



 Prestwick House

Activity Pack

THE HANDMAID'S TALE

BY MARGARET ATWOOD



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Written by Pete Boysen

Name: _____

Date: _____

Pre-Reading

Genre

Objective: Learning about the dystopian novel

Activity

The utopian and dystopian novels have been around almost as long as the novel genre itself. A utopian novel describes a future in which everything is ideal; a dystopian novel is the opposite. It describes a future in which most, if not all, of the worst tendencies in human behavior have become those of government, and life is highly oppressive.

Perhaps the earliest example of this is Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. While he uses the various fictitious countries to lampoon trends that he sees going on in England, the conditions that one sees in the lands governed by Laputa, for example, could be considered dystopian.

The best-known example of the dystopian novel is George Orwell's *1984*. Written after the Second World War, the novel foresees a future in which the government uses technology only for the purposes of surveillance of its citizens, denying the fruits of technology to those over whom the government holds sway. Mind control is only one of the ways in which Big Brother keeps his subjects afraid and under control.

The Handmaid's Tale falls squarely within this genre. The novel imagines a time in the future when the United States has been taken over by militant neo-Puritans. Technology has actually been removed in a number of areas of daily life, because of the opportunities it presents for heterodoxy in thought.

Read summaries of the following dystopian works: *1984*, *Animal Farm*, *Brave New World*, and *Gulliver's Travels*. Based on those summaries, make a list of at least twelve events you predict would be in a dystopian novel centering around a return to an Old Testament view on morality and interpersonal relationships.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Section I: Night**Imagery**

Objective: Visualizing and representing descriptive imagery

Activity

The net rhetorical effect of the first section is to portray a bleak existence for these women. The bleakness comes not only from their current conditions, but from the contrast between their current way of life and the way they lived before things changed.

One interesting strategy that Atwood uses in this section is to describe the gymnasium at two different points in time: the time back before the Republic of Gilead took power, and its current state. The juxtaposition of these two different points in time serves to show the stark differences between the way the Handmaid lived before, with Luke, and the way she is forced to live at this time.

Based on the information provided in the first section, draw two pictures of the gymnasium. The first should show the gymnasium as it was in the earlier times the narrator describes. The second should show the gymnasium as it appears in the first section. Be prepared to show your pictures to the class and explain why you chose the specific differences that appear.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Section II: Shopping**Imagery**

Objective: Analyzing and responding to imagery

Activity

Look at the description of the Commander's Wife's face on page 15. Notice how the details are written to make her face a clear reflection of her personality.

Starting with the oval below, draw the Commander's Wife's face. Make sure your drawing reflects her personality.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Section III: Night**Point of View**

Objective: Analyzing and interpreting second-person point of view

Activity

Read the last page of Chapter 7, beginning with the sentence “A story is like a letter.” The remainder of this passage is told in the second person, addressed to this hypothetical “You.”

With a partner, brainstorm the usual places one finds second-person narration. Make a list of three or four places.

With your partner, try to figure out why the second person is being used in this passage.

With your partner, rewrite this passage from either the first-person point of view, where the narrator uses “I” as the primary pronoun, or the third-person point of view. Be sure to keep her main idea in your writing.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Section IV: Waiting Room

Humor

Objective: Finding humor in dystopia

Activity

Being able to write humor into tragic literature was finessed by some of the world's greatest authors. Even Shakespeare could not help himself but to add a wry twist to desperate actions, and forced at least a smile in the midst of heinous circumstances.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, one might think there was no cause for laughter at any point. In some sections, however, the reader can spot an instance where life adds a bit of jest in a simple turn of events; the author's sense of humor peeking through the dark story.

Begin by finding in this section an instance that could be considered humorous. Study the meter and rhyme scheme of the limerick below. Using your own words, compose a limerick that would illustrate (from the narrator's point of view) the particular part in this section that made you smile or laugh. Using words or phrases from the text is allowed. Feel free to compose more than one stanza if you are so inclined.

There once was a lassie named Muffet
who dined as she sat on a tuffet.
A lecherous old spider
nestled right up beside her
but was killed when Ms. Muffet did cuff it.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Section VI: Household**Writing/Drawing**

Objective: Using descriptive writing to express theme

Activity

As was mentioned in an earlier activity, setting is crucial to the establishment of mood in a passage. It is very common to have one's mood affected by the surroundings in which one lives.

If one looks at the way the Handmaid describes the various places she has lived since she was forcibly separated from Luke, and compares or contrasts those with the hotel rooms she visited and the home that she had with Luke, it is clear that the Handmaid's surroundings have dramatically affected her self-concept.

In the space below, draw a floor plan of your home. Describe all of the rooms, particularly your own. Which rooms do you like the most? Which do you like the least? How does each room make you feel? What have you done to your own room to express your own preferences and personality? Show the objects that have the most importance for you.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Section VII: Night**Writing**

Objective: To show understanding of theme and to express personal ideas

Activity

Many of the dreams that are described in the Night sections could best be described as nightmares. They tend to relive the narrator's experiences before the establishment of the Republic of Gilead, events after her capture, or her fears about the future.

What is the scariest nightmare that you have ever had? Describe and illustrate the nightmare in the space provided below. Also, describe events that were going on in your life at the time that may have caused your dream to occur.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Section IX: Night**Juxtaposition**

Objective: Analyzing and interpreting the effects of juxtaposition in literature

Activity

Interspersed among the other dreams in this section is a memory of a video made about the Holocaust—the attempt by the Germans, during World War II, to eradicate the Jewish people from the earth.

Juxtaposition refers to the placement of words, phrases, sentences, or actions in close proximity to others in the story. The term could also refer to the author's choice of order of events or the insertion of particular details within a story.

With a partner, do some basic research about the facts surrounding the Holocaust. Make yourselves familiar with the causes, motivations, and techniques used by the Nazi regime to attempt to destroy the Jews.

In a paragraph, explain why the author chose to insert this allusion to the Holocaust into Section IX of the novel. What is the purpose of this allusion? How does it relate to the other events of the section? How does it relate to other events in the novel? Be sure to use text evidence to support your answer.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Section XIV: Salvaging**Relating Literature to Life**

Objective: Exploring theme by relating the events of the story to the reader's life

Activity

The Republic of Gilead uses the term “salvaging” to refer to the execution of criminals. Intriguingly, only women go to view the execution of women, and only men go to view the execution of men. Take a minute and reflect on the reason why the government has chosen the term “salvaging” to refer to the death penalty.

What traditions of our own society and/or culture mirror the salvaging process, as it is described in Section XIV? By yourself, with a partner, or in a small group, make a list of traditions we observe that have similar purpose to the salvaging in the culture of Gilead.

Choose one of these traditions, and imagine it taking place. Write a script for a three-minute play that carries out one of those traditions. If you are in a large enough group, prepare to present this play before your class.