

AQA English Literature A-level

The Handmaid's Tale Context

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Margaret Atwood

Atwood was born in 1939 in Ottawa, Canada. Her father was an **entomologist** and she spent much of her childhood in **rural Canada**, which likely informed the **themes of environmentalism** in her work. She was interested in **writing** and read voraciously from a young age, though she did not formally attend school until she was twelve. She studied for a Masters' degree at **Harvard** in Massachusetts, USA, which later provided inspiration for the setting of *The Handmaid's Tale*. During her degree, she studied **Puritanism**, which later influenced the political and religious overtones of the novel. As an adult, she had a successful **academic career** teaching at universities across the US. She has published **poetry, prose, essays** and **literary criticism**, but is best known for her **fiction**. Her work is often informed by **current affairs**, and she is a vocal advocate of **women's rights, free speech** and **LGBTQ+ rights**, as well as supporting **climate change activism**.

Atwood's work often focuses on the **dynamics of power**. She is explicitly critical of the **oppression of women** under **patriarchy**, and uses her work to explore the ways people interact under **oppression** through **mundane**, daily events. While her work is frequently **dystopian** and **surreal**, Atwood maintains that even the most **unsettling parts** of her fiction are based upon **real events**, often that have happened in the US and elsewhere. This rule means much of her writing is **chillingly believable**, even at its most **dystopian**. We see this with *The Handmaid's Tale* in her descriptions of the **rise of Gilead**. People **neglected** to notice the regime's **growing strength** before it was too late. This happened because they were **complacent**; and associated **political upheaval** as something that happens **elsewhere**, not under their own noses. Atwood's work reminds us to resist complacency and to understand that civil stability is never guaranteed.

The Handmaid's Tale was written in **1984** while the author was living in what was then **West Berlin**. The **Cold War** was at a moment of **particular intensity** in the 1980s, and Berlin was a focus for the **tensions** between the West and the Soviet Union. This was because of the Berlin Wall, which split the city into the **US-controlled 'West'** and the surrounding **Soviet-controlled 'East'**. Having grown up during World War II, Atwood knew that **established social and political orders** could "vanish overnight", as she wrote in her 2017 introduction to the novel. Encircled **physically** by the Berlin Wall and **metaphorically** by the **threat of Soviet attack**, Atwood wrote *The Handmaid's Tale* as a piece of **speculative fiction** that examined the idea that "Change could be as fast as lightning. "It can't happen here" could not be depended on: Anything could happen anywhere, given the circumstances" (2017 introduction).

Atwood's work is also heavily influenced by **second wave feminism**, which was reaching **momentum** in the early 1980s with the increased **growth of feminist literature**.



The Cold War in the 1980s

The **Cold War** was a period of **heightened political tension** and **psychological warfare** between the **Soviet Union** and the **USA** and members of **NATO** (the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation). It lasted from **1947 to 1991**, with the **dissolution** of the Soviet Union.

It was called “cold” because of the lack of **large-scale fighting** involved. The main ‘warfare’ of the Cold War was **psychological**, involving **varied attempts** from both sides to assert **global political dominance**. These efforts involved **propaganda campaigns**, **embargoes**, funding smaller governments with similar **political leanings**, and demonstrations of **technological supremacy**, like the Space Race.

At the time of writing *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the Cold War had been **ongoing** for almost all of Atwood’s life. During World War Two, the US dropped **nuclear bombs** on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which set a **precedent for further nuclear warfare**. Countries in the East and West raced to develop their own **nuclear weapons**, in order to have power on the global **political stage**. It was widely understood that **instigating nuclear violence** would inevitably lead to **mutually assured destruction (MAD)** - that is, to begin a nuclear war would lead to the **annihilation** of all countries involved, because of the sheer **destructive power** of **nuclear weapons**.

Being born in 1939, Atwood grew up with the **ongoing threat** of **nuclear war**. The mid-twentieth century saw an increase in **fiction** and **popular culture** devoted to the idea of **nuclear holocaust**, inspired by the looming political threat. Examples of nuclear science fiction include *The Chrysalids* by John Wyndham (1955), the film series *Mad Max* (1979), and the Japanese manga and film *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind* (1982). While *The Handmaid’s Tale* does not deal directly with nuclear apocalypse, **radioactive poisoning** is always on the periphery, with the **threat** of being sent to the Colonies. Much of the **speculative fiction** inspired by nuclear war centres on the **struggle for resources**, and *The Handmaid’s Tale* is no exception. Most obviously, the **declining birth rate** in Gilead has led to the system of **sexual slavery** enforced upon women.

Environmentalism

Atwood’s father was an **entomologist**; he studied insects. Because of his career Atwood spent much of her childhood in **rural** parts of Canada, fostering an **interest** and **appreciation** for wildlife and the environment. She is a **longtime environmentalist**, and often speaks about the ways in which **climate change** will exacerbate **existing inequalities** in society. The relationship between **society** and the **environment** is often explored in her work.

During the 60s and 70s, there was a rapid increase in **awareness** of **environmental issues** in the US and throughout the West. In 1962, American **biologist** and **conservationist** Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring*, a book which exposed for the first time the **adverse effects** of **pesticides** and **chemicals** on the environment. Pesticides that were particularly **harmful** began to get **banned** by the US Government, like DDT, which was banned in 1972, a pesticide which



had led some American birds to **near-extinction**. The effect of pesticides was not only **detrimental** to **natural ecosystems** but to humans too. We see this **environmental awareness** filter into *The Handmaid's Tale* when Offred mentions that grocery stores like *Loaves and Fishes* (a Bible reference) rarely opens any more because the **seas are so polluted** that there are no longer enough fish.

Feminism

Feminism is the term for a group of **movements** and **ideologies** concerning the rights of women and **advocating for sexual equality**. The Western feminist movement is generally seen as being divided into **four distinct waves**, starting with the suffrage movement in the mid 19th century.

First Wave	Mid 19th century to WWII	Suffragettes campaign for the right to vote across the West.
Second Wave	Mid 20th century	Characterised by advocacy for women's rights in the workplace , in marriage , and in society more generally. Until relatively late in the 20th century, rape was still legal within marriage. <i>The Second Sex</i> (1949) by French writer Simone De Beauvoir and <i>The Feminine Mystique</i> (1969) by American writer Betty Friedan characterised feelings of frustration and lack of gender equality felt by increasing numbers of women at the time.
Third Wave		Beginning in zine culture and the riot grrrl movement that emerged in the Pacific Northwest, USA from punk and DIY scenes . The work of black feminists began to have an impact on the wider mainstream with writers like bell hooks and Audre Lorde gaining a following. Intersectionality (the idea that different forms of oppression and privilege overlap and work together in different ways within people and within society) became a more widely accepted idea. Intersectional feminism recognised that while all women face oppression , it affects them individually in different ways. Black women experience a different kind of oppression to white women, for example, and black trans women experience a different kind of oppression to cisgender black women.
Fourth Wave	2012 onwards	Defined by social media , fourth wave



		feminism concerns itself with combatting sexual harassment and violence , post-colonialism , and tries to address the discrepancies between the rights of women in the West and elsewhere. It is characterised by campaigns like the #MeToo movement and the 2017 and 2018 Women's Marches , and intersects with the #BlackLivesMatter protests that sparked conversations about the inequalities between white women and women of colour .
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Atwood, writing *The Handmaid's Tale* in the early 80s, was influenced by feminism's **second wave**. In the novel, Offred refers to her mother, a **feminist activist** who we can deduce was probably involved in the **second wave feminist protests** of the 60s and 70s, when Offred was a child. In Chapter 7, Offred remembers going for a walk with her mother in the park and coming across people burning pornographic books. They are not **religious fundamentalists** but **feminists** protesting the **misogynistic nature** of much of **pornography**. Offred's mother appears to **support** the burning, and Offred is encouraged by onlookers to throw a magazine into the fire. Moira, Offred's best friend from college, is also a vocal **feminist**. While they are both in college, Moira throws an "underwhore" party to sell lingerie, **reclaiming** the word 'whore' in the process and using her **sense of humour** to **undermine sexism** - something she does throughout the novel. The two main women in Offred's life are **proponents of feminism**, yet Offred seems to observe their politics from a distance. Her focus is on **mental fortitude** and **survival**.

Is Offred a feminist?

Compared to her **mother** and **Moira**, Offred may not seem like much of a **feminist**. She doesn't overtly **rebel against** the regime, or **escape** the Red Centre like Moira, or even take up Moira's **offer** to join her as a **sex worker** at Jezebels', which Moira argues would give her **more autonomy**. Offred's focus is more on her own **mental struggle**. **Physical** and **mental survival** is the most important thing to Offred. She rebels in a more **subtle way**: by **stealing butter** to use as hand cream, by beginning a **secret affair** with Nick, and by maintaining a **relationship** with Ofglen, the member of **underground resistance** group Mayday. As the novel progresses, Offred becomes **increasingly subversive** in her behaviour.

Politics and Religion in the US

At the time of writing *The Handmaid's Tale*, the USA was in the **second year** of the **Reagan administration**. Ronald Reagan was a **Republican President** who served from **1981 to 1989**. His time in office was characterised by **tax cuts**, increased **defense spending** because of the Cold War, reduced spending on **social and public services**, and **anti-Communism**. A former Hollywood actor, Reagan was a **charismatic speaker** and, at the time, a **popular President** with Christian America.



The 1980s saw an increase in pressure on Government from the **Christian right wing**. During his time in office, President Reagan emphasised **conservatism** and his belief in ‘**family values**’, alluding to the **traditional, heterosexual, nuclear** family. He appealed to the **white, working class Americans** who felt **racist resentment** against the **advances** that Black people had made during the **civil rights movement**. He also appealed to religious groups like the **Moral Majority**. The Moral Majority were an organisation founded in 1979 by members of the **Christian right** and the **Republican Party**. They were founded in response to what they saw as the **decay of moral values** in American society. The **60s and 70s** - the decades preceding the organisation’s formation - were a time of **increased sexual** and **religious freedom**, with the **civil rights movement**, the **movement for gay rights**, and the rise of **second wave feminism**. Traditional ideas such as the role of women as **housewives**, **sex before marriage**, and women’s **sexual liberty** were being questioned. The Moral Majority pushed back against these advances.

The **Moral Majority** existed to fight what they saw as the **secularisation** of American society. They believed America to be a **fundamentally religious** nation. They fought against **abortion, gay rights, pornography**, and the **exclusion of Christian prayer** from public schools. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Atwood is **directly speculating** on what could have happened if the Moral Majority had achieved **ultimate power**. We can assume that the **inspiration** for Gilead came directly from the kind of **social order** desired by **fundamentalist Christians** like those in the Moral Majority.

The first cases of **HIV/AIDS** in the US were reported in **1980**. By 1984, nearly **4,000 people** had died of the virus and a **homophobic moral panic** was growing in the **mainstream media**. AIDS was the first **major pandemic** since the **Spanish Flu (1918-1920)**. At the time of writing *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the prognosis was **death** within about **one year** of an AIDS diagnosis. In the **historical notes**, we learn from Professor Piexoto that the **reduced fertility rate** in Gilead was a result of a **sexually transmitted disease** that produced infertility. **Public fears** about AIDS fed into **Christian right propaganda** that was against **sex outside marriage** and espoused **hatred against gay people**. It was this propaganda that inspired the **political backdrop** of Gilead.

