The Handmaid’s Tale as a Dystopian Novel

The Handmaid’s Tale is a dystopian or anti-utopian novel – it presents the reader with a dysfunctional future society. Often texts that are set in an imaginary future are actually used to criticise real aspects of the author’s own society and it is possible to read The Handmaid’s Tale as a satire or warning (Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-four and Huxley’s Brave New World are other examples of dystopian novels and they make useful comparisons with The Handmaid’s Tale). One of the reasons why Atwood’s novel is so disturbing is that there are historical parallels for the way Gilead is organised and its citizens are controlled. In an interview Atwood explained that she intended these parallels to be clear to the reader:

One of the tasks I set myself when writing the novel was to avoid including any practices that had not already happened somewhere, at some time. One of the functions of the afterword is to indicate the origins of some of the practices described in the novel. But it is vital to understand that every single one of the practices described in the novel is drawn from the historical record.

The ideas or issues below are all important in The Handmaid’s Tale. Can you think of historical parallels for them?

- the Handmaid’s uniform?
- public execution?
- religious wars?
- propaganda and censorship?
  - resistance movements?
- an underground railroad?
- ‘re-education’?
- testifying?
- re-patriation?
- enforced religious conversion?

Can you think of any other ideas or issues in the novel which have historical parallels?
Control and Resistance in *The Handmaid’s Tale*

As you will be aware Gilead is a highly stratified and ritualised society where the individual is tightly controlled by the totalitarian regime. Below is a list of some of the means by which Gilead controls individuals. Find places where these methods of control are referred to in the novel and think of examples where they have been or are being used in reality.

**Control in Gilead**

*Punishment* - examples include ritualised mass execution such as Salvaging (savage + salvation) and Particicution (execution + participation), exile to Jezebel’s or the Colonies and torture or ‘disappearance’. There is also the threat of cattle prods carried by the Aunts at the Red Centre and guns carried by the Angels (note the irony of these names). Some of these punishments are intended to remove people from Gilead who are openly hostile to the regime but many serve the double purpose of also acting as deterrents to other rebels (although where in the novel is it suggested that a punishment has had the opposite effect?).

*Rules and routines* – the life of the Handmaid, in particular, is tightly structured and highly regulated. What would a typical day in the life of a Handmaid involve? The other citizens of Gilead, including those of the highest status, are also expected to conform to certain routines and rituals, for example, the wives attend Birth Days and Prayvaganzas and the Commanders must attend the monthly Ceremony. In spite of the number of rules and regulations in Gilead many of these are actually broken, ironically, often by those most influential in their establishment and enforcement (see Gilead and Hypocrisy below).

*Uniform* – all uniforms, by definition, identify groups of people but deny individuality. How are particular uniforms useful as a means of control in Gilead? There is a detailed description of the Handmaids’ uniform on page 18 (Vintage, ‘96 edition). Each item of clothing has a particular function e.g. the headdress is, ‘to keep us from seeing, but also from being seen’. The overall effect of the Handmaids’ ‘habit’ is that of a ‘Sister, dipped in blood’. Why is this a particularly powerful and apt image? What significant differences are there between the uniforms of the Handmaids and those of other characters in the novel?

*Hierarchy* – Gilead has a strict hierarchy. Marthas, Commanders, Wives, Daughters, Unwomen, Handmaids, Guardians, Angels and Aunts have to behave according to their role and status. Try ordering the character groups listed above according to their status in Gilead and explain briefly what the role and function of each group is.

*Religion* – the Bible is used as a means of justifying the Gileadean regime and its practices. For example, the Rachel and Jacob story outlined in the epigraph and referred to throughout the novel is the basis for the relationship between Commanders, Handmaids and Wives in Gilead while wives are allowed to hit Handmaids because there is ‘scriptural precedent’ for this. Can you think of other examples where religion is used to justify particular practices in the regime or oppress groups or individuals within it? Remember much of the Biblical sayings are taken out of context, altered slightly or totally invented yet it is impossible for the Handmaids to check the authenticity of the sayings because they are not allowed to read and ‘the bible is kept locked up…it is an incendiary device’.

*Subordination of women* – the notion that women are inferior to men is central to Gilead’s ideology and aspects of the Bible are used to justify this view (see above). The Handmaids are valued only in so far as they are able to reproduce (and they are even blamed when they do not conceive because of their Commanders’ infertility) and they are often referred to as vessels or containers rather than as human beings. The use of patronyms in Gilead (Handmaids are known only by their Commanders’ names hence Of-Fred or Of-Warren) denies Handmaids’ unique identity, or makes them literally anonymous, and reinforces the low status of Handmaids in Gilead. What similar practice in our own society do you think Atwood could be satirising?

*Control of communication* – communication is tightly controlled in Gilead. The widespread use of propaganda and censorship means that the information Handmaids receive about the war, for example,
is limited and unreliable. Remember that the written word is outlawed in Gilead (for women) and for Handmaids even opportunities for talk other than in prescribed greetings and phrases are limited and often closely monitored.

Control of relationships – mixed-sex relationships in Gilead have to be based on procreation rather than love. Having a homosexual relationship (‘gender treachery’) is punishable by death. Handmaids are not permitted friendships with each other or with other character groups such as Marthas. The relationship between Wife, Commander and Handmaid is tightly regulated and focused on the monthly ‘Ceremony’ but is obviously still the cause of conflict, envy and bitterness for many.

Indoctrination - remember the Red Centre is a nickname for ‘the Rachel and Leah Re-education Centre’. This is where Handmaids are trained for their future role and indoctrinated in the ideology of Gilead. How are the Handmaids ‘re-educated’ both in the Red Centre and in their future lives in the homes of Commanders?

Obliteration of/ rewriting the past – Gileadean authorities respect only the parts of history which support their ideologies. Can you find examples? Other aspects of history and even the Handmaids’ personal experience are destroyed, ignored or re-presented. Think, for example, of the way the Aunts describe the freedom which the Handmaids had in ‘the time before’: ‘There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don’t underrate it.’

Surveillance – there is an entire network of surveillance in place in Gilead which is made up partly of the men employed as Eyes (spies) and partly of the way the Handmaids are encouraged to spy on each other through the way they are partnered when not in their Commander’s house.

Resistance in Gilead

Resistance in Gilead takes place on many levels. Clearly the Mayday underground movement of which Ofglen is a member is the most organised, and possibly the most effective form of resistance in Gilead, but you should not ignore the more subtle but very risky ways of resisting the regime which Offred herself carries out. Think, for example, about when Offred deliberately wiggles her hips in front of the Angels near the beginning of the novel, ‘it’s like thumbing your nose from behind a fence or teasing a dog with a bone held out of reach’ or when she steals a daffodil to put under her mattress, keeps butter to use as hand cream and secretly meets Moira in the bathroom at the Red Centre. Find as many other examples of resistance, however small, as you can.

Arguably, the most important way in which Offred survives the restrictions of Gilead is through her mind which allows her to preserve her memories of her life in the time before and mock Gileadean authorities even though she can only do this freely in her head. Humour, story-telling and love are also important ways of resisting and these are all vital to Offred’s survival and sanity. Compare Offred’s ways of resisting with the more obvious heroism of Ofglen or Moira’s refusal to conform. How is Offred’s response to her situation different again from that of Janine? What effects do you think Atwood intended to achieve through the use of these contrasting characters? What are your own feelings about Offred’s strategies for coping with life in Gilead?

Hypocrisy in Gilead

Ironically, the Commander, who is presented as so important in establishing Gilead and its means of control, seems to break more of its rules than any other character in the novel. The Commander, for example, has private meetings with Offred where he allows her to play Scrabble, has a secret store of magazines which are supposed to be banned, is able to get hand cream for Offred and takes her to Jezebels where sexual relations take place between men and women for pleasure rather than procreation. How does the Commander attempt to justify his hypocrisy to Offred? What are your views about this? How does the Commander reveal that he does not fully understand the restrictions placed on the Handmaids in their day-to-day lives? Which characters other than Offred also break the rules in Gilead?