

Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale": A Contextual Dystopia ("La servante écarlate" de Margaret Atwood: une dystopie contextuelle)

Author(s): David Ketterer

Source: *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (Jul., 1989), pp. 209-217

Published by: [SF-TH Inc](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4239936>

Accessed: 29-01-2016 23:50 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



SF-TH Inc is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Science Fiction Studies*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

David Ketterer

**Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*:
A Contextual Dystopia**

Until recently Margaret Atwood's interest in SF and fantasy has found only incidental expression in her creative work. At the conclusion of *Lady Oracle* (1976), the narrator, a writer of "Costume Gothics," reflects: "maybe I'll try some science fiction. The future doesn't appeal to me as much as the past, but I'm sure it's better for you" (37:345). Atwood herself has since tried some SF, most notably *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), which was nominated for the Ritz-Paris Hemingway Prize in France, shortlisted for the prestigious Booker Prize, and won the *Los Angeles Times* Prize, the Governor General's Award in Canada, and the first Arthur C. Clarke Award for the best SF work published in Britain in 1986. *The Handmaid's Tale* is, in fact, the best and most successful SF novel written by a Canadian. SF is only worthy of serious attention when it is about something real; and in this case, underlying the muted feminist polemic, the central theme, equally real and earlier identified by Atwood as particularly Canadian, is that of human survival.¹ How long will we survive? That, after all, is the big question about the future.

Atwood has imagined a late-20th-century future where a woman's ability to procreate is of paramount importance since disease and pollution have led to a catastrophic decline in the birthrate. Given this situation, the patriarchal Republic of Gilead, established as the result of a coup in New England, has thwarted what might seem a likely outcome: the increasing power of women with "viable ovaries" (38:234). After passing laws denying women jobs, property, and money, all women who were not officially recognized as Wives, widows, or lower-class Econowives were sorted into four groups: (1) women with viable ovaries became "two-legged wombs" (23:128), nuns of fertility known as Handmaids; dressed in red habits and white-winged hoods, each, after a period of training, was assigned to a particular Commander and his sterile Wife; (2) post-menopausal or unmarried sterile women called Aunts, whose job it was to indoctrinate the Handmaids with the aid of cattle prods and whistles; (3) a green-dressed servant-class known as Marthas; and (4) women who could not or would not belong to either of these groups and who were not hanged as subversive "criminals" became Unwomen, who were usually given the job of clearing toxic wastes

—itself a death sentence. Some women were allowed employment as prostitutes, but this alternative was not officially recognized.

Gilead is based on a new right-wing, religious fundamentalism. In this regard, Atwood's choice of dedicatees for the novel is significant. One of them is Perry Miller, the father of American Puritan studies and one of Atwood's teachers at Harvard. The other, Mary Webster, represents a move from the academic to the horribly actual. In a 1980 essay, Atwood describes how Webster of Connecticut, one of her ancestors, survived her hanging after being condemned as a witch, thanks to a tough neck. Because of the law of double jeopardy, whereby a person could not be executed twice for the same crime, Webster was released ("Witches," p. 331).

The novel consists of the taped accounts and recollections of a 33-year-old Handmaid named Offred. This name—suggestive of "offered" or "afraid" (Parrinder: 20) or "off-red" (a rebellious reference to her red habit) or "off-read" (in the sense of misread—Lacombe: 7)—is not her real one. Like all of the Handmaids, her real name has been erased in favor of the form "Of" plus the first name, possibly abbreviated, of her Commander. Her recollections, usually narrated in the seven spaced sections (out of a total of 15) all entitled "Night" (a time of relative freedom), are of an earlier era recognizably that of the 1970s and '80s. She recalls her feminist mother (now, we subsequently learn, an Unwoman) and the failed attempt she had made with her now "disappeared" husband Luke and their child to flee to Canada during the early stages of Gilead's totalitarian regime.

Offred's numbing account of her present reality in what is apparently the walled town of Cambridge, Massachusetts (where Harvard University is closed and the football stadium is used for executions), often takes the form of describing such Orwellian rituals as Testifying (chap. 13), communal prayers (chap. 15), the Ceremony (chap. 16), Birth Day (chap. 21), Pray-vaganzas (chaps. 33 and 34), Salvaging (chap. 42), and Particution (chap. 43). Testifying is the Gilead equivalent of what usually happens at group therapy sessions. The evening communal prayer session begins with the Commander reading appropriate bits from the Bible—most notably: "*Behold my maid Bilhah. She shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her*" (15:84), an abbreviation of verse 3 of one of the novel's epigraphs, Genesis 30:1-3, which is surely the essential seed of *The Handmaid's Tale*. The Ceremony is modelled directly on the Genesis passage. A Handmaid is fucked by a Commander as she lies between the legs and holds the hands of the Commander's Wife, in Offred's case a one-time gospel singer whose real name is Pam but who called herself Serena Joy. Of particular importance is Birth Day, when one of the Handmaids gives birth with the Wife's legs once again about her, in the presence of the other Handmaids. This occurs in the seventh and central of the book's 15 sections, the section entitled "Birth Day." Only "Birth Day" and "Salvaging" (Section XIV) are dignified as section titles. Women's Prayvaganzas

accompany group weddings; "men's are for military victories" (34:206). At Salvagings, the Handmaids symbolically take part in the hanging of "criminals." The bodies are subsequently conveyed to the main guarded gateway of the Wall and left hanging there. At Particutions (the word is, of course, an amalgam of "participation" and "execution") the Handmaids are encouraged, by way of catharsis, to literally tear a male offender—in the instance described, a supposed rapist—to pieces.

Many of the features of Gilead are familiar to the reader of dystopian fiction: the lack of freedom, the constant surveillance, the routine, the failed escape attempt (in this case by Offred's friend, identified by her real name, Moira), and an underground movement (in this case called Mayday). But the unique nature of the society that Atwood has created leads to other, rather more original, plot possibilities. At the center of Offred's story are the acts of betrayal she is forced to commit by the Commander, on the one hand, and on the other, by his Wife. The Commander requires a relationship with Offred outside of the Ceremony. Most of the time they play Scrabble (an illegal game since it promotes literacy); but on one occasion the Commander takes her to Jezebel's, a brothel for officers which includes Moira among its prostitutes. In the meantime, his Wife, concerned that the Commander may be sterile, sets Offred up with Nick, the chauffeur. Offred's story ends with the Wife's discovery of Offred's secret "relationship" with her husband and the consequent arrival of two men in a black van who take Offred away. Presumably she is to be "salvaged" but the possibility exists that the two men are agents of Mayday.

The success of Offred's narrative depends largely on Atwood's skilled use of indirection, irony, and understatement. Information is allowed to seep through gradually, often in a naturalistic, offhand, giveaway manner. As one would expect of a poet, Atwood's indirection frequently takes the form of imagery and symbolism. Given the subject matter, the sexual symbolism established at the very beginning of the book is surely inevitable: "We slept in what had once been the gymnasium. The floor was of varnished wood, with stripes and circles painted on it..." (1:3). As the book develops, it is the female imagery of circles and curves which predominates. Even the Wall, which might be construed as a masculine symbol, forms an imprisoning circle.

Of particular interest is the circular "hall mirror, which bulges outward like an eye under pressure" (8:46), or like the swollen belly of a pregnant woman. Likewise, in the Commander's sitting room, "over the mantel, there's an oval mirror" (14:76), the word "oval" suggesting those viable ovaries. The braided rug in Offred's room is also "oval" (2:7) and the face of her mother in a photograph is "a closed oval" (7:37). Frequently stressed is Offred's sense of the hallway mirror as a typically dystopian watching eye: "There remains a mirror, on the hall wall....I can see it as I go down the stairs, round, convex, a pier-glass, like the eye of a fish, and myself in it

like a distorted shadow..." (2:9); "I descend the stairs, a brief waif in the eye of glass that hangs on the downstairs wall" (14:75), making Offred a hanging body like those on the Wall; "In the curved hallway mirror I flit past, a red shape at the edge of my own field of vision, a wraith of red smoke" (32:196); and lastly, "I see the two of us...in the brief glass eye of the mirror as we descend" (40:243). The secret police are called Eyes. And, like all the Handmaids, Offred's ankle bears a related "small tattoo": "Four digits and an eye, a passport in reverse. It's supposed to guarantee that I will never be able to fade, finally, into another landscape" (12:60-61). Even the penis is described as a "delicate stalked slug's eye" (15:83). The circular mirror, then, comprehends and encompasses most of the novel's significant themes: viable ovaries, pregnancy, surveillance, imprisonment, hanged bodies, cyclical process (about which more later), and finally, the loss of human reality—the mirror conveys only images of reality and renders Offred as "a distorted shadow" (2:9), "a brief waif" (14:75), or "a wraith" (32:196).²

The preconceptions of the reader accustomed to the typical dystopian fiction are likely to be upset by the "Historical Notes" that conclude *The Handmaid's Tale*. It is usually assumed that the author of a dystopia is concerned with describing the horrors of life if present trends continue, If This Goes On. The author may hope that his or her fiction will serve either as a warning, if the possibility is allowed that what seems inevitable may be averted, or, at a later stage, as a call to rebellion. The "Historical Notes" consist of "a partial transcript of the proceedings of the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies...which took place at the University of Denay, Nunavit, on June 25, 2195" ("Notes," p. 281). Given that the one identified member of Denay's faculty has the Indian name Crescent Moon it seems reasonable to conclude that the university's name derives from that of the Indian Déné Nation. Nunavit may be an Inuit place somewhere in the north of "what was...Canada" ("Notes," p. 292) or, more probably, a future revised spelling of Nunavik, Greenland. Have the North American Indians and Inuit inherited the earth? What is transcribed, Professor Pieixoto's lecture, "Problems of Authentication in Reference to *The Handmaid's Tale*" ("Notes," p. 282), makes it clear that the Republic of Gilead is now long past.

The immediate effect of the "Historical Notes" is to appraise the reader of the "fact" that he or she has all along been fictively situated in this post-Gilead future, a future perhaps like the present of the 1980s to the extent that from both perspectives Gilead appears to be an almost incredible societal extreme. At the same time the "Notes" strongly imply that Atwood cannot have intended *The Handmaid's Tale* only as the typical dire dystopian warning or call to rebellion if she envisages Gilead either passing away naturally in the fullness of time or being dramatically overthrown. Gilead does not correspond to an Orwellian "boot stamping on a human

face—forever” (1984, p. 390). It might, then, be asked: Is there any point in penning a dystopia if that dystopia is explicitly presented as only transitory? In order to arrive at what I believe to be the correct “yes” answer to this question, Atwood’s dystopia must be distinguished from the traditional kind as a particular variant of what I shall term a “Contextual Dystopia,” by which I mean a *fully* Contextual Dystopia. After all, as Offred twice notes, “Context is all” (24:136; 30:180). In a review, Brian Stableford shows himself to be aware of the problem when he labels *The Handmaid’s Tale* “a Book of Lamentations” (p. 97) rather than a dystopia. Unlike the traditional dystopia, Atwood is concerned not just with the preceding context, the historical development—continuous or discontinuous—that led to the establishment of dystopia, but *also* with a succeeding *discontinuous* context, and historical development—unanticipated by Offred’s dystopian discourse but implied without being described in the “Notes”—that led, over time or abruptly, away from dystopia.

A Contextual Dystopia in this specific sense is rare. In fact, I know of no other example. The nearest parallel is perhaps Jack London’s *The Iron Heel* (1906), but there the socialist “eutopia” that succeeded the dystopian Oligarchy of the Iron Heel is clearly, in an immediate sense, continuous with Ernest Everhard’s dystopian memoir. Everhard’s desperate revolutionary activities spurred similar activities which, in the fullness of time, led to the overthrow of the Iron Heel and to a situation where a “eutopian” is able to edit and annotate the manuscript of the long-ago executed Everhard. No such historical sequence is even hinted at in Offred’s account (Mayday can only help dissidents escape from Gilead). (It might be wondered whether there are examples of what is surely a theoretical possibility—namely, a Contextual Eutopia in the full sense of contextual. As with dystopias, instances of eutopias [with or without qualifying quotation marks] including the presentation of an historically continuous post-eutopian society seem more likely than those including the presentation of an historically discontinuous one.) In Atwood’s case, as a result of both the essentially continuous ‘fore and the essentially discontinuous after historical contexts and the consequent acknowledgement of one particular SF sense of difference—change in the course of time—*The Handmaid’s Tale* conveys an evenhandedness, a degree of hard-headed acceptance regarding the contextual, framed, and hence limited human condition, a horizon of acceptance, that counteracts—some might say disastrously defuses—Atwood’s occasionally bitter satire and justified anger. It should be observed at this point that the traditional dystopia (and eutopia) generally assumes, and to some extent depends upon, a linear conception of time. A cyclical conception carries with it at least some degree of fatalistic acceptance that the writer of traditional dystopias (or eutopias) would consider inappropriate. Atwood’s vision of historical change in *The Handmaid’s Tale* appears to allow for both a series of pendulum swings and (as I have already intimated in rela-

tion to the hallway mirror) the effects of cyclical process; possibly the pendulum swings are subsumed by, or incorporated into, a cyclical history. It might be noted in this regard that the sequence of chapter titles mimes the cycle of night (death, freedom) and day (birth, imprisonment).

A cyclical view of history may, of course, take the form of static repetition or of a progressive or regressive spiral. Atwood does not commit herself on this matter. There is no clear sense of the kind of society (or societies) that has (or have) replaced Gilead and why. However, the world of 2195 *does* seem more civilized than, and generally preferable to, that of Gilead. Pieixoto's prissy academic jokes and the laughter they elicit from his audience provide evidence that sexist attitudes still persist. The place names Denay and Nunavit, read as "deny" and "none-of-it" (Kaler: 9), may suggest that Atwood is pointing, with disguised horror, to the smug blindness of a society that refuses to recognize, in what Professor Pieixoto terms "the clearer light of our own day" (Notes, p. 293), the seeds of sexism that could lead to another Gilead. But Atwood here seems more intent on lightly or resignedly satirizing human foible and vanity, and the decorum of academic discourse. Just as Offred believes regarding Gilead that there can be "no shadow unless there is also light" (18:99) so, in Pieixoto's world, the predominating light is not without shadow; it is simply that the proportions have been reversed. Anything approaching a fair, non-sexist society depends upon eternal vigilance. And Pieixoto, one of the co-editors of the ms. *The Handmaid's Tale* (the Chaucerian title was supplied by the other one), does provide some helpful information. Offred's tapes were unearthed on the site of what was Bangor, Maine. A non-Canadian reader or a Canadian reader who has forgotten the government's "Participaction" program is informed that the term "Particicution" was "lifted from an exercise program popular sometime in the last third of the century" ("Notes," p. 289; Atwood perhaps needs a "twentieth" before the "century" here). It is hypothesized that either Frederick R. Waterford or more likely B. Frederick Judd was Offred's Commander. The scholarship of 2195 has, however, failed to come up with what is most probably Offred's real name in spite of the clue that her manuscript provides. At the end of Chapter 1 Offred lists the names that she and her fellow trainee Handmaids would whisper from bed to bed: "Alma. Janine. Dolores. Moira. June" (1:4). In the course of the narrative all of these names are accounted for (22:121; 5:26; 22:125; 5:25) except for June. Presumably, then, June is Offred's real name. As it happens, the Gileadean Studies Symposium took place in June. (Are we to intuit, in terms of cyclical process, that the Spring and Summer of Gilead, like the Summer of the post-Gilead society, will inevitably give way to Fall and Winter?) Of course, Offred's list of names may be a list of protective pseudonyms. If so, Offred has deliberately chosen for herself a name that, she reminds us, signifies love: "*Love*, said Aunt Lydia with distaste. Don't let me catch you at it. No mooning and June-ing around

here, girls" (34:206).

This last quotation is one of several occasions where Atwood uses the device of quoting direct speech without quotation marks. It is generally used to signal that a conversation is being recalled and reconstructed. What is reconstructed—and much of Offred's narrative amounts to reconstruction—may not be the entire truth. Implicit here is one more aspect of Atwood's conscious artistry. With one notable exception, that artistry was acclaimed by all the novel's reviewers. Since the one exception was the prominent writer Mary McCarthy and since her attack appears to largely stem from her generic misapprehension of the novel as a straightforward dystopia, I will conclude by attempting to rebut the various charges that she levels. Her piece in *The New York Times Book Review* entitled "Breeders, Wives and Unwomen" begins with the claim of "thin credibility" (p. 35). Atwood's extrapolation does not ring true. McCarthy seems not to have allowed for the fact that the future Atwood describes was surely not conceived as a direct extrapolation from our present but as a pendulum swing away from present-day feminism. Given that intention, the historical steps that lead to Gilead are, I believe, plausible enough. Atwood's future is novel and not *inherently* incredible.

McCarthy also complains that Offred's future account is written in a language virtually indistinguishable from our own. It is certainly true that language changes with time and that many SF writers—William Gibson is a recent example—attempt to create a future argot. But while a future argot may add to the SF realism, it can also have the reverse effect and date a work very quickly. Atwood has chosen the less risky convention of allowing today's language to stand in for a future language whose subtle alterations simply cannot be predicted. Atwood is not writing genre SF and in fact some of her linguistic inventions are not as felicitous as those we have come to expect from the genre SF writer. For example, her "Birthmobile" (4:21) might be criticized as a tawdry touch out of Batman. However, it is more relevant to note that Gilead (unlike the world of 2195) is placed in a very near future setting. Linguistic changes in the short term are very minor and, in fact, Atwood's "Birthmobile" is probably derived from such contemporary real-world terms as "bookmobile" or "snowmobile." McCarthy's overall charge that Gilead is "insufficiently imagined" and that this poet's novel "lacks imagination" is, as I hope my analysis of this concretely detailed dystopia has demonstrated, simply untrue. Nor is the "writing undistinguished" (p. 35). The novel's short, breathless chapters gain in power as they proceed. What might be criticized as overwordiness ("We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of print....We lived in the gaps between the stories" [10:53]) could be justified as perfectly suited to the mode of oral narration. The style suits the teller.

But what of the teller's character? McCarthy believes that Offred's character, like that of all the characters except the Aunts, is weak. But

surely one of the prime aims of Gilead is to deprive its citizens, particularly the Handmaids, of their characters. In the circumstances it is not just special pleading to insist that shadowy characterization is appropriately inevitable. The point might also be made that McCarthy is here applying to the genre of SF a criterion more appropriate to the realistic novel. It is finally a failure to correctly identify Atwood's generic intent (insofar as that intent can be "reconstructed" from the text) that leads to McCarthy's most damning criticism. Thinking of *The Handmaid's Tale* as straightforwardly akin to Orwell's *1984* and as belonging to the traditional dystopian genre, McCarthy believes that Atwood's novel lacks "the destructive force of satire," it has "no satiric bite" (p. 35). But in the light of the concluding "Historical Notes" and what I have argued is the novel's generic status as a particular kind of Contextual Dystopia, possibly the first of its kind, purely destructive satire would be quite out of place. Both men and women come in for attack in *The Handmaid's Tale*.³ But Atwood's concern is not with the destruction of either sex; it is with their mutual survival. After all, as Offred observes, directly addressing her putative reader or readers, "who knows what the chances are out there, of survival, yours?" (7:37).

NOTES

1. See Atwood's *Survival*. For a spirited illustration of the proposition that all significant SF is about something real, in the sense of an enduring or relatively enduring human reality, see Blish, pp. 125-29.

2. For a survey of the negative role of mirrors in Atwood's poetry and fiction before *The Handmaid's Tale*, see Davey, pp. 94-98.

3. With regard to Atwood's "evenhandedness" here, it should be noted that her "Freeforall" provides a reverse companion piece to *The Handmaid's Tale*. Both works posit a situation in which sexually transmitted diseases have jeopardized the future of human reproductive survival. But in "Freeforall," as instanced by the Toronto of 2026, a repressive societal solution has emerged which victimizes males considerably more than females.

WORKS CITED

Atwood, Margaret. "Freeforall," *The Toronto Star*, 20 Sept. 1986; rpt. in *Tesseracts*², ed. Phyllis Gotlieb & Douglas Barbour (Victoria, BC: Porcépic Books, 1987), pp. 130-38.

_____. *The Handmaid's Tale*. Toronto: Seal Books, 1986.

_____. *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*. Toronto: House of Anansi, 1972.

_____. "Witches," in *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1982), pp. 329-33.

- Blish, James [as "William Atheling, Jr."]. "A Question of Content," in *The Issue at Hand: Studies in Contemporary Magazine Science Fiction* (Chicago: Advent, 1964), pp. 125-29.
- Davey, Frank. *Margaret Atwood: A Feminist Poetics*. Vancouver: 1984.
- Kaler, Anne K. "The Narrator as Female Hero in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*." Unpublished paper presented at the Ninth International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts, Fort Lauderdale, March 1988.
- Lacombe, Michele. "The Writing on the Wall: Amputated Speech in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*," *Wascana Review*, 21 (Fall 1986):3-20.
- McCarthy, Mary. "Breeders, Wives and Unwomen." *The New York Times Book Review* (9 Feb. 1986), pp. 1, 35.
- Orwell, George. 1984. With a Critical Introduction and Annotations by Bernard Crick. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984.
- Parrinder, Patrick. "Making Poison," *London Review of Books*, 8 (20 Mar. 1986), pp. 20-22.
- Stableford, Brian. "Is There No Balm in Gilead? The Woeful Prophecies of *The Handmaid's Tale*," *Foundation*, no. 39 (Spring 1987), pp. 97-100.

RÉSUMÉ

David Ketterer. La servante écarlate de Margaret Atwood: une dystopie contextuelle.—*Le roman de Margaret Atwood, La servante écarlate est le meilleur roman de science-fiction qu'ait produit le Canada anglais. Plusieurs éléments doivent être soulignés: les séries d'événements rituels, le symbolisme du miroir ovale du couloir et le statut générique tout particulier de ce roman qui pourrait être qualifié de «dystopie contextuelle». Cette forme se démarque de la dystopie conventionnelle par l'intérêt porté aux faits historiques discontinus qui suivirent la dystopie (il est à noter que cet intérêt n'est pas prévu par le discours dystopien) et par les conséquences découlant de l'interprétation judicieusement équilibrée qui furent suscitées par l'intérêt initial. Mary McCarthy n'a pas su reconnaître cette distinction générique et ce manque est en partie responsable de sa critique négative.* (DK)

Abstract.—*Of particular interest in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985)—to date the best English Canadian SF novel—are the series of ritual events, the symbolism of the oval hallway mirror, and its generic status as a particular kind of what is termed a "Contextual Dystopia." This kind is distinguished from the traditional dystopia by virtue of both its consideration of the discontinuous historical circumstances (unanticipated within the dystopian discourse) which succeeded the dystopian regime, and of the judiciously balanced interpretative consequences of that consideration. Mary McCarthy's negative review of *The Handmaid's Tale* is countered partly in terms of her failure to recognize this generic distinction.* (DK)