

MARGARET ATWOOD continued

Murder in the Dark (prose poems) and *Bluebeard's Egg* (short stories) (1983); *Interlunar* (poems) (1984); *The Handmaid's Tale* (novel) (1985); *Selected Poems II* (1986); *The Can Lit Food Book* (1987); *Cat's Eye* (novel) (1988); *Margaret Atwood: Conversations* (1990); *Wilderness Tips* (short stories) (1991); *Good Bones* (short fictions) (1992); *The Robber Bride* (novel) (1993); *Morning in the Burned House* (poetry), and *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature* (criticism) (1995); and *Alias Grace* (novel) (1996). She has also edited *The Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English* (1982) and co-edited *The Oxford Book of Short Stories in English* (1986) and *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Short Stories in English* (1995). Clearly, Margaret Atwood is dazzlingly proficient in both poetry and prose.

In her novels she has experimented with a range of narrative genres from Gothic romances and fairytales to spy thrillers, science fiction utopias and fictive autobiographies. *The Handmaid's Tale* combines elements from all these, for if one of the distinctive features of her fiction is its experimentalism, another is its thematic continuities. Margaret Atwood has always believed that art has a social function. As she wrote in 1982: 'If writing novels – and reading them – have any redeeming social value, it's probably that they force you to imagine what it's like to be somebody else. Which increasingly is something we all need to know' ('Writing the Male Character', in *Second Words*). Her novels are eye-witness (I-witness) accounts which focus on contemporary political issues: 'And what do we mean by "political"? What we mean is how people relate to a power structure and vice versa' (*Conversations*). This wide definition of 'politics' accommodates all Atwood's enduring concerns, which we see displayed in the dystopian fiction of *The Handmaid's Tale*: her feminism and her scrutiny of male-female relationships, her ecological interests, her nationalist concern with relations between Canada and the United States, and her wider concerns with basic human rights under various forms of state oppression.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

It is to be noted that Gilead has a specifically American location, and Atwood's clippings file for the novel contains a great deal of material on the American New Right in the early 1980s, with its warnings about the 'Birth

Dearth', its anti-feminism, its anti-homosexuality, its racism and its strong religious underpinnings in the Bible Belt. As a coalition of conservative interests which sought to influence government legislation on family issues and public morals, the New Right harked back to America's Puritan inheritance, and was politically powerful under Presidents Reagan and Bush though far less so under President Clinton. It is an interesting feature of utopias and dystopias that they are always responses to conditions which are causing anxiety at the time of writing, and it is that assault on liberal social policies which is satirised in Gilead as representing an extreme version of such ideology in practice. Atwood's interest in Puritan New England relates to her own ancestry (especially her relative Mary Webster who was hanged as a witch in 1683) and also to her studies at Harvard under Professor Perry Miller, the great scholar of the Puritan mind (see Summaries, Prefatory Material). Many of the practices in Gilead are to be found in Miller's histories, though Atwood shifts the emphasis away from patriarchal tradition to invent discordant women's voices which run counter to the new puritanism of Gilead.

Gilead's attempts to redefine female identity in reductively biological terms provides the opportunity for a scrutiny of North American feminism in its recent history since the 1960s (see Themes, on Feminism).

Not only does Atwood satirise American society, however, for as the 'Historical Notes' indicate, Gilead's tyrannical practices are based on an international range of models which include not only historical examples but also contemporary political atrocities in Latin America, Iran and the Philippines, and today one might add Iraq and Afghanistan. 'Denay Nunavit' (Deny None of It) seems to be Atwood's message out of the past and into the future, shocking readers out of complacency into a recognition of our shared moral responsibility.

LITERARY BACKGROUND

Set in a futuristic USA at the beginning of the twenty-first century, *The Handmaid's Tale* belongs to the science fiction genre of dystopian fiction. It might be read as a feminist update of masculinist dystopias like Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1920–1), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and specifically George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), and like them it