trees, cows ate grass [and] all that souped-up piss flowed into the rivers’ until Mother Nature turned round and revolted (Atwood 1996, Ch. 19).

The disaster that leaves most of the population infertile is not named, but the fear of being sent to the colonies to pick over nuclear waste as a punishment is a powerful agent of social control within the Republic of Gilead. Most people banished there survive for less than three years.

Introduction

Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) is set in the near future, after the overthrow of the US government. Women’s rights have been quickly eroded as the new Republic of Gilead has restructured society according to an ultra-conservative religious framework. The narrator and central protagonist, Offred, a powerless concubine or ‘handmaid’, tells the story of her life within the household of Commander Fred and his wife Serena Joy.

Social and historical contexts

In a newspaper interview published in 1986, Margaret Atwood asked, ‘If a woman’s place is in the home, then what? If you actually decide to enforce that, what follows?’ In fleshing out one possible answer to this fundamental question, *The Handmaid’s Tale* reflects a perceived contemporary anti-feminist backlash against the progressive social change that had taken place in previous decades. While many of Atwood’s fears about women’s rights, religious fundamentalism and a major nuclear or environmental meltdown have not in fact come to pass in the USA, if we look at our near future, after the overthrow of the US government.

The disaster that leaves most of the population infertile is not named, but the fear of being sent to the colonies to pick over nuclear waste as a punishment is a powerful agent of social control within the Republic of Gilead. Most people banished there survive for less than three years.

References and further reading


Online resources