

Discuss the significance of particular times, places or events from real life, either mentioned or implied, in the two works you have studied.

The Handmaid's Tale and *A Doll's House*, written by Margaret Atwood and Henrik Ibsen respectively, are both honest socio-political works of literature that address key issues in the context of the time in which they were written. Published in 1985, *The Handmaid's Tale* serves as a warning to its readers of their ignorance at the time towards the surge in gender inequality and political corruption, by following Offred's story in the fictional, dystopian world of Gilead. On the other hand, *A Doll's House*, a play written, set and first performed in 1870s Norway highlights key flaws in society's definitions of love, marriage and gender roles by engaging with themes such as individual versus society, money and work, and deceit, and through Ibsen's use of stage directions and modern realism, bringing greater fidelity of real life to the work. What brings the two works together is the significance of particular times, places or events from the author's context in terms of acting as the basis for the author's intentions and messages. Atwood's experiences of living in a politically divided American society and Berlin, along with her knowledge of world history play a key role in delivering her call for gender equality, individual freedom and fair power dynamics. Similarly, Ibsen's time in various patriarchal societies across Europe and personal history is invaluable to his production of a play that advocates for important changes in societal attitudes.

The objectification of women in Gilead is greatly inspired by Atwood's interest in the works of the American feminist movement in the 1960s and 1970s, and serves as the author's warning to the American population for their indifference towards the importance of the movement, and changes in the political spectrum that could have undermined it. A defining moment of this objectification is when Aunt Lydia tells Offred that "there are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren", a shocking comment that determines a woman's worth based solely on their fertility. The presentation of Aunt Lydia and her comments are part of Atwood's depiction of the worst possible outcome of disregarding those who fight for gender equality. This objectification of women is so severe in Gilead that even Offred is led to believe that she is a "cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear". Whereas she was once free to choose who she could love, before being trapped in Gilead, she used to be able to choose who to love freely. However, the strict laws of Gilead against women now prevent her from doing so. Gilead exists as a society in which women are reduced to "two-legged wombs" and all the work of the feminist movement in 1970s has been undone, namely the widespread availability of contraception, legalization of abortion, and women being allowed to vote. Atwood's implicit intention alludes to the issues with rise of religious conservative leaders such as Ronald Reagan in US, who believed the achievements of the feminist movement in the past decade were the "excesses of the sexual revolution". She demonstrates to her readers the potential outcomes handing power over such leaders could make the repressive regime in Gilead a reality. Therefore, she is able to present a mirror to reality through her work, calling for the audience to pay closer attention to real world issues at the time, and play their part in averting the formation of such a regime.

Similarly, the contrast between Ibsen's and his society's patriarchal attitudes towards love, marriage and gender roles paves the path for Ibsen to call for a change in the perception of

women. Ibsen, who married Suzannah Thoreson, and spent his lifetime living in Norway, Italy and Germany, believed that husband and wife have equal responsibility in a successful marriage. However, these views were criticized in what was a patriarchal society, which ruled that men belonged at the workplace, and women could only manage household chores. Inspired by the story of Laura Kieler, a close friend of the playwright, Ibsen presents the character of Nora to his Norwegian audience, showing her to break both the law and the institution of marriage by forging her father's signature in order to borrow a loan that saves her husband's life. Despite this act of love, Nora's actions would have been considered treacherous based on societal norms at the time. However, presenting this dilemma enables Ibsen to question his society's definition of love and marriage. He asks whether it is justified to hold one's reputation above their love for someone else. Furthermore, Ibsen portrays Nora's childhood friend, Mrs. Linde, as a woman who believes that "there is no pleasure in only working for yourself". When reunited with her first love, Krogstad, Mrs. Linde's words shocked the audience, who believed that women only belonged to their homes. Again, Ibsen urges his audience to rethink their perception of women, arguing that women are just as capable as men, and can fulfill their purpose not only inside, but also outside the household.

Both writers' experiences with oppression in their pasts give rise to the theme in their works, with the presentation of characters' oppression serving as the authors' warning to the audience of the impact that this could have in their own lives, especially on their psychology and on interpersonal relationships. Atwood's presentation of life in Gilead is representative of her experience living in Berlin and a number of countries behind the Iron Curtain. For instance, the Wall of Gilead is symbolic of the Berlin Wall, with both structures serving to hold those inside of it captive. Individuals who break the laws of Gilead, perhaps by orchestrating an abortion or engaging in homosexual activity, are hanged at the wall, where their crimes become their identity upon being hanged in a bag labelled with their crime. Despite this atrocity, Aunt Lydia urges to her Handmaids that "this may not seem ordinary to you now, but after a time it will". This comment suggests, that in the long run, even oppression and torture can become normalized. Atwood uses this statement as part of her warning, with allusions to such oppression in other parts of the world, such as the link between Aunt Lydia's "cattle prod" and the brutal treatment of women in Romania and between the concept of Handmaids and the "reeducation" of women in the Iranian revolution. Soon after, however, Offred conveys that "nothing changes instantaneously: in a gradually heating bathtub you would be boiled to death before you knew it", with the powerful imagery elaborating the nature of change in a more positive light. Atwood, despite conveying that things could change for the worse, urges that change also takes time, implying that her own society still has time to prevent Gilead becoming a reality, and history from repeating itself. Through her theme of liberty and captivity, and her experiences with oppressive societies, the writer urges the audience to prevent history from repeating itself in an even worse way.

Ibsen, too, points out the oppressive impacts of his own society's expectations of men and women, by demonstrating the impact that these expectations and apparent power hierarchies have on characters in the play and, therefore, more importantly, on individuals in the audience. Despite believing that Torvald would stand up for her if her hidden crime was to be exposed,

Nora finds that Torvald would “never give up his reputation for the woman he loves”, leading to her realization that she is “no longer content with what people say, or what it says in books” and that “she has to figure out things for herself”. She subsequently leaves her husband and children, with the play ending on a powerful door slam, which has great significance. Ibsen, through the characterization of Nora, demonstrates the psychological impact that society’s expectations can have on women, who for years have been “dolls” to the oppressive “doll’s house” (a symbol for society) that they have lived in. In fact, these events in the play perhaps even frighten men in the audience, causing them to fear that their own wives might leave them because they have been treated just how Torvald behaved with Nora. However, it is not just women who are oppressed by societal expectations. Men, too, for years have been forced to believe that the “most successful” man is one who feels the “glorious feeling of receiving a good fat income”, in the words of Torvald. These lines reflect the attitudes of society that place the richest and most powerful men at the top of the hierarchy, whereas others are considered unworthy. This is further supported by Krogstad’s intention to “get to the top” and ensure that the manager of the bank is “Nils Krogstad, and not Torvald Helmer”. Portraying the predatory attitudes that society’s expectations of men may be inducing, Ibsen shows the psychological effects of such expectations of societal attitudes on men, and as a result, women. It is important that these messages are conveyed in the form of a play, for it allows the audience to feel like they are part of the play, which makes them visually see how the events in the play are similar to their day to day lives. Therefore, when something goes wrong in the play, the audience reflects on events in their own lives, and questions whether or not changes are required. This helps Ibsen to convey messages of the changes that he tries to call for. Overall, however, it is the perceptions of gender roles at the time that inspire Ibsen to produce *A Doll’s House* with the intention of revolutionizing his society’s attitudes.

In conclusion, the writers’ contexts in the form of the time and place in which they were written allow Atwood and Ibsen to address key issues regarding gender roles, power hierarchies, and oppression. Together with the use of literary devices, the writers present an alternative version of their own realities to warn the audience of the impacts of their indifference towards the issues, and to urge them to change their attitudes. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Atwood presents the impact of the totalitarian Gileadean regime on individual characters, enabling her to demonstrate to her 20th century audience the impacts of the previously described issues on their own lives. Similarly, Ibsen, in what is arguably a far more realistic depiction, focuses on highlighting the negative impacts of the expectations of men and women during his time in *A Doll’s House*. What connects the two distorted realities, however, is that they allow the writers to not only entertain their audience in a novel and exciting manner, but also to offer new perspectives on important contemporary issues and events, some of which are, in fact, prevalent even today.