

# *The Handmaid's Tale*

by Margaret Atwood

Rationale by Sarah Zeiger

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## Grade Level and Audience

*The Handmaid's Tale* is recommended for grades eleven and up.

## Plot Summary

The award-winning novel *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood is an account of a woman's life in an oppressive society. *The Handmaid's Tale* gives readers a look at important social issues such as human rights, family roles, gender roles, political pressures, suicide, and depression.

*The Handmaid's Tale* is set in the futuristic world of Gilead. In Gilead, fertile women are a scarce resource due to infertility caused by past circumstances such as pollution. The Commanders, high ranking, wealthy public officials, have designed the Republic of Gilead to ensure they have access to fertile women, whom they have given the title of Handmaids. Sexual activity is regulated and controlled for everyone in the population. Harsh penalties for sexual desire, homosexuality, masturbation, and pornography are strictly enforced because of the regulation that sex is no longer for pleasure but for procreation of a high-class culture.

The book begins with the Handmaid Offred, the main character and narrator of the novel, and a number of other Handmaids sleeping on army-issued cots in the gymnasium of the former school. The Aunts, older women who keep control over the Handmaids and teach them the laws and rules of being a Handmaid, patrol around with cattle prods keeping order. The gymnasium is surrounded by a chain link fence topped with barbed wire and protected by guards who are not allowed in the gymnasium or to have contact with the Handmaids. Twice a day, the Handmaids are taken outside for walks around the football field, but this is the extent of their time outside.

Soon, Offred is sent to live with Commander Fred and his wife Serena Joy. Offred is given her name ("Of Fred") at this point. She lives in a room with no glass, a window that is shatterproof and only opens part of the way. There is nothing in the room from which to hang a rope and the door will not completely shut, all to prevent the Handmaids from committing suicide. Offred remembers Aunt Lydia, one of the head Aunts, telling her it is a privilege to be chosen and her circumstances are a privilege, not a prison.

Offred begins to think of her daughter, her husband Luke, and a time before the Republic of Gilead when she earned her own money and wore whatever she wanted. The only time Offred is allowed out of the house is for her daily walk or to run daily shopping chores for the house. However, she is not allowed to walk alone, so she is paired with another Handmaid, Ofglen. On their walk, Offred and Ofglen pass the Wall outside of the church. This is where the bodies of executed criminals are displayed as examples to the rest of Gilead. This particular day the dead bodies have pictures of fetuses hanging around their necks to symbolize their professions in life as abortion doctors before the change to the Republic, which strictly forbids abortion.

Offred continues having memories of life before the Republic of Gilead. She regrets not taking advantage of freedom when it was available. She begins to examine her room and discovers a Latin phrase scratched into the floor. She later finds the phrase to mean, "Don't let the bastards grind you down." She repeats this phrase to herself whenever she gets depressed or is trying to get through a hard time. The story then shifts to the monthly doctors' appointments the Handmaids must go to for pregnancy and disease testing. At the appointment the doctor offers to "help" Offred. He

explains that many of the husbands are too old and sterile to impregnate a woman. It is strictly forbidden to suggest that it is a man's fault for infertility. There are only Unwomen, or sterile women, and it is believed it is only a woman's fault if a baby cannot be conceived. Offred realizes her life depends on her ability to get pregnant, however, this offer is highly illegal and Offred declines because of the penalty of death if she were caught.

Offred is found to be in health and that night will attend the Ceremony with the rest of the house. The Commander arrives and reads from The Bible to everyone in the household. Then, Offred proceeds to the bedroom and lies between Serena Joy's legs, symbolizing that Serena Joy is really the one who will be impregnated by The Commander. The Commander enters, has sex with Offred, then leaves immediately. Serena Joy demands Offred leave her sight. That night Offred can't sleep and sneaks downstairs where she runs into Nick, the Commander's gardener and chauffeur. They kiss, but then stop because it's too dangerous. Nick tells her The Commander wants to see her in his office tomorrow. Offred goes to her bed and dreams of Luke and her daughter.

The next day the Birthmobile comes because a Handmaid is giving birth. All Handmaids must attend births along with the Commanders' wives. The Handmaid gives birth and the wife lies in bed. The baby is given to her as if she had given birth to the baby herself. Later that night, Offred meets the Commander in his office. She imagines he is going to rape her but finds, instead, he just wants to play a game of Scrabble with her. Offred knows if Serena discovers their meeting, Offred will be sent to the Colonies as an Unwoman, where the average survival time spent there is only three years. After two games of Scrabble, the Commander asks Offred for a kiss and receives it.

Offred decides she has to forget her old way of life, but also realizes she could benefit from the Commander's unusual wishes to see her. She continues to meet with him in his office at night. If Nick is not wearing his hat or is wearing it tilted, she knows to visit the Commander that night. The Commander does not make physical advances toward her, and they continue to play nightly games of Scrabble and he lets her look at old copies of *Vogue* despite the fact that reading is illegal for Handmaids. Offred finds the Ceremonies much more difficult now that there is something between her and the Commander. He almost touches her face during the Ceremony but she moves away fearing Serena will suspect something. On their walk the next day, Offred learns from Ofglen there are a lot of subversive Handmaids against the Republic. Offred feels relieved that Ofglen is as against the Republic as she is.

At this point, the Commander and Offred have become informal with each other. Offred asks to not play Scrabble one evening, but to just talk instead. The Commander tells of the fate of the last Handmaid in the house: Serena discovered the visits with the Commander and the Handmaid hanged herself. Offred realizes that the Commander asks her to his office to make her life bearable. She tells him what would really make her life bearable is to know what is going on. Later she looks out her window and sees Nick. She realizes she has a desire for him, and closes the curtains immediately.

On another walk, Ofglen tells Offred that the subversive Handmaids use "mayday" as a password. Offred returns to the house and notices Nick's hat is tilted. Serena calls Offred over and asks if there is any sign of pregnancy. Offred says no and Serena suggests The Commander may be sterile. Serena says Offred should try another man and Nick would be the safest possibility. Offred agrees. Serena gives her a cigarette and she gets a match from the kitchen. Offred decides to save the match under her mattress.

When Offred meets The Commander again, he is drunk and gives her a skimpy outfit. He asks to take her "out." She agrees, dresses, and puts on the makeup The Commander gives her. The Commander escorts her out and gives her a purple tag. If anyone asks, she is to say she is "an evening rental." He takes her to an old hotel that is now a club and says it is officially forbidden, but everyone realizes it's just natural. The Commander takes her to a hotel room. He seems disappointed when she doesn't seem excited about a real sexual encounter. She tells herself she can fake it. The Commander takes her home.

That night, Serena meets with Offred and tells her she will be "serviced" by Nick and Serena takes Offred to Nick's apartment. Offred is ashamed and sorrowful of what the act of love has become. Offred continues to see Nick at night without Serena's knowledge. She tells him of Ofglen and the subversive Handmaids. She also discloses that she thinks she may be pregnant.

The Handmaids are taken to a Salvaging where they are told a Guardian is convicted of rape. The swarm of Handmaids attacks the Guardian, kicking and beating the man unconscious. Ofglen explains to Offred that they attacked him as they did as part of the underground rebellion; they wanted to put him out of his misery quickly. After the Salvaging, Offred meets Ofglen for a shopping trip, however, instead of Ofglen, there is a new Handmaid there. Offred knows Ofglen was found out and now Offred feels she is in danger. The new Handmaid tells Offred the old Ofglen hanged herself before she could be taken away to the Colonies.

Serena calls to Offred and holds up the outfit from the night "out." She tells Offred she is a slut like the Handmaid before her and will end up in the same way. Offred retreats to her room.

In her room Offred debates setting the house on fire with the match under her mattress. She hears the van coming to take her away. She regrets not doing anything while she had the time. She is taken to the van and a feeling of betrayal overtakes her as Nick opens the door to the van. He whispers to her that they are not going to hurt her. They are "mayday."

The novel ends with the Epilogue. The Epilogue is a symposium taking place in the year 2195. The Republic of Gilead is a dead Republic. It is learned that Offred's story is a published manuscript titled *The Handmaid's Tale*. Her story was found recorded on some cassettes found in Maine. The professor giving the symposium says no one knows the fate of Offred. The tapes were disguised with labels of pop music from the time, the same voice was speaking on all the tapes, and the tapes were unnumbered and in random order. It is likely Offred escaped to England or Canada and did not make her story public to protect those who were left behind.

## Theoretical Support and Redeeming Values

Rosenblatt states that literature allows the reader to "sympathize or to identify with the experiences of others" (p. 37). There are many instances within *The Handmaid's Tale* that the reader can identify or sympathize with, and that lend themselves to class discussion of the characters' dilemmas and of how students might respond to similar dilemmas.

Christenson's (1988) *Values and Attitudes To Be Fostered By the Public Schools* says it is important to "develop the courage to resist group (or individual) pressures to do what we believe, when alone, that we should not do." In *The Handmaid's Tale* many members of the society are against the movement. The Handmaids have an underground rebellion because they do not agree with the Republic. Even Offred states she knows The Commander invites her to his office to help make her life bearable. However, no one stands up against the movement because they are afraid of the repercussions they may face. *The Handmaid's Tale* can help a reader understand the importance of following what they believe is right through seeing an extreme example of what happens when everyone goes along with those in power.

According to Kohlberg's (1969) *Stages in the Development of Moral Thought and Action*, "Moral development is best taught through history and literature." Stages five and six of moral development include social contract, which is focusing on what is best for society, and ethical principles, focusing on following one's conscience and doing what one believes to be right. Literature such as *The Handmaid's Tale* offers readers the opportunity to think about and discuss what is best for society by examining the politics and practices in the Republic of Gilead and comparing them to current politics and practices in the world today. Students can also discuss how people can follow their consciences in challenging situations such as those in the novel.

According to Carlsen (1979) in *Books for the Teenage Reader*, the late stage of adolescence is "the last two years of high school—[students] tend to read adult books but will also read adolescent books." The focus at this level is on a "search for personal values, books of social significance, strange and unusual human experiences, and transition to adult life" (pp. 33–34). *The Handmaid's Tale* fulfills these need for students in late adolescence. When reading this novel, students are able to look at adult situations and assert their own morals and values in making judgments on the actions, dialogues, and circumstances.

Finally, this novel fits Carlsen's idea of "strange and unusual human experiences" (p. 33–34). The idea that most of the women in society could become completely infertile and that lower-class women would be enslaved to give birth for

upper class, infertile women would seem fantastic to most people. The surprising setting and unusual experiences in *The Handmaid's Tale* are effective sparks to students' imagination and creative thinking. Michael Angelotti (1980), in his article "Do We Really Want to Teach Literature to Adolescents?" (*The Texas Tech Journal of Education*) states, "Some things we know about adolescent readers are the obvious. They are complex, curious, unpredictable beings; wills-o-the-wisp given to deeply emotional and sometimes brilliantly intellectual responses, now involved and sensitive, now apathetic and cold" (p. 7). For students at this age, it is important to find reading materials that will capture and keep their interest. Novels such as *The Handmaid's Tale* motivate readers and foster imagination and critical thinking.

## Literary Qualities and Summaries of Reviews

*The Handmaid's Tale* has won many awards, including the Arthur C. Clarke Award for Best Science Fiction, the Commonwealth Literature Prize, and the Council for the Advancement of Authors Association Novel of the Year Award.

In addition, the book's author, Margaret Atwood, has won many awards in the United States and other parts of the world including: St. Lawrence Award for fiction; Radcliff Medal, International Writer's Prize; Los Angeles Times Book Award; Canadian Bookseller's Association Author of the Year and Book of the Year; International Dublin Literary Award; President's Medal, University of Western Ontario; Guggenheim Fellowship Award; Harvard University Centennial Medal. Atwood has also been the recipient of honorary degrees from Trent University, Concordia University, Smith College, University of Toronto, Mount Holyoke College, University of Waterloo, University of Guelph, Victoria College, University of Montreal, University of Leeds, Queen's University, Oxford University, and Cambridge University.

*The Handmaid's Tale* is recommended in *Best Books For Young Adults* (1986) (p. 165), the *Senior High School Library Catalog* (1986) (p. 617), and *Fiction Catalog* (1991) (p. 25).

Ann Fisher of *Library Journal* (1986) describes *The Handmaid's Tale* as a "powerful and memorable novel" (p. 91).

A reviewer from *The Economist* (October 1986) says, "[Atwood's] book is a secret record of atrocities. . . The novel is Ms. Atwood's best to date, polished, ingenious, and terrifying" (p. 96).

Cathy Davidson of *Ms.* (February 1986) magazine reports that, "Atwood's future eerily resembles our present. . . A gripping suspense tale, *The Handmaid's Tale* is an allegory of what results from politics based on misogyny, racism, and anti-Semitism. What makes the novel so terrifying is that Gilead both is and is not the world we know" (p. 24).

According to a review from *Choice* magazine (March 1996), "*The Handmaid's Tale* is perhaps her [Atwood's] most innovative. This book can be used by students and scholars alike" (p. 1132).

## Possible Objections

As Foerstel (1994) states in *Banned in the U.S.A.*, *The Handmaid's Tale* has been banned for multiple reasons, most commonly for profanity, sexual explicitness, and unusual religious beliefs. In addition, a reason given in one school was that Offred was a female character that young men could not relate to. Other objections have been made to a lack of respect for Christianity, treatment of women as sex objects, and themes of despair.

Ruth Wood (2002) argues for the novel's morality:

"Who can blame censors for making a quick score? On its surface, Atwood's novel displays a society whose elite women are concubines and male leaders bigamists; it implies that social sanctions against liberal sexuality do the opposite of repressing sexual appetites. For most would-be censors, such content is all that is needed to close the case; a dominant point of the book is that human urges are hard to control.

"But just as the novel requires that the protagonist take time to contemplate the series of events and choices that have led her to this virtual prison, so must a reader work through the novel carefully to get its object lesson—that

indifferent permissiveness coupled with a decreased sense of social responsibility jeopardizes what Americans like to think of as 'inalienable rights' and opens doors to factions that feel justified in controlling women's choices. *The Handmaid's Tale* urges the reader to forego 'the privilege of ignoring' and learn to practice judicious self-governance."

## Biographical Information

Margaret Eleanor Atwood was born in Ontario, Canada, in 1939. She worked odd jobs as a beginning writer working as a waitress and camp counselor. Her interest in writing and literature led to positions in schools as a lecturer and professor. She worked for the University of British Columbia, Vancouver; Sir George Williams University, Montreal, Quebec; York University, Toronto, Ontario; University of Alabama; New York University; and Macquarie University, North Ryde, Australia.

Atwood is known for her work with novels, short stories, poetry, children's fiction, literary criticisms, and historical fiction. Her works focus on tension within society as well as women's rights. She has written many other award-winning novels beside *The Handmaid's Tale*, including *The Edible Woman*, *Lady Oracle*, *Life Before Man*, and *The Blind Assassin*.

## Alternative Books

Some of the important themes in *The Handmaid's Tale* include women's health, power relations, and sexuality.

### Women's Health

Atwood, M. (1996). *Alias Grace*. Doubleday.

Grace Marks deals with the problem of being convicted of a murder she didn't commit, the death of her mother, and the death of her best friend from a complicated abortion.

Atwood, M. (1996). *Bodily Harm*. Doubleday.

Ronnie lives an upscale life until she finds out she has a life threatening disease. When her appearance is altered she learns to deal with pressures from her upper class friends and society.

Atwood, M. (1993). *Hairball*. Bantam Books.

Kat spent all of her life making sure she kept up with the times, kept up with fashion, and kept herself looking great. She learns the importance of being a woman when she is inflicted with a deadly disease.

Bryner, J. (1995). *This Red Oozing*. Kent State University Press.

A woman comes into the emergency room after being brutally raped and tells her terrifying story.

Chopin, K. (1976). *The Awakening*. Norton Press.

Edna Pontellier is an aristocrat in Louisiana who deals with her adultery and the pressures of upper-class life.

Engel, M. (1970). *The Honeyman Festival*. Toronto: Anansi Press.

Minn deals with a difficult life as the young mother of four and thinks about her days before becoming a wife and mother.

Gilman, C.P. (1989). *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Bantam Books.

The narrator's psychiatric problems overtake her when she is confined to a room in her summer house and feels overcome by the yellow wallpaper.

Mann, T. (1990). *The Black Swan*. University of California Press.

Rosalie feels young and in love again when she begins a powerful relationship with her son's teacher.

## Power Relations

Arnold, J. (1989). *Sister Gin*. Feminist Press New York.

Sue, a highly regarded journalist, is having a tough time in life when she is visited by a mysterious figure who puts her life into perspective.

Austen, J. (1984). *Persuasion*. Bantam Books.

Ann learns to deal with the difficulty of facing her ex-love Frederick and meeting his new love interest.

Ellison, R. (1990). *Invisible Man*. Random House Books.

In a world full of racism, the narrator feels invisible because of his skin color.

McGrath, P. (1997). *Asylum*. Random House Books.

Stella begins a sexual affair with a patient in a psychiatric ward she works in.

Rowling, J.K. (1997). *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. Scholastic Books.

Harry Potter is forced to live with his annoying aunt and uncle after his parents die in a car accident. Only after he finds out his family's heritage of wizardry and attends the school of Hogwarts does his life take a turn for the better.

## Sexuality

Blume, J. (1973). *Deenie*. Bantam Doubleday Books.

Deenie is apprehensive about having to be placed in a brace because of a back problem. However, she finds the boy she likes does not find the brace unattractive and learns to become more comfortable with her body image.

Doherty, B. (1991). *Dear Nobody*. Orchard Books.

Helen has family troubles when she finds she is pregnant and thinks about abortion.

Slater, L. (1998). *Prozac Diary*. Random House Books.

Lauren doesn't think she can live after developing a drug dependency on Prozac.

Walker, A. (1976). *Meridian*. Pocket Books.

A black woman named Meridian works tirelessly for her community. She develops an illness, but experiences a halo-like light in her head as she thinks of the history of her people and of her role in helping them, and ultimately heals herself.

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