

Melanie's "Rationale"

1. I first decided that I wanted to write a paper that showed the similarities between contemporary American society and the society of Gilead, in order to show that Atwood's fictional society was not as far-fetched as it might appear. My research question became, "What attitudes in America today are similar to those in Atwood's dystopian society?" I decided to focus on censorship because it plays an important part in the book (Offred remembers burning a book of pornography as a child, only a select few of Gilead's citizens are permitted to read, etc.) After I decided my paper would focus on censorship, I decided to create a scenario in which *The Handmaid's Tale* was contested by a parent of a high school student, to show same attitudes that existed in Gilead exist in our society. When I began my research, I didn't know if the book had even been taught at the high school level, if attempts had ever been made to censor it, and if attempts had been made, what the outcome of them had been. I also didn't know what the process was for requesting that a book be removed from a library or from a high school classroom, and I wasn't sure what would motivate a parent to do so. So, I researched all of these topics in order to complete my MVA.
2. The audience for my MVA is primarily those who have read *The Handmaid's Tale* but do not feel that a society like Gilead could happen in America today. Perhaps they feel that Atwood's work is not believable, or that it should not be taken seriously. For example, one of my classmates confided in me that her father – a very conservative Christian – told her *The Handmaid's Tale* was nothing but "intellectually weak propaganda." I consider a person with such a viewpoint be my audience. My audience would want proof that our current society is similar to, or could develop into, a society like Gilead. I chose to use the issue of censorship to illustrate this similarity, because the attitudes that are behind the action of censorship – the imposition of one's standards of morality upon a larger community – are similar to that of the theocratic society of Gilead.
3. I want readers of my project to see how close our society is to that of Atwood's fictional Gilead – that Gilead could happen here in America today. In "The Time Before" - the society before Gilead - both the religious right and those in the women's movement were concerned with censorship, especially pornography. However, this type of censorship – which can be looked at as a good cause from both the religious right and from those in the women's movement – paved the way for a society in which only a select few were allowed to read. Therefore, Atwood is arguing that when censorship is allowed to occur, even in small doses, it can have disastrous consequences.

My thesis that *The Handmaid's Tale* is relevant today comes across both overtly – through “One Step Closer to Gilead” – and covertly, through the actions of the characters who wish to censor *The Handmaid's Tale*. The paper “One Step Closer to Gilead” specifically addresses the similarities between our society and Gilead. On a larger scale, simply the idea that a work like *The Handmaid's Tale* is being censored today because of its depictions of sexual situation and of religion supports my argument.

4. I first decided that I wanted to tell a story, and planned out a timeline in which the events in the story would happen. I chose my genres because I wanted to allow each of my characters to present their perspective in a written form, but in the form that they would typically write in. For Mollie, the teenager who is reading *The Handmaid's Tale*, her ideas are expressed through e-mail to a friend and through her poetry, which is a homework assignment. Her teacher, Ms. Johnson, expresses her ideas through an article written for a publication for high school English teachers and through her assignment sheet. Mollie's father, a minister, expresses his views in both letters and in the church bulletin.
5. The genres work together in chronological order to tell a story. However, the story is told in different, often opposing viewpoints – *The Handmaid's Tale* is presented both as an excellent book for students and as pornographic material, for example. The reader must piece together the story as it unfolds, and determine what the main argument of the MVA is. My thesis is found near the end of the MVA, in Bianca's letter to the editor, and in her paper on *The Handmaid's Tale* and the religious right. Because she doesn't really “interact” with the other characters, her main purpose is to point out that, should censorship be allowed to occur in Elmhurst, it could plant the seeds for a society like Gilead to develop.
6. I have a reason for everything that is in my paper, even though that reason might not be obvious at first. For example, I used Mollie's e-mail to her friend Sarah as a way to introduce the setting and the characters, and to provide transitions throughout the paper. In some cases, I made references to one genre in another, for example, in her e-mail, Mollie tells Sarah that her teacher has written a paper about *The Handmaid's Tale*, and then the next piece in the MVA is the paper. I also made references to several different characters throughout the paper, for example, Bertha Mason, a character who writes two letters to the editor, is also mentioned in the church bulletin. The letters from Bertha are included not only to make the letters to the editorial page look more realistic, but also to illustrate what kind of a town Elmhurst is. It's a small town where everyone knows everyone else – and most everyone, including Bertha, knows Reverend Albright. Most of the town goes to his “community” church, so he has a lot

of influence. The other letters, like the one about the library parking, show that Elmhurst is a community that cares about reading - and they aren't so conservative that they have banned Harry Potter, for example. The letter to the editor about pornography is really important, because it shows that censorship comes from both sides – not just from the religious right, but from the women's movement as well. It is based on Atwood's statement that one of the reasons that she wrote *The Handmaid's Tale* was because she saw the religious right and the women's movement working together to fight against pornography, and she was troubled by this partnership. It is also a reference to the novel itself, as Offred's mother participates in Take Back the Night.

7. For this project, I researched several different areas and applied that research to the different portions of my paper. For example, I interviewed a research librarian about the process of requesting that a book is removed from a library, and I found a form online that I incorporated into my paper. A great deal of my paper is based on my interview with her, as she was once a librarian in a small conservative Ohio town. In our interview, she explained what circumstances motivated patrons to object to certain materials in the library. She expressed to me that often a patron who objected a library item had not read the book or seen the video that they were asking to be removed from the library; they were simply doing so because their minister had told them to do so. She believed a few people in the town were trying to impose their moral standards on the rest of the community. I thought that was very interesting, and I tried to incorporate that in my paper.

Along with the interview, I used a variety of other research methods to create the various genres in my paper. For example, to write Ms. Johnson's article and assignment sheet, I researched the methods that teachers use to teach *The Handmaid's Tale* in their classrooms. In order to make the church bulletin more realistic, I read bulletins from different churches. I read reviews of *The Handmaid's Tale* and incorporated them into the letter from the librarian to the reverend. I researched the censorship history of *The Handmaid's Tale* and found that it has been contested many times, but I didn't find that it had ever been removed from a classroom or a library, and I based the ending of my paper on this fact. The poems are based on my interpretation of the characters of Moira and. Finally, the e-mails, while they might appear to just be in the MVA to set the scene or to provide transition, are based on the research that I did while writing the paper, and on my own experiences as a member of a conservative religious community.

8. My entire paper, I think, is a risk, because in it, I attempt to speak from the perspectives of so many different people: a high school senior, a minister, a

high school teacher, a librarian, characters in *The Handmaid's Tale*, etc. Anytime that an attempt is made to take the voice of another person, there is always the chance that the final product will sound forced or unrealistic. I was especially unsure of myself when speaking in the voice of the Rev. John, because his viewpoints were drastically different from my own.

9. Of all the parts of my paper, I am most pleased with the church bulletin. I like not only because it is different, but also because it subtly explores both the influence that the reverend has upon the congregation by asking them to fight against a book they have not read. Furthermore, it shows that the church is divided along gender lines. For example, this division is taken for granted by members of the congregation, but gender lines determine everything in Gilead – a society in which women are not even permitted to read the Bible.
10. Ha. I've already spent way too much time on this! Seriously, I could add more portions to my paper – documents such as a letter from the school board, or a rationale from Ms. Johnson to the school board explaining why she teaches *The Handmaid's Tale*, but I don't think my paper should be any longer than it is!
11. As an arguer in the multigenre project, I compare my style to that of a newsreporter. I try to present all sides of the story, but like all writers, I am biased and I have an underlying argument. However, it is the responsibility of the reader of my paper to detect my argument and to determine the validity of it.
12. Two types of learning took place as I worked on my MVA. First of all, there was the knowledge that I gained about different issues in America, such as censorship and the religious right. Secondly, and more importantly, I learned to enjoy and respect the idea of the MVA. At the beginning of the semester, I was extremely reluctant to do an MVA. I had had some experiences with multigenre writing before – with another professor – and I didn't consider the projects that I (or my classmates) did to be “academic” enough. However, after I began to write the MVA, I started to see how valuable it was, because it gave me the opportunity to show a variety of perspectives within one paper. And once I realized that I had probably done twice as much research for my MVA as I usually do for a traditional paper, I dismissed the idea that the MVA wasn't academic!