

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

A block past All Flesh, Ofglen pauses, as if hesitant about which way to go. We have a choice. We could go straight back, or we could walk the long way around. We already know which way we will take, because we always take it.

"I'd like to pass by the church," says Ofglen, as if piously.

5 "All right," I say, though I know as well as she does what she's really after. [...]

To the right, if you could walk along, there's a street that would take you down towards the river. There's a boathouse, where they kept the skulls once, and some bridges; trees, green banks, where you could sit and watch the water, and the young men with their naked arms, their oars lifting into the sunlight as they played at winning. On the way to the river are the old dormitories, used for something else now, with their fairy-tale turrets, painted
10 white and gold and blue. When we think of the past it's the beautiful things we pick out. We want to believe it was all like that.

The football stadium is that way too, where they hold the Men's Salvagings. As well as the football games. They still have those. [...]

15 The church is a small one, one of the first erected here, hundreds of years ago. It isn't used anymore, except as a museum. Inside it you can see paintings, of women in long somber dresses, their hair covered by white caps, and of upright men, darkly clothed and unsmiling. Our ancestors. Admission is free.

We don't go in, though, but stand on the path, looking at the churchyard. The old gravestones are still there, weathered, eroding, with their skulls and crossed bones, *memento mori*, their doughfaced angels, their winged hourglasses to remind us of the passing of mortal time, and, from a later century, their urns and willow trees, for
20 mourning.

They haven't fiddled with the gravestones, or the church either. It's only the more recent history that offends them.

Ofglen's head is bowed, as if she's praying. She does this every time. Maybe, I think, there's someone, someone in particular gone, for her too; a man, a child. But I can't entirely believe it. I think of her as a woman for whom every act is done for show, is acting rather than a real act. She does such things to look good, I think. She's out to
25 make the best of it.

But that is what I must look like to her, as well. How can it be otherwise?

Now we turn our backs on the church and there is the thing we've in truth come to see: the Wall.

The Wall is hundreds of years old too; or over a hundred, at least. Like the sidewalks, it's red brick, and must once have been plain but handsome. Now the gates have sentries and there are ugly new floodlights mounted on
30 metal posts above it, and barbed wire along the bottom and broken glass set in concrete along the top.

No one goes through those gates willingly. The precautions are for those trying to get out, though to make it even as far as the Wall, from the inside, past the electronic alarm system, would be next to impossible.

Beside the main gateway there are six more bodies hanging, by the necks, their hands tied in front of them, their heads in white bags tipped sideways onto their shoulders. There must have been a Men's Salvaging early this
35 morning. I didn't hear the bells. Perhaps I've become used to them.

Annotations:

1 "*All flesh*" originally means "all of humanity" (see Isaiah 40:5) but here is given a more literal sense as the name for butcher shops (Spark notes) 4 *pious* – having strong religious beliefs 6 *river* – Charles River (flowing through Cambridge/Boston) 7 *scull* – light boat for one person 9 *dormitory* – building where students live 9 *turret* – small tower 12 *Salvaging* – here: execution 15 *somber* – dark 16 *ancestors* – reference to early Puritans who first landed near Boston 18 *memento mori* – reminder of death 27 *the Wall* (+ *gates*) – newly erected to surround Harvard University (see photo of Harvard university gates) 29 *sentry* – guard

Assignments:

1. What changes have taken place in Cambridge (the capital of Gilead) and Harvard (one of America's elite universities)?
2. Analyse the language and other literary means that Atwood uses to give the readers her evaluation of the changes that have taken place.
3. Like any writer of (anti-) utopian fiction Margaret Atwood takes us into a world that came to life in human imagination. Use the excerpt above as a starting point to comment on the relationship between Atwood's imagined world and the world we know.

