

How Far is The Handmaids Tale a Dystopian Text, Specifically at the Regime of Gilead and its Successes and Flaws?

'*The Handmaids Tale*' is set in a society where everything is wrong, which would usually suggest that it was a dystopian novel, yet while a 'dystopia' is generally defined as a society 'in which the conditions of life are extremely bad as from deprivation or oppression or terror' this is clearly not the whole case when it comes to Gilead. This is because while there are many aspects of the regime which are unjust and morally wrong compared to modern values, there are certain parts of the society which are improved. This is shown quite clearly in Atwood's depiction of freedom and imprisonment. One of the main expressions used within the novel is 'Freedom to' and 'freedom from'. We are told that in Gilead you are given freedom from, as opposed to in our modern 'days of anarchy' where we have freedom to do as we please. It is this difference that affects the Gileadean society, and through this the whole of Atwood's novel, and what ultimately makes it a dystopia.

Despite being obviously morally wrong (for instance, Handmaids are practically raped weekly in order to bear a child for their 'commander', and that only heterosexual white people are allowed in the regime) many of the people in Gilead do not rebel. This is because they are scared of what might happen if they do. There are 'eyes' dotted all over the country who will have them executed if they rebel. Offred is even scared of reading the 'FAITH.' cushion in her bedroom, as 'It's the only thing they've given me to read.' She is worried that if she is 'caught doing it, would it count?' and goes on to defend her actions before she is reprimanded, worriedly telling herself that she 'didn't put the cushion here myself' Offred is very aware that simple things like putting butter on her face as 'makeshift moisturiser' may have her killed. This fear shows how much control the regime has over people; they can barely move for fear of being taken away to the 'colonies' to die. However, the fear has another side to it; the people in *The Handmaid's Tale* (especially the women) can live without fear of certain things. Although they live in fear of being killed for disagreeing with the Gileadean regime, they are mostly safe in the knowledge that they have 'freedom from' murder, violence and rape (however, the very point of being a handmaid is to agree to being raped forcibly, so this is an oxymoron). This is especially true in the case of the Handmaids, who would be protected above all because of their fertility.

However, something the people in Gilead do not get 'freedom from' is surveillance. When walking through town, Offred and Ofglen have to go through security checks, past 'two men, who stand at attention, stiffly, by a roadblock, watching our retreating shapes'. Throughout the novel Offred is all too wary of the 'big brother' state in which she is forced to live, often covert and careful of her actions, just like Winston in George Orwell's '1984'. In 1984, which is a classic dystopian piece, the characters live in a society which is constantly controlled and observed upon by an ambiguous leader called 'big brother'. The ambiguity of the people running the country in 1984 is very similar to what we see in *The Handmaids Tale*, because neither Offred nor anybody else knows who is actually behind the regime. She is also not totally protected from unwanted attention, as when she and Ofglen 'walk away' from the guards she 'knows they're watching, these two men who aren't yet permitted to touch women,' these guards who 'touch with their eyes instead'. This presents the idea that *The Handmaid's Tale* is a dystopian novel because in it, the very people who should be protecting the vulnerable women are the ones abusing them, albeit in a reduced way to what would have been before.

Gilead. This abuse of power is common in many places with a police system in the world, and allows the audience to relate to Offred, and makes them think about what it would be like if the events in the novel actually happened.

The 'freedom to' in today's society is described in *The Handmaid's Tale* in a number of ways. The Japanese tourists in the novel are wearing shocking clothes for Gilead, with their 'skirts reaching just below the knee and the legs coming out from beneath them, nearly naked in their thin stockings'. This clothing would be considered acceptable within today's society. Offred is at first shocked by the tourists, but then she remembers how she 'used to dress like that' and 'that was freedom.' Atwood uses Offred's memories of before the Gileadean regime to show how much the society has changed since then. In modern times, politicians are often seen as being untruthful, and with surveillance growing all over the world, Gilead is quite relatable to today's society.

Gilead is also shown as a dystopian society in that it uses propaganda to further its ideologies. Atwood creates the feeling of fear and control by putting a military like force in control. 'Brainwashing' is used in many ways to influence the Handmaids and to make them sympathise with the rulers of Gilead. The 'Aunts' act as teachers in the 'Red Centre' and keep the Handmaids in line. They 'brainwash' the handmaids by showing them old pornographic films and photographs, and by telling them how badly women were treated in 'the time before'. They also insult the previous society by emphasising that women in 'the old days' were disgusting and that they had no self respect. The point of the Red Centre is to turn young, fertile women from 'the time before' into Gilead sympathising Handmaids, and this is most strongly seen affecting Janine. Out of all the people who attend the red centre, she is the one who seems to agree with the regime after being brainwashed by 'the aunts', and in the end, she is the one who is rewarded; she is the only Handmaid we hear about in the novel that actually has a baby. This is significant because it shows that in the dystopian society which Atwood has created, only the people who adhere to the regime are rewarded. Anyone seen to rebel is punished, as is mostly seen in Moira, who escapes the 'Red Centre' after threatening one of the aunts and posing as her to escape. Later in the novel, we see that she has ended up in Jezebel's, the lowest place a woman can get to in the society. This all relates to how successful Gilead is; Janine is rewarded for adhering, whereas Moira is punished for rebelling. This proves that Gilead is in some ways a successful society, because the ones who rebel are always found out. This is an example of how Atwood wants to present rebellion in the novel; she presents it as futile, because rebelling only leads to Moira being worse off. This in turn is an example of Atwood trying to tell the audience to rebel against the 'big brother' society in which we live, before it is too late.

Women in Gilead have no independent status. The lack of real identity for the Handmaids indicates that they are 'owned' by their Commanders. This is an example of the dehumanisation of women in Gilead, which has worked well for the society. The handmaids are only ever known as 'of' their commander, which makes them less human and more like baby-makers, which is what the rulers of Gilead intended. Free time is limited in Gilead, with the Handmaids only being allowed to go shopping with another Handmaid, where they are watched. The concept of spies is obvious in the novel, and the Handmaids are careful of what they say when they leave the household, in case an 'eye' catches on to her rebelling. This is illustrated when Offred and Ofglen come across Japanese tourists, and are asked if they are happy in Gilead. At first, neither Ofglen nor Offred speak, as they do not know what to say without lying. However, because they fear that 'sometimes it's as dangerous not to

speak' Offred lies and 'murmurs' that they are 'very happy'. The fact she lies shows how fear is controlling Gilead, and how Offred feels that if she did not reply to the tourists, it is as good as saying no. The fact she 'murmurs' her reply is also significant, as it shows she is reluctant to adhere. However, as keeping silent may lead to further punishment, she lies anyway. This is another successful part of the Gilead regime, as nobody dares question any of it.

The Handmaid's Tale uses many biblical references throughout the text, and the Gilead regime is based upon the traditional values written in the bible. Offred and the commander's visit to Jezebel's is significant because the word 'Jezebel' is a name taken from the Bible. 'Jezebel' was a wicked 'scarlet woman' found in Kings 21:15. The name has different meanings which Atwood wants us to interpret. 'Jezebel's' refers to how women are treated in Gilead and how men abuse Gilead's regime. 'Jezebel' was wicked and so men are calling the prostitutes in Jezebel's (like Moira) 'wicked' even though the women 'didn't have much choice' in whether they went there or not. If women were fertile they were told to become a handmaid because eventually they would get freedom, if they conceive. If they were infertile then they were better off being a prostitute because their job is to sexually please men, not reproduce. This is a flaw in the regime, because it goes against everything that the regime stands for; the very idea of Gilead is that sex is for reproduction only and thus, Jezebel's itself is one of Gilead's ultimate flaws, because according to its own laws, such things are unnecessary.

Overall, *The Handmaid's Tale* is a fine example of a classic dystopian text. However it is hard to describe what makes it a dystopian novel on its own; therefore we can compare it to other classic dystopian literature, such as George Orwell's *1984*, and Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*. In both of these novels, the characters are oppressed from freedom by higher powers which they are unsure of; in *1984*, they live in a totalitarian state which is surveyed by an ambiguous leader who never shows his face, and they are constantly being watched. In *Fahrenheit 451*, the characters are not permitted to read, and the "firemen" in the novel burn all the books in the country "for the good of humanity". This shows how *The Handmaid's Tale* is comparable to these two classic dystopian novels and therefore shows how far it can be presented as a dystopian novel itself.

The massive use of fear to control people in Gilead is the main reason that *The Handmaid's Tale* is a dystopian novel; In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the handmaids are deprived of love, are oppressed because they are not allowed to think, or have a full life, and they live in terror that they may be executed or sent to 'the colonies' to die. This is the reason that, despite its flaws, Gilead is a success; and this, in itself, makes *The Handmaid's Tale* a dystopian novel. It is realistic and frightening to read, just like *1984* and *Fahrenheit 451*, because it connects to so many real-life events that we as a reader feel like it could actually happen in the near future. The use of news stories in the novel such as overfishing and infertility are prevalent in today's society, and the use of surveillance is something which is being documented in our own news. These relations to our reality make the audience aware of how similar Gilead actually is to the society in which we live, and make *The Handmaid's Tale* far more 'speculative fiction' than simply 'Science Fiction'. The general public opinion seems to be that it is 'incredibly inventive, moving and really quite frightening', and it shows that Atwood gets her main message across when the reviewer says 'let us hope it is not too prophetic.' Atwood's use of hierarchy and biblical references within Gilead show how, even in our modern age, certain disasters could send us back to living like people did long ago, and her warning is clear to society; Beware of the

institute we are placing ourselves in, creating boundaries for different people because of ethnicity or sex. Beware of what drastic changes may take place in the future if we continue the way we are, or else we may end up living in a society just like Gilead.