

# The Handmaid's Tale Study Guide

## The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood

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# Introduction

By the time *The Handmaid's Tale* was published in 1985, Margaret Atwood had already been an internationally recognized figure in literature for twenty years. Her work has been characterized as having a "feminist" focus, and this novel certainly fit into that simple understanding; the story describes a society where dehumanization of women is not just a custom but actually the law.

What keeps the novel from being only a work of propaganda for feminist ideology is the complexity and roundness of all of the characters. Among the male characters, one is willing to fight with the underground against the oppressive government and another, who is at the top of this male-oriented social order, feels trapped by it and secretly breaks the laws in order to indulge himself in simple, meaningless pleasure. The female characters may be oppressed, but they are not portrayed as powerless victims. The novel's harshest judgements are applied to the Handmaid-in-training who sells out her own integrity by declaring her own guilt for being raped as a child, and to the narrator herself for lacking the nerve to help the underground resistance movement.

*The Handmaid's Tale* was a best seller at the time of its publication. It is possible that Atwood's reputation and the appeal of reading about contemporary social issues such as toxic waste, abortion and pornography helped its initial rise to fame, but its continuing popularity surely rests on its seamless, chillingly believable blending of modern religious fundamentalist attitudes with the historically proven methods of almost all totalitarian governments.

## Author Biography

Margaret Atwood is one of the best-known Canadian writers of our day. She is certainly one of the most prolific authors in North America, having produced over twenty volumes of poetry and just as many books of fiction (including novels and short story collections), as well as important essays, dramas and children's books. Recognition for her work has included winning the Governor-General's Award twice, as well as the Coles Book of the Year Award, the Arthur C. Clarke Award, and the Harvard University Centennial Medal.

She was born in Ottawa in 1939 and grew up in suburban Toronto. Her father was an entomologist, and during her childhood, Atwood, showing as much ability in science as she did in writing, believed that she would follow in his footsteps in the field of biology. Her talent as a writer became apparent early: in High school, she contributed poetry, short stories and cartoons to the school newspaper. Her first volume of poetry was published the same year that she graduated from Victoria College, University of Toronto, and five years later her second book of poetry was given one of Canada's most coveted prizes, the Governor-General's Award. Since the 1960's she has taught at several Canadian and American universities, usually through honorary guest fellowships, and she has produced a tremendous body of work.

Throughout her writing career, critics have often categorized Atwood's works as "feminist," a label that she has avoided because it often applied to any work written by a woman with leading female characters. She has been one of the foremost spokespersons for the previously under-examined tradition of Canadian literature and wrote one of the most important and widely-read books about the subject, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, indicating that gender identity is no more important in her work than national identity.



# Plot Summary

## Part I

In Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred, the main character, recounts her experiences as a Handmaid in the Republic of Gilead, a twenty-first-century authoritarian society run by radical Christian fundamentalists. In this American dystopia, women have been reduced to the status of breeders. As Offred chronicles her days as a Handmaid, she gradually pieces together for readers the horrors of the totalitarian regime and her struggle for survival.

Offred begins her story with a flashback to her time at the Rachel and Leah Center, where she and other Handmaids received their training. She remembers the Aunts, who guarded and taught them, patrolling at night with electric cattle prods and leather belts. The Handmaids-in-training were confined to what used to be a gymnasium, except for twice daily walks within the chain-link, barbed wire fence. During the long nights the women communicated with each other in the dark by lip reading silent whispers and by touching hands.

The Commander's home, where she has served for five weeks, consists of five other people: two Marthas, Rita and Cora; Nick the chauffeur; the Commander; and the Commander's Wife. Offred recognizes the Commander's Wife as Serena Joy, a performer on a television program she had watched as a child. One of Offred's tasks is to purchase the household food during daily trips to the local stores. Every day she walks with Ofglen, another Handmaid, through guarded checkpoints. While shopping they see a pregnant Handmaid, and Offred recognizes her as an acquaintance from the Center named Janine. On the way home they walk past the prison wall where six bodies of "war criminals" hang. She explains that they were probably doctors or scientists who were executed for past "crimes" against society.

## Part II

One afternoon she inspects her room and finds the indecipherable message "Nolite te bastardes carborundorum" scratched into the floor. Later during her monthly checkup at the gynecologist, her doctor offers personally to help her become pregnant. She is afraid of getting caught but acknowledges that a pregnancy will lead to her salvation.

While resting in her room she thinks back to the first time she saw her friend, Moira, at the Center; she had obviously been beaten. She also recalls Janine "testifying" about her gang rape and subsequent abortion, and, spurred on by jeering women, admitting full responsibility for these actions. Offred explains that the Aunts encouraged these testifying sessions as a "good example" for the others. Returning to the present, she dreams of her husband Luke and painful memories of trying and failing to escape with him and her daughter across the border.



That night she comes downstairs for the Ceremony, a required monthly ritual. The Ceremony begins with the Commander reading aloud a passage about procreation from the Bible. Then Offred lies on Serena's bed between her legs while the Commander tries to impregnate her. She senses his detachment and Serena's anger. Back in her room, she rubs the butter she has saved from dinner on her face to keep her skin soft, since Handmaids are not allowed any lotion. Later that night she creeps downstairs, thinking she will steal something. Nick discovers her and they kiss and touch. He later tells her the Commander wants to see her tomorrow in his study.

## Part III

The next morning Offred aids in the delivery of Janine's baby. When a baby girl is born, all are happy except Janine who cries "burnt-out miserable tears." Offred notes she will be allowed to nurse the baby only for a few months when she will be transferred to another Commander's home. That night Offred sneaks downstairs to meet the Commander in his book-lined private study where she plays Scrabble with him and, as he requests, gives him a kiss goodnight. She visits the Commander two or three nights a week after getting a signal from Nick. The Commander allows her to read forbidden books and magazines and brings her hand lotion that she applies while he watches. Both are embarrassed a few weeks later during the Ceremony since they now know each other.

During a trip to the store Ofglen identifies herself as part of the underground and tells her "you can join us." As they walk home a black van with the white-winged Eye on the side stops in front of them. Two Eyes Jump out and grab an ordinary man walking in front of them, assault him and throw him into the back of the van and move on.

Later in her room she thinks back to the past, when her world changed. The new Republic began when someone shot the President and the members of Congress, the army subsequently declared a state of emergency, and the group that took over suspended the Constitution. People stayed at home for weeks, "looking for some direction" as newspapers were censored and roadblocks prevented passage without the proper passes. Offred notes that these changes met with little resistance. One day during this period she was denied access to her bank account and lost her job transferring books onto disks at a library. She soon discovered that the new rulers had made it illegal for women to work or have money.

That night in the study, she asks the Commander what "Nolite te bastardes carborundorum" means, and he tells her "Don't let the bastards grind you down." He informs her that the Handmaid who scratched that message in the floor hanged herself in her room. When he admits that he wants her life to be "bearable," and so asks her what she would like, she answers "to know what's going on!"



## Part IV

One day while shopping, Ofglen tells her the secret password of the underground: "mayday." When she returns home, Serena suggests she try to get pregnant with Nick since she hasn't yet with her husband. Offred notes the risk, but agrees. Serena tells her she will try to get her a picture of her little girl and gives her a cigarette. Offred gets a match from Rita and goes up to her room, thinking that she may save the match and burn down the house and escape.

Another day Offred goes to the Prayvaganza, an event attended by all the women in the district. There she sees Janine looking pale and learns her baby was a "shredder" -deformed as many babies were by the polluted environment-and so was destroyed. After the Commander in charge of the service gives a speech about victory and sacrifice, twenty Angels returned from the front are wed to twenty girls, some as young as fourteen. On the way back Ofglen tells her they know she is seeing the Commander in secret and asks her to find out anything she can.

That night the Commander has her put on a skimpy, flashy costume and takes her to Jezebel's, a brothel. She sees Moira there who tells her that after her escape from the Center, she tried to cross the border but was caught, tortured, and sent to work as a prostitute at Jezebel' s. Offred is distressed that Moira seems to have given up, and notes that this was the last time she would see her.

When the Commander takes her up to one of the rooms and they have sex, she tells herself to try to fake enthusiasm.

Later that night she meets Nick in his garage apartment. She acknowledges that their subsequent sexual encounter was an act of love and thus feels she has betrayed Luke. After that night, she returns often to Nick's room, admitting that she is getting reckless and taking too many chances. She talks less with Ofglen who continues to press her for information from the Commander, but her interest lies only with Nick and their time together. She thinks she may be pregnant and thus no longer wants to leave, which makes her ashamed.

## Part V

One morning she attends a district Salvaging, for women only. Two Handmaids and one Wife are salvaged-hung for unknown crimes. When a Guardian who has been accused of rape is brought out, the Handmaids form a circle around him and beat him to death. During this ceremony, Ofglen kicks the Guardian savagely in the head, later explaining to Offred that he was "one of them," and so she quickly put him out of his misery.

While shopping that afternoon, she discovers that Ofglen has been replaced with a new Handmaid. She tells her Ofglen hanged herself when she saw the black van coming for her. Offred, relieved that she was not caught, decides to repent and not break any more rules. That night the black van comes for her. Nick arrives with the Guardians and tells



her that she should go with them and trust that she will be saved. They escort her out, telling Serena and the Commander that she is being arrested for "violation of state secrets." They both worry about their own fates. The narrative ends with Offred stepping into the van

## Part VI

The last section, called "Historical Notes," jumps ahead to the year 2195 to a university conference session on Gileadean Studies. There the speaker tells his audience that what he just read a transcript of Offred' s story-was found recorded on tapes in a house in Massachusetts. He admits he does not know Offred's true Identity or whether she successfully made It across the border. He then speculates about the identity of the Commander who, he suggests, played an important part in setting up the Republic of Gilead, which has now fallen.



# Characters

## The Commander

The Commander is a powerful figure in the Gileadean government. He is apparently sterile, although this is not confirmed because, according to law, only women are tested for being fruitful or barren.

The first time the Commander is seen breaking the strict social structure is when he sends for the handmaiden to come to his office alone at night: it is arranged like a sexual rendezvous, but she finds to her amusement that he shyly asks her to play Scrabble. As her night visits to the office increase, she becomes increasingly informal with him, sometimes even correcting him, as when she tells him "Don't ever do that again," after he nearly becomes affectionate during the impregnation ceremony.

He acts amused when she shows strength. The gifts he offers her show that he underestimates her intelligence: skin lotion, glances through magazines, and a secret trip to a house of prostitution. These are all presented with the expectation that she will be delighted, with no recognition that she only accepts them because her life is so empty of stimuli

At the house of prostitution, the Commander does finally force himself upon her sexually, mindlessly responding to the environment of degrading sexuality. His attempts to win the handmaid's approval are contrasted to the fear he has for his wife. In the end, when their secret relationship has been found out, she sees him sitting behind the wife, looking harried and gray: "No doubt they're having a fight, about me," the narrator asserts. "No doubt she's giving him hell".

## The Commander's Wife

The Commander's wife was once Serena Joy, the lead soprano on the *Growing Souls Gospel Hour*, a television program devoted to telling Bible stories to children. Throughout the story, Offred refers to The Commander's Wife as Serena Joy, although none of the other characters do.

Like 99 of 100 women in Gilead, the Commander's wife has been found to be sterile. On account of her husband's high government rank, she is supposed to receive Offred's baby as soon as it is born. During the traditional fertilization ceremony, she holds the handmaiden between her legs while the Commander attempts to impregnate her. She cannot help being jealous, despite all of the rules built into the ceremony to make the relationship between her husband and the handmaid impersonal; when the ceremony is over, Serena Joy curtly tells the handmaid to leave, even though standing and walking will diminish the odds of fertilization.



In the end, she finds evidence that the Commander has taken the handmaid out of the house in makeup and frilly clothes, and the handmaid finds that her predecessor, the last Offred, hanged herself because Serena Joy found out about a similar arrangement. "Behind my back?" Serena Joy tells her. "You could have left me something," which raises the question of whether there was love in the cold relationship between the Commander and his wife after all. When the handmaid is taken away by uniformed guards, Serena Joy is angry but also panicky, afraid that the government will find out about illegal actions around the house.

## **Cora**

Cora is a Martha, the housekeeper in the Commander's household.

## **Aunt Elizabeth**

At the Red Center, Aunt Elizabeth is in charge of the less spiritual aspects of the training of the handmaids: she teaches gynecology and oversees discipline. When Moira escapes, it is Aunt Elizabeth that she ties up and strips of her clothes.

## **Janine**

The handmaid who narrates this story refers to this character as "that whiney bitch Janine," and she is shown throughout this story to be annoying and pathetic. At the Red Center, when Janine tells the other handmaids-in-training about being gang raped at age fourteen, they chant that it was her fault, that she led the boys on. The next week Janine announces that this rape was her fault. For the rest of the story she behaves as the model handmaid, is trusted as Aunt Lydia's spy when Moira escapes, and gives her baby up immediately after the delivery is over. Her compliance is achieved at the cost of her sanity: when the handmaids tear a man apart with their hands during the ritual called the Salvaging, Janine wanders around with blood smeared on her cheek and a clump of hair in her hand. Clearly delusional, she babbles cheerfully: "Hi there," "How are you doing?" "You have a nice day."

## **Luke**

Luke was the husband of the narrator before the time in which this novel takes place. They had a daughter together. They were caught trying to escape from Gilead, and, while she was put into the handmaid program because of her ability to have children, she never finds out his fate. Their daughter's name is never mentioned, but the narrator does get to see a current photograph of her in exchange for agreeing to go along with Serena Joy's plan to get her pregnant.



## Aunt Lydia

Aunt Lydia is responsible for teaching enslaved women how to be handmaids. She wears a khaki dress and lectures about what behaviors are decent and which are inappropriate, filling the women with disgust for the dangers of outlawed practices, such as pornography and abortion, while encouraging admiration that borders on awe toward pregnancy. "There's more than one kind of freedom," she tells them. "Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underestimate it."

## Moira

An old friend who knew the narrator well before the events of this novel take place, at least since college, Moira surfaces several times throughout the story as an emblem of resistance to the misogynistic, totalitarian state. She also is used to contrast the government's repressive attitude toward sexuality.

In college, Moira once hosted an exotic lingerie party, selling the sort of items that were sold at the Porno-marts before they were outlawed by the state. Later, after the narrator has been at the teaching center for handmaids for a few weeks, Moira shows up, having been arrested for "gender treachery," or homosexuality. She tries to escape from the Red Center by feigning illness, hoping to bribe the guards in the ambulance with sex. When they cannot be bribed she shows up back at the center with her feet mutilated, causing the narrator to remember that an official has told them, "for our purposes, your hands and feet are not essential." Her second escape is successful: she makes a weapon from a part of the toilet mechanism and threatens the guard, Aunt Elizabeth, then takes Aunt Elizabeth's clothes and pass and walks out of the Center's front gate.

After eight or nine months underground, she is caught, and the narrator later meets her in Jezebel's, the house of prostitution. Moira is dressed in a tattered, lewd bunny costume. Despite the realization that prostitutes are often put to death in three or four years, Moira claims to like being at Jezebel's. She only works nights, and can drink and take drugs, and is allowed to have sex with other women. She compares it to the only other option-working with toxic waste in the Colonies until her body rotted away. Since the life of prostitution, symbolized by her ridiculous costume, is so completely the opposite of what she had stood for, her enthusiasm for working at Jezebel's can be seen as a blend of wishful thinking and potent brain washing.

## The Mother

"I don't want a man around, what use are they except for ten seconds' worth of half-babies," the narrator's mother once told her, explaining why she never married. "A man is just a woman's strategy for making other women." With her view of sex as good only for procreation and her activism against pornography, her views are similar in ways to



those supported by the Gileadean government, although to them she would be considered an "Unwoman," too strong-willed to have a place in society.

## Nick

Nick is the commander's chauffeur. He is an attractive young man about the narrator's age. He is not allowed to associate with the handmaid, but they defy the rules and start a physical relationship. On the night after the impregnation Ceremony, the narrator goes downstairs to the sitting room of the house because she feels like stealing something. Nick finds her there, and in the silence they kiss and touch each other.

Nick functions as a messenger throughout her series of clandestine meetings with the Commander. When he wears his hat sideways, she knows that she is to go see the Commander that night. Later, the Commander's wife arranges for the narrator to get to Nick's room safely at night in order to become pregnant by him, since it appears that the Commander is sterile. She keeps her affair with Nick going, sneaking to his room over the garage even without the approval of the Commander's wife.

Eventually Nick provides an escape from her enslavement. It is revealed that he is a member of the Mayday resistance group and takes her to safety.

## Offred

We never learn the real name of the narrator of this story, although she reveals it to several other characters whom she trusts. She is officially known as "Offred": the name means that she is the possession "of" the Commander, "Fred", as "of warren" and "Of glen" belong to Warren and Glen. This name can also be read as "off-red," indicating that she is not well-suited to her role as a red-uniformed handmaid trained at the Red Center.

When the novel begins, the narrator is already a handmaid, and has been "posted" at the Commander's house for five weeks. She is not supposed to express her individuality in any way; she cannot sing, ask questions, or in any way express unhappiness with her situation. Her mission is to become pregnant by the Commander, so that he and his wife will have a baby to raise as their own.

Her history comes out as the novel progresses: she had a husband and a child and worked as a librarian before the government was overthrown by right-wing fanatics and the rights of women were limited, supposedly for their own protection. Attempting to escape the country, she and her husband and child were captured by government troops, and she never saw them again, although she thinks of them often throughout the novel. In the Republic of Gilead, she is intimidated, afraid to talk openly to the other handmaid, Ofglen, who is her companion, and is certainly afraid of confiding in any of the other members of her household.



When the Commander summons her illegally to his office at night, she goes, even though she assumes that his purpose is to have sex with her, because she feels that she has no option: it is amusing to her that all he wants to do is play word games and read magazines, which are as illegal for a Commander as they are for a handmaid, indicating that he feels as enslaved as she is. Their relationship grows, so that she can express herself more freely as time goes on, but she is always aware of the legal control he has over her.

When the Commander's Wife arranges for her to have sex with Nick, the chauffeur, in order to become pregnant and complete her mission in the house, she continues sleeping with him for weeks, even though it will be fatal for her if she is caught. She feels unfaithful to her husband, Luke, but she is so desperate for affection that she cannot help herself. But when Ofglen confides in her about the resistance movement and asks her to help, she cannot overcome her fear of the consequences. The "Historical Notes on *The Handmaid's Tale*" at the end of the book say that the narrative was recorded on a series of cassette tapes and found in a safe place along the Underground Female road, indicating that she did escape from Gilead in the end.

## Ofglen

The woman referred to as "Ofglen" in this story is just one of a succession: the narrator knew an Ofglen before her, and at the end of the novel another Ofglen shows up in her place.

When she first shows up in the novel, the narrator says, "she is my spy, as I am hers." They are mutually distrustful, carefully keeping conversation to officially-sanctioned topics, each unsure if the other will turn them in to the authorities as a subversive if they mention forbidden topics. As the novel progresses, Ofglen turns out to be connected to the revolutionary group called "Mayday," a fact that she first hints at by commenting on the weather: "It's a beautiful May day."

Later, she speaks openly to the narrator about the underground movement, and reveals mysteriously that she knows about Offred's evening meetings in the Commander's office. She asks her to look through his paperwork and find anything that could help them fight against the government. When the handmaids attend a Salvaging, at which they are to beat a man to death with their hands for allegedly raping a pregnant woman, Ofglen rushes out in front and knocks him unconscious with kicks to the head. She later explains that he was not a rapist but a Mayday activist, and she was putting him out of his misery. The next day a new Ofglen shows up, explaining that the old one hanged herself when government agents were coming to take her away.

## Ofwarren

See Janine

## **Rita**

Rita is a Martha, the cook in the Commander's household.

## **Serena Joy**

See The Commander's Wife



# Themes

## Sex Roles

The roles that are assigned to the two genders in this novel are exaggerations of the roles traditionally played: women here are responsible for domestic duties and men in Gilead run the government functions (since this is a totalitarian state, business and military concerns are part of the government). To most of the people of Gilead, the strict assignment of these roles seems reasonable, a natural outcome of the physical traits that define males and females.

Industrial pollution has caused sterility in ninety-nine percent of the female population and countless numbers of the males, creating a crisis for the ability of the human race to survive into the future. From this the government had claimed the right to require any fertile females to participate in government-supervised child-bearing programs. This has caused a need to keep all non-fertile females in structured domestic roles, in order to assure the passivity and cooperation of the fertile females; and this in turn has caused the requirement that males make political decisions and enforce them with military rule. All of these steps require more than a social policy, they require an almost religious faith in order to assure the participation of the greatest number of people. Training centers like the Rachel and Leah Re-education Center become necessary.

To the social planners of Gilead, this system might seem a reasonable response to the threat of extinction. To people of the modern world and to the futuristic society of Professor Piexoto who view it from the year 2175, it seems rash, twisted, and naive, rooted more in the greed of men than in the common good.

In the name of preserving the lives of the citizens, executions become common; in order to offer women "freedom from" they must give up their "freedom to," dressing in government-assigned uniforms and suffering intellectual starvation as the only offered alternatives to rape and exploitation. Men like the Commander dictate morality-men that are so corrupt that they break the laws against sex and contraband that they themselves have established.

The roles of the two sexes in this novel are extremes of traditional roles, and that serves to raise the question of whether they are derived from nature or if men are working hard to keep oppressive traditions alive after their usefulness to society is spent. From the shocking contradictions that Gileadean society is forced to accept, the latter appears to be the case.

## Free Will

Any dystopian novel, which means a novel that describes a society that is a terrible place to live in-such as George Orwell's 1984 and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*-



*raises* the question of free will: to what degree, readers are asked, are the people in the novel forced to participate in a government that violates their basic ethical beliefs?

The same question dominated the Nuremberg trials after World War II, when Nazis who had participated in the Holocaust justified the murder of thousands of innocent, anonymous victims because they were "just following orders." Through this novel's structure, we are introduced to the different ways society uses to intimidate its citizens: the lack of personal possessions or identity, the cattle prods, the armed guards, the dangerous gossip, the subversives hung to death as public spectacle, etc.

It is only gradually, as the narrator recalls being trained to behave like a good housemaid, that the government's ability to control one's thoughts presents itself. The narrator behaves as she is supposed to, despite (or because of) the despair she feels, but when she describes Janine's behavior, she is disgusted as she imagines the conversation the Commander's wives would probably have about what a good handmaid Janine is. Looking at her life from the outside, the narrator can accept her own behavior as being prudent for survival, but seeing how proud Janine is of her pregnancy keeps her from accepting government-sanctioned ideas as her own.

The novel complicates the question of whether free will is absolute or if it has limits by giving no clear-cut answer about the fate of the character With the strongest will, Moira: she says that she is happy working at the house of prostitution, but such happiness would strongly contradict what she has stood for before, and it conveniently fits the government's role for her. Readers are invited to wonder whether she is really thinking for herself after enduring her torture.'

The narrator herself is too fearful to help the Mayday resistance movement, even after they have reached out to her and after the Commander has shown his weakness. When the Of glen that she knows to be part of the resistance disappears, she is fearful that she will be arrested: so strong is the government's hold over her mind that she is afraid even though she has done nothing wrong. On the other hand, she carries on her illegal affair with Nick, risking arrest and death to go to his room night after night, telling him her true name. Her love for him neutralizes her intense fear of punishment, raising the issue of her free will again, never answering whether love is freedom or a way to mentally flee worse fates.

## **Guilt and Innocence**

For a situation that causes such misery, none of the characters in this novel is presented as evil or specifically guilty. Aunt Lydia seems to believe that her brainwashing will help her students stay safe from assault, Janine is mercilessly pressured by her peers into compliance, and even the Commander, who comes closest among all of the characters to wielding control, is such a pawn of the situation that he takes risks just to talk With the narrator, listen to her, and play games With her. None of these characters is particularly admirable, but none can be pointed to as a specific example of what has caused the problem in Gilead.



This shows Atwood to be a fair, even-handed writer, willing to examine bad behavior and negative results without losing empathy or creating a two-dimensional villain. It also gives a more accurate depiction of a totalitarian society. A society that relies upon citizens to be responsible for intimidation and oppression would leave itself vulnerable to attacks of conscience, but a society that only asks each person to compromise a little, Without turning anyone into an obviously guilty party, can reach further into the homes of otherwise good people and can Justify its existence for a long time.

# Style

## Narration

The events in this novel take place at different points in the life of the narrator, but the primary setting, the present tense of the novel, is Gilead, where she has been a handmaid in the Commander's house for five weeks. The reader is introduced to new characters that she meets from this point forward, such as the doctor and the new Ofglen, while others that she is already familiar with—Rita and Cora for example—are taken for granted and woven into the narration without explanation.

Because the narrator's life had been designed by the government to be uneventful and to not require independent thought, the tone of the novel is drab, flat, desensitized. Information about how her life came to be this way is conveyed through flashbacks, most of them drawn from *two* sections of time in her past: her memories of the Rachel and Leah Re-education Center inform readers about how she came to be the way she is, and her memories of the time between the government's fall and her capture at the border explain how society came to be the way that it is.

## Structure

In the first few pages, the first section called "Night" is told in flashback, establishing the fact that this book takes place at a time when army blankets that say "U.S." are notably old, in a place where women sleep in a gymnasium surrounded by barbed wire. This sets a tone of danger for the following present-tense episodes, to contrast the passivity of the bland life described there.

The chapters of the novel alternate, with the even-numbered ones naming some place in town that the narrator goes to and the odd-numbered ones named "Night" (with the exception of "Nap" in Chapter V). Tills emphasized the distinction between the times when the handmaid's brain is allowed to be active and when it is supposed to be shut down in sleep, ironically, her life becomes more active and colorful during the "Night" sections, usually because she uses her private time to remember, and later to carry on her affair with Nick. It is significant that the trip to Jezebel's is not placed in a "Night" section, even though it occurs after dark and is a supposedly covert action, indicating that it could still be considered mainstream because it poses no threat to the power structure.

At the end of the novel, the "Historical Notes" section offers a lecture given in the year 2195 by the Director of Twentieth-and Twenty-first Century Archives at Cambridge University. This jump to almost *two* hundred years beyond the events of the *book* allows readers to put these events into a larger perspective, offering the hope that an oppressive society like Gilead is not the fate of human kind, but instead is the sort of misstep that civilization is bound to take in its development.



## Point of View

Because Atwood allows each of her characters sufficient motivation to be rounded, reasonable human beings, without relying on exceptional degrees of good or evil to explain any of them, the world of this book would have a different impact if it were presented from any other point of view. If this story were told by the Commander's wife, for example, the social structure might seem necessarily harsh and even fair, while the Commander might find it slowly improving under the tinkering of social architects.

Because the narrator is a handmaid, one of the most basic contradictions in this situation is emphasized: motherhood is praised as one of the greatest achievements in this world, but mothers are stripped of possessions, dignity, identity, and, ultimately, of their children. Having one of society's most powerless members tell the story brings out the fear of social authority that all of the characters feel, and it sheds light on the injustice of it all.

If the narrator were an angrier handmaid, she might not have gained the confidences of the Commander and Serena Joy; if the character had been more complacent, the members of the resistance may never have approached her. In either case the full story would not have been covered.

## Deus ex Machina

This phrase translates from Latin to mean "god from the machine," and it refers to the practice in ancient Greek drama of having a complex, twisted plot resolved in the end by suddenly having a god character descend from the sky (lowered onto the stage by a machine) to explain all mysteries, punish the bad and reward the good. This is of course a poor substitute for having a resolution that grows naturally out of the plot.

Some readers have charged that the sudden appearance of the Mayday group at the end is a case of *deus ex machina*, providing a happy ending that the situation did not prepare for. Although the appearance of Mayday is abrupt, it is not done without preparation. First, Ofglen's knowledge of the activities in the Commander's house hints halfway through the novel that the movement had a spy there. More significantly, the strength of the resistance group is never made clear throughout the novel because the narrator is kept uninformed of any real news: Mayday could rescue hundreds of people per day from Gilead, making their appearance at the end quite reasonable, but readers would not suspect this activity because it has been hidden from the narrator.

## Imagery

Most of the imagery in this novel does not occur naturally, but has been planted by the government: for instance, the frightening specters of the hanged traitors; the nun-like habits that the handmaids wear; the ominous black vans that symbolize swift and

unforeseeable death; the tattered bunny costume that makes Moira look like a cheap, vulgar toy.

There are also symbols that the characters in the novel see in front of them, whether they are aware of it or not: the garden that assures Serena Joy that she is concerned with life and beauty; the chauffeur's cap, symbolic of obedience to the social order, that is turned askew when the Commander and Offred are to meet as near-equals; and the fixture that was put in the ceiling to replace the chandelier that the former Offred hung herself from, symbolizing both death and also, because it looks like a breast hanging down, life.

# Historical Context

## International Conservatism

In the 1980s, the political climate around the globe turned toward fiscal restraint and social conservatism. In general, this shift was a response to the permissiveness and unchecked social spending that occurred in the 1970s, which were in turn the extended results of the freedoms won by the worldwide social revolutions of the 1960s.

This conservative trend appeared in different forms in different countries. In Margaret Atwood's home country of Canada, Pierre Trudeau, the Liberal Party leader who had been Prime Minister since 1968 (with an eight-month gap in 1979-80), resigned in 1984, and the voters replaced him with Progressive Conservative Brian Mulroney. Margaret Thatcher, who was elected Prime Minister of England in 1979, reversed decades of socialism by selling government-run industries to private owners. In the United States, the 1980 election of Ronald Reagan created such a turbulent reversal of previous social policy that the changes sweeping through the government during the first half of the decade came to be referred to as "the Reagan Revolution. "

The Reagan administration's popularity was based on the slogan of "getting government off of people's backs," implying government regulations had become too cumbersome and expensive for the American economy to sustain. Reagan's personal popularity allowed his administration to shift the priorities of government. Military spending was increased year after year, in order to stand up to the Soviet Union, which the President openly declared an "evil empire." As a result of this spending, the United States became a debtor nation for the first time in its history, even though social programs were cut and eliminated. The benefits gained by slashing redundant programs were offset by increases in poverty and homelessness, since many of the affected programs had been established to aid the poor, and to balance financial inequalities that had become established by centuries of racist and sexist tradition.

The extreme shift toward conservatism in the United States at that time is significant to the social change that created the Republic of Gilead in Atwood's imagination. After the novel was published, she told an American interviewer that she had tried originally to set the novel in Canada, but that it just would not fit the Canadian culture. "It's not a Canadian sort of thing to do," she told Bonnie Lyons in 1987. "Canadians might do it after the United States did it, in some sort of watered-down version. Our television evangelists are more paltry than yours. The States are more extreme in everything."

## Religious Fundamentalism

One of the most powerful political groups to affect American politics in the 1980s was an organization called The Moral Majority. It was founded in 1979 by Jerry Falwell, an



evangelist and the host of the *Old Time Gospel Hour* on television, to register voters in support of the group's fundamentalist agenda.

Millions of voters registered and identified themselves as members of the Moral Majority, giving the group a strong voice in national politics. Among the issues opposed by the Moral Majority were the Equal Rights Amendment, which would have provided a Constitutional guarantee that women would be treated equally to men; the White House Conference on the Family, which they felt gave recognition to too many varieties of family structure; and abortion. The issues supported by the Moral Majority included the saying of prayers in publicly-funded schools, tax credits for schools that taught religious doctrine, and government opposition to pornography.

The group's impact on American politics was wide-reaching, and politicians running for national and local offices lined up to pledge their support of the "family values" program that the Moral Majority used to define their agenda, knowing that they could not win election without appeasing such a well-organized bloc of voters.

Organized Fundamentalists made their mark on the structure of the American government.

The Equal Rights Amendment went unratified when it could not gather enough support. The National Endowment for the Arts came under national scrutiny and had its budget cut because some of the artists it had benefited had produced works found to offend standards of decency. Abortion, possibly the key issue of the Christian political movement, also had its federal funding eliminated, even though attempts to limit or outlaw abortion itself were fought successfully on Constitutional grounds.

Though sexually explicit publications are also protected by the Constitution, they were studied by a Presidential Commission on Pornography, which like most symbolic actions, had little tangible impact; one large convenience store chain, for example, stopped carrying pornographic magazines, but began stocking them in a few years, after the heat was off.

As the decade wore on, the pervasive influence of the Moral Majority, and of politically active religious figures in general, wore out. Some policies, such as Reverend Falwell's support of Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos or his opposition to South African freedom fighter Bishop Desmond Tutu, exposed the group to ridicule and charges of hypocrisy. Falwell left the organization in 1988 to take charge of *The 700 Club*, a television ministry whose leader had been forced to resign in a sex scandal. The Moral Majority disbanded the following year.

## Critical Overview

Although *The Handmaid's Tale* achieved great popular success when it was published—weeks on the bestseller lists, its adaptation as a major motion picture—its reception by critics has been wildly uneven. Critics generally have been positive about the book, but for many different reasons.

These reasons have been so diverse that it seems at times that reviewers were reviewing different books. Such wide disagreement is testimony to Atwood's strength as a novelist: it shows that no reviewer could dismiss *The Handmaid's Tale* lightly, that they gave the book, its subject matter, and its implications serious attention. It takes a novel with few obvious flaws and so much social relevance to bring out so many different approaches.

In general, reviewers divided their attentions toward either the book's political success or its success as a piece of literature, although there is vast disagreement about whether it works in either of these areas.

Critic Joyce Maynard, who reviewed the book for *Mademoiselle* soon after its publication in 1986, expressed her amazement and admiration for the way that Atwood put together a complete fictional world, with "not only the basic rules and structures by which Gilead operates, but a thousand small, odd, harrowing particulars too." Maynard started reading the book at ten o'clock at night and could not stop reading until she had finished the last page, after daybreak, because she was captivated by the "incredible and moving story."

In contrast, Robert Linkous was one of the very few reviewers completely unmoved by the novel: "Offred's monotonous manner of expression just drones and drones," he wrote in *San Francisco Review of Books*.

Brad Hooper, writing for *Booklist*, contrasted the book's social aims with its narrative achievement, noting that "the book is simply too obvious (in its moral agenda) to support its fictional context." Often, this debate about whether the book's thinly-veiled criticism of contemporary politics is justified by Atwood's story-telling ability has been shifted, slightly, to an analysis of how *The Handmaid's Tale* compares to similar dystopian novels, such as 1984 and *Brave New World*, which also sound the alarm against coming political calamity.

In his review for *Newsweek* in 1986, Peter Prescott wrote that *The Handmaid's Tale* was better than those other books because Atwood was a more talented novelist. "Unlike those English gentlemen, she can create a nuanced character," he wrote in a review entitled "No Balm In This Gilead." "The dystopia she imagined may be more limited than theirs, but it's fully horrifying—and achieved without recourse to special effects."

Famed author Barbara Ehrenreich, however, saw the book as being insufficiently realized, both as a novel and as a work of political speculation. "As a dystopia, this is a



thinly textured one," she wrote in *The New Republic*, directly contrasting Prescott's and Maynard's views. She pointed out improbabilities in the Atwood's imaginary Gilead, such as the fact that outlawing printed matter would be unlikely if they have cars and computers that would need operating manuals, and she faults the novel's protagonist for lacking character, calling her "a sappy stand-in for (1984's) Winston Smith," and Gilead "a coloring-book version of (1984's) Oceana." As a sign of the narrator's vagueness and inappropriateness for telling the tale, Ehrenreich points to the fact that, given a chance to obtain forbidden information from the Commander, Offred comes up with nothing better than a weak request for "whatever there is to know ... what's going on."

It is an indicator of the distance between critical perspectives that Joyce Johnson's review in *The Washington Post* cited the same quote, but she interprets it as "a classic demand for something valuable and forbidden."

Even those reviewers who were unimpressed with Atwood's storytelling skills found enough in the issues the book raised to make it worth reading. Although Ehrenreich thought *The Handmaid's Tale* was not as good as other dystopia novels, she did express great interest in the often overlooked phenomenon that Atwood brings attention to: the similarity between religious fundamentalism and cultural feminism. She says that the book is fascinating and worth reading, despite its literary weaknesses, because of the extra dimension it adds to its mirror of our times. "We are being warned, in this tale, not only about the theocratic ambitions of the religious right, but about the repressive tendency of feminism in general," she wrote. She went on to cite evidence in the harsh treatment of pornography and the group beating of rapists as signs that Gilead is not too far from a hard-line feminist's ideal.

If this warning was what made the book worthwhile for Ehrenreich, it was not enough to keep Mary McCarthy, the novelist, engaged in the story.

McCarthy called the book "very readable" in *The New York Times Review of Books*, but she went on to explain that she could not take its scary version of the future very seriously because, even though she herself was suspicious almost to the point of being paranoid about small things like credit cards being "instruments of social control," she could not see the far right of the political spectrum rising up violently to overthrow the government, which is, of course, the novel's central premise.



# Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

# Critical Essay #1

*Perkins is an Assistant Professor of English at Prince George's Community College in Maryland and has written numerous critical articles for essay collections, journals, and educational publishers. In the following essay, she explores the complex interplay of dominance, submission, and rebellion in The Handmaid's Tale through a focus on the main character's struggle for survival.*

Critics read Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* as a cautionary story of oppression against women as well as a critique of radical feminism. Some who focus on Offred, the narrator and main character, criticize her passivity in the face of rigid limitations on her individual freedom: Gayle Green in her article, "Choice of Evils," published in *The Women's Review of Books* insists, "Offred is no hero." Barbara Ehrenreich in her *New Republic* article, "Feminism's Phantoms," finds her to be "a sappy stand-in for [1984's] Winston Smith.

Even her friend Moira characterizes her as "a wimp " Yet, although Offred cannot be considered a more obvious traditional hero like Moira, an examination of her more subtle rebellion against the oppressive totalitarian regime which governs her life illustrates the indefatigable nature of the human spirit.

The Republic of Gilead is a typical totalitarian society in that it promotes terror tactics while enforcing its rigid dogmas. Amin Malak in "Margaret Atwood's 'The Handmaid's Tale' and the Dystopian Tradition," notes that Gilead "prescribes a pattern of life based on frugality, conformity, censorship, corruption, [and] fear." The novel also illuminates the intricate politics of power leaders define acceptable roles for subordinates (in this case, the women), who are said to be unable to perform more valued functions (reasoning and governing skills). As a result subordinates often find it difficult to believe in their own ability.

Subordinates are encouraged to develop childlike characteristics-submissiveness, docility, dependency-that are pleasing to the dominant group. This group then legitimizes the unequal relationship and incorporates it into society's guiding concepts. In Gilead's power structure women are subservient to men because they are considered not as capable as men This system involves the marginalization of women, illustrating Simone de Beauvoir's point in *The Second Sex* that a man defines a woman not as autonomous but only as relative to him. He is the Subject and she is the Other. Women in Gilead must concentrate on basic survival and so avoid direct, honest reactions to this marginalization and the terror-tactics of those in power. Sometimes the women disguise their actions, appearing to accommodate the demands of this oppressive system, while subtly rebelling.

Throughout the novel, Offred proves her consistent efforts not only to survive, but also to maintain her individuality. When she begins her story with a flashback to her time at the Rachel and Leah Center, she illustrates the politics of power that characterize the novel. She notes the Aunts guarding them with electric cattle prods and leather belts,



restricting their movement and interaction with each other. The Handmaids-in-training seem on the surface to submit to this treatment. At night, however, under the threat of severe beatings, they struggle to maintain contact with each other through silent communications in the dark.

Offred also risks physical harm when she steals a few minutes during bathroom breaks to speak to Moira. During these breaks the two women reminisce about past lives and voice their fears and disgust over their present reality. Offred notes, "there is something powerful in the whispering of obscenities, about those in power. There's something delightful about it, something naughty, secretive, forbidden, thrilling... It deflates them, reduces them to the common denominator where they can be dealt with."

As Offred's thoughts turn to the teenagers who must have once populated the former gymnasium, she commits a more personal act of rebellion. The citizens of the new Republic are repeatedly warned to forget the past or to View it with contempt. Yet, throughout her narrative, Offred continually flashes back to her life before the formation of Gilead, especially with her husband Luke and their daughter. These recollections of the freedom and happiness she used to have in her friendship with Moira, in her work, and in her life with family help her to maintain crucial ties to her past life and thus to a sense of identity.

Even under the strict regulations of the Commander's home, Offred finds ways to assert her individuality as she breaks rules. In the Commander's study she heroically reads forbidden books and magazines and begins to assert her own personality in her relationship with him. One of her most courageous actions occurs when she tells the Commander that she would like to know "what's going on"-everything from what the scribbled message "Nolite te bastardec carborundorum" means to specific details about the inner workings of the Republic. When she wants to talk to the Commander instead of read, she breaks two rules: asking for "dangerous" information and forming a relationship with him. Both activities are against the law and thus acts of subversion.

Sometimes she openly disagrees with him, as when he tries to justify the dogmas of the new regime: "We've given women more than we've taken away. This way they all get a man, are protected and can fulfill their biological destinies in peace." Offred insists they overlooked love, a crucial element in the male/female relationship. Her more subtle acts of rebellion include hoarding butter from her meals to rub on her face, and saving a match that she considers using to bum down the house. Often during her nights alone in her room she tries to come to terms with what has happened to her and to decide what she can do in order to survive physically and mentally.

Her walks with Ofglen present a more overt juxtaposition of oppression, Submission, and rebellion. Every day the pair observe the consequences of rebellion as they walk through machine gun guarded checkpoints, where suspected terrorists have been shot, and past the prison wall, where bodies of "war criminals" hang. When Ofglen identifies herself as part of the underground and elicits Offred's help, they both risk their lives. This fact becomes painfully apparent one day as they observe the secret police attack and whisk away a man walking in front of them. Even with this reminder that her survival



depends on submission, Offred continues to gain forbidden information and will soon begin a relationship that will place her in more danger

At first glance her relationship with Nick appears to be evidence of her desire to withdraw from the harsh realities of her world. She communicates less with Ofglen and claims little interest in discovering new information for her during nights with the Commander. Yet Offred knowingly places her life in real danger each time she meets Nick in his apartment.

Her physical relationship with Nick is also an act of subversion. In Gilead her body determines her function. As Offred notes, in her service as a Handmaid her body is no longer "an implement for the accomplishment of [her] will." Aunt Lydia has urged them at the Center to renounce themselves and become "impenetrable" and therefore pure breeding machines.

Offred regains some individual power when she takes back her body and offers it to Nick, willingly. Their sexual union and growing affection for each other prove that she has allowed her self to be "penetrated" both literally and figuratively. Although she feels ashamed when she admits to herself that she no longer wants to leave the Commander's home when she suspects she is pregnant, her desire to maintain her relationship with Nick and their child is another form of rebellion.

Atwood juxtaposes the actions of other female characters with those of Offred in order to highlight her sensibility and her courage. Offred appears to be not as strong as Moira or her mother, who was a radical feminist before the new Republic took over. She admits she feels like "a wimp" when compared to her friend Moira who continually tries to escape the confines of the Republic. Yet Moira suffers greatly for her attempts; she is beaten severely and is sent to Jezebel's, where she will have "three or four good years" before she is sent "to the boneyard."

Offred insists that she wants "gallantry from [Moira], swashbuckling heroism, single-handed combat. Something I lack." Yet Offred survives, unlike the "Incorrigibles" like Moira who are given two choices: a few years as either a prostitute at Jezebel's or a worker in the Colonies cleaning up toxic waste dumps and then death. Offred's mother, another more traditional hero, was sent to the Colonies. Before the new Republic took over, she had staged demonstrations against oppressive treatment of women and rallies to "Take Back the Night" from male predators. Yet Offred has "taken back the night" in her own personal way during her nightly meetings with Nick. Offred's heroism is more subtle, but no less dangerous, and it helps keep her alive.

Atwood also juxtaposes Offred's behavior with that of the pregnant Handmaid, Janine who "testifies" about her gang rape and subsequent abortion, and, spurred on by jeering women, admits full responsibility for these actions, thus setting a "good example" for the others. Janine gives in completely to the Republic and its dogma and as a result often slips into a trance-like state and loses all sense of reality and her own identity.



Throughout *The Handmaid's Tale* Atwood traces her heroine's efforts to cope, endure, and survive her nightmare world. Offred's account of her life in Gilead presents a fascinating portrait of the politics of power and the strength of the individual will in its struggle to preserve a sense of self.

Source: Wendy Perkins, in an essay for *Novels for Students*, Gale, 1998.



## Critical Essay #2

*In the following essay, Wood compares Fahrenheit 451 with Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale, focusing on their historical context and respective treatment of conformity and institutionalized repression.*

Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* depict the rational decision to go into exile, to leave one's native land, that is, the pre-exile condition. These novels present horrifying views of the near future where societal pressures enforce rigid limitations on individual freedom. Their alienated characters find their circumstances repugnant. Justice and freedom are denied them, along with the possibility for enriching their lives through intellectual pursuits. These speculative novels like Orwell's *1984* are dystopian in nature, showing how precarious are today's constitutional rights and how necessary it is to preserve these liberties for future generations. They depict ordinary people, caught in circumstances that they cannot control, people who resist oppression at the risk of their lives and who choose exile because it *has* to be better than their present, unbearable circumstances. Voluntary exile necessitates a journey into the unknown as an alternative to the certain repression of the present.

Both novels offer a bleak possible future for the United States. Bradbury, writing in the McCarthy era of the 1950s, envisions a time when people choose to sit by the hour watching television programs and where owning books is a crime. Atwood, in the 1980s, foresees a time when, in the wake of changes begun during the Reagan Administration, women are denied even the most basic rights of working and owning property. Both novels thus present "political" stances in the widest sense of the word....

The novels by Bradbury and Atwood examine the personal response of an individual who is in conflict with the majority in his society and whose occupation is abhorrent to him. Atwood's novel recounts the story of a protagonist caught up in the rapid transition of her society. Dehumanized, stripped of her personal name and individual identity, and referred to only by the name of the man to whose household she is assigned, Offred (or Offred), a handmaid, experiences firsthand an upheaval in the social order ending in limited personal freedom. The new oligarchy uses Old Testament injunctions to justify extreme repression. Like the shock troops to which they are compared, handmaids are in the *avant garde* of the social reform and they undergo brutal re-education at the Rachel & Leah Re-Education Centers, after which, like soldiers, they are "posted" to a commander's household. Even more than Montag, Offred's life is determined by her social role. As a fertile woman in a nearly sterile society, her function is to produce viable offspring and her entire life is regulated by her reproductive duties. She describes herself and her fellow handmaids as "two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices." There is nothing erotic about the handmaids, their mission is strictly biological: "We are for breeding purposes: we aren't concubines, geisha girls, courtesans." From the beginning of the narrative, [Offred] is literally a prisoner, watched at all times and even tattooed with a number: "Four digits and an eye, a passport in



reverse. It's supposed to guarantee that I will never be able to fade, finally, into another landscape. I am too important, too scarce, for that. I am a national resource."

In both novels the population is strictly regulated and the conduct of individuals is highly regimented. Indeed, in these repressive circumstances, it is not surprising that the protagonists would wish to flee, especially since, by the end of the novels, they have broken laws which would bring the death penalty if they were apprehended....

Discipline is less mechanized in *The Handmaid's Tale* but no less ruthless. Cadres of brutal "Aunts," "Angels," "Guardians," and "Eyes" enforce order in Atwood's imaginary Gilead. Cattle prods punish uncooperative handmaids in the re habilitation center. For particularly bad infractions, the handmaids' hands and feet are tortured: "They used steel cables, frayed at the ends. After that the hands. They didn't care what they did to your feet or your hands, even if it was permanent. Remember, said Aunt Lydia. For our purposes your feet and your hands are not essential." Other punishments are even more severe. A woman caught reading three times merits a hand cut off. Handmaids are executed for being unchaste, attempting to kill a commander, or trying to escape. Wives die for adultery or for attempting to kill a handmaid. As in the Middle Ages, cadavers of tortured prisoners are displayed on the town wall to encourage conformity to rules. Offred describes her reaction to the cadavers hanging there:

It's the bags over the heads that are the worst, worse than the faces themselves would be. It makes the men like dolls on which the faces have not yet been painted; like scarecrows, which in a way is what they are, since they are meant to scare. Or as if their heads, are sacks, stuffed with some undifferentiated material, like flour or dough. It's the obvious heaviness of the heads, their vacancy, the way gravity pulls them down and there's no life anymore to hold them up. The heads are zeros.

Execution is a public event, called a "Salvaging." The local women are assembled to witness the execution by hanging of two handmaids and a wife. The authorities decide to depart from past procedure and not read the crimes of the condemned in order to prevent a rash of similar crimes. Offred comments on the unpopularity of this decision: "The crimes of others are a secret language among us. Through them we show ourselves what we might be capable of, after all." The assembled women are required to assent to the punishment even though they do not know the nature of the crime. As part of the audience, Offred makes the ceremonial gesture of compliance with the execution: "I ... then placed my hand on my heart to show my unity with the Salvagers and my consent, and my complicity in the death of this woman."

An even more frightening public ceremony is that of "Participation," where handmaids act as executioners of an accused rapist. Death is the punishment set in Deuteronomy 22:23-29. Offred paints the scene in terms of bloodlust: "The air is bright with adrenaline, we are permitted anything and this is freedom." The women literally tear the accused apart with their bare hands. These brutal ceremonies serve to release violent emotion in a socially approved setting, since its normal expression is otherwise denied....





Whereas in *Fahrenheit 451* the government acted opportunistically, taking advantage of the lack of passionate readers to outlaw books, the government in *The Handmaid's Tale* actively shapes lifestyles through public policy. Atwood's protagonist recalls the governmental action that declares women may no longer own property and hold jobs. Offred is fired, along with every other woman in the country. Her money can be transferred to her husband, but she no longer may control the funds accessed by her plastic card. The government deprives women of the right to work and to own property simultaneously, to prevent a mass exodus. These freedoms were not the first to be lost, however. Offred explains the progressive loss of the women's constitutional rights, perpetrated by an ominous invisible group she identifies as "they":

It was after the catastrophe, when they shot the president and machine-gunned the Congress and the army declared a state of emergency. They blamed it on the Islamic fanatics, at the time. . That was when they suspended the Constitution They said it would be temporary There wasn't even any rioting in the streets People stayed home at night, watching television, looking for some direction There wasn't even an enemy you could put your finger on.

Still the transition is gradual and required the complicity of the populace: "We lived, as usual, by ignoring. Ignoring isn't the same as ignorance, you have to work at it. Nothing changes instantaneously: in a gradually heating bathtub you'd be boiled to death before you knew it." The protagonist finally decides that the conditions of the military state are untenable and unsuccessfully tries to escape to freedom with her husband and child, only to find that it is too late. When captured, she is separated from her family whom she never sees again, and is forced to take her place as a handmaid.

In both novels books represent important artifacts of the past and the act of reading becomes a heroic gesture. This is not surprising since both authors are avid readers and have described the importance of books in their lives Allusions to being denied the right to read occur throughout *The Handmaid's Tale*. As a handmaid, Offred is forbidden to read, a hardship for a person whose former job was in a library. The only words she sees are "faith" on the petit point cushion in her *room* and "*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*" (Don't let the bastards get you down) which is scratched in tiny letters near the floor of her cupboard. During the course of the novel Offred recalls reading and having access to books and regrets her former biased attitude toward them. Because they are now denied to her, they become very precious whereas once books were commonplace and taken for granted. In the middle of the novel her Commander (the Fred of Offred) invites her to forbidden soirees in his private study. He permits her to read old women's magazines. Offred philosophically reflects on the promise that the old magazines once held:

What was in them was promise. They dealt in transformations; they suggested an endless series of possibilities, extending like the reflections in two mirrors set facing one another, stretching on, replica after replica, to the vanishing point. They suggested one adventure after another, one wardrobe after another, one improvement after another, one man after another. They suggested rejuvenation, pain overcome and transcended, endless love The real promise in them was immortality.





The Commander not only lets Offred read magazines but plays scrabble with her. This is the ultimate in forbidden games in a society where women are not allowed to read: "Now it's dangerous. Now it's indecent. Now it's something he can't do with his Wife. Now it's desirable. Now he's compromised himself. It's as if he's offered me drugs."

When the Commander allows Offred to read magazines, the experience is equated to the orgasmic pleasures of eating or of sex: "On these occasions I read quickly, voraciously, almost skimming, trying to get as much into my head as possible before the next long starvation. If it were eating it would be the gluttony of the famished; if it were sex it would be a swift furtive stand-up in an alley somewhere." The Commander, who watches the illicit reading, is described as a sort of pervert: "While I read, the Commander sits and watches me doing it, without speaking but also without taking his eyes off me. This watching is a curiously sexual act, and I feel undressed while he does it. I wish he would turn his back, stroll around the room, read something himself. Then perhaps I could relax more, take my time. As it is, this illicit reading of mine seems a kind of performance."

These magazines somehow escaped the government's attention, although house-to-house searches and bonfires were conducted on the orders of the oligarchy in order to remove all reading material from women. The government of Gilead denied women access to the printed word as a means of controlling them. Only the vicious Aunts are allowed to read and write as a part of their role in reeducating the handmaids. The effect of this is to silence the women, or as Atwood has said elsewhere: "The aim of all suppression is to silence *the voice*, abolish the word, so that the only voices and words left are those of the ones in power."

In her essays Atwood speaks out against suppression of reading and writing, abhorring fascism on anyone's part. This view is paralleled in the novel where Offred remembers as a young girl attending a magazine burning with her mother, who is recalled as a quintessential feminist demonstrator of the 1970s. As the pornographic material burns the image evoked is particularly poetic: "I threw the magazine into the flames. It rifled open in the wind of its burning; big flakes of paper came loose, sailed into the air, still on fire, parts of women's bodies, turning to black ash, in the air, before my eyes." Offred's views toward women's rights are much less activist in nature than her mother's. The mother/daughter relationship is fraught with tension and their opposing viewpoints brings into question some of the tactics of the women's movement including the book burning. After attending a "Birthing," a particularly grotesque woman's ritual in Gilead, Offred ironically comments: "Mother, I think. Wherever you may be. Can you, hear me? You wanted a women's culture. Well now there is one. It isn't what you meant, but it exists. Be thankful for small mercies." Her feminist mother probably dies a victim of the new regime, but when Gilead comes into being, there is no triumph on the part of the rightwing opponents to the woman's movement like the Commander's Wife Serena Joy. These women also find no happiness in the new society.

Despite the fact that the social order is founded on biblical references, women are not allowed to read the Bible: "The Bible is kept locked up, the way people once kept tea locked up, so the servants wouldn't steal it. It is an incendiary device: who knows what



we'd make of it, if we ever got our hands on It? We can be read to from it, by him [the commander], but we cannot read." Even the familiar reading passages read by the commander hold their attraction for those hungering for the written word: "He's like a man toying with a steak, behind a restaurant window, pretending not to see the eyes watching him from hungry darkness not three feet from his elbow. We lean towards him a little, iron filings to his magnet. He has something we don't have, he has the word. How we squandered it, once." Tapes of biblical readings are an integral part of the re-education in the Rachel and Leah Centers. The quotations, however, have been changed to further the goals of the oligarchy. Offred notices transformations in the Beatitudes: "*Blessed be the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the merciful Blessed be the meek. Blessed are the silent.* I knew they made that up, I knew it was wrong, and they left things out, too, but there was no way of checking. *Blessed be those that mourn, for they shall be comforted.* Nobody said when." Her ironic comments underscore her frustration with the prohibition against reading and her resistance to indoctrination.

Just as the Beatitudes are rewritten, Marx's comments about the distribution of property are attributed to the Bible in order to Justify the distribution of the precious and scarce handmaids in Gilead: "Not every Commander has a Handmaid: some of the If Wives have children. *From each, says the slogan, according to her ability; to each according to his needs.* We recited that, three times, after dessert It was from the Bible, or so they said. St. Paul again, in Acts."

The author's ironic use of religious terms becomes comic when she creates the franchise "Soul Scrolls" where prayers are continually spewed out on printout machines called "Holy Rollers" and paid for by pious citizens. Like the flavors in an ice cream store, there are five different prayers: "for health, wealth, a death, a birth, a sin." The state religion distortedly caricatures fundamentalist beliefs, including having a former television gospel singer as the Commander's wife.

Each novel ends with the protagonist's escape and the beginning of IDS exile from repression. There is some ambiguity, however, since the alternative order is not elaborated on. In the last lines of her tale [Offred] describes her feelings as she steps into the Black Maria which has come for her: "Whether this is my end or a new beginning I have no way of knowing: I have given myself over into the hands of strangers, because it can't be helped. And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light." The postscript "Historical Notes on *The Handmaid's Tale*" provides information that the heroine survives to record her story on cassette tapes. She is rescued by the Mayday organization of the Underground Pemaleroad. Her ultimate fate is unknown to the scholars of 2195 who, in an academic conference, comment on the handmaid's story as a historical document from the past.

The appeal of these two highly acclaimed novels stems from the main characters' difficult situation in a repressive future United States. The plausible explanations given by both Bradbury and Atwood for the ghastly turn taken by American society in the futures they portray serves as a vivid reminder that freedom must be vigilantly guarded in order to be maintained. Apathy and fear create unlivable societies from which only a



few courageous souls dare escape. "Ordinary" says one of the cruel Aunts of *The Handmaid's Tale* "is what you are used to." The main characters never are able to accept the "ordinariness" of the repression which surrounds them. They are among the few who are willing to risk the difficult path of exile.

Source: Diane S Wood, "Bradbury and Atwood. Exile as Rational Decision," in *The Literature of Emigration and Exile*, edited by James Whitlark and Wendall Aycock, Texas Tech University Press, 1992, pp. 131-42.



## Critical Essay #3

*In the following excerpt, Malak examines how Atwood infuses the conventions of the dystopian genre with her own distinctive artistry in The Handmaid's Tale.*

One of [*The Handmaid's Tale's*] successful aspects concerns the skillful portrayal of a state that in theory claims to be founded on Christian principles' yet in practice miserably lacks spirituality and benevolence. The state in Gilead prescribes a pattern of life based on frugality, conformity, censorship, corruption, fear, and terror-in short, the usual terms of existence enforced by totalitarian states, instance of which can be found in such dystopian works as Zamyatin's *We*, Huxley's *Brave New World*, and Orwell's *1984*.

What distinguishes Atwood's novel from those dystopian classics is its obvious feminist focus. Gilead is openly misogynistic, in both its theocracy and practice. The state reduces the handmaids to the slavery status of being mere "breeders." ... The handmaid's situation lucidly illustrates Simone de Beauvoir's assertion in *The Second Sex* [Knopf, 1971] about man defining woman not as an autonomous being but as simply what he decrees to be relative to him: "For him she is sex-absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not with reference to her; she is the incidental, as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute-she is the Other." This view of man's marginalization of woman corroborates Foucault's earlier observation about the power-sex correlative; since man holds the sanctified reigns of power in society, he rules, assigns roles, and decrees after social, religious, and cosmic concepts convenient to his interests and desires.

However, not all the female characters in Atwood's novel are sympathetic, nor all the male ones demonic. The Aunts, a vicious elite of collaborators who conduct torture lectures, are among the churchstate's staunchest supporters; these renegades turn into zealous converts, appropriating male values at the expense of their feminine instincts. One of them, Aunt Lydia, functions, ironically, as the spokesperson of antifeminism; she urges the handmaids to renounce themselves and become non-persons: "Modesty is invisibility, said Aunt Lydia. Never forget it. To be seen-to be *seen-is* to be-her voice trembled-penetrated. What you must be, girls, is impenetrable. She called us girls." On the other hand, Nick, the Commander's chauffeur, is involved with the underground network, of men and women, that aims at rescuing women and conducting sabotage. Besides, Atwood's heroine constantly yearns for her former marriage life with Luke, presently presumed dead. Accordingly, while Atwood poignantly condemns the misogynous mentality that can cause a heavy toll' of human suffering, she refrains from convicting a gender in its entirety as the perpetrator of the nightmare that is Gilead. Indeed, we witness very few of the male characters acting with stark cruelty; the narrative reports most of the violent acts after the fact, sparing the reader gory scenes. Even the Commander appears more pathetic than sinister, baffled than manipulative, almost, at times, a Fool.



Some may interpret Atwood's position here as a non-feminist stance, approving of women's status-quo. In a review for the *Times Literary Supplement*, [March 21, 1986] Lorna Sage describes *The Handmaid's Tale* as Atwood's "revisionist look at her more visionary self," and as "a novel in praise of the present, for which, perhaps, you have to have the perspective of dystopia." It is really difficult to conceive Atwood's praising the present, because, like Orwell who in 1984 extrapolated specific ominous events and tendencies in twentieth-century politics, she tries to caution against right-wing fundamentalism, rigid dogmas, and misogynous theosophies that may be currently gaining a deceptive popularity. The novel's mimetic impulse then aims at wresting an imperfect present from a horror-ridden future: it appeals for vigilance, and an appreciation of the mature values of tolerance, compassion, and, above all, for women's unique identity.

The novel's thematics operate by positing polarized extremes: a decadent present, which Aunt Lydia cynically describes as "a society dying... of too much choice," and a totalitarian future that prohibits choice. Naturally, while rejecting the indulgent decadence and chaos of an anarchic society, the reader condemns the Gilead regime for its intolerant, prescriptive set of values that projects a tunnel vision on reality and eliminates human volition: "There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it." As illustrated by the fears and agonies that Offred endures, when human beings are not free to aspire toward whatever they wish, when choices become so severely constrained that, to quote from Dostoyevsky's *The Possessed*, "only the necessary is necessary," life turns into a painfully prolonged prison term. Interestingly, the victimization process does not involve Offred and the handmaids alone, but extends to the oppressors as well. Everyone ruled by the Gilead regime suffers the deprivation of having no choice, except what the church-state decrees; even the Commander is compelled to perform his sexual assignment with Offred as a matter of obligation: "This is no recreation, even for the Commander. This is serious business. The Commander, too, is doing his duty."

Since the inhabitants of Gilead lead the precarious existence befitting victims, most try in varied ways to cope, endure, and survive. This situation of being a victim and trying to survive dramatizes Atwood's major thesis in her critical work *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, [Anansi, 1973] in which she suggests that Canada, metaphorically still a colony or an oppressed minority, is "a collective victim," and that "the central symbol for Canada... is undoubtedly *Survival, la Survivance*." Atwood, furthermore, enumerates what she labels "basic victim positions," whereby a victim may choose any of four possible options, one of which is to acknowledge being a victim but refuse "to accept the assumption that the role is inevitable." This position fully explains Offred's role as the protagonist-narrator of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Offred's progress as a maturing consciousness is indexed by an evolving awareness of herself as a victimized woman, and then a gradual development toward initiating risky but assertive schemes that break the slavery syndrome. Her double-crossing the Commander and his wife, her choice to hazard a sexual affair with Nick, and her association with the underground network, all point to the shift from being a helpless victim to being a sly, subversive survivor. This Impulse to survive, together with the occasional flashes of warmth and



concern among the handmaids, transmits reassuring signs of hope and humanity in an otherwise chilling and depressing tale.

What makes Atwood's book such a moving tale is its clever technique in presenting the heroine initially as a voice, almost like a sleepwalker conceiving disjointed perceptions of its surroundings, as well as flashing reminiscences about a bygone life. As the scenes gather more details, the heroine's voice is steadily and imperceptively, yet convincingly, transfigured into a full-roundedness that parallels her maturing comprehension of what is happening around her. Thus the victim, manipulated and coerced, is metamorphosed into a determined conniver who daringly violates the perverted canons of Gilead. Moreover, Atwood skilfully manipulates the time sequence between the heroine's past (pre-Gilead life) and the present: those shifting reminiscences offer glimpses of a life, though not ideal, still filled with energy, creativity, humaneness, and a sense of selfhood, a life that sharply contrasts with the alienation, slavery, and suffering under totalitarianism. By the end of the novel, the reader is effectively and conclusively shown how the misogynous regime functions on the basis of power, not choice; coercion, not volition; fear, not desire. In other words, Atwood administers in doses the assaulting shocks to our sensibilities of a grim dystopian nightmare initially, the narrative voice, distant and almost diffidently void of any emotions, emphasizes those aspects of frugality and solemnity imposed by the state, then progressively tyranny and corruption begin to unfold piecemeal. As the novel concludes, as the horror reaches a climax, the narrative voice assumes a fully engaged emotional tone that cleverly keeps us in suspense about the heroine's fate. This method of measured, well-punctuated revelations about Gilead connects symbolically with the novel's central meaning: misogynous dogmas, no matter how seemingly innocuous and trustworthy they may appear at their initial conception, are bound, when allowed access to power, to reveal their ruthlessly tyrannical nature.

Regardless of the novel's dystopian essence, it nevertheless avoids being solemn; on the contrary, it sustains an ironic texture throughout. We do not find too many frightening images that may compare with Oceana's torture chambers: the few graphic horror scenes are crisply and snappily presented, sparing us a blood-curdling impact. (Some may criticize this restraint as undermining the novel's integrity and emotional validity) As in all dystopias, Atwood's aim is to encourage the reader to adopt a rational stance that avoids *total* "suspension of disbelief." This rational stance dislocates full emotional involvement in order to create a Brechtian type of alienation that, in turn, generates an ironic charge. This rational stance too should not be total, because Atwood does want us to care sympathetically about her heroine's fate; hence the emotional distance between reader and character must allow for closeness, but up to a point. Furthermore, Atwood is equally keen on preserving the ironic flair intact. No wonder then that she concludes *The Handmaid's Tale* with a climactic moment of irony: she exposes, in a hilarious epilogue, the absurdity and futility of certain academic writings that engage in dull, clinically sceptic analysis of irrelevancies and inanities, yet miss the vital issues. The entire "Historical Notes" at the end of the novel represents a satire on critics who spin out theories about literary or historical texts without genuinely recognizing or experiencing the pathos expressed in them: they circumvent issues, classify data, construct clever hypotheses garbed in ritualistic, fashionable Jargon, but no spirited





illumination ever comes out of their endeavours. Atwood soberly demonstrates that when a critic or scholar (and by extension a reader) avoids, under the guise of scholarly objectivity, taking a moral or political stand about an issue of crucial magnitude such as totalitarianism, he or she will necessarily become an apologist for evil; more significantly, the applause the speaker receives gives us a further compelling glimpse into a distant future that still harbours strong misogynous tendencies.

While the major dystopian features can clearly be located in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the novel offers two distinct additional features: feminism and irony. Dramatizing the interrelationship between power and sex, the book's feminism, despite condemning male misogynous mentality, upholds and cherishes a man-woman axis; here, feminism functions inclusively rather than exclusively, poignantly rather than stridently, humanely rather than cynically. The novel's ironic tone, on the other hand, betokens a confident narrative strategy that aims at treating a depressing material gently and gradually, yet firmly, openly, and conclusively, thus skilfully succeeding in securing the reader's sympathy and interest. The novel shows Atwood's strengths both as an engaging storyteller and a creator of a sympathetic heroine, and as an articulate crafts-woman of a theme that is both current and controversial. As the novel signifies a landmark in the maturing process of Atwood's creative career, her self-assured depiction of the grim dystopian world gives an energetic and meaningful impetus to the genre....

Source: Amin Malak, "Margaret Atwood's 'The Handmaid's Tale' and the Dystopian Tradition," in *Canadian Literature*, No. 112, Spring, 1987, pp. 9-16.

# Adaptations

*The Handmaid's Tale* was adapted as a film by Volker Schlöndorff, starring Natasha Richardson, Faye Dunaway, Aidan Quinn and Robert Duvall, screenplay by Harold Pinter, Cinecom Entertainment group, 1990.

The author is interviewed on "Margaret Atwood," which is a videotape from the Roland Collection of Films on Art/ICA Video of Northbrook, Illinois. 1989.

Another video about the author is "Margaret Atwood' Once In August," distributed by Brighton Video of New York, NY, 1989.

"Margaret Atwood" is the name of a short, 1978 video recording from the Poetry Archive of San Francisco State University.

Atwood is featured in the educational film "Poem as Image: Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer," from the "A Sense of Poetry" series produced by Cinematics Canada and Learning Corporation of America.

This book is available on audiocassette as "Margaret Atwood Reads from *The Handmaid's Tale*," by American Audio Prose Library of Columbia, Missouri, 1988. It is #17 in the "A Moveable Feast" series.

Actress Julie Christie reads *The Handmaid's Tale* on a two-cassette audio tape recording available from Durkin Hayes Publishers in 1987. Order #DHP7214.

Another audio tape recording of *The Handmaid's Tale* is the eight-cassette collection produced by Recorded Books of Charlotte Hall, Maryland, in 1988. Order #88060.

"Margaret Atwood: An Interview with Jean Castro" is an audio cassette produced by American Audio Prose Library of Columbia, Missouri, in 1983. Order #3012.





## Topics for Further Study

Research the techniques used by the government of Nazi Germany to oppress people, such as blacks, Jews, homosexuals and Gypsies in the 1930's and 40's, and compare them to the methods the Gileadean government uses to oppress women.

What sort of images would this totalitarian government use to reinforce its control? Design several posters that might be hung in Gilead to remind women of what sort of behavior is expected of them, or write a song that handmaids and Marthas might be required to sing every morning.

The abortion issue has been a continuing controversy in the United States, but it was a particularly important political issue in the mid-1980's, when this novel was published. Read about a prominent figure from that time who was either strongly pro-choice or strongly pro-life. Report on that person's background, what they are doing today, and what you think they would say about the Republic of Gilead.

Find an academic history-similar to the "Historical Notes" at the end of his novel-of the Underground Railroad that was used to free American slaves in the early and mid-1800's. Write a fictional first-person account, based on details from that work, that explains what the experience might have been like for a slave trying to escape.

## What Do I Read Next?

Margaret Atwood followed this book with *Cat's Eye* in 1988. Some of the same concerns show up in the later book: a controversial painter returns to the city that she grew up in and runs into old friends and the memories of old friends. Marge Piercy has always been associated with Atwood, mostly because both write poetry and fiction from a feminist perspective. Piercy's book most like this one is *Woman on the Edge of Time*, her 1976 novel with some science fiction elements to it. The main character, confined to the psychiatric ward at Bellevue Hospital, must learn to behave the way that her oppressors expect of her, but she also travels in time to the future, to the year 2137, with a fellow inmate.

Critics examining *The Handmaid's Tale's* sinister view of the future often compare it to George Orwell's 1984, which is considered the standard bearer for dystopian novels. Published in 1949, it tells the tale of a society where government surveillance techniques have been perfected, so that every move that citizens make can be monitored and regulated, and of the struggle of one man, Winston Smith, to be free.

The other dystopian that is usually mentioned at the same time as 1984 is *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley. Published in 1932, the futuristic society imagined by Huxley has many similarities to our own: citizens use pills to control their moods, babies are born in laboratories, the masses are distracted from disapproving from the government by "Feelies," which are like movies that entertain with sight, hearing and touch. Like Atwood's and Orwell's novels, the problem with total government control is that it interferes when the protagonist falls in love.

*A Clockwork Orange* by Anthony Burgess, published in 1963, gives a frightening view of the future, concentrating on the lives of juvenile delinquents and speculating about which is worse: their inhuman crimes or the mind-control techniques used by the government to stop their violence.

Carol Ann Howell's recent book on Atwood, entitled simply *Margaret Atwood* (1996), has some complex and insightful points about Atwood's works in general. The chapter "Science Fiction in the Feminine" is especially useful to students for its examination of how the female perspective puts a different slant on the science fiction tradition and how this genre is particularly useful for conveying feminist concerns.

## Further Study

Arnold E Davidson, "Future Tense: Making History in *The Handmaid's Tale*," in *Margaret Atwood: Visions and Forms*, edited by Kathryn van Spanckeren and Jan Garden Castro, Southern Illinois University Press, 1988, pp 113-21.

Examines how the imaginary country of Gilead is more of a reflection of a state of mind than a political reality. Also included in this book is an autobiographical forward by Margaret Atwood.

Barbara Ehrenreich, "Feminism's Phantoms" in *The New Republic*, Vol 194, No 11, March 17, 1986, pp. 33-5. Interprets the novel as a warning about feminism's repressive tendencies.

Mark Evans, "Versions of History: 'The Handmaid's Tale' and Its Dedictees, in *Margaret Atwood. Writing and Subjectivity*," edited by Colin Nicholson, St. Martin's, 1994, pp 177-88.

Discusses Puritanism in the novel.

Barbara Garlick, "The Handmaid's Tale' Narrative Voice and the Primacy of the Tale," in *Twentieth-Century Fantasists. Essays on Culture, Society and Belief in Twentieth Century Mythopoeic Literature*, edited by Kath Filmer and David Jasper, St Martin's, 1992, pp. 161-71.

Explores how the novel's treatment of utopia is supported by its structure.

Gayle Greene, "Choice of Evils," in *The Women's Review of Books*, Vol. 3, No 10, July, 1986, p. 14.

Green compares the novel with other writers of feminism by Marge Piercy and Doris Lessing. She concludes that the novel presents a critique of radical feminism.

Amin Malak, "Margaret Atwood's 'The Handmaid's Tale' and the Dystopian Tradition," in *Canadian Literature*, Vol. 112, Spring, 1987, pp. 9-16.

Examines how Atwood's feminist focus distinguishes her novel from dystopian classics like Huxley's *Brave New World* and Orwell's 1984.

*Margaret Atwood' Language, Text and System*, edited by Sherrill E. Grace and Lorainne Weir, The University of British Columbia Press, 1983.

Published before *The Handmaid's Tale*, this book analyzes Atwood's use of language. Some of the essays here are written for a professional level, but most are informative and meticulously detailed.



Madonne Miner, "'Trust Me': Reading the Romance Plot in Margaret Atwood's 'The Handmaid's Tale,'" in *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol 37, No 2, Summer 1991, pp. 148-68.

Explores the theme of love in the novel and its link to survival.

Barbara Hill Rigney, *Madness and Sexual Politics in the Feminist*, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1978.

Views four feminist authors-Bronte, Woolf, Lessing and Atwood-in terms of their treatment of madness in their work.

Jerome H. Rosenberg, *Margaret Atwood*, Twayne Publishers, 1984.

Traces Atwood's career up to *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Roberta Rubenstein, "Nature and Nurture in Dystopia: 'The Handmaid's Tale,'" in *Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms*, edited by Kathryn Van Spanckeren, Jan Garden Castro, and Sandra M. Gilbert, Co. Illinois Press, 1988, pp. 101-12.

Discusses the issue of nature and nurture in the novel.

Hilde Staels, "Margaret Atwood's 'The Handmaid's Tale' Resistance through Narrating," in *English Studies*, Vol. 78, No.5, September, 1995, pp. 455-67.

Focuses on the narrative structure of the novel and shows how the task of narrative becomes a crucial part of the main character's resistance to oppression.

Charlotte Templin, in a review in *The Explicator*, Vol 49, No.4, Summer, 1991, pp. 255-56.

Examines the relationship of setting and theme in the novel.



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Robert Linkous, "Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*." in *San Francisco Review of Books*, Fall, 1986, p. 6 Amin Malak, "Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and the Dystopian Tradition," in *Canadian Literature*, Vol. 112, Spring, 1987, pp. 9-16.

Joyce Maynard, "Briefing for a Descent into Hell," in *Mademoiselle*, March, 1986, p. 114.

Mary McCarthy, "Breeders, Wives and Unwomen," in *The New York Times Book Review*, February 9, 1986, p. 1. Peter Prescott, "No Balm in Gilead," in *Newsweek*, Vol. CVII, No.7, February 17, 1986, p. 70.



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## **Introduction**

### **Purpose of the Book**

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's □For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

### Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel; and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals—helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

### How Each Entry Is Organized





Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- **Introduction:** a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- **Author Biography:** this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- **Plot Summary:** a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- **Characters:** an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in *Invisible Man*—the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- **Themes:** a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- **Style:** this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- **Historical Context:** This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- **Critical Overview:** this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- **Criticism:** an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).



- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an "at-a-glance" comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

### Other Features

NfS includes "The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature," a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.



Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

### Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

### We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: [ForStudentsEditors@gale.com](mailto:ForStudentsEditors@gale.com). Or write to the editor at:

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