

## **An Oppressive Regime (That's Successful)**

From the start of *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood, Gilead is presented as an oppressive society, this is non-negotiable. Characters in the book, from the main character, Offred, to the Commander, are all aware of this, and readers can see how it dictates their behaviors from the beginning of the book. But what exactly about Gilead makes it a strong oppressive regime, and is Gilead a nearing reality for the United States?

### **GILEAD'S OPPRESSION AND CONNECTIONS TO HISTORY**

To start, in history, fiction, and Gilead, the oppression we see is social oppression. This means certain people are oppressed based on things like class, race, religion, gender and more. These oppressive regimes typically control a group of people using one or more of five techniques: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence. In Gilead pretty much all of these techniques are used in some way shape or form, but the main ones being exploitation, cultural imperialism and violence.

Starting with exploitation. In oppressive societies, exploitation is often seen as using a certain group of people to do some type of labor for the people in power in this society. The oppressed group will often receive little to nothing as compensation and the compensation given, if any, will often be heavily monitored by the oppressors. In the United States, the most prominent example of this in our history is slavery. The most notable exploitative work slaves in the United States were doing was working in the fields. They received no compensation and were kept in line by violence, threats and more. When slavery was abolished, slave owners still needed mass amounts of labor to keep their farms going, and sharecropping became increasingly popular. Although workers now would receive compensation for their work, it was hardly anything. They were often given special currencies they could use only at a store run by the farm owner, and just enough for most basic necessities. This prevented people from being able to break away, as they were often in debt and wouldn't be allowed to leave until their debt was paid off.

In Gilead, the Handmaids are the main group of people doing the exploitative work, namely, giving birth to children for the people in power. If they break rules they could be hurt, starved, or even killed. Their compensation is a roof over their heads and little food. The first example we see of a controlled currency system is when Offred and Ofglen go to the store, "'Quiet,' says one of the Guardians behind the counter, and we hush like schoolgirls. Ofglen and I have reached the counter. We hand over our tokens, and one Guardian enters the numbers on them into the Compubite while the other gives us our purchases, the milk, the eggs." (PDF Page 22) Here, we see that the person operating the store is a Guardian. The Guardians are more powerful than the Handmaids, showing that the stores are not of an outside party, but rather a piece that the leaders of Gilead control. Offred also mentions "tokens" showing that not only are the stores controlled, but the currency is too. This means that even if a person were to escape Gilead, any currency they had would not prove useful. While exploitative work is a very important part of Gilead's society, Gilead could not operate the way it does with exploitation alone.

Cultural imperialism is another thing that controls Gilead. Cultural imperialism is when people in power force their views and ideologies onto those with less power. They can do this in many ways such as intimidation, misinformation, restrictive laws, and public humiliation. One example of an oppressive group that uses this technique is the Taliban in Afghanistan. The Taliban is an Islamic fundamentalist group. They enforce their interpretation of the Qur'an on the people of Afghanistan, which is

predominantly seen as violence against women and people of religious minorities. They take away education and access to information especially for women. If their rules are not followed, they will use heavy amounts of violence to scare people into doing what they want.

Gilead does a great job at spreading its ideologies, while keeping people from possibly coming up with their own ideas. To start, reading, writing, books, magazines, tv shows, music, and other forms of media are strictly banned. This started as simple book burnings, one of which Offred's mom attended with Offred, "Don't let her see it, said my mother. Here, she said to me, toss it in, quick. I threw the magazine into the flames. It riffled open in the wind of its burning; big flakes of paper came loose, sailed into the air, still on fire, parts of women's bodies, turning to black ash, in the air, before my eyes."(PDF Page 30) By the time the Handmaid's Tale occurs, this has escalated to an all out ban on not just books and magazines, but almost everything that allows people in Gilead to freely think and form ideas on their own. Additionally, the Handmaids are constantly reminded that Gilead is better than the time before, and it is drilled into them constantly. One example is when an Aunt Lydia says, "It will be so much better. The women will live in harmony together, all in one family; you will be like daughters to them," and "Your daughters will have greater freedom. We are working towards the goal of a little garden for each one, each one of you — the clasped hands again, the breathy voice — and that's just one for instance. The raised finger, wagging at us. But we can't be greedy pigs and demand too much before it's ready, now can we?"(PDF Page 112) Offred and some other's show some reluctance to these ideas, but the threat of violence keeps them in check.

Violence is the last and most important part that holds together Gilead. Violence in real life holds together many oppressive regimes such as in North Korea. In North Korea, torture, and death are quite common when you break rules of the nation. As one of the world's most oppressive regimes, even people in their own homes are not always safe. They have people listening all around for people who may break the laws and the punishments are so severe that most people would never even consider breaking the laws. Gilead also uses the threat of violence to deter the people from leaving. Guards have firearms, and Aunts have whips. When Offred is out she even sees dead people hanging from The Wall, "There are three new bodies on the Wall. One is a priest, still wearing the black cassock. That's been put on him, for the trial, even though they gave up wearing those years ago, when the sect wars first began; cassocks made them too conspicuous. The two others have purple placards hung around their necks: Gender Treachery," their presence and fate, a reminder of the rules.

In conclusion, Gilead follows many of the strategies that are implemented in real world oppressive societies, and these foundational pieces of oppression are what hold Gilead together.

## **CAN GILEAD HAPPEN TODAY?**

With the current state of the United States, it's not too far-fetched to say Gilead is not too far off. While not obvious from the beginning, exploitation of people is seen every day, as inflation causes prices to go up, while wages stay the same. However, the extremely rich people with power, such as Elon Musk (Straight, White, cis male, Christian), a big controller in our media, and Jeff Bezos (Straight, White, cis male, Christian) only get richer by the day. Additionally, cultural imperialism around bodily autonomy and abortion is getting increasingly more similar to Gilead. Book bans are being enforced around the country, restricting knowledge of what an abortion is and how it works, people who want an abortion or gender affirming healthcare are publicly shamed even trying to go to the buildings to receive care, and more and more laws are coming into place restricting what people are allowed to do with their own

bodies. Lastly, violence is ever present in our society. Whether it's death threats to those seeking an abortion, sexual assault to a woman simply walking down the street, or even the police themselves taking advantage of those they have power over. So, yes. Gilead can happen and is much closer than we may think. It is time to take action so we can protect those we love and our rights to freedom.