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Prestwick House
Literature
Teaching Unit
Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide



The Handmaid's Tale

by Margaret Atwood

- Learning objectives
- Study Guide with short-answer questions
- Background information
- Vocabulary in context
- Multiple-choice test
- Essay questions
- Literary terms



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The Handmaid's Tale

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.

The Handmaid's Tale

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?

The Handmaid's Tale

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?

Sections III and IV: Night and Waiting Room

Chapters 7 - 8

VOCABULARY

abstracted – preoccupied; lost in thought
disconsolate – unable to be cheered up
gloating – bragging about one's success to make someone else feel bad
ingratiate – to seek the favor of someone by flattering or pleasing
nostalgic – sentimental about the past
parley – talks or negotiations, particularly between opposing forces
sanctity – the quality of holiness
sulking – showing moodiness or bad-temper due to disappointment or anger
tremulous – trembling from fear or nervousness

1. Why is the night special and significant to Offred?

2. As Moira becomes more fully fleshed out, who does she become in the reader's perspective?

3. What is the child Offred's reaction to the porn cover? How is this different from the expected reaction?

4. Why would Offred "like to believe this is a story [she's] telling [?] [She] need[s] to believe it."

Sections V and VI: Nap and Household

Chapters 13 - 14

VOCABULARY

animation – liveliness, energy
candid – honest, sincere
espionage – relating to spying
heretical – against established religious beliefs
lethargic – sluggish, tired
sedentary – inactive; tending to laziness
translucent – clear; able to see through

1. What was Offred unprepared to deal with in her situation? How does this make her feel?

2. How does Moira demonstrate that she is perhaps not entirely willing to adopt the Handmaid status?

3. When Janine tells her story of being gang-raped, how does the Aunts' conditioning of Janine and the other Handmaids prove to be extremely effective?

4. How has Offred's view of her body been altered from before?

5. What do Offred's dreams reveal about her fears about Luke?
