

# THE HANDMAID'S TALE

MARGARET ATWOOD

# LIVING LITERATURE SERIES

A PERMA-BOUND PRODUCTION

TEACHER'S GUIDE

GUIDE WRITTEN BY WARNER WINTER

## SYNOPSIS

The republic of Gilead, a country created in the New England area of the near future, is a patriarchal theocracy where legislation is based on literal and selected readings of the Old Testament. It is a country at war with other "sects," with few personal freedoms, where women are denied independence and education, and are reduced to mere functions (identified by colours and costumes)—wives, daughters, Marthas (housemaids), Econowives, and Handmaids—and used as rewards for service by men. Disobedient women are declared unwomen and either shipped off to the colonies, a vague and frightening place outside of Gilead—full of toxic wastes and peopled by political dissenters—or publicly executed.

Shortly after the time Gilead was formed, Offred, the story's narrator, had lost her husband, Luke, and her daughter in an escape attempt and, as a fertile woman, her rights to individuality and self-determination. Among the first group of Handmaids, she was trained by a group of women instructors called "Aunts," to become a "handmaid" whose sole function was to bear children for high-ranking childless government officials and their wives. To this end, her name and identity and all personal freedoms have been taken away. She is dressed in the red uniform of "the Handmaids" and reduced to a prepositional phrase, "Of Fred" or Offred, indicating her connection to her present male commander.

The Commander's wife, Serena Joy, dressed in blue—the colour of the "wives"—is a former Gospel Hour singer. Serena Joy is not happy to see Offred because it is Offred's duty to couple with her husband. In the mating ritual Offred must lie between Serena Joy's legs to receive her commander's insemination. She is now thirty-three and has three years to conceive—thirty-six encounters. If not, she will be sent to the colonies.

Serena Joy's household is run by "Marthas," dressed in dull green. The household also has "Guardians," or lesser spies who do "male jobs," assigned to it, and watching over all the households are the secret police called "Angels" or "Eyes."

Offred's movements are restricted. When shopping for groceries she must travel in the company of another handmaid, Ofglen. They occasionally visit "the Wall" made of red brick, a wall to hold inhabitants from escaping but also used to contain the bodies of the executed. (Executions are public rituals called "Salvagings.")

Babies are born during other public rituals, called "Birthings," attended by all classes of women. One day, just after one of Offred's fellow Handmaids, Janine, is "birthing," Offred comes home ahead of Serena Joy and is illegally summoned into her commander's private room for an illicit game of "scrabble." (Books are forbidden in Gilead, and women are not allowed to read.) The Commander eventually asks Offred to kiss him and Offred recognizes all this as more than simply a change in her dull routine; she sees the beginning of an opportunity. From

then on she continues to meet him secretly two or three times a week. As a reward he lets her look at old and now forbidden magazines; once he even gets her hand lotion.

On another occasion the Commander takes Offred to a hotel ("Jezebel's") featuring entertainment forbidden by the regime, but "unofficially" permitted for visiting heads of state and high government officials. Prostitute/hostesses dressed in outfits from former days "entertain." Alcohol is also served.

While there, Offred meets Moira, a companion from her youth, and from her Handmaid training period. Moira had been a trouble maker at the Red Centre and had finally escaped. She was always a reminder to Offred of her own moral cowardice. Eventually caught, she was sent to Jezebel's as a hostess.

Serena Joy wants Offred to produce a child and, since she suspects impotency in her husband, arranges for Offred to sleep with the chauffeur, Nick, this being her surest way of getting a pregnancy. In return she shows Offred a photo of her daughter as she now is.

Offred actually enjoys the physical contacts with Nick, although she struggles with her version of what happens, of the "truth." At a Salvaging, she and Ofglen assist in killing what the state calls a rapist but who Ofglen says is really one of the secret "Mayday" group, opposing the regime. Ofglen is found out and commits suicide. Serena Joy finds out about Offred's additional relationship with her husband but shortly afterwards a van arrives to arrest Offred for violating state secrets. Nick suggests that it is really a rescue party arranged by "Mayday."

We then skip to the year 2195, to a historical convention where academics discuss Gilead and the taped journal of Offred. The people of Gilead have become specimens for antiquarian research. Their pain is dissolved in the jargon and process of scientific study. Offred did escape but little else can be authenticated. In reducing her account to facts the academics empty her account of personality and meaning. Offred becomes "historical" and therefore "unreal."

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

A Canadian writer, Margaret Atwood was born in 1939 and was much influenced by her father and her brother in her early reading. Her father was an entomologist who spent much time outdoors; Margaret spent much time with him in the bush. At the University of Toronto she read much Canadian literature and later at Harvard University she continued to think seriously about Canadian culture. After graduation she held several academic and non-academic posts and wrote mainly poetry. Her *The Circle Game* won the Governor General's Award for Poetry in 1966. In 1972 she published *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, a book which had a great influence on Canadian cultural nationalism. Soon novels and non-fiction started to surpass her poetry output.

Atwood is generally considered to be not only the leading Canadian writer of today but also one whose work has given her

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an international reputation. Her range has widened steadily. Generally her novels are romances in which the protagonist makes a symbolic journey that culminates in a place of oracular revelation. Recent writings have treated more of life's actualities, such as womanhood, Canadian unity, political torture in foreign countries, and the force of the wilderness.

### CRITIC'S CORNER

A wealth of criticism exists on the work of this widely read artist. Feminists, myth critics, nationalistic Canadians, and structuralists are particularly enthusiastic.

Much of the critical reaction to *The Handmaid's Tale* focuses on three aspects: its message, its structure, and its unconventional ending. Critics have suggested they do not really "love" her novels (this includes *The Handmaid's Tale*) but that they admire the "uncompromising author."

*The Handmaid's Tale* won the 1986 Governor General's Award and in the same year was nominated for Britain's Booker Prize. It was on the *New York Times* Bestseller List for 35 weeks and has sold millions of copies worldwide.

### GENERAL OBJECTIVES

1. To promote science fiction as a worthwhile literary genre, particularly because of its subject matter and style
2. To evaluate *The Handmaid's Tale* as an example of good science fiction—mythomorphic, speculative literature which dramatizes the effects of change upon men and women
3. To make students aware of the story pattern as a first step to literary insight and judgment
4. To describe values which the author suggests are essential to a worthwhile life
5. To discuss the influence of the past on present and future events
6. To define the use of the narrator as story presenter and evaluate the advantages of using this point-of-view (as opposed to the use of omniscient author, etc.)
7. To identify and discuss the various themes and issues raised by the novel
8. To realize traits in the key characters that are real (verisimilitude), sympathetic (we care about what happens to them) and memorable (they remain in our minds long after the story is finished); to consider, as well, whether or not the characters are three-dimensional
9. To recognize the conflict between the rules of a society and the needs of an individual

### SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

1. To evaluate the effectiveness of the conclusion and see it as a possible example of humour to release psychological tension
2. To discover symbols (colours, etc.) and to develop reasonable interpretations of them
3. To examine Atwood's use of imagery
4. To analyze the difficulties faced by women in the novel and compare and contrast them to the difficulties faced by women in the roles they are expected to play today
5. To understand the meaning of the word dystopia or "nightmare of the future" and to compare and contrast *The Handmaid's Tale* to at least one other example (possibly film)

6. To analyze the conflict between the rules of her society and the needs of Offred
7. To view this book as a critique of present society
8. To note the means by which the government in *The Handmaid's Tale* controls its citizens, particularly its female citizens
9. To evaluate the roles played by males in the novel and consider whether their gender is presented in a credible fashion

### MEANING STUDY

Below are words, phrases, sentences, or thought units that have a particular meaning in the novel. Explain each. Page numbers are given so that you can note the context from which the item is taken.

1. "red: the colour of blood, which defines us" (p. 11)  
(*The handmaids are dressed in red uniforms, suggestive of nuns. Whereas nuns are married to Christ, the handmaids are married to the state. The uniform obviously enables the society to keep track of them. The red suggests "scarlet" women, women who have fallen because of their sexuality (in this society they have risen). The colour of blood "defines" them, menstrual blood indicating they are still productive. When that blood stops flowing they can no longer function as Handmaids. Interestingly, Offred, even at this early stage of the novel, says that red is "not my colour," suggesting she is unhappy in her role and foreshadowing future rebellion. In addition, "white" wimples or "wings" deprive the Handmaids of their peripheral vision, preventing them from seeing what goes on around them. And they obscure their physical identity.*)
2. "I hunger to commit the act of touch." (p. 14)  
(*The syntax of Offred's words is suggestive of fundamentalist Christianity. Obviously she has been re-educated to think "touching" is wrong. The world of Gilead is dehumanized and cold. Even the sex that takes place later with her commander takes place with a minimum of "touching" in every sense of the word. Offred longs for spirituality and benevolence but knows that this longing is officially wrong.*)
3. "I am a reproach to her; and a necessity." (p. 17)  
(*In this patterned, rigid world, Offred is a continual reminder to the aging Serena Joy of the fact that she can no longer "breed" and that Offred is necessary for the production of a baby. Eventually Serena Joy is willing to have Offred break the law of Gilead in order to give her the honours of being a mother.*)
4. "Modesty is invisibility....never forget it. To be seen—to be seen—is to be—" her voice trembled—"penetrated. What you must be, girls, is impenetrable." (p. 38)  
(*Aunt Lydia functions ironically as the spokesperson for antifeminism. She and the other Aunts collaborate with the male rulers urging the "girls" [she even uses sexist language] to renounce their femininity. Atwood refrains from romantizing the female gender in her portrait of the Aunts.*)
5. "FAITH, in square print, surrounded by a wreath of lilies" (pp. 75, 140)  
(*"Faith, Hope and Charity" are a biblical threesome usually seen together. In Offred's room is a pillow with only the first embroidered on it. Gilead has attempted to eradicate "hope" and "charity," and the missing pillows reflect this. Faith presumably is the religious "faith" Gilead promotes*

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but it is also a reminder to Offred that with her present "faith" the other two may soon come. With "faith" she can cope, endure and survive.)

6. "Of all the dreams this is the worst." (p. 98)  
(This is the dream that begins the film version of the novel. It is obviously painful to Offred because it involves her failed escape from Gilead and the last time she saw her husband and child.)
7. "Resettlement of the children of Ham is continuing on schedule." (p. 107)  
(This is a Gilead T.V. commentary and again shows the Christian fundamentalist vocabulary used by official totalitarian Gilead. Blacks, like women, are inferior and because they are not really necessary to society are being moved out. Gilead is a caucasian patriarchy.)
8. "We are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices." (p. 176)  
(The state has reduced the handmaids to the slave status of mere "breeders." They have no names other than those which suggest male possessions; they are "holy" appendages to those who exercise sexual mastery over them. They are worse off than the state-sponsored prostitutes, the "Jezebels." They are considered "sacred," because they are defined as such by the governing male fundamentalists.)
9. "He [Luke] doesn't mind this, I thought...I am his." (p. 236)  
(In Offred's pre-Gilead days she had a job and bank account, etc. Eventually the new state took these away from her. The night she lost her job, Luke wanted to make love to her and she realized Luke enjoyed having her as a dependent. Atwood refrains from convicting the male gender in its entirety [Nick is a sympathetic character and the commander more foolish than evil] and Luke is Offred's beloved, the man she is constantly yearning for. Yet Offred is realistic enough to recognize his gender defects.)
10. "Nolite te bastardes carborundorum." (pp. 69, 240, 241)  
(This is the graffiti Offred finds in her room and which is eventually decoded for her by the commander to be bastard Latin, meaning "Don't let the bastards grind you down." It was written by the previous Handmaid, who eventually committed suicide. Originally Offred took this phrase to be her motto, a secret communication to her from the previous Offred. She discovers that it is only a language corruption and this discovery forms part of her "development." Offred understands that she is unable to truly understand another person, another situation; and yet the motto is true, the cry of a person who wants to survive.)
11. "This is a betrayal, not the thing itself but my response." (p. 340)  
(Offred gives three different reconstructions of her first "affair" with Nick, ending each with, "It didn't happen that way." Earlier Offred had indicated that she should/would make her life a "tribute to the loved one." Now she is betraying that response by showing feelings [love?] for Nick. She is suffering a moral dilemma and, in her various "reconstructions" she is acknowledging the impossibility of telling the truth about those feelings.)
12. "Pick up that disgusting thing and get to your room. Just like the other one, a slut. You'll end up the same." (p. 369)  
(Serena Joy discovers that Offred has been meeting secretly with her husband. Offred [and the reader] won-

ders at the indignation. Does Serena Joy love her husband? Is her indignation fake? [After all, the more her husband gets together with Offred the more likely for a pregnancy to result.] Atwood is ambiguous.)

13. "The superscription "The Handmaid's Tale" was appended to it by Professor Wade, partly in homage to the great Geoffrey Chaucer." (p. 381)  
(The professor suggests that Wade loved puns and chose the word "tale" because it suggested "tail." The whole of the story we have just read is reduced by a remote future to a humorous absurdity. Future academics are not really sympathetic to our heroine's fate. Should we be?)

### COMPREHENSION STUDY

Answer the following questions in your own words. There is not always a right answer. Your judgment is important and you should be ready to defend your answers by referring to passages from the novel.

#### Questions 1-3 Literal Level

1. Interpret the three quotations that form the frontispiece to the book and indicate reasons for their use.
  - the quotation from Genesis recounts Rachel's reasons for giving her maid, Bilhah, to Jacob to bear his child. It is a Biblical justification for the kind of polygamy practised by the Gilead regime. It forms the basis for the cold, dehumanizing ritual sex undertaken by the commanders and their Handmaids.
  - Swift's satire uses exaggerations of reality. Atwood exaggerates attitudes held about women and in doing so reveals truths about a woman's place, the value of her work, her role in society.
  - The Sufi proverb states that prohibitions are unnecessary for the self evident. The complicated mechanisms set up to tyrannize and control human relationships and emotions won't work.)
2. How do costumes and colours identify roles?  
(Wives dress in blue, Aunts in brown, Daughters in virginal white, Marthas in green, and Handmaids in red. Colour identifies rank and separates women, paradoxically making them uniform.)
3. Choose details which Atwood uses in the first chapter to establish setting and introduce character. Comment on the effective opening of *The Handmaid's Tale*.  
(Chapter 1 is set in a former gymnasium, now the Red Centre where Handmaids are trained. The details suggest that things are different from the way they were, that we are in a "future" world. The note of "hope" for better things in the future is a leitmotif for the novel. Offred's "yearnings for the future" indicate a numbness to all that has happened to her. She has learned not to trust anyone, least of all herself, a self she believes to be shallow and weak. Gradually she changes and starts to take risks. The unusual contradictory images suggest a distorted world. It is a domestic, child's ["We had flannelette sheets, like children's"] world with aunts and angels and first names only, intimate yet associated with fear and violence. The children are guarded with "cattle prods" and thus treated like animals; the angels use guns. The girls communicate only in secret.)

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### Questions 4-6 Interpretive Level

4. In what ways are "the Aunts" unsympathetic?  
*(The name "Aunts" is ironic; the Aunts are, in fact, vicious torturers rather than loving kinfolk. They are collaborators with the male-dominated hierarchy and are amongst its staunchest supporters. They are almost more "male" than the actual males in the novel, incorporating all of that gender's worst traits. They devote their lives to supporting the shibboleth that woman's true purpose in life is to bear children.)*
5. Does Atwood appear to be optimistic or pessimistic concerning the future of the individual?  
*(Even when we move into Offred's past life we see an existence which, although not perfect, is still filled with energy, creativity, humaneness, and a sense of life that contrasts sharply with the world of Gilead. Moira and her mother represent this world. Offred eventually escapes from Gilead. She escapes in every respect. Most importantly she finally comprehends what is happening around her by realizing she is a victim and she joins the Mayday conspiracy. Interestingly the opening chapter suggests that her original name was "June," the period of spring [as is "May"]. While the reader is never given her original name, Offred eventually tells Nick. The Afterword points out that Gilead was an ephemeral attempt at tyranny so, yes, Atwood is optimistic. The use of humour [and a general lack of solemnity] adds to the optimistic flavour. The Afterword, however, is arguably pessimistic indicating as it does rather smugly, that permanent lessons are never learned from history and that suffering and humility are not permanently redemptive.)*
6. Offred tells her story in the present tense, except when she refers to her life before becoming a handmaid. What effect is created by this?  
*(More writers today are using the present tense, primarily because fiction writers want to create the illusion that what they are describing actually happened. The "historic present" creates a sense of immediacy. The tense suits the unmeditated life of Offred; she is often bewildered by her reactions and by events, hence her need to "reconstruct." The present tense lends itself [as it does in film] to dialogue, to scenes, to the observation of detail. It is in marked contrast to the past tense used by the Academics in the Afterword. There the style is exegesis. By writing in the past, authors make tacit statements about their writing; by writing in the present they make tacit statements about the world [it resembles a movie, or a dream].)*

### Questions 7-9 Critical Level

7. *The Handmaid's Tale* is an ideological novel. What do we learn from it?  
*(Atwood cautions against religious fundamentalism, rigid dogmas and misogynous theosophies that are so popular these days. Misogynous dogmas, no matter how seemingly innocuous and trustworthy and Bible-supported, are bound, when allowed access to power, to reveal their ruthless tyrannical nature. The book is an appeal to her readers to look carefully at the world around them, to weigh the messages that besiege them, to interpret carefully the implications of action and not to yield individuality. It suggests an appreciation for the values of tolerance, compassion, and for an acceptance for women's unique*

*identity.)*

8. At the conclusion of the film version of the novel, Offred—at the instigation of the Mayday conspirators—kills the commander. In the novel she doesn't. Which ending is more effective? Why?  
*(Film has difficulty portraying the subtleties and shifting nature of the inner mind and therefore tends to concentrate on action. Offred's complete conversion to the conspirator's cause is emphasized by having her kill the Commander and she is presented as a more daring violator of the perverted canons of Gilead than she is in the novel. On a symbolic level, this ending has appeal for feminists since the message suggests "death to this kind of male." On the other hand, the Commander is not a violent or cruel person [nor are most of the male characters]; he is really more pathetic than evil. He fears his wife and is easily manipulated by her—and by Offred. The name "Fred" rather suits him. Does he deserve to live? Could one interpret his being kept alive as a non-feminist stance, an acceptance of women's status quo?)*
9. How has Atwood made the Afterword ("Historical Notes") a successful or unsuccessful conclusion to her novel? Use details to reinforce your point of view. If you feel the ending is "unsuccessful" suggest an alternative one and justify your choice.  
*(In Atwood's conclusion we experience what Brecht called an alienation device. We are suddenly distanced from the previous events, distanced through a lengthy time leap and through a sudden shift into almost total humour. Brecht used "alienation" to remind people that what they were seeing [or reading] was artifice. He wanted people to think rather than merely get emotionally involved. The Academics in Atwood's Afterword review our heroine's life in scholarly fashion. We are forced to reflect, to take a rational stance—about what has previously been more of an emotional experience. Of course, even the presentation of the Academics might be ironic, since through all their puns and irrelevant asides their analysis is so absurd that we may end up with sympathies for Offred strengthened. Since the ending is so unexpected [uncalled for?], original, interesting and hilarious it is probably effective.)*

### Questions 10-14 Creative Level

10. Pretend to be a fifteen-year old living at the same time as this novel takes place and write your reactions, your fears or hopes or dreams. Then be the same person fifty years later. You are now quite mature; reflect on your past.
11. Choose the one of the following statements which best supports your attitude and develop an intelligent, well supported proof:
- the future will be like the present
  - changes in our representative political system will affect us more than anything
  - the power released by science is limiting human freedom and destroying the world
  - machines are the downfall of civilization
  - up to now we have been improving the physical, materialistic conditions of living, but a greater awareness for advances in the spiritual and psychological components of life is needed.
13. A favourite science fiction pattern is that of the disaster

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which destroys an evil world except for a chosen few who build a new society. Using this pattern, create a second story making use of the characters from *The Handmaid's Tale*.

14. Consider the effect of these alternative endings on the theme(s) and on the view of human nature expressed in the novel:
  - the arrest of Offred is genuine but since she confesses and is pregnant she is freed by the Eyes. She is content and accepts society without reservations.
  - Nick is really a spy and Offred eventually kills herself.

### ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

#### Math

1. Using the text as your basis, what changes in math might you predict would be taught in the schools of Gilead?
2. Present a logical argument (with proof) for Offred's original name.
3. Based on this novel, prepare a question (and answer) which an obsessive math student might create.

#### Social Studies and History

1. Create a map of North America, indicating those places mentioned in *The Handmaid's Tale*.
2. In this book, men are presented as superior to women. What is the historical/religious basis for this?
3. Write the constitution for the Republic of Gilead. Use legal and absolutely clear language.
4. Create a political platform for the Mayday Underground movement in Gilead. Write a political speech for it, attacking the government and providing an intelligent alternative to existing conditions.

#### Psychology

1. Research the psychology of colours mentioned in the book. Discuss the validity of the colours, as Atwood uses them.
2. Write a definition of love—sexual, familial and patriotic—as is suggested by this novel. Use the words "irony" or "ironic" at various times.
3. Most Gilead inhabitants are deprived of their individual freedoms. List these deprivations and show the reactions of the characters involved.

#### Cinema/Media

1. Compare and contrast the book to the Volker Schlöndorff film version.
2. Contrast either the book or the film to a film handling a similar theme. For example: *Sophie's Choice*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *The Time Machine*, one of the *Back to the Future* films, *Lost Horizon*, 1984, *Animal Farm*, etc.
3. Plan a media campaign for crushing the Mayday rebellion. Describe newspaper ads, T.V. commercials, etc.
4. Prepare a pamphlet that the Mayday underground could secretly distribute.

#### Health

1. Briefly summarize the methods of contraception and the ways of giving birth in various societies. What use is made of husbands and midwives? Contrast this to our culture's

methods of giving birth: The Lamaze method, Cesarean section.

2. How workable is Gilead's method for disposing toxic wastes? Research the different ways other societies have disposed of their wastes. Indicate future concerns and plans.

#### Language Arts

1. Make an exhaustive alphabetized glossary of terms used in Gilead and give their definitions.
2. Make a list of images used in the novel under the headings of sound, touch, sight, smell and taste and state the effects suggested.
3. Find examples of diction in the novel which are particularly suggestive of a dystopia, or "nightmare of the future." What aspects were probably suggested to Atwood by events in the present?

#### Art

1. Do illustrations of the apparel worn by representative groups, showing them in colour.
2. Illustrate "the wall." Be aware of good taste; you might consider using abstractions.
3. Create an Exhibit on the Future consisting of models, drawings, proposals, etc. Wherever possible give the source of the prediction you use.
4. Using either photographs or painting combine design and colour to create some visual effects similar to those suggested in this book.

#### Science

1. Present the scientific reasons for colour variations. What colours are similar? How valid is Atwood's symbolism?
2. "Developments in the biological sciences will drastically alter the so-called facts of life, especially birth, marriage, and death." Give a scientific basis for this quotation. Make allusions to *The Handmaid's Tale*.
3. Science fiction writers shape their speculations according to the demands of their story. But non-fiction speculation is also affected by the writer's attitude to science and men and women in society. Collect and reproduce a series of articles and news columns — non-fiction in nature, which reflect similar views of the future to Atwood's. Create a portfolio and give brief justifications for each inclusion.

#### Music

1. Write the lyrics and compose the music for the national anthem of Gilead.
2. Compose a ballad based on the life of Offred and set it to music. The music need not be original.

### STUDENT INVOLVEMENT ACTIVITIES

1. People of all ages and all backgrounds are questioning almost all our traditional institutions and values: organized religion, organized patriotism, race relations, the consumer society, the multiversity, our representative political systems, etc. Choose one of these and write an original critical analysis.
2. Write a justification for rejecting the Gileadian lifestyle from a male point-of-view.
3. Outline a plan that you think would be a successful safe-

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guard against the kind of world Atwood presents. Or create a debate topic and debate this in class.

4. Make a study of at least one other dystopian novel. Either in an essay or in an oral report, compare the treatment of the same themes. You might consider: P.D. James' *The Children of Men*, Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, or George Orwell's *Animal Farm* or 1984.
5. "People do strange things in times of stress." Comment on this statement in the light of at least THREE incongruous incidents you found in the novel.
6. Choose an incident which you feel was most pathetic. Explain pathos and then explain the effectiveness of your selection.
7. "Faith is only a word, embroidered." (p. 274) Discuss the irony of this statement, with reference to the novel.
8. Write a response to:
  - the nightclub scene
  - the Salvaging
  - the "Ceremony"

### ALTERNATIVES FOR STUDENT INVOLVEMENT

1. Make an analysis of the biblical references and parallels to this novel.
2. There are many ironical speeches and situations in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Select TWO and record a reading that brings that irony across. At the conclusion of your reading explain the irony involved.
3. Suspense is a most effective plot device. Define it and use references to reveal that Atwood has used it effectively.
4. Tape your parents telling you the story of your birth or adoption and write out a response to your past. Use the present tense.
5. Write a justification (you should be ironic, of course) of the Gilead lifestyle from the point-of-view of either a male or a female.
6. Imagine yourself as a (male if you are female or female if you are male) tourist to Gilead and write a first person account of two days of your life there.
7. "Mother, I think. Wherever you may be. Can you hear me? You wanted a woman's culture. Well, now there is one. It isn't what you meant, but it exists. Be thankful for small mercies." To what degree is Offred ironic?

### OTHER BOOKS BY MARGARET ATWOOD

#### Fiction

*The Edible Woman*

*Surfacing*

*Lady Oracle*

*Life Before Man*

*Bodily Harm*

*Cat's Eye*

#### Short Fiction

*Dancing Girls*

*Bluebeard's Egg*

*Wilderness Tips*

*Good Bones*

#### Poetry

*Selected Poems*

*The Circle Game*

*The Animals in That Country*

*The Journals of Susanna Moodie*

*Procedures for Underground*

*Power Politics*

*You Are Happy*

*Two-Headed Poems*

*True Stories*

*Interlunar*

*Selected Poems II*

#### Non Fiction

*Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*

*Second Words*

### RELATED READING

Faber Birren's *Color Psychology and Color Therapy*

Arthur C. Clarke's *July 20, 2019: Life in the 21st Century*

Robert Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land*

Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*

P.D. James' *The Children of Men*

Doris Lessing's *The Memoirs of a Survivor*

George Orwell's *Animal Farm*

1984

Ayn Rand's *Anthem*

William Styron's *Sophie's Choice*

Philip Wylie's *The Disappearance*

John Wyndham's *The Chrysalids*

*The Trouble With Lichen*

Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*

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VOCABULARY TEST

Provide a synonym (or phrase that substitutes for the meaning) for any TWENTY of the words in bold in the sentences below. Write the synonym in the space provided.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. "Looking out the window I can see it, a glimmer, like the **phosphorescence** you get in stirred sea water..."
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. "Gilead's society was **Byzantine** in the extreme."
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. "The **minimalist** life. Pleasure is an egg."
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. "...childless couples were eager for **progeny** by any means."
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. "**Abstinence** makes the heart grow fonder."
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. "I've heard this speech...often enough before: the same **platitudes**, the same slogans, the same phrases...."
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. "'Offred' gives no clue, since, like 'Ofglen' and 'Ofwarren,' it was a **patronymic**..."
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. "They can do with me what they like. I am **abject**."
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. "She's [Aunt Lydia] rubbing our noses in it, letting us know exactly who she is, making us watch her as she silently reads, flaunting her **prerogative**."
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. "...perhaps she was one of those escaped Handmaids who had difficulty adjusting to life in the outside world and...became...a **recluse**."
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11. "Gilead was, although undoubtedly **patriarchal** in form, occasionally matriarchal in content."
- \_\_\_\_\_ 12. "...the music lingered, a **palimpsest** of unheard sound, style upon style, an undercurrent of drums..."
- \_\_\_\_\_ 13. "The squares on the board in front of me are filling up: I'm making my **penultimate** play of the night."
- \_\_\_\_\_ 14. "These are the kinds of **litanies** I used to compose myself."
- \_\_\_\_\_ 15. "Subversion, **sedition**, blasphemy, heresy, all rolled into one."
- \_\_\_\_\_ 16. "**Covertly** we regard each other, sizing up each other's bellies."
- \_\_\_\_\_ 17. "Her voice is pious, **condescending**, the voice of those whose duty it is to tell us unpleasant things for our own good."
- \_\_\_\_\_ 18. "**Chauvinist** pig, she'd say."
- \_\_\_\_\_ 19. "We are two legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, **ambulatory** chalices."
- \_\_\_\_\_ 20. "Moira didn't look much like Aunt Elizabeth, even with the brown **wimple** in place..."
- \_\_\_\_\_ 21. "I must beware of **inertia**."
- \_\_\_\_\_ 22. "It seems so primitive, **totemistic** even, like couries shells."



THE HANDMAID'S TALE

COMPREHENSION TEST A

Part I: Identification (10 Points)

Identify any FIVE of the characters printed in bold or in blank. Choose from the names in the list below. You may use some names more than once.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Now that she is "the carrier of life, **she** is closer to death."
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. "Remember," said \_\_\_\_\_. "For our purposes your feet and your hands are not essential."
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. "I am a reproach to **her**; and a necessity."
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. "There is a Bomb in Gilead," was what \_\_\_\_\_ used to call it.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. "It means you can't cheat Nature, " **he** says. "Nature demands variety, for men."
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. "We were a society dying," said \_\_\_\_\_, "of too much choice."

- |                |                |
|----------------|----------------|
| (a) Serena Joy | (e) Janine     |
| (b) Offred     | (f) Aunt Lydia |
| (c) Moira      | (g) Nick       |
| (d) Luke       | (h) Fred       |

Part II: True/False (20 points)

In the space provided write T if the statement is completely true or write F if any part of the statement is false.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Salvagings are not segregated.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Eventually Moira becomes a prostitute.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. Every article of clothing that handmaids wear is red.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. Offred's memoirs were not written down but recorded by her on a cassette.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. The commander does not drink alcohol.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. The main reason for Offred being a handmaid is that her relationship with Luke was adulterous.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. Aunts are used at Jezebels.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. Serena Joy never finds out about Offred's relationship with the Commander.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. Both Offred and Ofglen knew that Janine's baby was fathered by a doctor and not by her commander.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. Gilead's homosexuals end up either upon the wall or in the colonies.



## THE HANDMAID'S TALE

### Part III: Multiple Choice (10 points)

Complete each of the following statements with the best response. Indicate your choice by writing the letter of the appropriate response in the space provided.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. In return for agreeing to sleep with Nick, Serena Joy gave Offred: (a) a package of cigarettes (b) a photo of her daughter (c) hand lotion (d) nothing but the promise of a possible baby.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Who of the following does NOT know Offred's real name: (a) Luke (b) Moira (c) the reader (d) Nick.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. Serena does all of the following except: (a) smoke (b) wear perfume (c) plant flowers (d) sing (e) share the same bed as her husband.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. Prayvaganzas were held for all of the following except: (a) christenings (b) military victories (b) group weddings (c) nuns who recanted (d) funerals.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. The key instrument or person to help Moira escape from the Red Centre is (a) a wimple (b) a toilet (c) a cigarette (d) Janine.

### Part IV: Short Answers (20 points)

In no more than one sentence for each, answer any TEN of the following:

1. In which room does the Handmaid perform the "Ceremony"?
2. When the handmaids are at school and need punishment which parts of their bodies are punished?
3. What is the source of the name Gilead?
4. What was the fate of Offred's mother?
5. "Resettlement of the children of Ham is concluding on schedule." Restate this, showing you understand it completely.
6. Indicate an incident involving Quakers.
7. What does "Nolite te bastardes carborundum" mean?
8. What happened to the handmaid who occupied Offred's room before her?
9. Explain: "Faith is only a word, embroidered."
10. Identify "the Red Centre."
11. The conclusion tells us that a professor from the 21st Century created the novel's title and that he created it for two possible reasons. What is one of those reasons?

### Part V: Essay (40 points)

Answer one of the following, in approximately four paragraphs.

1. Contrast Offred to Moira and in your response indicate the type of relationship they share.
2. After sleeping with Nick, Offred thinks: "This is a betrayal. Not the thing itself but my response." Explain. Is Offred justified in considering what she does as "a betrayal"?

## THE HANDMAID'S TALE

### COMPREHENSION TEST B

#### Part I: Multiple Choice (20 points)

Choose an answer to complete each statement below.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. "They've frozen them," she said. "Mine too....Any account with an F on it instead of an M." By "F" Moira means (a) female (b) future (c) fanatic (d) non-citizen of Gilead.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. The password used for the network that opposes the Gilead regime is (a) Blessed be the fruit (b) Mayday (c) May the lord open (d) participation.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. "Resettlement of the Children of Ham is continuing on schedule." This is a reference to (a) blacks (b) Jews (c) homosexuals (d) unwomen.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. "Abstinence makes the heart grow fonder" shows Moira's fondness for (a) using quotations (b) punning (c) lesbian love (d) Offred.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. The one person amongst the following names, who does not smoke is: (a) Moira (b) Aunt Lydia (c) Offred (d) Serena Joy.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. In Gilead, a shredder is (a) an unwoman (b) a baby that doesn't live (c) a garbage disposal unit (d) a guardian who has been issued a gun.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. "Gender treachery" is another name for (a) killing a person of the same sex (b) feeling love for a member of the opposite sex (c) homosexuality (d) a Handmaid's betrayal of a Commander's wife.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. One of the following persons has a baby while she is a handmaid: (a) Ofwarren (b) Janine (c) Ofglen (d) Moira (e) none of these.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. "Econowives" are (a) thrifty women (b) wives of Commanders (c) Handmaids (d) wives of poor men.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. "All Flesh" is the name of (a) Jezebel's (b) the suburb where Offred lived (c) the guardians (d) a butcher shop.

#### Part II: True or False (30 points)

Mark each answer either T for true or F if any part is false. Place your response in the blank provided at left.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Nick is a Guardian.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Universities in Gilead are considered to be very important.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. At one time some Japanese tourists want to know whether the Handmaids are happy.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. The Aunts keep watch over the Handmaids with guns and cattle prods.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. Baptists are part of the mainstream religion in Gilead.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. In Gilead, females are not allowed to own property, have bank accounts or even to earn money.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. Offred loses her baby three years before the main story takes place, when the baby was five.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. There is no such thing as men's "salvagings."
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. The Red Centre was the location where the Aunts trained the handmaids, but that was only a nickname for it.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. Gilead was created after a group shot the President and machine-gunned the U.S. Congress.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11. Commander's wives are even permitted to kill their Handmaids.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 12. At Jezebel's hotel, Offred and the Commander have sex together.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 13. Offred's predecessor had been fooling around with the Commander and because Serena Joy found out about it, Offred's predecessor killed herself.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 14. When Offred leaves the Red Centre she never sees Aunt Lydia again.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 15. Women's Prayvaganzas were for group weddings while men's were for military victories.

## THE HANDMAID'S TALE

### Part III: Identification (10 points)

Identify any FIVE of the characters printed in **bold**. Choose from the names in the list below. You may use some names more than once.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. "I see the two of us, a blue shape, a red shape, in the brief glass eye of the mirror as we descend. Myself, my **obverse**."
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. "**She** hanged herself," she says. "After the Salvaging. **She** saw the van coming for her. It was better."
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. "I saw your mother....Not in person, it was in that film they showed us, about the Colonies."
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. "I'll take care of it [a cat]," \_\_\_\_\_ said. And because he said *it* instead of *her* I knew he meant to *kill*."
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. "No, **he** said. She wouldn't understand. Anyway, she won't talk to me much any more. We don't seem to have much in common, these days."
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. "Hello," **she** said, but not to me...."I'm your waitperson for this morning. Can I get you some coffee to begin with?"

- |                   |                |
|-------------------|----------------|
| (a) Nick          | (e) Serena Joy |
| (b) Luke          | (f) Moira      |
| (c) the Commander | (g) Ofglen     |
| (d) Janine        | (h) Offred     |

### Part IV: Essay (40 points)

Choose ONE of the following and write a response in approximately four paragraphs.

1. Justify Atwood's choice of title for her novel. You should make reference to that part of the book where the title actually appears.
2. Write a job description for "Handmaids" making reference to uniform, terms of employment, pre-requisites, duties, choice of names, etc.

**THE HANDMAID'S TALE**

**ANSWER KEY**

**VOCABULARY TEST**

1. heatless light
2. excessively complex
3. uncluttered, sparse
4. children
5. avoidance of food and/or liquor
6. commonplace or trite saying
7. name showing descent from a given person
8. miserable, degraded
9. exclusive rights or privileges
10. person leading solitary life
11. male dominated
12. parchment previously written upon and erased
13. second last
14. prayers in which congregation responds
15. stirring rebellion against a government
16. secretly
17. patronizing
18. fanatic patriot or someone excessively devoted to race (or one's sex)
19. able to walk
20. nun's head covering
21. disinclination to act
22. primitively symbolic

**COMPREHENSION TEST A**

**Part I: Identification (10 points)**

- |      |      |
|------|------|
| 1. e | 4. c |
| 2. f | 5. h |
| 3. a | 6. f |

**Part II: True/False (20 points)**

- |      |       |
|------|-------|
| 1. T | 6. T  |
| 2. T | 7. T  |
| 3. F | 8. F  |
| 4. T | 9. T  |
| 5. F | 10. T |

**Part III: Multiple Choice (10 points)**

- |      |      |
|------|------|
| 1. b | 4. d |
| 2. c | 5. b |
| 3. e |      |

**Part IV: Short Answers (20 points)**

1. the wife's bedroom
2. hands and feet
3. the Bible
4. became an unwoman, in colonies
5. Blacks will get their own country.
6. Moira escapes to family of Quakers; they run an underground railway
7. Don't let the bastards grind you down
8. hanged herself
9. statement on pillow in Offred's room
10. training centre for handmaids
11. (a) Geoffrey Chaucer influence  
(b) pun on word "tale" ("tail")

**Part V: Essay (40 points)**

Answers will vary.

**COMPREHENSION TEST B**

**Part I: Multiple Choice (20 points)**

- |      |       |
|------|-------|
| 1. a | 6. b  |
| 2. b | 7. c  |
| 3. a | 8. b  |
| 4. b | 9. d  |
| 5. b | 10. d |

**Part II: True or False (30 points)**

- |      |       |
|------|-------|
| 1. T | 9. T  |
| 2. F | 10. T |
| 3. T | 11. F |
| 4. F | 12. T |
| 5. F | 13. T |
| 6. T | 14. F |
| 7. T | 15. T |
| 8. F |       |

**Part III: Identification (10 points)**

- |      |      |
|------|------|
| 1. e | 4. b |
| 2. g | 5. c |
| 3. f | 6. d |

**Part IV: Essay (40 points)**

Answers will vary.



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