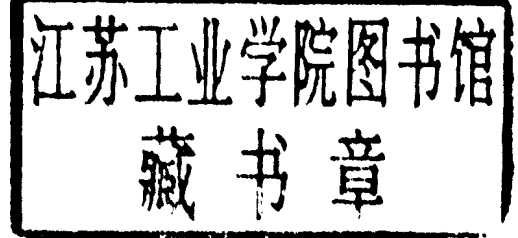


☐ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

CLC 135

Contemporary
Literary Criticism



Volume 135

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and
Other Creative Writers

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Preface

Named “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 include authors who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today’s reader.

Scope of the Series

CLC provides significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered in *CLC* inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author’s career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author’s works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the general critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete biographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

Organization of the Book

A *CLC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author’s actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.

- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- Whenever possible, a recent **Author Interview** accompanies each entry.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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Yvor Winters, *The Post-Symbolist Methods* (Allen Swallow, 1967), 211-51; excerpted and reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, vol. 85, ed. Christopher Giroux (Detroit: The Gale Group, 1995), 223-26.

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The Handmaid's Tale

Margaret Atwood

(Full name Margaret Eleanor Atwood) Canadian novelist, poet, short story writer, critic, editor, and children's writer.

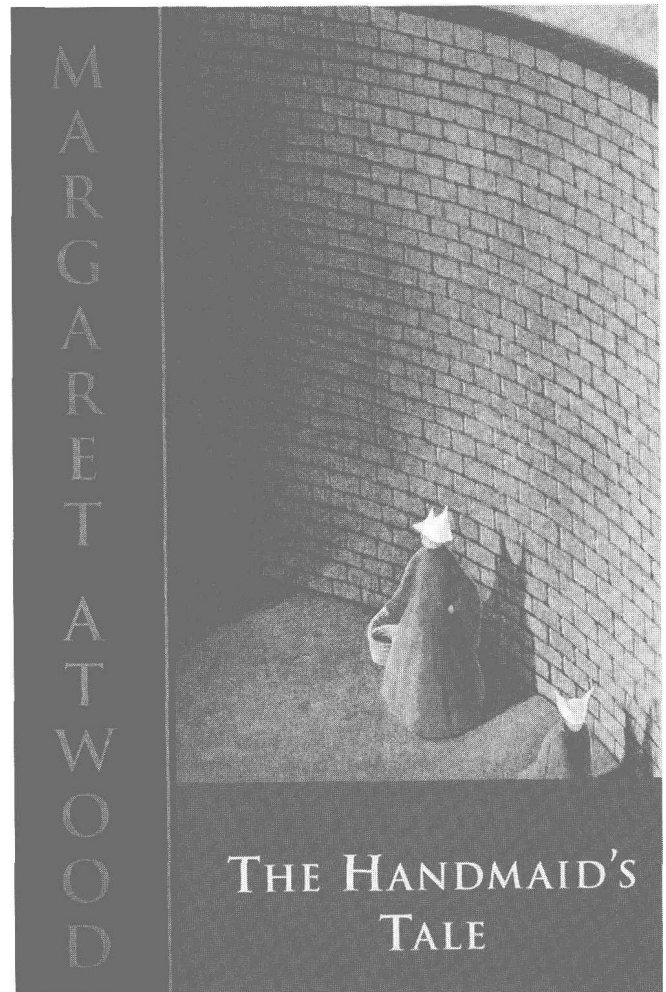
The following entry presents criticism on Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). For further information on Atwood's life and works, see *CLC*, Volumes 2, 3, 4, 8, 13, 15, 25, 44, and 84.

INTRODUCTION

A Canadian and feminist writer, Margaret Atwood is internationally acclaimed as an accomplished novelist, poet, short story writer, and literary commentator. Her novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) is highly regarded as a provocative work of feminist dystopian fiction that examines the cultural construction of female identity, language, and historical memory. Alternately chilling, satirical, and suspenseful, Atwood's cautionary tale portrays the physical and psychological oppression of women under a futuristic totalitarian regime that reduces its female subjects to mere voiceless, childbearing vessels. Presented as the eyewitness recollections of its entrapped heroine, the novel vividly displays the dehumanizing effects of ideological rhetoric, biological reductionism, and linguistic manipulation. Among Atwood's most celebrated works, *The Handmaid's Tale* displays the author's superior narrative abilities, her distinct poetic voice, and the chief feminist and humanitarian concerns which fascinate her.

PLOT AND MAJOR CHARACTERS

Set sometime during the late twentieth century, *The Handmaid's Tale* relates events in the Republic of Gilead, a militaristic Christian state that has supplanted the democratic government of the United States after a violent coup d'état. The proliferation of toxic pollution and sexually transmitted diseases in the near future has caused widespread sterility and a decline of Caucasian births. The new ruling male theocracy, situated in Cambridge, Massachusetts, is founded on fundamentalist biblical principles and a social hierarchy designed to promote controlled procreation. The strict moral code of the regime, a reaction against the amorality and permissiveness of the former United States, is enforced by the constant surveillance of Eyes (secret agents), Angels (soldiers), and Guardians (police). Though women in Gilead are prized for their ability to reproduce, they are forbidden to work, own property, or read. A select number of women who are fertile



and unmarried are recruited as Handmaids; they wear red habits with white hoods and are assigned to a Commander, a high-ranking government official, and his post-menopausal Wife. The sole function of the Handmaid is to produce children, a task that requires her to engage in ritualized, monthly copulation with the Commander in the presence of his Wife. Beneath the Handmaids in the caste system are Econowives, the spouses of lower class men who wear striped dresses. The remainder of infertile and unmarried women are divided into the following: Marthas, a servant class designated by drab green dresses; Aunts, a cattleprod-wielding corps entrusted with the indoctrination and discipline of the Handmaids; and Unwomen, a group comprised of resistant women who are sent to the em-

battled Colonies to clean up toxic waste. *The Handmaid's Tale* revolves around the first-person narrative of Offred, a thirty-three year old woman who is forced into the ranks of the Handmaids after a failed attempt to flee to Canada with her husband, Luke, and their young daughter. Earlier, Offred's mother, an ardent feminist in the old society, was condemned to the Colonies. Following a period of political re-education at the Rachael and Leah Center, a converted gymnasium where the Handmaids are detained and systematically brainwashed by the Aunts, Offred is assigned to a Commander named Fred (the name "Of-Fred" denotes her fealty to Fred) and his wife Serena Joy, a television gospel singer and leading proponent of the new female order. Offred is a replacement for Fred's former Handmaid, Janine, who has committed suicide. Offred's story describes her cloistered existence in the Commander's home, her despair over her lost identity and freedom, and the horrific realities of Gileadean society, including public executions, called "salvagings," of homosexuals, traitors, and other undesirables whose corpses are displayed on the wall of Harvard Yard. During paired shopping excursions with Ofglen, another Handmaid, Offred learns of the underground movement called Mayday, of which Ofglen is a part. Though initially passive and hopeless, Offred is gradually emboldened by her brief exchanges with Ofglen. Offred also becomes involved in an illicit relationship with Commander Fred, who summons her to his study during the evenings to play Scrabble—a illegal activity since women are condemned to illiteracy. She is compensated with hand lotion and old copies of banned women's magazines. Fred further violates their officially sanctioned relationship by kissing Offred, dressing her in slinky clothing, and taking her out to an underground nightclub called Jezebel's where various Unwomen are assembled for the pleasure of the officers. There Offred reencounters her friend Moira, a lesbian and rebellious former Handmaid-in-training whose failed escape from the Rachael and Leah Center has landed her a role as a prostitute at the club. At home, Offred also enters into a dangerous clandestine relationship with Nick, the Commander's limousine driver, who may have links to both the secret police and underground resistance. Her late-night couplings with Nick are tacitly approved by the Commander's Wife, Serena, in an effort to facilitate a speedy pregnancy after Fred fails to inseminate Offred during their monthly sessions. While Offred is permitted to satisfy her sexual longings with Nick, Serena stands to benefit from the prestige of having a birth in her home, a ceremonious event in itself attended by the Wives and Handmaids. Offred's risky involvements become increasingly perilous and complicated. Serena eventually learns of her unauthorized meetings with Fred and, in the final scene of her narrative, an ominous black van arrives at the Commander's house. Offred is whisked away either to safety with the underground resistance, perhaps arranged by Nick, or to certain death at the hands of the Eyes. A postscript to the novel entitled "Historical Notes on *The Handmaid's Tale*" reveals that the preceding narrative derives from a transcription of some thirty audiotapes dictated by Offred after her apparent escape. The postscript purports to be an excerpt from

the "Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies," an academic conference held in the year 2195 at the University of Denay, Nunavit, located in northern Canada. The historians in attendance, presided over by keynote speaker Professor James Darcy Pieixoto, have gathered to debate the authenticity and significance of Offred's account, which has been recently discovered by archaeologists in Bangor, Maine.

MAJOR THEMES

The Handmaid's Tale is primarily concerned with the problems of ideological extremism, historical interpretation, and most importantly the objectification of women in modern society. As in most dystopian fiction, the future setting merely affords the author an opportunity to illustrate the magnified ill effects of familiar contemporary problems left unchecked. As such, the Republic of Gilead embodies the dangerous potential of religious fanaticism, militarism, and sexism, whereby the Bible is appropriated as a tool of subjugation, democratic freedom is replaced by brutal coercion, and women are reduced to a strictly biological role as "two-legged wombs." The biblical foundation of Gilead evokes parallels between America's New England Puritan past and the evangelical Christianity of the contemporary Moral Majority. Biblical names and allusions permeate the text and the literal interpretation of Genesis 30:1-3, in which Jacob employs his wife's handmaid as a surrogate to produce children, forms the basis of Gileadean ideology. Orchestrated public events such as Prayvaganzas and the production of computerized prayers called "soul scrolls" also serve to underscore the political and commercial subversion of religion in Gilead. The omnipresence of Eyes, Angels, Guardians, and Aunts—all agents of state sponsored repression—evoke an atmosphere of constant surveillance and social control in which biblical mandate, fascist tactics, and technology are all merged. Atwood frequently employs satire as a method of social critique: Econowives and Birthmobiles parody modern consumerism; Serena Joy serves as an ironic name for the bitter, repressed religious leader of women's passivity; and the "Historical Notes" postscript lampoons the arrogance and false objectivity of male academics. Though men also suffer under the tyrannical Gileadean order, Atwood focuses on the persecution of women and their various efforts to resist male domination, including flight (Moira), dissent (Ofglen), suicide (Janine), acceptance (Serena), and storytelling (Offred). The use of language as a mode of both manipulation and liberating affirmation is a dominant motif in the novel. For example, the recurring images of eyes, eggs, ovals, and mirrors in the text contrast positive feminine symbols of fertility, continuity, and wholeness with negative aspects of surveillance, control, and imprisonment. Likewise, the blood-red gowns of the Handmaids conjure positive associations with birth and life as well as pejorative links with suffering, shame, and female bondage to reproductive cycles. Such multiplicity of meaning is also embedded in Offred's name, which may be interpreted as *off-read*, *off-red*, *offered*, or *afraid*. Though Offred's pre-Gilead name is never explicitly mentioned, some

critics have deduced from the text that it is June, a name significantly associated with Spring and rebirth. Throughout her narrative, Offred relies upon linguistic invention as an internal voice of self-expression, subjectivity, and, ultimately, survival, as her tapes suggest that women may transcend oppression by documenting and sharing their experiences. However, the "Historical Notes" postscript offers a skeptical conclusion that reveals the inadequacies of historical analysis and the persistence of male authority long after the fall of Gilead. Offred's account is ascribed the title "The Handmaid's Tale" by male historians who revel in its sexist pun on the word tale/tail and its association with Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, suggestive in this context of a medieval regression. The pompous jibes of Professor Pieixoto, his focus on Offred's credibility, and refusal to make any moral judgements about Gileadean society indicate that Offred's voice and harrowing reality are not taken seriously, and that a reinstated patriarchal establishment continues to marginalize women. The location of the conference at the University of Denay, Nunavit, forms the linguistic pun "deny none of it." In the end, Pieixoto's closing remark to his audience—"Are there any questions?"—serves as an ironic, open-ended, final statement that places responsibility and the possibility of change in the hands of the reader.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

The Handmaid's Tale is widely acclaimed as a major work of feminist protest and speculative fiction. A critical and popular success, the novel was awarded the *Los Angeles Times* Book Award, Arthur C. Clarke Award, and the Commonwealth Literature Prize, and was also adapted into a film in 1990. Critics consistently draw attention to the depth and complexity of the novel, praising Atwood's ability to illustrate the insidious presence of sexism and anti-feminism in contemporary society. Recognized as a daring departure from her previous novels, most commentators have applauded Atwood's compelling extrapolations of modern social, political, and environmental problems in this work. *The Handmaid's Tale* is frequently compared to classic dystopian novels such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, George Orwell's *1984*, and Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*. While many critics regard Atwood's novel as a rival to these works and a breakthrough contribution to an essentially male genre, others, most notably *New York Times Book Review* contributor Mary McCarthy, feel Atwood's novel lacks the satiric power and imagination of these earlier novels. However, Atwood's satire has prompted other reviewers to favorably compare her work to such literary staples as Jonathan Swift: Lucy M. Freibert writes, "Instead of a modest proposal, her Swifitean serio-comic vision comprises an ironic indictment of a society that treats woman's body as a pawn and her life as an academic question." Atwood's skillful use of postmodern narrative devices, ironic names, wordplay, and poetic language received frequent praise and is the focus of many scholarly studies of the novel. Commenting on the novel's universal significance, Stephanie Barbé Hammer writes, "the satire in *The Handmaid's Tale* directs its criticism to-

wards all of us—feminists and non-feminists, women and men. It warns us of the imperceptible technology of power, of the subtle domination of women by men, and of our unconscious imprisoning of each other and ourselves by ourselves."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

- Double Persephone* (poetry) 1961
- The Circle Game* (poetry) 1966
- The Animals in That Country* (poetry) 1968
- The Edible Woman* (novel) 1969
- The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (poetry) 1970
- Procedures for Underground* (poetry) 1970
- Power Politics* (poetry) 1971
- Surfacing* (novel) 1972
- Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (criticism) 1972
- You Are Happy* (poetry) 1974
- Lady Oracle* (novel) 1976
- Selected Poems, 1965-1975* (poetry) 1976
- Dancing Girls and Other Stories* (short stories) 1977
- Two-Headed Poems* (poetry) 1978
- Up in the Tree* (juvenilia) 1978
- Life Before Man* (novel) 1979
- True Stories* (poetry) 1981
- Bodily Harm* (novel) 1982
- Second Words: Selected Critical Prose* (criticism) 1982
- Bluebeard's Egg* (short stories) 1983
- Murder in the Dark: Short Fictions and Prose Poems* (short stories and poetry) 1983
- Interlunar* (poetry) 1984
- The Handmaid's Tale* (novel) 1985
- Selected Poems II: Poems Selected and New, 1976-1986* (poetry) 1987
- Cat's Eye* (novel) 1990
- Wilderness Tips and Other Stories* (short stories) 1991
- Good Bones* (short stories) 1992
- The Robber Bride* (novel) 1993
- Morning in the Burned House* (poetry) 1995
- Princess Prunella and the Purple Peanut* (juvenilia) 1995
- Alias Grace* (novel) 1996
- Morning in the Burned House: New Poems* (poetry) 1996
- Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature* (lectures) 1996
- Eating Fire: Selected Poetry 1965-1995* (poetry) 1998
- Blind Assassin* (novel) 2000

CRITICISM

Cathy N. Davidson (review date February 1986)

SOURCE: "A Feminist '1984,'" in *Ms.*, Vol. XIV, No. 8, February, 1986, pp. 24-6.

[In the following review, Davidson offers a favorable analysis of *The Handmaid's Tale*.]

I once watched Margaret Atwood try to pass unnoticed through a crowded conference center where she was to be a keynote speaker. Her memorable whirl of curling hair was pulled tightly back into a bun, her collar was up, her head down. The intensity with which she attempted to appear unobtrusive was a dead giveaway. Even in disguise, she looked like someone you should know.

With *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood is again conspicuously incognito. The novel marks a radical departure for the 46-year-old Canadian who has written more than 20 books that have been published in almost as many countries. Arguably her best work yet and unarguably her most controversial, *The Handmaid's Tale* takes place sometime in the near future, perhaps the nineties, perhaps the turn of the century. It is set in the Republic of Gilead, formerly known as the United States of America.

The Handmaid's Tale is a speculative fiction in the tradition of Aldous Huxley or George Orwell, but with important differences. First, Atwood's future eerily resembles our present, and, second, unlike her predecessors, she concentrates on what happens to women, especially to one woman, Offred, in a fascist country controlled by a group strikingly similar to the Moral Majority. After a President's Day massacre in Congress and the suspension of the Constitution, a junta seizes power. The new leaders promise free elections, but soon the U.S. borders are sealed, and potential rebels mysteriously disappear into the night.

Most of the novel consists of a transcript of 30 tapes, an oral diary left by Offred and discovered by archaeologists of the 22nd century who are trying to piece together the decline and fall of a once-powerful nation. Hers is one of the only extant eyewitness accounts of Gilead, a private record of a nation's public march to fascism and self-destruction. She tells of the day when women were fired from their jobs and forbidden access to their credit cards or bank accounts. More poignantly, she recalls her attempt to flee to Canada with her family, being caught and waking up in a strange room, her husband and child gone. Not even shock treatments can erase the memory of her loss. And then daily, in a language both present and tense, she recounts the monotonous dangers of her life as a Handmaid, a woman with "viable ovaries" who has been forced to become a childbearer for Fred (from whence her name), a commander in the Gilead Regime. A latter-day Anne Frank, Offred defiantly witnesses and records what she cannot overtly protest. Speaking freely in Gilead is a capital offense. Most things are.

A gripping suspense tale, *The Handmaid's Tale* is an allegory of what results from a politics based on misogyny, racism, and anti-Semitism. What makes the novel so terrifying is that Gilead both is and is not the world we know. For example, Serena Joy, the Schlafly-like wife of the

commander, is no longer the nation's most famous proponent of female subordination, but has been taken at her word. A private housewife now, she bitterly resents her loss of status. As Atwood notes, "it's a contradiction in terms for women to take a public position saying women shouldn't take public positions."

The depth and complexity of Atwood's critique of contemporary society are stunning. She has obviously thought long and hard about these issues, and yet she admits that she resisted writing this novel. "Usually I have about three novels in my head concurrently," but "I avoided writing this one for four years. I think part of it was that I thought it was so zany. I'd never written anything set in the future before, and it's not a conventional novel. For all those reasons, I just put it off. Then I started another book last year in England, and it wasn't working properly. It kept wandering off into the subject matter of this one, and I felt that, all right, this is the book I should be writing." The more she worked on it, the more she found it "a compelling story. I had to write this novel."

But could it happen here? Some of it "is happening now," she says. She is careful to distinguish her novel set in the future from futuristic fantasy. "It's not science fiction. There are no spaceships, no Martians, nothing like that." In fact, "there is nothing in *The Handmaid's Tale*, with the exception maybe of one scene, that has not happened at some point in history. I was quite careful about that. I didn't invent a lot. I transposed to a different time and place, but the motifs are all historical motifs."

A "Historical Note" affixed to the end of the novel provides more background information on the causes of the Gilead takeover. Prior to the coup, pollutants, radiation, and toxic wastes caused high rates of genetic mutation and sterility. ("There's a high concentration of PCBs in mother's milk. These things are already around. Why would it not have results?") The AIDS epidemic and other sexually transmitted diseases had spread throughout the population at large. Women's freedom to control their reproduction also contributed to a serious decline in birthrates, especially among affluent whites. The Gilead Regime reacted to this demography with social conservatism, religious Fundamentalism, and a literal enactment of Genesis 30: 1-3, an epigraph to the novel: when Rachel saw she could not bear children, she ordered Jacob to "go in unto" Bilhah, her maid, and "she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her." As Atwood notes, "A new regime would never say, 'we're socialist; we're fascist.' They would say that they were serving God. . . . You can develop any set of beliefs by using the Bible."

But even with this appeal to scripture, the regime cannot survive without some cooperation from women and, to secure this, the regime makes promises: an end to violence in the streets; no more rape, pornography, or disrespect for women. "Repressive regimes always have to offer up something in return," Atwood says. But at what cost? In Gilead, the promises are traps. Or, at best, they are double

binds, like the current debate over censorship and pornography. "Pornography is not particularly good for women. Neither is censorship. . . . Women are in the position of being asked to choose between two things, neither of which is good for them. Why can't they have a third thing that is good for them . . . some kind of reasonable social milieu in which pornography would not be much of an issue because it would not be desired by men?" I ask if she thinks that is possible. "It's possible," she smiles, "but it's not imminent."

Is Gilead imminent? "The United States is where it's going to happen first," she answers. "Canada is very socially conservative. It's more radical in other ways—socialized medicine, health care, and those things. But . . . people are much more skeptical about sudden change. It was never a revolutionary society. The United States was. It had its revolution in 1776 and from that it got the idea that you could change reality overnight. . . . The United States . . . is humanity's testing ground. It's like a teeming bacterial culture of everything you can imagine. It's where very different ideas fight it out." When Atwood discusses the novel, her low, steady voice goes even lower, becomes barely a murmur. It was not an easy book to write, to live with.

The author's young daughter, Jess, briefly interrupts our conversation in order to arrange with her mother for a ride to meet with a friend. It is a simple action, one performed routinely by any parent, but in the context of our conversation it is not routine at all. I think again about Offred who lives in a perpetual state of not knowing: of not knowing what happened to her mother, her husband, her child, or of what will happen to herself. "It's a lot more frightening, more intimidating not to know. Disappearance is more frightening than death." And I recall Offred's lyrical, even rhapsodic memories of the most simple aspects of her pre-Gilead past: women's magazines from the seventies and eighties, a store that sells several flavors of ice cream, a jumble of plastic garbage bags under the sink. Even hotel rooms take on new dimensions in a world where so much is forbidden. "Hotel rooms are very indulgent places—everything is just for you. Phone up and food appears. There's soap in little wrappers, clean towels and sheets, stationery in the drawers." The author speaks with real appreciation, like someone who has been to another place.

The Handmaid's Tale is a stark, even gruesome book, but it does not yield to despair and neither does its author. "You have to notice in the book I don't have everyone turning into a rhinoceros." There is a massive uprising in Detroit; a civil war in the South is led by the Baptists; elsewhere Quakers and Catholics rebel. "The people who have taken over are not able to do so without resistance. And some of the groups who are resisting you might think would go along with this—but they wouldn't. . . . Any monolithic structure tries to get rid of any opposition, any opposition. Look at Hitler's Germany. Some of the people being very oppressed were the Jehovah's Witnesses.

"Repressive regimes never last forever," she insists. "Look at the Puritans." The book is set in Cambridge, Massachu-

setts, and parallels abound between the new Republic of Gilead and Colonial America. Atwood even dedicates the novel to the late historian of Puritan culture, Perry Miller, her teacher at Harvard ("It was my first real view of American society") and to Mary Webster, her Puritan forebear who was hanged as a witch, but survived it. "She had a very tough neck." The writer notes, proudly, that her ancestors were "kicked out of one place or another because of their beliefs."

Their conviction has been passed on into Atwood's concerns as a writer. "Good writing takes place at intersections, at what you might call knots, at places where the society is snarled or knotted up. Something that has absolutely made up its mind one way or another is not very interesting writing. It's polemical. And I'm not saying writing shouldn't be political. It should encompass everything in life, and politics is part of life."

Does Atwood think fiction can change lives? "I'm not that naïve," she answers. But like all social critics, she believes in the potential for change. "Speculative fiction is a logical extension of where we are now. I think this particular genre is a walking along of a potential road, and the reader as well as the writer can then decide if that is the road they wish to go on. Whether we go that way or not is going to be up to us."

Paul Gray (review date 10 February 1986)

SOURCE: "Repressions of a New Day," in *Time*, February 10, 1986, p. 84.

[In the following review, Gray offers qualified praise for *The Handmaid's Tale*.]

Canadian Author Margaret Atwood's sixth novel will remind most readers of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. That can hardly be helped. Any new fictional account of how things might go horribly wrong risks comparisons either with George Orwell's classic or with Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. To a remarkable degree, these two books have staked out the turf of contemporary antiutopias. Which punishment is it to be this time? Relentless, inescapable totalitarianism or the mindless, synthetic stupors of technology? As it turns out. Atwood's look at the future takes place under conditions that Orwell would recognize. Repression is the order of the new day in *The Handmaid's Tale*. But the villains in this piece are not the ones that Orwell accused, and the most prominent victim and hero is a woman.

She is also the narrator, and the events that led to her current condition must be pieced together from memories she has been conditioned to forget. The United States of America is now the Republic of Gilead, a Fundamentalist Christian theocracy that arose after "they shot the president and machine-gunned the Congress and the army declared a state of emergency. They blamed it on the Islamic

fanatics, at the time.” The current regime is militantly opposed to the recent past, especially all traces of the moral permissiveness that arose in the U.S. during the waning decades of the 20th century. The embattled state must also try to reverse a disastrously declining birthrate, which began to slide with the growing acceptance of abortion and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases in the bad old days. It grew worse after the toxic effects of various ecological disasters.

Hence women like the narrator who are of childbearing age and still possess “viable ovaries” have been forcibly recruited into the ranks of Handmaids. After a period of indoctrination, they are assigned to two-year tours of duty with the important men, the Commanders of the Faithful, whose wives are barren. Handmaids are slaves to their own biological possibilities and derive their identity solely from their Commanders. The narrator’s new name, Offred, really identifies her owner; she belongs for the time being to a man named Fred. She explains the duties of her station: “We are for breeding purposes: we aren’t concubines, geisha girls, courtesans. On the contrary: everything possible has been done to remove us from that category. There is supposed to be nothing entertaining about us.”

Yet Offred’s narrative is beguiling in the extreme. Imprisoned in “a pampered life,” her own survival hanging on her ability to obey and reproduce, she surreptitiously reveals the play of intelligence and curiosity that has been forbidden to her sex. She has a keen eye for daily routines in the old Victorian house, located in what was apparently once Cambridge, Mass. She notes the costume she must wear, a Handmaid’s uniform, when she is allowed to go out shopping: “Everything except the wings around my face is red: the color of blood, which defines us. The skirt is ankle-length, full, gathered to a flat yoke that extends over the breasts, the sleeves are full.” The image of a scarlet nun seems appropriate to her role in this strange new society. Once a month, during the Ceremony, Offred has sex with her Commander. She lies between the legs of the Commander’s wife, “my head on her stomach, her public bone under the base of my skull, her thighs on either side of me.” All three participants in this ritual are fully clothed. Offred knows that if a child is conceived and born healthy, not an Unbaby or a “shredder,” the wife will raise it. She endures these ordeals as best she can: “One detaches oneself. One describes.” And she ponders constantly the possibilities of escape.

The Handmaid’s Tale will be taken in some quarters as a feminist parable or rallying cry. What is Offred, after all, if not an embodiment of woman subjugated to the power of men? In truth, Atwood’s vision is considerably more complex than that. For the Republic of Gilead has come about, in part, with the help of women. Offred’s memories of childhood include the time that her mother, an ardent feminist, took her to a ceremonial burning of pornographic magazines.

Later, at the indoctrination center, Offred sees her mother again, this time in a newsreel approvingly shown by the authorities: “She’s in a group of other women, dressed in

the same fashion; she’s holding a stick, no, it’s part of a banner, the handle. The camera pans up and we see the writing, in paint, on what must have been a bed sheet: TAKE BACK THE NIGHT.” Now there are no sleazy districts in Gilead. A woman can walk in public without being whistled at or worse. Offred wonders what her mother, if still alive, thinks about the new Puritanism: “Wherever you may be. Can you hear me? You wanted a women’s culture. Well, now there is one. It isn’t what you meant, but it exists.”

As a cautionary tale, Atwood’s novel lacks the direct, chilling plausibility of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Brave New World*. It warns against too much: heedless sex, excessive morality, chemical and nuclear pollution. All of these may be worthwhile targets, but such a future seems more complicated than dramatic. But Offred’s narrative is fascinating in a way that transcends tense and time: the record of an observant soul struggling against a harsh, mysterious world.

Tom O’Brien (review date 25 April 1986)

SOURCE: “Siren’s Wail,” in *Commonweal*, April 25, 1986, pp. 251-3.

[In the following review, O’Brien cites flaws in the plausibility of Atwood’s dystopia as depicted in *The Handmaid’s Tale*.]

I like Margaret Atwood very much, but her new novel, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, less. It’s an ambitious recasting of 1984, from a woman’s point of view, positing a takeover of the United States by right-wing religious fanatics who establish a monotheocracy. Atwood sets this in the near future, time enough, she imagines, for a crisis in fertility caused by AIDS, new strains of syphilis, and poisoning by environmental and toxic hazards. As a result, the male oligarchy that runs Gilead turns all available women (divorcees, anyone married to a divorced man, or women who have lived with men) into second wives, handmaids, as long as they have “viable ovaries.” A police state enforces this polygamy and general policy with ruthless terror.

It’s not exactly the outlandishness of this that bothers me. As Atwood notes, most of the things she depicts here have their parallel in contemporary events: in the attack on women’s rights by some Protestant evangelicals and Islamic fanatics, and in the practice of government terror that she is all too familiar with as a member of Amnesty International.

Atwood even includes small topical terms like “salvaging”—the Philippine expression for state-sponsored murder—to describe Gilead’s executions, and “re-education centers”—from the Cambodian and Vietnam takeovers—where “handmaids” are taught to accept the benefits of their new lot. In a historical note at the end of the book