

Advanced Placement in  
English Literature and Composition

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

**The Handmaid's Tale**

by Margaret Atwood

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# The Handmaid's Tale

## Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. explore the author's use of ambiguity in the novel, particularly as it relates to the narrator's identity and acceptance of her role in the Gilead regime.
2. analyze *The Handmaid's Tale* as an example of speculative fiction, addressing then-contemporary issues in American society and politics.
3. examine the relationship techniques Atwood uses to advance the plot and develop character.
4. argue whether word play and metafictional narration make this novel an example of postmodern fiction.
5. respond to multiple-choice questions similar to those that appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
6. respond to writing prompts similar to those that appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
7. offer a close reading of *The Handmaid's Tale* and support all assertions and interpretations with direct evidence from the text, from authoritative critical knowledge of the genre, or from authoritative criticism of the work.

## Introductory Lecture

### SPECULATIVE FICTION

In his 1947 essay “On the Writing of Speculative Fiction,” science fiction and fantasy writer Robert A. Heinlein recognized a subgenre of science fiction that included works that looked predominantly at the human condition and “[embodied] the notion...‘What would happen if—?’.” He called this genre *speculative fiction*. According to Heinlein, stories with plotlines that involve a man struggling to feed his family after biological warfare destroys US farmlands or the societal and religious ramifications of developing human embryos in artificial environments would fall into the *speculative fiction* genre.

Some speculative fiction authors view speculative fiction as completely unrelated to science fiction. Margaret Atwood herself once said in an interview, “Science fiction has monsters and spaceships; speculative fiction could really happen.” These authors assert that, while speculative fiction examines possible futures, it is distinct from traditional science fiction in that it remains rooted in established fact. Heinlein himself argues that, in speculative fiction, “Lizards can’t cross-breed with humans. The term ‘space warp’ does not mean anything without elaborate explanation.” Instead, speculative works extrapolate from contemporary science and technology to examine how people will cope with problems that arise from new situations; these works are concerned with sociology and psychology.

A number of famous novels can plausibly be included in the speculative fiction genre. The societies depicted in classic dystopian novels such as *1984* by George Orwell, *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury, and *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley are all based on social, cultural, and political trends that were prevalent at the time the novels were written. In each, the author follows the progression of that trend to its plausible, if not inevitable, consummation. Other popular works of speculative fiction include Cormac McCarthy’s post-apocalyptic novel *The Road*, Suzanne Collins’s *Hunger Games* trilogy, and Philip K. Dick’s *The Man in the High Castle*, which explores an alternate history in which the Axis Powers win World War II.

In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Atwood takes what she saw as some of the most pressing issues of the early 1980s—a rise of religious extremism, a backlash against the women’s rights movement, increasing pollution—and follows them to their extreme conclusions, creating an alternate near-future in which a totalitarian theocracy, the Republic of Gilead, has been established in what had been the United States. Atwood states that, in the creation of her future dystopia, she included only technology that was already available and events that had already occurred. The plausibility of the future depicted in *The Handmaid’s Tale* is debatable, but by basing the Republic of Gilead on scientific fact and actual contemporaneous social and political issues, Atwood shows that such a society is possible.

### Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. What might Atwood be attempting to achieve by structuring the novel as she does? What likely purpose do the larger divisions and the smaller chapters serve? What effect does the repetition of the section title “Night” create?
2. What is the significance of the phrase “*Nolite te bastardes carborundum*”? How does the phrase’s personal meaning for Offred change over the course of the novel?
3. Argue whether the loosening of some rules (such as playing Scrabble, seeing her daughter’s photo, her relationship with Nick) actually bonds Offred more tightly to Gilead’s regime, rather than making her rebel against it more.
4. Readers do not learn that the narrator is called Offred until Chapter 14 of the novel, and her true identity is never revealed. How does Atwood’s withholding the narrator’s name affect the reader’s understanding of Offred?
5. Discuss Atwood’s use of language throughout the novel. How is language a form of power? How is it a means of escape? How does Offred, in particular, use language as a tool to escape the plight of her existence?

## Practice Free-Response Items

### PRACTICE FREE-RESPONSE ITEM 1

Many works of speculative fiction present extreme scenarios in order to critique then-contemporary issues. Often, ironically, these works of fiction eventually prove to have been almost prophetic. Write a thoughtful and well-supported essay in which you examine the extent to which Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* seems to have predicted aspects of modern American society. Explain how changes in social and political landscape have affected readers' interpretation of the novel.

### PRACTICE FREE-RESPONSE ITEM 2

Authors of modern and postmodern works often end their novels on a neutral or ambiguous note. The story concludes without the reader's knowing whether the protagonist has succeeded or failed. In a thoughtful and well-supported essay, examine the ending of Offred's story in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and explain how the ending's ambiguity affects the reader's understanding and appreciation of the story. Consider the techniques Atwood uses to achieve this uncertainty. Do not merely summarize the plot of the novel.

### PRACTICE FREE-RESPONSE ITEM 3

In her collection of essays *In Other Worlds*, Margaret Atwood wrote:

Books and characters in books...all have families and ancestors, just like people.

In a well-organized essay, analyze Margaret Atwood's use of biblical, historical, literary, or cultural allusions as the "families and ancestors" of the ideas and characters in *The Handmaid's Tale*. How do these allusions both clarify the essential principles of Gilead and contribute to the meaning of the novel?

### PRACTICE FREE-RESPONSE ITEM 4

Carefully read the passage from Chapter 2 in section II: "Shopping Day" of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* that begins "A chair, a table, a lamp" and ends, "...the dusty-rose carpet." Then, write a well-organized essay in which you analyze the literary techniques Atwood uses to provide a vivid impression of the setting and characterize the narrator.

## Practice Multiple-Choice Questions

### PRACTICE MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS 1-5

Carefully read the passage from Chapter 2 in section II “Shopping” of Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* beginning, “A chair, a table...” to “...her cane on the dusty-rose carpet” before selecting the best answers to the following multiple-choice questions.

- The narrator’s listing of what she sees in the room emphasizes her
  - attachment to the contents.
  - detachment from her surroundings.
  - disgust for the room.
  - longing for the past.
  - sense of isolation.
- Evidence in this passage suggests that the “traditional values” of this society involve
  - frugality.
  - creativity.
  - intelligence.
  - domesticity.
  - trustworthiness.
- The narrator describes her reflection as “like a distorted shadow, a parody of...some fairy-tale figure.” This simile suggests all of the following EXCEPT
  - her attire resembles a costume.
  - her mirror is flawed.
  - she is embarrassed by her appearance.
  - she copes with her new life through dark humor.
  - her current life seems unreal to her.
- In addition to discipline (measuring time by bells) and modesty (absence of mirrors), the comparison of the narrator’s location with a “nunnery” suggests
  - chastity.
  - poverty.
  - patience.
  - obedience.
  - humility.
- The end of this passage emphasizes which developing idea?
  - the loss of personal freedom
  - the lack of interpersonal connections
  - the scarcity of material goods in the current society
  - the status of women in society
  - the differences between the current society and “the time before”

# The Handmaid's Tale

## Sections I and II: Night and Shopping

### Chapters 1-2

1. Consider the novel's three epigraphs.

And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, Give me children, or else I die.

And Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel; and he said, Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb?

And she said, Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her.

— Genesis 30: 1-3

But as to myself, having been wearied out for many years with offering vain, idle, visionary thoughts, and at length utterly despairing of success, I fortunately fell upon this proposal...

— Jonathan Swift, A Modest Proposal

In the desert there is no sign that says, Thou shalt not eat stones.

— Sufi proverb

What idea or issue does Atwood's reference to the story of Jacob and Rachel from Genesis raise? What admission is the narrator of *A Modest Proposal* making? What "truth" does the Sufi proverb convey?

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2. What ideas does Atwood seem to raise in these three epigraphs taken together? What expectations do they set for the reader?

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**Chapters 28-29**

1. What are the narrative and thematic effects of Atwood's choice to follow Offred's newfound hope of resistance with her memories about the revolution that first established Gilead?

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2. How completely should the reader accept Offred's account of how Luke behaved immediately after the Gilead takeover? Why?

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3. What point about her contemporaneous society is Atwood suggesting with Moira's immediate response to the revolution?

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4. In what ways is Nick a foil for Luke? What is ironic about the narrator's saying she would "like to think better of" Nick?

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## Section XV: Night and Historical Notes

### Historical Notes

1. Most of Professor Pieixoto's address simply repeats information the reader already knows from the novel itself. What narrative purpose does Atwood achieve with this repetition?

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2. What important new information does the Historical Note provide?

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3. What can the reader infer about the world in 2195 from clues provided in the Historical Note?

- The University of Denay, Nunavit:

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- The advertised conference social activities:

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