

Boekverslag A Handmaid's Tale (Margaret Atwood)

Marc Franken

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A Handmaid's Tale

By: Margaret Atwood

Publisher: Virago

Year:1987

First print 1986 (England)

Title.

A science fiction story about a maid, somewhere in the future.

The title explains the about the social position of the person in question.

She finds herself in a submissive situation with very little control over her own behaviour.

The Author.

Margaret Atwood is a feminist writer, she was born in Ottawa Canada.

She graduated at the Radcliffe College.

In the 30 year of her writers existence Margaret receive many awards and wrote more than twenty books, poetry, fiction and non fiction.

She's best known by: "The Edible Woman(1974)", "The Handmaid's Tale(1983)", "The Robber Bride(1984)" and "Alias Grace(1996)".

Her book, The Blind Assassin received the prestigious Booker Prize.

The Handmaid's Tale received the Arthur Clack SF award.

A movie was made in 1990 after the book.

Literature

The book is seen as contemporary literature.

Genre

It's a science fiction Novell, some sources speak of feminist science fiction which is a genre by itself.

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Summary

The story is told by Offred, a woman of around thirty of which we will never learn the real name.

Somewhere in the twentieth century, in an area that was called the state of main, a movement called the Gilead, runned by convinced feminists that time, take over control of the country.

Institutions are founded and put under control by Commanders and Aunts.

Offred is lives in one of these institutes.

She is a Handmaid, the single purpose of a Handmaid is to function as a surrogate mother, carrying children of the Commander.

Offred lives in a world where everything is rationalised to the absurd, stores are all changed, warehouse, butchers, they are all gone.

The butcher is now the meet store, all shops carry the name of the product thats sold there.

At the Gilead a strict regime is dictated, Offred is put together with another Handmaid, Ofglen, they're not allowed to socialise, the purpose of them being together is to watch over each other.

During the walks to the shops they pass "the wall", a place where the punished are hung as a display off bad behaviour, a warning of what one can overcome if behaved wrongly.

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Offred is at the Gilead because she tried to escape to Canada, at a checkpoint she was arrested together with her husband Luke and her daughter.

Nothing is heard of Luke anymore, later in the story she is presented with a photo from her daughter, she's grown a lot and now lives at foster parents.

Ofglen is a member, as it turns out to be, from an organisation that, in secret, fights against the Gilead and their ideas.

Offred is introduced to the secret code of the resistance but doesn't make much use of it.

Offred's friend, Moira has become a Handmaid too, but is resisting her fate and tries to escape.

She gets caught and is tortured, hitting steel cables against her feet.

Later she manages to escape.

The local police of the Gilead are the Guards, contact is strictly forbidden, some Guards are also Eyes, the Gilead secret police.

Offred is called to the Commander, she is amazed, the purpose alone is to feed his vanity.

At the Commander she's allowed to read magazines of whom she thought were all destroyed.

They play scrabble and talk about different subjects.

The former occupant of her room was also visiting the Commander she finds out.

She starts a secret love relation with Nick, the Commander's chauffeur, Nick is also a Guard and an Eye.

As she gets pregnant she thinks it's Nick's.

At a certain day the Commander takes her to the Club, an old hotel that is now used as a brothel, she is there as a spectator.

Offred is baffled with the display of so much vice, all that is forbidden can be bought here, alcohol and woman.

Here she finds back Moira, her friend from the time before the Gilead.

Moira was again caught at her last attempt to escape, Moira explains that she is tortured with electric shocks.

She's been given a choice to work in the Club or go to one of the kolonies.

In the kolonies one has no life, you can be put to work to clean up toxic or radioactive waste.

If lucky, you can work in agri- or fruit culture.

Looking at her own background she chooses for the Club.

At the Club you can work for a number of years before you're deported to one of the kolonies.

Moira has seen a propaganda movie in where she spotted Offred's mother, it was one of the worst kolonies there is, she couldn't have survived.

Back at the institute a salvaging, a public lynching is held.

The salvaging is conducted by Martha executioners.

A heavily beat up man is brought in, he is guilty of gruesome deeds so the Martha's say, he is guilty of rape of a pregnant woman.

Ofglen becomes hysterical and kicks and beats the man till he's unconscious.

Later Offred is told the the man was a member of the resistance, a political member, she wanted to spare him the suffering that waiting for him.

Back home the Commanders wife Serena Joy is waiting, she shows her, her habit, there is still a smutch of lipstick on it.

Ofglen knows, she knows of her trip to the Club.

Serena Joy is furious and accuses Offred to be ungrateful.

Offred is sent of to her room, she expects to be collected by the Van and be brought to one of the labour kolonies.

When the van arrives, Nick appears and says it's ok.

They take her away, Serena Joy and the Commander are told not to interfere at this official matter.

Serena Joy and the Commander just stand there, unable to intervene.

Nick takes her to a secret address, from where she's brought to the underground femailroad to escape to Canada.

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The last chapter of the book is told by Professor Pieixoto, this is still part of the story.

Professor Wade has given the title to this tale and is co-author en translator of the transcript being the source of the tale.

The transcript is found, recorded on a series of tapes, it is on music tapes from that time, first the music plays the is cut off and a speaking voice takes over.

The Professor explains how to interpret the story and how to be put to perspective in relation to time.

Characters

Offred.

Offred is the the narrator and main character in the book.

She sees herself as a victim of the regime, Offred is not her real name but was composed of the possessive preposition and the first name of the gentleman in question, her Commander Fred.

We never get to know her real name.

She is about thirty years old and a mother of one daughter, married to Luke.

Luke

Luke is mentioned a few times in the story bu doesn't play a role.

He is merely used to compare the now an then.

Moira.

Her friend from the time before Gilead, Moira is also put at the Martha's in the same house as Offred.

She plays an important role in the story, we see how Moira fights and at the end loses, in perspective to Offred who is more cautious and manages to escape.

Ofglen.

Is her assigned partner at the Martha's, in fact there are three Ofglen's.

A first one who we never meet, a second one who will her partner almost to the end of the book and a third one who replaces the second at the end of the book because the second is probably caught a member of the resistance.

Serena Joy.

She's a Wife, the wife of the Commander, also head of the house, Serena Joy is one of the convinced Martha's.

Commander.

Is seen as the ruler in the story, the Commander has power and can do almost anything he wants. The Commander needs to produce offspring at the Handmaid's.

This doesn't change throughout the story.

Time and order.

The story is told in a time around early the twentieth century.

Place/Space

Place of the story is the state of Maine, Maine can be located at the most northeast corner of th e United States, in the north its border is Canada

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Background

Theme

The Republic of Gilead allows Offred only one function: to breed.

If she deviates, she will, like all deserters, be hanged at the wall or sent out to die slowly of radiation sickness.

But even a repressive state cannot obliterate desire, neither Offred's nor that of the two men on whom her future hangs.

Motto

If this were true.

What could happen if the feminists have their way and are able to found an organisation aiming to free themselves of the man ruled society.

The opposite happens, a gruesome dictatorship ruled society is created where man have all privileges and find themselves at the top positions at the Gilead.

Use of language

Margaret Atwood uses normal modern English, some phrases are difficult to interpret because of their sexual implicities.

The Gilead can be traced back to the bible, Margaret Atwood used the bible as a reference book.

Perspective

The story is told through the eyes of the narrator

Opinion/analysis

This book was recommended to me by my sister who graduated English, her essay was written about Virginia Wolf.

Mainly because of my love for science fiction I accepted and started reading.

I needed almost one third of the book to get a feeling of the situation, to my opinion nothing much was happening.

Thing is, that it's not about what is happening but the whole situation in which Offred is in.

I wanted to know more about this and started to find out about it on the internet and discuss the book with my sister.

I began to notice the hidden implicities in the book and learned to interpret them better.

In this book the language is carved to tell a story, not a true story but a what if story.

Margaret must know that this would not really happen, but at the end of the book there is a reference to Iran.

Woman in Iran (at least according to the book) must be living in a sort like situation, except they are not presumed to be in charge.

Officially this is science fiction, one might think it's not but science fiction need not to involve technological innovation.

Apparently there is a whole range of books of this genre.

I will surely read another book form Margaret Atwood, but will try to read the newest, you have to read the book in perspective of the time it is written in.

Back in 1986, opinion about emancipation was way different than now.

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Evaluation

Some social controversy underlies this book,

In the eighties a debate raged about feminists anti-porn groups.

It was the need to protect "good" woman from sex that justified a manner of repression in the nineteenth century, like confining them to home, refrain from public health and voting.

The defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment, the rise of the religious right, the election of Ronald Reagan, and many sorts of backlash (mostly hugely misinformed) against the women's movement led writers like Atwood to fear that the anti feminist tide could not only prevent further gains for women, but turn back the clock.

Margaret was part of the feminist movement in the seventies and eighties but has never been a spokesman for it, she always insisted in having her individual perspective.

That makes this book like a pillar in feminist literature, something to stand still for and contemplate the subject.

The book is rarely used as a realistic predictor for a realistic future.

Atwood here examines some of the traditional attitudes that are embedded in the thinking of the religious right and which she finds particularly threatening.

Atwood made use of the King James version of the bible you can find numerous references in the text. For instance in Genesis 30:1-3 it was perfectly normal for a man to have sex and beget children from his slaves, even more so if his wife would be infertile.

Also the Gilead can be found in numerous occasions in the bible.

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