

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

The Handmaid's Tale

by Margaret Atwood

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Background Lecture

Upon the release of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* in 1986, it received both literary and political acclaim, evidenced in the weeks the book spent on best-seller lists, and its adaptation into a major motion picture. Reasons for its success are its literary strengths and the truths so easily recognized in its text. *The Handmaid's Tale* is a harrowing account of a future that doesn't seem too far out of the way, but it is simple, almost prose-poetry in nature. The narrator, Offred, is an easily identifiable every-woman trapped in a non-identity that is a non-choice. The setting is one that is familiar to the reader—it is a once-upon-a-time-cityscape that many people have once been a part of, and may feel the loss of.

The Handmaid's Tale falls into the categories of “dystopian” or “speculative” fiction, and has been, for the most part, favorably compared to contemporary works such as *Brave New World* and *1984*. Evidence of a dystopia, an imaginary place where everything is as bad as it can possibly be, is omnipresent throughout the novel.

Set in Massachusetts near the former Harvard University, Gilead is Atwood's vision of the United States after extensive war, ecological, and chemical damage here been wrought. Gilead is actually based on similar practices in cultures around the world, including some in the United States. Polygamy, for example, has been practiced by many cultures around the world as have theocracies. Polygamy has its basis in Biblical culture, taking its justification from the story of Rachel and her servant Bilhah. Rachel, not having borne any children, had the idea of having her husband Jacob impregnate Bilhah in her stead. Thus, the idea for the Handmaids was born, since only one in four children survive at this time in Gilead and very few women are even capable of conceiving.

A key, and often overlooked aspect of this novel, is Atwood's concern with the early 1980s debate about feminist attitudes toward sexuality in general, and pornography in particular. Whether or not this debate inspired *The Handmaid's Tale* is controversial, but it definitely makes its presence known throughout the story, in Offred's memories of her mother (who pickets on such things, and burns books), in Offred's girlfriend Moira, a lesbian, in the references to Pornomarts, the references to the black market sex club, etc. Essentially, during the early 1980s, many feminists railed against pornography in general as a demeaning force against women. They were deeply disturbed by another group that was also lobbying against it, a powerful religious rights group. The latter were zealots who, by allying themselves with the feminist group to join the anti-porn movement, could slip easily into a “no freedom” for women movement simply by using the justification of providing “protection” for women.

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Objectives

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

1. define and discuss the concept of dystopian literature and “speculative fiction.”
2. explain how the author uses the development of literary elements such as point of view, character, and setting to propel the plot and reveal its themes.
3. analyze the social stratification of women in the Gilead regime, explaining specifically the roles, duties, and significance of each of the various “types” of woman.
4. analyze Atwood's structural writing process by examining how the novel is arranged and determining how its arrangement impacts its plot and character development.
5. evaluate the impact of historical feminism on the novel.
6. evaluate and identify with the central character through examining her strengths and weaknesses.
7. examine the author's use of ambiguity in the novel, particularly as it relates to language, the narrator's identity, and the narrator's acceptance of her role in the Gilead regime.
8. explain farcical and ironic elements of Atwood's story as they emerge.
9. compare and contrast Offred to other women in her life, particularly her mother, Moira, and Serena Joy.
10. discuss the use of the following motifs throughout the novel:
 - the flower as a symbol of womanhood.
 - the eye as a reminder of control and authority.
 - the color red.
 - the deliberate avoidance of the narrator's name.
11. discuss the following themes:
 - Although society appears to be a powerless one, the people find interesting, subtle ways of exerting power over themselves and others.
 - The needs of the majority take precedence over the needs of the individual.
 - Language is powerful, dangerous, and even illicit, especially for women.
 - All relationships are difficult, even when care has been taken to reduce them to minimal definitions.

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Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. The novel begins with three epigraphs. What are their functions? Explain each.
2. In Chapter 1, Atwood makes a reference to a “palimpsest.” A palimpsest is a parchment that has been scraped almost clean so that a medieval scribe may reuse it, but some traces of the former ink remain and visible beneath the new ink. How is Gilead a palimpsest?
3. In Gilead, women are categorized, and each serves to fill a role. Discuss the various roles, provide an example of a woman who fills each, and explain how each role would be instantly recognizable to an outsider.
4. Why is the Bible under lock and key in Gilead? Think of the evenings in the Commander's house when it is time for Offred to do her duty, which is preceded by the Bible ceremony. Who does the Bible reading? Why is this significant?
5. What are some of the methods used to control the women of Gilead? What are some of the subtle rebellions?
6. Describe the chance meeting with the Japanese tourists. How does Offred see herself (and other women) as she used to be? What dual emotions does she feel?
7. Why were some of the women content to live the life they were living?
8. Is it possible that the loosening of some of the rules (such as playing Scrabble, seeing her daughter's photo, her relationship with Nick) actually bond Offred more tightly to Gilead's regime, rather than making her rebel against it more? Why? How?
9. Discuss the Commander. Is he a sympathetic character, simply weak, a villain, or a combination of all? Use the text to support your answer.
10. Discuss Atwood's use of language throughout the novel. How is it 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?
11. What is the function of the “Historical Notes” at the end of the novel? Are they meant to downplay the plight of the Handmaids, or to sound callous and sarcastic?
12. Discuss the various coping mechanisms that Moira, Offred, and Janine employ. How does each differ?
13. How much of what is depicted in *The Handmaid's Tale* do you think is actually possible?

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Sections I and II: Night and Shopping

Chapter 1 - 2

VOCABULARY

fraternize – to socialize or associate oneself with
insatiability – greed; the inability to be satisfied
palimpsest – a manuscript written over a partially erased document in such a way that the original shows through
parody – a humorous imitation of something

1. Read the brief prologue to the book. With these quotations in mind, what predictions can you make about the novel?

2. Aunt Sara and Aunt Elizabeth patrol at night with “electric cattle prods slung on thongs from their leather belts.” What does this detail, along with others, reveal about the situation thus far? More important, what does it reveal about the narrator?

3. Who are the Angels? What is the narrator’s hope regarding them?

4. What detail(s) reveal the strictness of the prison that the narrator finds herself in?

6. What are the “things” that used to happen to women? Who did Aunt Lydia blame for these “things?”

7. What does Offred offer as an excuse for this way of life taking over? What makes it believable, acceptable?

Chapters 22 - 23

VOCABULARY

- approbation** – approval
- audacity** – boldness; confidence
- beseeking** – asking or begging
- candor** – complete honesty
- collusion** – the plotting between two or more people to commit an illegal act or wrongdoing
- concubine** – a lover; mistress
- nuances** – subtle differences
- shanghaied** – tricked or forced into doing something
- sheepish** – embarrassed; awkward
- sniveling** – whining or crying
- totem** – an object serving as a symbol of a clan or society, often used in rituals

1. What exception is made for the Aunts? Why would this exception be made, both from a practical and social standpoint?

2. How does Offred characterize Janine?

3. What does Aunt Lydia tell Janine about Moira? What does she want in return?

4. How is Moira a “loose woman”?

Sections XI and XII: Night and Jezebel's

Chapters 30 - 32

VOCABULARY

anecdotes – short, and often humorous, stories
appeased – fulfilled a want or need to soothe or keep pace
coquettish – flirtatious
deign – to do something considered to be beneath one's status
dissipation – the overindulgence in physical pleasure (usually related to sex, drugs, or alcohol)
implacable – relentless; without mercy
importunate – demanding; unrelenting
obliterated – completely destroyed
ostentation – a showy display of wealth
palpable – able to be perceived by the senses
querulous – argumentative and difficult to get along with
regimented – disciplined, well-ordered, and maintained
stolidity – the state of being unemotional

1. What does Offred think is the reason her nightgown was made with long sleeves?

2. What does Luke decide to do with the cat before he and Offred make their escape?

3. How would you characterize the God that Offred prays to? Despite everything, does she seem to believe in God?

