

Reflections:

A Student Response Journal for...

The Handmaid's Tale

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Pre-Reading

1. You've probably heard the phrase "you can't judge a book by its cover." Before beginning *The Handmaid's Tale*, though, or even reading the back, take a good look at its cover. What do you think the book will be about? Using only the front cover for inspiration, write a short paragraph that explains what you think is the subject matter of this book.
2. Flip to the Table of Contents and note the manner in which the chapters are organized. Do you see a pattern? What do you think this pattern might suggest about the story? Write a short paragraph that discusses why you think the author might have arranged the chapters as she did.
3. An epigraph is a short quotation or series of quotations at the beginning of a work of literature that is placed deliberately to suggest its theme. Read the epigraphs prior to the Table of Contents. One is the story of Rachel and Bilhah, from Genesis. The next is a reference to Jonathan Swift's "Modest Proposal." The third is a Sufi proverb that states simply that "In the desert there is no sign that says, Thou shalt not eat stones."

Taken all together, what do you suppose these epigraphs will mean in relation to the novel's message? Write a predictive paragraph that develops your theory.

Sections I and II: Night and Shopping

Chapters 1-2

4. Offred refers to other women like herself as "sisters, dipped in blood." Imagine that the ban on reading and writing for women does not exist, and Offred has the opportunity to write a letter to one of her "sisters," telling her what life is like now that she has moved into the Commander's home. Compare her time in the school to her new quarters and responsibilities at the commander's home. Describe her relationships and interactions with other individuals around her, such as the Wife, Rita, and Cora, and other women at the school.

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5. The character of the Commander's Wife is not an especially sympathetic character. Put yourself in her shoes, though, as Offred attempts to do. In the beginning of the novel, Offred observes Serena Joy in her garden and reflects that "from a distance it looks like peace," knowing that it is really far from it. Imagine that Serena Joy has written to an advice columnist of a popular newspaper for help upon being informed that a Handmaid would be moving into her household and her marriage. Write her letter, and write the advice columnist's response. Make sure that you adopt the appropriate voice for each letter.
6. Write a predictive paragraph (or set of paragraphs) explaining what you believe is going on in this novel thus far. In the first couple of chapters, the author feeds you bits and pieces of fairly ambiguous information that nonetheless help you put together an image of the situation—explain this, and what you foresee happening in later chapters.

Chapters 3-4

7. In Chapter 3, Offred arrives at her new post at the Commander's house. There is tension between her and Serena Joy and she describes relations between the Handmaids and the Wives as uncertain and tense; Serena Joy, in fact, tells Offred, "I want to see as little of you as possible. I expect you feel the same way about me." Offred is uncertain as to how to reply: "as a yes would have been insulting, a no contradictory." The Wives and Handmaids are navigating new terrain, and are not clear on where to go or how to get there.

One thing that could possibly help the situation is a list of expectations for both Wives and Handmaids. Write a list of rules for the women that will help them get through this difficult transitional period. Be specific in the rules that you come up with. It may help to come up with headings that will help organize your thoughts before you start a random list. Consider rules for disciplining of Handmaids, Handmaids' responsibilities, Handmaids' interactions, and the like.

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8. In Chapter 4, Offred and her “partner-spy,” Ofglen, meet to walk and buy groceries. Their conversation is rife with insincerity.

“The war is going well, I hear,” she says.

“Praise be,” I reply.

“We’ve been sent good weather.”

“Which I receive with joy.”

“They’ve defeated more of the rebels, since yesterday.”

“Praise be,” I say. I don’t ask her how she knows. “What were they?”

“Baptists. They had a stronghold in the Blue Hills. They smoked them out.”

“Praise be.”

Sometimes I wish she would just shut up and let me walk in peace.

Offred in particular dares not say many things she would like to say to Ofglen, for fear that Ofglen is a spy for the Eyes. She would like to ask about the true state of affairs on the front, ask about her husband, ask if Ofglen has any news at all, but she is afraid. Write a dialogue between Offred and Ofglen that says everything you think they would really like to say to each other, if fear and distrust were not factors.

9. In *The Handmaid*, the Republic of Gilead views women’s sexuality as dangerous. Women must conceal their sexuality with head-to-toe clothing, and even hide their faces with winged hats. It is interesting to note that in seeking to control women’s sexuality in this way, the Republic is, more to the point, seeking to control women and nullify their power. Offred realizes this, in small part, when she sees that she attracts she inspires in the young Guardians, and understands that she can manipulate them in Chapter 4. “I move my hips a little, feeling the full red skirt sway around me...I enjoy the power; power of a dog bone, passive but there.” She sees that this is the only power left to the women, the only power that cannot be fully taken away or controlled.

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Imagine that Offred is emboldened enough to break free of her passive role and gather other Handmaids together for a rebellion. Write a speech that she might give to the other Handmaids urging them to abandon their habits and dress as individuals. The speech should focus on the effects of the habit on their psyche and the freeing aspects of individualized behavior. Offred should, of course, offer them some alternatives to their current lifestyle, as well.

Chapters 5-6

10. In Chapter 5, Offred and Ofglen become the objects of a trade delegation from Japan's curiosity. The delegation is fascinated by the women, their strange way of dress and even stranger customs. They ask, " 'Are you happy' [Offred] can imagine it, their curiosity: *Are they happy? How can they be happy?*" Offred responds, in the wake of Ofglen's silence, "Yes, we are very happy."

Imagine that you are a member of this visiting delegation and that you are unconvinced by Offred's murmured response. You are appalled by the society as a whole but specifically by its oppression of women. You would like to do something to help, and decide that your first step is to write a letter to the editor of every major newspaper in the global economy. You will state clearly what exactly is going on in the Republic of Gilead and why, in your opinion, it is wrong. You will describe why you believe the situation is of interest to people in other countries and perhaps why they should consider getting involved.

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11. Thus far in the novel, several different “stations” have been described in varying detail: Aunts, Guardians, Angels, Eyes, Wives, Handmaids, Marthas, Ritas, and Coras.

Choose a station and assume the identity of an individual of that rank; for example, you might pretend you are Martha “Jane Adams” who wishes to work in the home of a specific commander. Write a resume for yourself that details your past experience, future goals, and ambitions for the present. Imagine that the Republic of Gilead has been in operation long enough for you to have past experience. Be creative in your resume entries. You might, for instance, be so bold as to state that you wish to move from one rank to another—as a young Guardian might dream of being promoted to an Angel, and one day attaining his own Handmaid.

Use details presented in the text to help enhance the realism of your resume.

12. In Chapters 5 and 6, Offred and Ofglen walk through a town once very familiar to them and visit several shops to purchase groceries for their households. A key difference in their errand-running is that there are no words of any kind posted anywhere—only pictures that a child could interpret. Women in Gilead are no longer allowed to read—another attempt by the regime to control their minds and bodies.

Picture yourself in a similar situation: a world turned upside down, almost overnight, where the right to read is suddenly a crime punishable by death. Now imagine that you, like Offred, have been given the task of running errands. Choose a familiar territory in your hometown and describe from start to finish how it would be different if not identified with words. For example, if you start your errand run on Forest Road, instead of a sign with those words, you may see a sign with a road filled with trees. It may be helpful to list the errands that need to be completed first, and then decide on pictograms for each location afterwards.