

(Adapted and taken from <https://schol.wordpress.com/2008/06/01/the-historical-and-political-context-of-the-handmaids-tale/>)

The background to *The Handmaid's Tale*

Posted on June 1, 2008 by ncowie

The society in *The Handmaid's Tale* is a throwback to the early **Puritans**. The early Puritans came to America not for religious freedom, but to set up a society that would be a **monolithic theocracy** (like Iran) ruled by religious leaders. The Puritans went to the United States and promptly began **persecuting** anyone who wasn't a Puritan. Her book reflects the form and style of the early Puritan society and addresses the dynamics that bring about such a situation.

Atwood had an intense focus on **fertility** because in a society in which the birth-rate plummets, people will be forced to determine whether or not it will slide gently into **oblivion** and vanish from the face of the earth. (One theory at the time of writing the novel was that will be no Germans by the year 2020 because their birth-rate is so low; Germany is going to be Turkish.) Atwood asked, 'what does a society do at this point?' Either it accepts the situation, or it puts into existence conditions that will increase the number of births.

Parallel to that, Atwood realised that male **sterility** was on the increase and so were spontaneous **miscarriages** and **birth defects**. In the 1980s, they found a harmful chemical in polar bears, and they were worried about the future of the polar bear species because the chemical could lead to male sterility. Other factor influencing sterility were radiation and pollution. So, fertility in Gilead is something rare and special. Fertile women, women who can reproduce, are prize objects for those in power.

Atwood wants us to learn from the book about what happens when certain casually held attitudes about women are taken to their logical conclusions. For example, she explores several conservative opinions still held by many - such as a woman's place is in the home. Atwood takes these beliefs to their logical ends and sees what happens.

In addition, Atwood found herself increasingly alarmed by statements made frequently by religious leaders such as Jerry Falwell in the United States. He published *Listen America!* in 1981, which influenced a lot of Americans. Then a variety of events from around the world could not be ignored, particularly the rising **fanaticism** of the Iranian **monotheocracy**. The thing Atwood wants us to remember is that there is nothing new about the society depicted in *The Handmaid's Tale* except the time and place. History proves that what we have been in the past, we could be again.

Tasks

According to the text, what is the novel *The Handmaid's Tale* about? What is the main theme?

Sum up on what social and environmental developments the novel is based on (using bullet points):

Do some further research and answer the following questions:

- What is a Puritan?
- What is *Listen America!* all about?
- Explain a monolithic theocracy like Iran in your own words