

Theme: Dystopian Visions of the Future **Text:** *The Handmaid's Tale* (by Margaret Atwood)

We aren't going to the river though, we won't see the little cupolas on the buildings down that way, white with blue and gold trim, such chaste gaiety. We turn in at a more modern building, a huge banner draped over its door - WOMEN'S PRAYVAGANZA TODAY. The banner covers the building's former name, some dead president they shot. Below the red writing there's a line of smaller print, in black, with the outline of a winged eye on either side of it: *God Is a National Resource*. On either side of the doorway stand the inevitable Guardians, two pairs, four in all, arms at their sides, eyes front. They're like store mannequins almost, with their neat hair and pressed uniforms and plaster-hard young faces. No pimply ones today. Each has a submachine gun slung ready, for whatever dangerous or subversive acts they think we might commit inside.

The Prayvaganza is to be held in the covered courtyard, where there's an oblong space, a skylight roof. It isn't a citywide Prayvaganza, that would be on the football field; it's only for this district. Ranks of folding wooden chairs have been placed along the right side, for the Wives and daughters of high-ranking officials or officers, there's not that much difference. The galleries above, with their concrete railings, are for the lower-ranking women, the Marthas, the Econowives in their multicolored stripes. Attendance at Prayvaganzas isn't compulsory for them, especially if they're on duty or have young children, but the galleries seem to be filling up anyway. I suppose it's a form of entertainment, like a show or a circus. [...]

The sitting space in the courtyard is filled now; we rustle and wait. At last the Commander in charge of this service comes in. He's balding and squarely built and looks like an aging football coach. He's dressed in his uniform, sober black with the rows of insignia and decorations. It's hard not to be impressed, but I make an effort: I try to imagine him in bed with his wife and his Handmaid, fertilizing away like mad, like a rutting salmon, pretending to take no pleasure in it. When the Lord said be fruitful and multiply, did he mean this man?

This Commander ascends the steps to the podium, which is draped with a red cloth embroidered with a large white-winged eye. He gazes over the room, and our soft voices die. He doesn't even have to raise his hands. Then his voice goes into the microphone and out through the speakers, robbed of its lower tones so that it's sharply metallic, as if it's being made not by his mouth, his body, but by the speakers themselves. His voice is metal-colored, horn-shaped.

"Today is a day of thanksgiving," he begins, "a day of praise."

I tune out through the speech about victory and sacrifice. Then there's a long prayer, about unworthy vessels, then a hymn: "There Is a Balm in Gilead."

"There Is a Bomb in Gilead," was what Moira used to call it.

Now comes the main item. The twenty Angels enter, newly returned from the fronts, newly decorated, accompanied by their honor guard, marching one-two one-two into the central open space. Attention, at ease. And now the twenty veiled daughters, in white, come shyly forward, their mothers holding their elbows. It's mothers, not fathers, who give away daughters these days and help with the arrangement of the marriages. The marriages are of course arranged. These girls haven't been allowed to be alone with a man for years; for however many years we've all been doing this.

Annotations: 1 *cupola* – domed roof 13 *econowives* - the women of the poorer men 18 *insignia* - a badge or sign showing a soldier's or officer's rank 22 *embroidered* – ornamented with needlework 28 *tune out* – pay no more attention ; *sacrifice* (n.) – Christ sacrificed his life to save mankind. 29 *vessel* – (old use) a container for holding liquids; *balm in Gilead* – myrrh = aromatic gum resin used in incense and perfume (reference to Jeremiah 8, 22) 31 *Angels* – soldiers 33 *veiled* – veil - piece of material worn by women to cover their faces

Assignments:

1. What marks the Prayvaganza described in this extract as an event that differs from religious gatherings as we know them?
2. Analyse the language and other literary means that Atwood uses to give the readers her evaluation of the happenings described in this extract.
3. Is there any likelihood for Margaret Atwood's vision (as presented in this excerpt) to come true? Give reasons in your answer.