**Book Review: The Handmaid’s Tale**

**By Shannon Hill from *The Feminist Mystique*** **Blog**

The Feminist Mystique Blog:

*“I started this blog as a way to continue thinking critically and writing about issues I'm passionate about. But also as a way to think through what it means to be a feminist outside of the academy. My goal is to explore how to fully live a feminist life; how to help make this world a better place for women. For me, this means thinking about the big things -- like reproductive rights, sexual violence, and international law; but also some of the smaller things -- like what I eat and wear, what I do with my last name, and how I spend my money.” –The Feminist Mystique*

*The Handmaid's Tale* is a feminist dystopian novel, similar to George Orwell's *1984*and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. It is set in the not-so-distant future, when a Christian group has taken over the United States and established a totalitarian theocracy called the Republic of Gilead. The book is told from the perspective of a woman, Offred, who lives in the Republic of Gilead (Offred is a patronymic that means "Of Fred"). She is a "handmaid," a class of women who are used solely for their reproductive functions.

The book primarily explores themes of women's subjugation and what could potentially happen if an extremist Christian religious group took over the U.S. It offers a critique of theocratic fascism and the idealization of "traditional values," specifically the idea that women are best suited for the home and making babies. Interestingly, it also offers a critique of anti-pornography feminists (the book was written in 1985 when the "sex wars" between feminists were raging), and Atwood implies that these anti-pornography feminists gave the religious extremists too much power and became somewhat fascist themselves.

The novel is rife with biblical allusions and plays on the idea of basing a society's morality on the morality found in the Bible. Gilead (Genesis 31:21) is used in the Bible to refer to a mountain region east of the Jordan River, and is frequently translated to mean "heap/mount of testimony." The handmaids, such as Offred, are sent to the Rachel and Leah Re-education Center to train for the position of handmaid, and Atwood makes it clear that the Gileadean idea of the handmaids is derived from the story of Rachel and Leah found in Genesis 29-35. In the biblical story, Rachel and Leah, the two wives of Jacob, give their maids to Jacob so he can have (more) children through them. This biblical story is read by the husband to his wife and handmaid before they all engage in a bizarre fertility ritual.

Atwood has stated that "this is a book about what happens when certain casually held attitudes about women are taken to their logical conclusions." I don't think she could have described it more accurately.

The book takes ideas that we hear all the time from the religious right today --  ideas like women should return to the home, that men are the rightful "head" of a household, that women shouldn't have access to birth control and/or abortion, and that women's pursuit of things like an education and career are to blame for a declining birth rate and the corruption of society -- and shows what happens if those ideas, and the people who believe in them, are allowed to influence law. In the novel, women are not allowed to be educated, to use birth control or have abortions, to work, travel freely, or hold private property. Divorce is declared invalid, and anyone who is in a second marriage when the Republic of Gilead is established is accused of adultery.

One of my favorite parts is about the wife of the husband Offred serves, who used to be a televangelist and was active in establishing the Republic of Gilead. She preached that women should return to the home, but becomes deeply depressed after the Republic is established and she is confined to the home and unable to speak in public. Through this story, Atwood critiques women who are active in political life while preaching domesticity, and implies that anti-feminist women would be unhappy if they actually lived out the traditional roles they idealize.

To me, one of the most disturbing aspects of this story is how quickly the United States became the Republic of Gilead. Much of it was done in the name of security (initially, an increase in military control is blamed on the need to protect from Islamic fundamentalists), and the constitution is actually suspended after the religious group realizes that the constitution does not, in fact, establish the religious theocracy they idealize. The warning of the novel is clear: you have to protect women's rights -- protect not just freedom of religion but freedom from religion -- because it is a slippery slope. Rights can be chipped at and taken away if we aren't careful, don't advocate for ourselves, and don't fight every attack.

Honestly, this is a book that everybody should read (the other one being the [*Price of Motherhood*](http://elevatedifference.com/review/price-motherhood-why-most-important-job-world-still-least-valued)). Religious extremists are constantly trying to limit women's rights, take too much control of our government, and preach dangerous, limiting, and disempowering views on women and femininity. The Handmaid's Tale is a deeply distrubing picture of what our society could look like if these groups win. We don't want the Republic of Gilead to become our reality.