

The Handmaid's Tale (1985)

Margaret Atwood



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Handmaid's Tale

The author, Margaret Atwood



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- Novel Maddadam due in 2013



Background: the Title



- *The Canterbury Tales*: a collection of stories written by Geoffrey Chaucer in the 1400's

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- *The Canterbury Tales*: a collection of stories written by Geoffrey Chaucer in the 1400's
- Tales include "The Miller's Tale," "The Knight's Tale"
- Handmaid = servant

Background: Biblical allusion



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- The Genesis story of Jacob (Abraham's grandson) and his wives Leah & Rachel



Background: Biblical allusion

- The Genesis story of Jacob (Abraham's grandson) and his wives Leah & Rachel
- Rachel begs Jacob to impregnate her handmaid Bilhah ("*she shall bear upon my knees*") – Gen 30:3



Gilead



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- Actual place near Jordan river

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- The prophet Elijah was from there

Gilead



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- According to Genesis, Jacob lived near there
- The prophet Elijah was from there
- In more recent times, it's become confused with heaven

The Dystopian Novel



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- Opposite of Utopian



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- Utopia = creation of paradise; dystopia = creation of a nightmare



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- 1984 – George Orwell



Underlying allusion: Feminist/Conservative war on porn (strange bedfellows?)



Discussion



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- What does the use of biblical allusion bring to the story?



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- What point is made about the role of women in such a society?

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- The forbidden affair: why does Offred take such pleasure in it?



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- What is the message here about us in general?



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- What trade-offs are made for the good in Gilead?

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- What trade-offs are made for the good in Gilead?
- What's the concept of "freedom to" vs. "freedom from"?

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- The novel has been called “a cautionary tale.” What is it cautioning us against?



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- Are we (the U.S.) headed toward it or away from it?



Discussion

- Gilead is fictional, but societies like it do exist.
- Are we (the U.S.) headed toward it or away from it?
- What evidence do you see in either case?



Theme(s)



- What would you say are some of the primary themes in the book?

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- What would you say are some of the primary themes in the book?
- How can you prove them?