Context, Culture and History.

*The Handmaid’s Tale* by Margaret Atwood.
“There’s nothing in this text that hasn’t already occurred in human history.”

**Dystopian Genre:** A dystopia is a ‘worst case scenario’ world- the worst society imaginable. *A dystopian text provides comment on issues/events* from present/past society. They are usually cautionary tales, which construct some form of ‘warning’ about where society could be heading if...

Some dystopian narratives explore the following possibilities- *what if...*

- We cease to challenge or question authority or the ideas circulating within our own society about different groups/individuals
- We allow technology to consume us
- We continue to be entertained by gratuitous violence on television or other mediums
- We conform without question
- We submit to fear campaigns about groups in our society
- We permit the invasion of our privacy
- **We stop reading and writing by choice (YR 12’s)**

So...when we look at a question like:

*Discuss how a text you have studied has conformed to your expectations of a particular genre.*

Then, we need to consider that part of our expectation of the dystopian genre is that it provides insight to or critiques a part of our own current or past society that is problematic.

So...*Where does The Handmaid’s Tale (1985) come from? What is Atwood critiquing from her present or past? But we also need to consider if this text still contains some relevance to readers in 2017.*

Atwood has packed so much into this text; it is sometimes hard to think about how the world within this text is a ‘worst case’ scenario of aspects of the world outside the text.
The Setting of Gilead: Harvard, Massachusetts, US.
Where did it come from? The Puritans: early America

- The Puritans were a fundamentalist, Christian group who originally fled religious persecution in Britain. They settled in the US in the 17th century and established their own THEOCRACY in a region of Massachusetts.
- They had a very literal and archaic interpretation of the Bible and they expected every member of their community to conform to their rules inspired by religious scripture. Sound familiar?
- In particular, women in this Puritan society were expected to be chaste (if they weren’t married), subservient and subject to their fathers, brothers or husbands. It was a very rigid life. They even had to wear bonnets and clothing that covered their bodies completely.

↔ ↔ A Puritan woman – “Inside it (the church) you can see paintings, of women in long sombre dresses, their hair covered in white caps (...) our ancestors. Admission is free.” (P41)

↔ ↔ A Handmaid.

“Our white wings skew our vision of the world”

Puritan Women:
- Women were, of course, subordinate to men. In the new colonies, the same laws existed as in England. Married women were not allowed to possess property, sign contracts, or conduct business. Their husbands owned everything, including the couple’s children. Only widows who did not remarry could own property and run their own businesses.
- Women had to dress modestly, covering their hair and arms. Women found guilty of immodest dress could be stripped to the waist and whipped until their backs were bloody. Public humiliation could include confessing one’s sins in front of the whole church congregation.
- The Puritans believed that Eve’s role in original sin exemplified woman’s inherent moral weakness. They feared that women were much more susceptible to temptations, and that they possessed qualities that could be exploited and become sinful. A woman was to love, obey and further the interests and will of her husband. If she was a good mate, she had fulfilled her God-given duty.

The Puritans were also infamous for the Salem witch trials of 1692. They executed 14 women for ‘witch craft’. They believed them to be in league with the devil. Atwood had ancestors who were Puritan:

“One was my study of 17th century Puritan New England. I have a personal connection because some of my ancestors were creepy 17th century Puritan New Englanders. One was even implicated in witchcraft. She’s in a book by Cotton Mather. That’s why The Handmaid’s Tale is dedicated to Mary Webster. My granny was a Webster.”
But, *The Handmaid's Tale* is a bit of a ‘mash-up’ in the sense that she doesn't just draw inspiration from the experiences of women within Puritan theocracy. Atwood considers the experiences of women (and men) across generations- and the conflicting attitudes held about a woman or man’s role in our society – attitudes held by both men and women.

The following Puritan beliefs may seem archaic to a modern citizen of the world, but they are ‘ideas’ about men and women, which have been circulating for centuries and perhaps still exist.

- A woman was to love, obey and further the interests and will of her husband. If she was a good mate, she had fulfilled her God-given duty.
- Married women were not allowed to possess property, sign contracts, or conduct business or participate in law making.

**The Suffragettes:** In the late 19th/early 20th century fought for a woman’s right to vote- to participate as active contributors in the law-making process within their own society. Today, we view this right to vote as perfectly normal and logical. But, it always wasn’t so.

The Backlash: the right to vote was seen by some as a threat to family order and traditional roles.
Anti-Suffragette campaigns instilled this fear that women winning the right to vote would threaten social order. Women who were campaigning were neglecting their domestic responsibilities- the household was falling apart. These women threatened the establishment.

In order to win the vote, many women went on hunger strikes; they participated in civil disobedience and were often imprisoned for their efforts. It was a long and often brutal battle.

But, they felt they had to get loud in order to be heard. By about 1920, women in the US, UK and Australia had won the right to vote.

**Anti-Suffragette Campaign Posters: early 20th century.**
And, then it went quiet for a while. Most Western countries were still patriarchal. ‘Working class’ women worked- they always really worked as well as looked after the household- but they weren’t necessarily getting equal opportunity, the same pay or the same conditions as men in the workplace.

Women during the Second World War were contributing to the war effort in the US, UK and Australia by working in agriculture and industry, whilst the men were overseas.

However, when the men returned, women had to vacate their employment positions.

Women began to ‘grumble’ again and threaten the patriarchal pillars.

1950’s America:

- 1950’s America was a time of mass industry and the forging of the American Dream.
- There was a boom in the creation of new technologies to make living more efficient- especially for managing the household. There were kitchen appliances galore being manufactured- and guess who got to pose next to the products in the advertisements? Women of course- but men bought them. This was the re-vamping of the age-old tradition of women in the domestic sphere and men in the public sphere- that lady by the fridge may not be wearing a bonnet, but she looks awfully handmaid red to me.

He “is the head of the household. The house is what he holds. To have and to hold, till death do us part.” (P 91)

Women too often were turning the pages of magazines or newspapers and seeing images of women in kitchens cooking and cleaning. The image of the domestic woman was multiplying at a rapid rate in Western society. For some women, it felt like a very one-dimensional representation. It was oppressive and allowed for limited autonomy. Texts — film, music, art, literature, advertisements, magazines etc. can shape how we see ourselves, or how other people see us. Women were seeing a narrow version of the female identity.

“Doubled, I walk the street” – (P33)

Just like Offred and Ofglen when they go shopping. All women are the same- they look the same, they behave they same, they all suffer under the same policies.

Remember that interview we watched with Margaret Atwood and Jennifer Byrne? Byrne said to Atwood, “And, your books were embraced by the feminists?” and Atwood astutely replied, “Any book written by a woman that wasn’t about cooking and cleaning was embraced by the feminists.”
Second Wave Feminism: 1960’ s-1970’s

In brief, a lot of ground-work was completed during this time for women’s rights. Like with any movement, there were some radicals. It’s important to note that women (and men) are not a homogenous group- they all come with a different set of values, beliefs, attitudes and experiences. So, within this movement, there were different factions striving for different aims and they held differences of opinion.

But on the whole, this movement set out to achieve:

- Equal opportunity in the workplace
- Constitutional protection from sex discrimination- in America, this came in the form of amendments to the constitution - the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA).
- Reproductive Rights
- Sexual liberation

BUT there was BACKLASH: Late 1970’s- Early 1980’s

Phyllis Schlafly – a Republican, Religious Conservative and a Professional.

She sought to halt the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment in the US and she won.

She argued that this amendment would in fact remove many protections that already existed for women in the constitution.

The cornerstone of her argument was that if you added the phrasing ‘free from sex discrimination’ into the constitution, then it would open up women to be called up to the draft- that they would have to fight in combat. It would also integrate bathrooms and bring about the destruction of the family. To her, the ERA was a challenge to traditional values. In her mind, women and men had very distinctive roles in the family.

Gloria Steinem – a famous feminist and a magazine editor of the day said of Phyllis’ backlash movement:

“ I would love to blame Phyllis, but I don’t think she’s really to blame at all- I don’t think she’s changed votes, she’s just used as an excuse, as a cosmetic. They are going to vote against it, these institutions, for their own economic benefit, because equal pay is expensive and they need to have a woman to make it okay. She just happens to be the only nationally known woman who happens to be against the Equal Rights Amendment.”

Republican politician Ronald Regan, in his campaign for the US American Presidency in the 1980’s, promoted a return to ‘traditional American values’. The Republican Party formed a tight relationship with right-wing Christian conservative groups who just couldn’t deal with all this sex, drugs and rock n roll spurred by the liberal movements of the 1960’ s-70’s. There was too much freedom and right wing groups feared that there would be some sort of apocalypse- that American society was losing its Christian morality and it was going to implode.
It was this message of the Regan Government of ‘the return to traditional values’ that concerned Margaret Atwood at the time she was writing, *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

What did this ‘return to traditional values’ mean for American men and women? Whose traditional values? From which tradition and whose era? Atwood explores this notion that this is a dangerous message to be promoting.

Atwood constructs a ‘worst-case’ scenario world in which she explores the possibilities of returning to these so-called ‘traditional values’.

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<tr>
<th><strong>Gilead returns men and women to a set of “traditional values” to make the world a better place</strong></th>
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<td>• Women are contained within the domestic sphere- women are returned to being the property of men, they do not own any property and they do not earn an income.</td>
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<td>• The handmaids shop, nap and reproduce. They are not employed in anything else. Their jobs and bank accounts are removed from them.</td>
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<td>• They do not own their bodies- they have no reproductive rights. They are defined by their ability or inability to reproduce. It does say in the bible that women are the bearers of fruit.</td>
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<td>• Women and men are not free to express their sexuality. Women are either sent to the colonies or clothed in robes, which desexualises their bodies but keeps them free from objectification.</td>
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<td>• Women are forbidden education.</td>
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<td>• Women are not part of the political process – they have no input in policies or law in Gilead. The men hold the power and make the decisions.</td>
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<td>• Women must conform to the rigid structures of society without question.</td>
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<td>• Women are told that the times before Gilead were not good times- that their independence meant that they were victims of brutality, abuse and sexual objectification. That returning them to these traditional values was for their own ‘protection’- ‘freedom to and freedom from’.</td>
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<td>• Women are encouraged to feel ashamed of being ‘loose’ in the times before Gilead- that it brought them all sorts of problems.</td>
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If you think about it on Atwood’s genius level- Atwood considers our own pattern of human behaviour and the formation and destruction of societies. She explores the influence that ideological ways of thinking can have on the shaping of human civilisations and how sometimes ‘history can repeat’.

No matter the society- power can be abused and used to exploit and oppress a group or an individual. We have seen this throughout the entirety of human history; yet, we never seem to be free from it. Gilead was formed after the collapse of a democracy, then it became a theocracy, then it imploded and fell apart, but then what? *The Historical Notes* indicate that the ‘thinking’ which spurred the regime in the first place, is still circulating.

*Disclaimer: politics, religion and history are far more complex than what is written down on these pages. This is a very diluted version of events, histories and issues. It is meant as a brief overview to help clarify any confusion over some aspects of context. Believe me, Atwood packed in more than this into this literary masterpiece genius of a novel.*