

An analysis of the handmaid's tale by margaret atwood

Profession, Writer



The Handmaid's Tale Margaret Atwood Context Margaret Atwood was born in Ottawa, Ontario, on November 18, 1939. She published her first book of poetry in 1961 while attending the University of Toronto. She later received degrees from both Radcliffe College and Harvard University, and pursued a career in teaching at the university level. Her first novel, *The Edible Woman*, was published in 1969 to wide acclaim. Atwood continued teaching as her literary career blossomed. She has lectured widely and has served as a writer-in-residence at colleges ranging from the University of Toronto to Macquarie University in Australia.

Atwood wrote *The Handmaid's Tale* in West Berlin and Alabama in the mid-1980s. The novel, published in 1986, quickly became a best-seller. *The Handmaid's Tale* falls squarely within the twentieth-century tradition of anti-utopian, or "dystopian" novels, exemplified by classics like Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and George Orwell's 1984. Novels in this genre present imagined worlds and societies that are not ideals, but instead are terrifying or restrictive. Atwood's novel offers a strongly feminist vision of dystopia.

She wrote it shortly after the elections of Ronald Reagan in the United States and Margaret Thatcher in Great Britain, during a period of conservative revival in the West partly fueled by a strong, well-organized movement of religious conservatives who criticized what they perceived as the excesses of the "sexual revolution" of the 1960s and 1970s. The growing power of this "religious right" heightened feminist fears that the gains women had made in

previous decades would be reversed. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood explores the consequences of a reversal of women's rights.

In the novel's nightmare world of Gilead, a group of conservative religious extremists has taken power and turned the sexual revolution on its head. Feminists argued for liberation from traditional gender roles, but Gilead is a society founded on a "return to traditional values" and gender roles, and on the subjugation of women by men. What feminists considered the great triumphs of the 1970s—namely, widespread access to contraception, the legalization of abortion, and the increasing political influence of female voters—have all been undone. Women in Gilead are not only forbidden to vote, they are forbidden to read or write.

Atwood's novel also paints a picture of a world undone by pollution and infertility, reflecting 1980s fears about declining birth rates, the dangers of nuclear power, and environmental degradation. Some of the novel's concerns seem dated today, and its implicit condemnation of the political goals of America's religious conservatives has been criticized as unfair and overly paranoid. Nonetheless, *The Handmaid's Tale* remains one of the most powerful recent portrayals of a totalitarian society, and one of the few dystopian novels to examine in detail the intersection of politics and sexuality.

The novel's exploration of the controversial politics of reproduction seems likely to guarantee Atwood's novel a readership well into the twenty-first century. Atwood lives in Toronto with novelist Graeme Gibson and their daughter, Jess. Her most recent novel, *The Blind Assassin*, won Great

Britain's Booker Prize for literature in 2000. Plot Overview Offred is a Handmaid in the Republic of Gilead, a totalitarian and theocratic state that has replaced the United States of America. Because of dangerously low reproduction rates, Handmaids are assigned to bear children for elite couples that have trouble conceiving.

Offred serves the Commander and his wife, Serena Joy, a former gospel singer and advocate for "traditional values." Offred is not the narrator's real name—Handmaid names consist of the word "of" followed by the name of the Handmaid's Commander. Every month, when Offred is at the right point in her menstrual cycle, she must have impersonal, wordless sex with the Commander while Serena sits behind her, holding her hands. Offred's freedom, like the freedom of all women, is completely restricted.

She can leave the house only on shopping trips, the door to her room cannot be completely shut, and the Eyes, Gilead's secret police force, watch her every public move. As Offred tells the story of her daily life, she frequently slips into flashbacks, from which the reader can reconstruct the events leading up to the beginning of the novel. In the old world, before Gilead, Offred had an affair with Luke, a married man. He divorced his wife and married Offred, and they had a child together. Offred's mother was a single mother and feminist activist. Offred's best friend, Moira, was fiercely independent.

The architects of Gilead began their rise to power in an age of readily available pornography, prostitution, and violence against women—when pollution and chemical spills led to declining fertility rates. Using the military,

they assassinated the president and members of Congress and launched a coup, claiming that they were taking power temporarily. They cracked down on women's rights, forbidding women to hold property or jobs. Offred and Luke took their daughter and attempted to flee across the border into Canada, but they were caught and separated from one another, and Offred has seen neither her husband nor her daughter since.

After her capture, Offred's marriage was voided (because Luke had been divorced), and she was sent to the Rachel and Leah Re-education Center, called the Red Center by its inhabitants. At the center, women were indoctrinated into Gilead's ideology in preparation for becoming Handmaids. Aunt Lydia supervised the women, giving speeches extolling Gilead's beliefs that women should be subservient to men and solely concerned with bearing children. Aunt Lydia also argued that such a social order ultimately offers women more respect and safety than the old, pre-Gilead society offered them.

Moira is brought to the Red Center, but she escapes, and Offred does not know what becomes of her. Once assigned to the Commander's house, Offred's life settles into a restrictive routine. She takes shopping trips with Ofglen, another Handmaid, and they visit the Wall outside what used to be Harvard University, where the bodies of rebels hang. She must visit the doctor frequently to be checked for disease and other complications, and she must endure the " Ceremony," in which the Commander reads to the household from the Bible, then goes to the bedroom, where his Wife and Offred wait for him, and has sex with Offred.

The first break from her routine occurs when she visits the doctor and he offers to have sex with her to get her pregnant, suggesting that her Commander is probably infertile. She refuses. The doctor makes her uneasy, but his proposition is too risky—she could be sent away if caught. After a Ceremony, the Commander sends his gardener and chauffeur, Nick, to ask Offred to come see him in his study the following night. She begins visiting him regularly. They play Scrabble (which is forbidden, since women are not allowed to read), and he lets her look at old magazines like *Vogue*.

At the end of these secret meetings, he asks her to kiss him. During one of their shopping trips, Ofglen reveals to Offred that she is a member of “Mayday,” an underground organization dedicated to overthrowing Gilead. Meanwhile, Offred begins to find that the Ceremony feels different and less impersonal now that she knows the Commander. Their nighttime conversations begin to touch on the new order that the Commander and his fellow leaders have created in Gilead. When Offred admits how unhappy she is, the Commander remarks, “[Y]ou can’t make an omelette without breaking eggs. ”

After some time has gone by without Offred becoming pregnant, Serena suggests that Offred have sex with Nick secretly and pass the child off as the Commander’s. Serena promises to bring Offred a picture of her daughter if she sleeps with Nick, and Offred realizes that Serena has always known the whereabouts of Offred’s daughter. The same night that Offred is to sleep with Nick, the Commander secretly takes her out to a club called Jezebel’s, where the Commanders mingle with prostitutes. Offred sees Moira working

there. The two women meet in a bathroom, and Offred learns that Moira was captured just before she crossed the border.

She chose life in Jezebel's over being sent to the Colonies, where most political prisoners and dangerous people are sent. After that night at Jezebel's, Offred says, she never sees Moira again. The Commander takes Offred upstairs after a few hours, and they have sex in what used to be a hotel room. She tries to feign passion. Soon after Offred returns from Jezebel's, late at night, Serena arrives and tells Offred to go to Nick's room. Offred and Nick have sex. Soon they begin to sleep together frequently, without anyone's knowledge.

Offred becomes caught up in the affair and ignores Ofglen's requests that she gather information from the Commander for Mayday. One day, all the Handmaids take part in a group execution of a supposed rapist, supervised by Aunt Lydia. Ofglen strikes the first blow. Later, she tells Offred that the so-called rapist was a member of Mayday and that she hit him to put him out of his misery. Shortly thereafter, Offred goes out shopping, and a new Ofglen meets her. This new woman is not part of Mayday, and she tells Offred that the old Ofglen hanged herself when she saw the secret police coming for her.

At home, Serena has found out about Offred's trip to Jezebel's, and she sends her to her room, promising punishment. Offred waits there, and she sees a black van from the Eyes approach. Then Nick comes in and tells her that the Eyes are really Mayday members who have come to save her. Offred leaves with them, over the Commander's futile objections, on her way either to prison or to freedom—she does not know which. The novel closes with an

epilogue from 2195, after Gilead has fallen, written in the form of a lecture given by Professor Pieixoto. He explains the formation and customs of Gilead in objective, analytical language.

He discusses the significance of Offred's story, which has turned up on cassette tapes in Bangor, Maine. He suggests that Nick arranged Offred's escape but that her fate after that is unknown. She could have escaped to Canada or England, or she could have been recaptured. Character List Offred - The narrator and protagonist of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Offred belongs to the class of Handmaids, fertile women forced to bear children for elite, barren couples.

Handmaids show which Commander owns them by adopting their Commanders' names, such as Fred, and preceding them with "Of. Offred remembers her real name but never reveals it. She no longer has family or friends, though she has flashbacks to a time in which she had a daughter and a husband named Luke. The cruel physical and psychological burdens of her daily life in Gilead torment her and pervade her narrative. Read an in-depth analysis of Offred. The Commander - The Commander is the head of the household where Offred works as a Handmaid. He initiates an unorthodox relationship with Offred, secretly playing Scrabble with her in his study at night.

He often seems a decent, well-meaning man, and Offred sometimes finds that she likes him in spite of herself. He almost seems a victim of Gilead, making the best of a society he opposes. However, we learn from various clues and from the epilogue that the Commander was actually involved in

designing and establishing Gilead. Read an in-depth analysis of The Commander. Serena Joy - The Commander's Wife, Serena worked in pre-Gilead days as a gospel singer, then as an anti-feminist activist and crusader for "traditional values. In Gilead, she sits at the top of the female social ladder, yet she is desperately unhappy. Serena's unhappiness shows that her restrictive, male-dominated society cannot bring happiness even to its most pampered and powerful women. Serena jealously guards her claims to status and behaves cruelly toward the Handmaids in her household. Read an in-depth analysis of Serena Joy. Moira - Offred's best friend from college, Moira is a lesbian and a staunch feminist; she embodies female resourcefulness and independence. Her defiant nature contrasts starkly with the behavior of the other women in the novel.

Rather than passively accept her fate as a Handmaid, she makes several escape attempts and finally manages to get away from the Red Center. However, she is caught before she can get out of Gilead. Later, Offred encounters Moira working as a prostitute in a club for the Commanders. At the club, Moira seems resigned to her fate, which suggests that a totalitarian society can grind down and crush even the most resourceful and independent people. Read an in-depth analysis of Moira. Aunt Lydia - The Aunts are the class of women assigned to indoctrinate the Handmaids with the beliefs of the new society and make them accept their fates.

Aunt Lydia works at the "Red Center," the re-education center where Offred and other women go for instruction before becoming Handmaids. Although she appears only in Offred's flashbacks, Aunt Lydia and her

instructions haunt Offred in her daily life. Aunt Lydia's slogans and maxims drum the ideology of the new society into heads of the women, until even those like Offred, women who do not truly believe in the ideology, hear Gilead's words echoing in their heads. Nick - Nick is a Guardian, a low-level officer of Gilead assigned to the Commander's home, where he works as a gardener and chauffeur.

He and Offred have a sexual chemistry that they get to satisfy when Serena Joy orchestrates an encounter between them in an effort to get Offred pregnant. After sleeping together once, they begin a covert sexual affair. Nick is not just a Guardian; he may work either as a member of the Eyes, Gilead's secret police, or as a member of the underground Mayday resistance, or both. At the end of the novel, Nick orchestrates Offred's escape from the Commander's home, but we do not know whether he puts her into the hands of the Eyes or the resistance.

Ofglen - Another Handmaid who is Offred's shopping partner and a member of the subversive " Mayday" underground. At the end of the novel, Ofglen is found out, and she hangs herself rather than face torture and reveal the names of her co-conspirators. Cora - Cora works as a servant in the Commander's household. She belongs to the class of Marthas, infertile women who do not qualify for the high status of Wives and so work in domestic roles. Cora seems more content with her role than her fellow Martha, Rita.

She hopes that Offred will be able to conceive, because then she will have a hand in raising a child. Janine - Offred knows Janine from their time at the

Red Center. After Janine becomes a Handmaid, she takes the name Ofwarren. She has a baby, which makes her the envy of all the other Handmaids in the area, but the baby later turns out to be deformed—an “Unbaby”—and there are rumors that her doctor fathered the child. Janine is a conformist, always ready to go along with what Gilead demands of her, and so she endears herself to the Aunts and to all authority figures.

Offred holds Janine in contempt for taking the easy way out. Luke - In the days before Gilead, Luke had an affair with Offred while he was married to another woman, then got a divorce and became Offred's husband. When Gilead comes to power, he attempts to escape to Canada with Offred and their daughter, but they are captured. He is separated from Offred, and the couple never see one another again. The kind of love they shared is prohibited in Gilead, and Offred's memories of Luke contrast with the regimented, passionless state of male-female relations in the new society.

Offred's mother - Offred remembers her mother in flashbacks to her pre-Gilead world—she was a single parent and a feminist activist. One day during her education at the Red Center, Offred sees a video of her mother as a young woman, yelling and carrying a banner in an anti-rape march called Take Back the Night. She embodies everything the architects of Gilead want to stamp out. Aunt Elizabeth - Aunt Elizabeth is one of the Aunts at the Red Center. Moira attacks her and steals her Aunt's uniform during her escape from the Red Center. Rita - A Martha, or domestic servant, in the Commander's household.

She seems less content with her lot than Cora, the other Martha working there. Professor Pieixoto - The guest speaker at the symposium that takes place in the epilogue to *The Handmaid's Tale*. He and another academic, working at a university in the year 2195, transcribed Offred's recorded narrative; his lecture details the historical significance of the story that we have just read. Analysis of Major Characters Offred Offred is the narrator and the protagonist of the novel, and we are told the entire story from her point of view, experiencing events and memories as vividly as she does.

She tells the story as it happens, and shows us the travels of her mind through asides, flashbacks, and digressions. Offred is intelligent, perceptive, and kind. She possesses enough faults to make her human, but not so many that she becomes an unsympathetic figure. She also possesses a dark sense of humor—a graveyard wit that makes her descriptions of the bleak horrors of Gilead bearable, even enjoyable. Like most of the women in Gilead, she is an ordinary woman placed in an extraordinary situation. Offred is not a hero. Although she resists Gilead inwardly, once her attempt at escape fails, she submits outwardly.

She is hardly a feminist champion; she had always felt uncomfortable with her mother's activism, and her pre-Gilead relationship with Luke began when she became his mistress, meeting him in cheap hotels for sex. Although friends with Ofglen, a member of the resistance, she is never bold enough to join up herself. Indeed, after she begins her affair with Nick, she seems to lose sight of escape entirely and suddenly feels that life in Gilead is almost

bearable. If she does finally escape, it is because of Nick, not because of anything she does -herself.

Offred is a mostly passive character, good-hearted but complacent. Like her peers, she took for granted the freedoms feminism won and now pays the price. The Commander The Commander poses an ethical problem for Offred, and consequently for us. First, he is Offred's Commander and the immediate agent of her oppression. As a founder of Gilead, he also bears responsibility for the entire totalitarian society. In person, he is far more sympathetic and friendly toward Offred than most other people, and Offred's evenings with the Commander in his study offer her a small respite from the wasteland of her life.

At times, his unhappiness and need for companionship make him seem as much a prisoner of Gilead's strictures as anyone else. Offred finds herself feeling sympathy for this man. Ultimately, Offred and the reader recognize that if the Commander is a prisoner, the prison is one that he himself helped construct and that his prison is heaven compared to the prison he created for women. As the novel progresses, we come to realize that his visits with Offred are selfish rather than charitable.

They satisfy his need for companionship, but he doesn't seem to care that they put Offred at terrible risk, a fact of which he must be aware, given that the previous Handmaid hanged herself when her visits to the Commander were discovered. The Commander's moral blindness, apparent in his attempts to explain the virtues of Gilead, are highlighted by his and Offred's visit to Jezebel's. The club, a place where the elite men of the society can

engage in recreational extramarital sex, reveals the rank hypocrisy that runs through Gileadean society.

Offred's relationship with the Commander is best represented by a situation she remembers from a documentary on the Holocaust. In the film, the mistress of a brutal death camp guard defended the man she loved, claiming that he was not a monster. "How easy it is to invent a humanity," Offred thinks. In other words, anyone can seem human, and even likable, given the right set of circumstances. But even if the Commander is likable and can be kind or considerate, his responsibility for the creation of Gilead and his callousness to the hell he created for women means that he, like the Nazi guard, is a monster. Serena Joy

Though Serena had been an advocate for traditional values and the establishment of the Gileadean state, her bitterness at the outcome—being confined to the home and having to see her husband copulating with a Handmaid—suggests that spokeswomen for anti-feminist causes might not enjoy getting their way as much as they believe they would. Serena's obvious unhappiness means that she teeters on the edge of inspiring our sympathy, but she forfeits that sympathy by taking out her frustration on Offred. She seems to possess no compassion for Offred. She can see the difficulty of her own life, but not that of another woman.

The climactic moment in Serena's interaction with Offred comes when she arranges for Offred to sleep with Nick. It seems that Serena makes these plans out of a desire to help Offred get pregnant, but Serena gets an equal reward from Offred's pregnancy: she gets to raise the baby. Furthermore,

Serena's offer to show Offred a picture of her lost daughter if she sleeps with Nick reveals that Serena has always known of Offred's daughter's whereabouts. Not only has she cruelly concealed this knowledge, she is willing to exploit Offred's loss of a child in order to get an infant of her own.

Serena's lack of sympathy makes her the perfect tool for Gilead's social order, which relies on the willingness of women to oppress other women. She is a cruel, selfish woman, and Atwood implies that such women are the glue that binds Gilead. Throughout the novel, Moira's relationship with Offred epitomizes female friendship. Gilead claims to promote solidarity between women, but in fact it only produces suspicion, hostility, and petty tyranny. The kind of relationship that Moira and Offred maintain from college onward does not exist in Gilead. In Offred's flashbacks, Moira also embodies female resistance to Gilead.

She is a lesbian, which means that she rejects male-female sexual interactions, the only kind that Gilead values. More than that, she is the only character who stands up to authority directly by making two escape attempts, one successful, from the Red Center. The manner in which she escapes—taking off her clothes and putting on the uniform of an Aunt—symbolizes her rejection of Gilead's attempt to define her identity. From then on, until Offred meets up with her again, Moira represents an alternative to the meek subservience and acceptance of one's fate that most of the Handmaids adopt.

When Offred runs into Moira, Moira has been recaptured and is working as a prostitute at Jezebel's, servicing the Commanders. Her fighting spirit seems

broken, and she has become resigned to her fate. After embodying resistance for most of the novel, Moira comes to exemplify the way a totalitarian state can crush even the most independent spirit.

Themes, Motifs & Symbols

Themes

Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.

Women's Bodies as Political Instruments

Because Gilead was formed in response to the crisis caused by dramatically increased birthrates, the state's entire structure, with its religious trappings and rigid political hierarchy, is built around a single goal: control of reproduction. The state tackles the problem head-on by assuming complete control of women's bodies through their political subjugation. Women cannot vote, hold property or jobs, read, or do anything else that might allow them to become subversive or independent and thereby undermine their husbands or the state. Despite all of Gilead's pro-women rhetoric, such subjugation creates a society in which women are treated as subhuman.

They are reduced to their fertility, treated as nothing more than a set of ovaries and a womb. In one of the novel's key scenes, Offred lies in the bath and reflects that, before Gilead, she considered her body an instrument of her desires; now, she is just a mound of flesh surrounding a womb that must be filled in order to make her useful. Gilead seeks to deprive women of their individuality in order to make them docile carriers of the next generation.

Language as a Tool of Power

Gilead creates an official vocabulary that ignores and warps reality in order to serve the needs of the new society's elite.

Having made it illegal for women to hold jobs, Gilead creates a system of titles. Whereas men are defined by their military rank, women are defined solely by their gender roles as Wives, Handmaids, or Marthas. Stripping them of permanent individual names strips them of their individuality, or tries to. Feminists and deformed babies are treated as subhuman, denoted by the terms "Unwomen" and "Unbabies." Blacks and Jews are defined by biblical terms ("Children of Ham" and "Sons of Jacob," respectively) that set them apart from the rest of society, making their persecution easier.

There are prescribed greetings for personal encounters, and to fail to offer the correct greetings is to fall under suspicion of disloyalty. Specially created terms define the rituals of Gilead, such as "Prayvaganzas," "Salvagings," and "Particutions." Dystopian novels about the dangers of totalitarian society frequently explore the connection between a state's repression of its subjects and its perversion of language ("Newspeak" in George Orwell's 1984 is the most famous example), and *The Handmaid's Tale* carries on this tradition. Gilead maintains its control over women's bodies by maintaining control over names.

The Causes of Complacency In a totalitarian state, Atwood suggests, people will endure oppression willingly as long as they receive some slight amount of power or freedom. Offred remembers her mother saying that it is "truly amazing, what people can get used to, as long as there are a few compensations." Offred's complacency after she begins her relationship with Nick shows the truth of this insight. Her situation restricts her horribly

compared to the freedom her former life allowed, but her relationship with Nick allows her to reclaim the tiniest fragment of her former existence.

The physical affection and companionship become compensation that make the restrictions almost bearable. Offred seems suddenly so content that she does not say yes when Ofglen asks her to gather information about the Commander. Women in general support Gilead's existence by willingly participating in it, serving as agents of the totalitarian state. While a woman like Serena Joy has no power in the world of men, she exercises authority within her own household and seems to delight in her tyranny over Offred. She jealously guards what little power she has and wields it eagerly.

In a similar way, the women known as Aunts, especially Aunt Lydia, act as willing agents of the Gileadean state. They indoctrinate other women into the ruling ideology, keep a close eye out for rebellion, and generally serve the same function for Gilead that the Jewish police did under Nazi rule. Atwood's message is bleak. At the same time as she condemns Offred, Serena Joy, the Aunts, and even Moira for their complacency, she suggests that even if those women mustered strength and stopped complying, they would likely fail to make a difference.

In Gilead the tiny rebellions or resistances do not necessarily matter. In the end, Offred escapes because of luck rather than resistance. Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, or literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text's major themes. Rape and Sexual Violence Sexual violence, particularly against women, pervades *The Handmaid's Tale*. The

prevalence of rape and pornography in the pre-Gilead world justified to the founders their establishment of the new order.

The Commander and the Aunts claim that women are better protected in Gilead, that they are treated with respect and kept safe from violence. Certainly, the official penalty for rape is terrible: in one scene, the Handmaids tear apart with their bare hands a supposed rapist (actually a member of the resistance). Yet, while Gilead claims to suppress sexual violence, it actually institutionalizes it, as we see at Jezebel's, the club that provides the Commanders with a ready stable of prostitutes to service the male elite.

Most important, sexual violence is apparent in the central institution of the novel, the Ceremony, which compels Handmaids to have sex with their Commanders. Religious Terms Used for Political Purposes Gilead is a theocracy—a government in which there is no separation between state and religion—and its official vocabulary incorporates religious terminology and biblical references. Domestic servants are called “Marthas” in reference to a domestic character in the New Testament; the local police are “Guardians of the Faith”; soldiers are “Angels”; and the Commanders are officially “Commanders of the Faithful. All the stores have biblical names: Loaves and Fishes, All Flesh, Milk and Honey. Even the automobiles have biblical names like Behemoth, Whirlwind, and Chariot. Using religious terminology to describe people, ranks, and businesses whitewashes political skullduggery in pious language. It provides an ever-present reminder that the founders of Gilead insist they act on the authority of the Bible itself. Politics and religion

sleep in the same bed in Gilead, where the slogan “ God is a National Resource” predominates. Similarities between Reactionary and Feminist Ideologies

Although *The Handmaid's Tale* offers a specifically feminist critique of the reactionary attitudes toward women that hold sway in Gilead, Atwood occasionally draws similarities between the architects of Gilead and radical feminists such as Offred's mother. Both groups claim to protect women from sexual violence, and both show themselves willing to restrict free speech in order to accomplish this goal. Offred recalls a scene in which her mother and other feminists burn porn magazines. Like the founders of Gilead, these feminists ban some expressions of sexuality.

Gilead also uses the feminist rhetoric of female solidarity and “ sisterhood” to its own advantage. These points of similarity imply the existence of a dark side of feminist rhetoric. Despite Atwood's gentle criticism of the feminist left, her real target is the religious right. Symbols Symbols are objects, characters, figures, or colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts. Cambridge, Massachusetts The center of Gilead's power, where Offred lives, is never explicitly identified, but a number of clues mark it as the town of Cambridge.

Cambridge, its neighboring city of Boston, and Massachusetts as a whole were centers for America's first religious and intolerant society—the Puritan New England of the seventeenth century. Atwood reminds us of this history with the ancient Puritan church that Offred and Ofglen visit early in the novel, which Gilead has turned into a museum. The choice of Cambridge as a

setting symbolizes the direct link between the Puritans and their spiritual heirs in Gilead. Both groups dealt harshly with religious, sexual, or political deviation. Harvard University

Gilead has transformed Harvard's buildings into a detention center run by the Eyes, Gilead's secret police. Bodies of executed dissidents hang from the Wall that runs around the college, and Salvagings (mass executions) take place in Harvard Yard, on the steps of the library. Harvard becomes a symbol of the inverted world that Gilead has created: a place that was founded to pursue knowledge and truth becomes a seat of oppression, torture, and the denial of every principle for which a university is supposed to stand. The Handmaids' Red Habits

The red color of the costumes worn by the Handmaids symbolizes fertility, which is the caste's primary function. Red suggests the blood of the menstrual cycle and of childbirth. At the same time, however, red is also a traditional marker of sexual sin, hearkening back to the scarlet letter worn by the adulterous Hester Prynne in Nathaniel Hawthorne's tale of Puritan ideology. While the Handmaids' reproductive role supposedly finds its justification in the Bible, in some sense they commit adultery by having sex with their Commanders, who are married men. The wives, who often call the Handmaids sluts, feel the pain of this sanctioned adultery.

The Handmaids' red garments, then, also symbolize the ambiguous sinfulness of the Handmaids' position in Gilead. A Palimpsest A palimpsest is a document on which old writing has been scratched out, often leaving traces, and new writing put in its place; it can also be a document consisting

of many layers of writing simply piled one on top of another. Offred describes the Red Center as a palimpsest, but the word actually symbolizes all of Gilead. The old world has been erased and replaced, but only partially, by a new order. Remnants of the pre-Gilead days continue to infuse the new world.

The Eyes The Eyes of God are Gilead's secret police. Both their name and their insignia, a winged eye, symbolize the eternal watchfulness of God and the totalitarian state. In Gilead's theocracy, the eye of God and of the state are assumed to be one and the same. Chapters 1-3 Summary: Chapter 1 The narrator, whose name we learn later is Offred, describes how she and other women slept on army cots in a gymnasium. Aunt Sara and Aunt Elizabeth patrol with electric cattle prods hanging from their leather belts, and the women, forbidden to speak aloud, whisper without attracting attention.

Twice daily, the women walk in the former football field, which is surrounded by a chain-link fence topped with barbed wire. Armed guards called Angels patrol outside. While the women take their walks, the Angels stand outside the fence with their backs to the women. The women long for the Angels to turn and see them. They imagine that if the men looked at them or talked to them, they could use their bodies to make a deal. The narrator describes lying in bed at night, quietly exchanging names with the other women. Summary: Chapter 2

The scene changes, and the story shifts from the past to the present tense. Offred now lives in a room fitted out with curtains, a pillow, a framed picture, and a braided rug. There is no glass in the room, not even over the framed

picture. The window does not open completely, and the windowpane is shatterproof. There is nothing in the room from which one could hang a rope, and the door does not lock or even shut completely. Looking around, Offred remembers how Aunt Lydia told her to consider her circumstances a privilege, not a prison.

Handmaids, to which group the narrator belongs, dress entirely in red, except for the white wings framing their faces. Household servants, called “Marthas,” wear green uniforms. “Wives” wear blue uniforms. Offred often secretly listens to Rita and Cora, the Marthas who work in the house where she lives. Once, she hears Rita state that she would never debase herself as someone in Offred’s position must. Cora replies that Offred works for all the women, and that if she (Cora) were younger and had not gotten her tubes tied, she could have been in Offred’s situation. Offred wishes she could talk to them, but Marthas are not supposed to develop relationships with Handmaids. She wishes that she could share gossip like they do—gossip about how one Handmaid gave birth to a stillborn, how a Wife stabbed a Handmaid with a knitting needle out of jealousy, how someone poisoned her Commander with toilet cleaner. Offred dresses for a shopping trip. She collects from Rita the tokens that serve as currency. Each token bears an image of what it will purchase: twelve eggs, cheese, and a steak. Summary: Chapter 3 On her way out, Offred looks around for the Commander’s Wife but does not see her.

The Commander’s Wife has a garden, and she knits constantly. All the Wives knit scarves “for the Angels at the front lines,” but the Commander’s Wife is

a particularly skilled knitter. Offred wonders if the scarves actually get used, or if they just give the Wives something to do. She remembers arriving at the Commander's house for the first time, after the two couples to which she was previously assigned " didn't work out. " One of the Wives in an earlier posting secluded herself in the bedroom, purportedly drinking, and Offred hoped the new Commander's Wife would be different.

On the first day, her new mistress told her to stay out of her sight as much as possible, and to avoid making trouble. As she talked, the Wife smoked a cigarette, a black-market item. Handmaids, Offred notes, are forbidden coffee, cigarettes, and alcohol. Then the Wife reminded Offred that the Commander is her husband, permanently and forever. " It's one of the things we fought for," she said, looking away. Suddenly, Offred recognized her mistress as Serena Joy, the lead soprano from Growing Souls Gospel Hour, a Sunday-morning religious program that aired when Offred was a child.

Analysis: Chapters 1-5 The Handmaid's Tale plunges immediately into an unfamiliar, unexplained world, using unfamiliar terms like " Handmaid," " Angel," and " Commander" that only come to make sense as the story progresses.

Offred gradually delivers information about her past and the world in which she lives, often narrating through flashbacks. She narrates these flashbacks in the past tense, which distinguishes them from the main body of the story, which she tells in the present tense. The first scene, in the gymnasium, is a flashback, as are Offred's memories of the Marthas' gossip and her first meeting with the Commander's Wife.

Although at this point we do not know what the gymnasium signifies, or why the narrator and other women lived there, we do gather some information from the brief first chapter. The women in the gymnasium live under the constant surveillance of the Angels and the Aunts, and they cannot interact with one another. They seem to inhabit a kind of prison. Offred likens the gym to a palimpsest, a parchment either erased and written on again or layered with multiple writings. In the gym palimpsest, Offred sees multiple layers of history: high school girls going to basketball games and dances wearing miniskirts, then pants, then green hair.

Likening the gym to a palimpsest also suggests that the society Offred now inhabits has been superimposed on a previous society, and traces of the old linger beneath the new. In Chapter 2, Offred sits in a room that seems at first like a pleasant change from harsh atmosphere of the gymnasium. However, her description of her room demonstrates that the same rigid, controlling structures that ruled the gym continue to constrict her in this house. The room is like a prison in which all means of defense, or escape by suicide or flight, have been removed.

She wonders if women everywhere get issued exactly the same sheets and curtains, which underlines the idea that the room is like a government-ordered prison. We do not know yet what purpose Offred serves in the house, although it seems to be sexual—Cora comments that she could have done Offred's work if she hadn't gotten her tubes tied, which implies that Offred's function is reproductive. Serena Joy's coldness to Offred makes it plain that she considers Offred a threat, or at least an annoyance. We do

know from Offred's name that she, like all Handmaids, is considered state property.

Handmaids' names simply reflect which Commander owns them. "Of Fred," "Of Warren," and "Of Glen" get collapsed into "Offred," "Ofwarren," and "Ofglen." The names make more sense when preceded by the word "Property": "Property Offred," for example. Thus, every time the women hear their names, they are reminded that they are no more than property. These early chapters establish the novel's style, which is characterized by considerable physical description. The narrator devotes attention to the features of the gym, the Commander's house, and Serena Joy's pinched face.

Offred tells the story in nonlinear fashion, following the temporal leaps of her own mind. The narrative goes where her thoughts take it—one moment to the present, in the Commander's house, and the next back in the gymnasium, or in the old world, the United States as it exists in Offred's memory. We do not have the sense, as in some first-person narratives, that Offred is composing this story from a distanced vantage point, reflecting back on her past. Rather, all of her thoughts have a quality of immediacy. We are there with Offred as she goes about her daily life, and as she slips out of the present and thinks about her past.

Chapters 4-6 Summary: Chapter 4 As she leaves the house to go shopping, Offred notices Nick, a Guardian of the Faith, washing the Commander's car. Nick lives above the garage. He winks at Offred—an offense against decorum— but she ignores him, fearing that he may be an Eye, a spy assigned to test her. She waits at the corner for Ofglen, another Handmaid

with whom Offred will do her shopping. The Handmaids always travel in pairs when outside. Ofglen arrives, and they exchange greetings, careful not to say anything that isn't strictly orthodox.

Ofglen says that she has heard the war is going well, and that the army recently defeated a group of Baptist rebels. "Praise be," Offred responds. They reach a checkpoint manned by two young Guardians. The Guardians serve as a routine police force and do menial labor. They are men too young, too old, or just generally unfit for the army. Young Guardians, such as these, can be dangerous because they are frequently more fanatical or nervous than older guards. These young Guardians recently shot a Martha as she fumbled for her pass, because they thought she was a man in disguise carrying a bomb.

Offred heard Rita and Cora talking about the shooting. Rita was angry, but Cora seemed to accept the shooting as the price one pays for safety. At the checkpoint, Offred subtly flirts with one of the Guardians by making eye contact, cherishing this small infraction against the rules. She considers how sex-starved the young men must be, since they cannot marry without permission, masturbation is a sin, and pornographic magazines and films are now forbidden. The Guardians can only hope to become Angels, when they will be allowed to take a wife and perhaps eventually get a Handmaid.

This marks the first time in the novel we hear the word "Handmaid" used. Summary: Chapter 5 In town, Ofglen and Offred wait in line at the shops. We learn the name of this new society: "The Republic of Gilead." Offred remembers the pre-Gilead days, when women were not protected: they had

to keep their doors closed to strangers and ignore catcalls on the street. Now no one whistles at women as they walk; no one touches them or talks to them. She remembers Aunt Lydia explaining that more than one kind of freedom exists, and that “[i]n the days of anarchy, it was freedom to.

Now you are being given freedom from. ” The women shop at stores known by names like All Flesh and Milk and Honey. Pictures of meat or fruit mark the stores, rather than lettered signs, because “ they decided that even the names of shops were too much temptation for us. ” A Handmaid in the late stages of pregnancy enters the store and raises a flurry of excitement. Offred recognizes her from the Red Center. She used to be known as Janine, and she was one of Aunt Lydia’s favorites. Now her name is Ofwarren. Offred senses that Janine went shopping just so she could show off her pregnancy.

Offred thinks of her husband, Luke, and their daughter, and the life they led before Gilead existed. She remembers a prosaic detail from their everyday life together: she used to store plastic shopping bags under the sink, which annoyed Luke, who worried that their daughter would get one of the bags caught over her head. She remembers feeling guilty for her carelessness. Offred and Ofglen finish their shopping and go out to the sidewalk, where they encounter a group of Japanese tourists and their interpreter. The tourists want to take a photograph, but Offred says no.

Many of the interpreters are Eyes, and Handmaids must not appear immodest. Offred and Ofglen marvel at the women’s exposed legs, high heels, and polished toenails. The tourists ask if they are happy, and since Ofglen does not answer, Offred replies that they are very happy. Summary:

Chapter 6 This may not seem ordinary to you now, but after a time it will. It will become ordinary. (See Important Quotations Explained) As they return from shopping, Ofglen suggests they take the long way and pass by the church. It is an old building, decorated inside with paintings of what seem to be Puritans from the colonial era.

Now the former church is kept as a museum. Offred describes a nearby boathouse, old dormitories, a football stadium, and redbrick sidewalks. Atwood implies that Offred is walking across what used to be the campus of Harvard University. Across the street from the church sits the Wall, where the authorities hang the bodies of executed criminals as examples to the rest of the Republic of Gilead. The authorities cover the men's heads with bags. One of the bags looks painted with a red smile where the blood has seeped through.

All of the six corpses wear signs around their necks picturing fetuses, signaling that they were executed for performing abortions before Gilead came into existence. Although their actions were legal at the time, their crimes are being punished retroactively. Offred feels relieved that none of the bodies could be Luke's, since he was not a doctor. As she stares at the bodies, Offred thinks of Aunt Lydia telling them that soon their new life would seem ordinary. Analysis: Chapters 4-6 The theocratic nature of Offred's society, the name of which we learn for the first time in these chapters, becomes clear during her shopping trip.

A theocracy exists when there is no separation between church and state, and a single religion dominates all aspects of life. In Gilead, state and

religion are inseparable. The official language of Gilead uses many biblical terms, from the various ranks that men hold (Angels, Guardians of the Faith, Commanders of the Faith, the Eyes of God), to the stores where Offred and Ofglen shop (Milk and Honey, All Flesh, Loaves and Fishes), to the names of automobiles (Behemoth, Whirlwind, Chariot). The very name "Gilead" refers to a location in ancient Israel. The name also recalls a line from the Book of Psalms: "there is a balm in Gilead. This phrase, we realize later, has been transformed into a kind of national motto. Atwood does not describe the exact details of Gilead's state religion. In Chapter 2, Offred describes her room as "a return to traditional values." The religious right in America uses the phrase "traditional values," so Atwood seems to link the values of this dystopic society to the values of the Protestant Christian religious right in America. Gilead seems more Protestant than anything else, but its brand of Christianity pays far more attention to the Old Testament than the New Testament.

The religious justification for having Handmaids, for instance, is taken from the Book of Genesis. We learn that neither Catholics nor Jews are welcome in Gilead. The former must convert, while the latter must emigrate to Israel or renounce their Judaism. Atwood seems less interested in religion than in the intersection between religion, politics, and sex. The Handmaid's Tale explores the political oppression of women, carried out in the name of God but in large part motivated by a desire to control women's bodies.

Gilead sees women's sexuality as dangerous: women must cover themselves from head to toe, for example, and not reveal their sexual attractions. When

Offred attracts the Guardians, she feels this ability to inspire sexual attraction is the only power she retains. Every other privilege is stripped away, down to the very act of reading, which is forbidden. Women are not even allowed to read store signs. By controlling women's minds, by not allowing them to read, the authorities more easily control women's bodies. The patriarchs of Gilead want to control women's bodies, their sex lives, and their reproductive rights.

The bodies of slain abortionists on the Wall hammer home the point: feminists believe that women must have abortion rights in order to control their own bodies, and in Gilead, giving women control of their bodies is a horrifying crime. When Offred and Ofglen go to town to shop, geographical clues and street names suggest that they live in what was once Cambridge, Massachusetts, and that their walk takes them near what used to be the campus of Harvard University. The choice of Cambridge for the setting of *The Handmaid's Tale* is significant, since Massachusetts was a Puritan stronghold during the colonial period of the United States.

The Puritans were a persecuted minority in England, but when they fled to New England, they re-created the repression they suffered at home, this time casting themselves as the repressors rather than the repressed. They established an intolerant religious society in some ways similar to Gilead. Atwood locates her fictional intolerant society in a place founded by intolerant people. By turning the old church into a museum, and leaving untouched portraits of Puritan forebears, the founders of Gilead suggest their admiration for the old Puritan society. Chapters 7-9 Summary: Chapter 7

I would like to believe this is a story I'm telling. I need to believe it. I must believe it. Those who can believe that such stories are only stories have a better chance. (See Important Quotations Explained) At night, Offred likes to remember her former life. She recalls talking to her college friend, Moira, in her dorm room. She remembers being a child and going to a park with her mother, where they saw a group of women and a few men burning pornographic magazines. Offred has forgotten a large chunk of time, which she thinks might be the fault of an injection or pill the authorities gave her.

She remembers waking up somewhere and screaming, demanding to know what they had done with her daughter. The authorities told Offred she was unfit, and her daughter was with those fit to care for her. They showed her a photograph of her child wearing a white dress, holding the hand of a strange woman. As she recounts these events, Offred imagines she is telling her story to someone, telling things that she cannot write down, because writing is forbidden. Summary: Chapter 8 Returning from another shopping trip, Ofglen and Offred notice three new bodies on the Wall.

One is a Catholic priest and two are Guardians who bear placards around their necks that read " Gender Treachery. " This means they were hanged for committing homosexual acts. After looking at the bodies for a while, Offred tells Ofglen that they should continue walking home. They meet a funeral procession of Econowives, the wives of poorer men. One Econowife carries a small black jar. From the size of the jar, Offred can tell that it contains a dead embryo from an early miscarriage—one that came too early

to know whether it was an “ Unbaby. ” The Econowives do not like the Handmaids.

One woman scowls, and another spits at the Handmaids as they pass. At the corner near the Commander's home, Ofglen says “ Under His Eye,” the orthodox good-bye, hesitating as if she wants to say more but then continuing on her way. When Offred reaches the Commander's driveway she passes Nick, who breaks the rules by asking her about her walk. She says nothing and goes into the house. She sees Serena Joy out in the garden and recalls how after Serena's singing career ended, she became a spokesperson for respecting the “ sanctity of the home” and for women staying at home instead of working.

Serena herself never stayed at home, because she was always out giving speeches. Once, Offred remembers, someone tried to assassinate Serena but killed her secretary instead. Offred wonders if Serena is angry that she can no longer be a public figure, now that what she advocated has come to pass and all women, including her, are confined to the home. In the kitchen, Rita fusses over the quality of the purchases as she always does. Offred retreats upstairs and notices the Commander standing outside her room. He is not supposed to be there. He nods at her and retreats. Summary: Chapter 9

Offred remembers renting hotel rooms and waiting for Luke to meet her, before they were married, when he was cheating on his first wife. She regrets that she did not fully appreciate the freedom to have her own space when she wanted it. Thinking of the problems she and Luke thought they had, she realizes they were truly happy, although they did not know it. She

remembers examining her room in the Commander's house little by little after she first arrived. She saw stains on the mattress, left over from long-ago sex, and she discovered a Latin phrase freshly scratched into the floor of the closet: *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*.

Offred does not understand Latin. It pleases her to imagine that this message allows her to commune with the woman who wrote it. She pictures this woman as freckly and irreverent, someone like Moira. Later, she asks Rita who stayed in her room before her. Rita tells her to specify which one, implying that there were a number of Handmaids before her. Offred says, guessing, "[t]he lively one . . . with freckles." Rita asks how Offred knew about her, but she refuses to tell Offred anything about the previous Handmaid beyond a vague statement that she did not work out. Analysis:

Chapter 7-9

Atwood suggests that those who seek to restrict sexual expression, whether they are feminists or religious conservatives, ultimately share the same goal—the control of sexuality, particularly women's sexuality. In the flashback to the scene from Offred's childhood in which women burn pornographic magazines, Atwood shows the similarity between the extremism of the left and the extremism of the right. The people burning magazines are feminists, not religious conservatives like the leaders of Gilead, yet their goal is the same: to crack down on certain kinds of sexual freedom.

In other words, the desire for control over sexuality is not unique to the religious totalitarians of Gilead; it also existed in the feminist anti-pornography crusades that preceded the fall of the United States. Gilead

actually appropriates some of the rhetoric of women's liberation in its attempt to control women. Gilead also uses the Aunts and the Aunts' rhetoric, forcing women to control other women. Again and again in the novel, the voice of Aunt Lydia rings in Offred's head, insisting that women are better off in Gilead, free from exploitation and violence, than they were in the dangerous freedom of pre-Gilead times.

In Chapter 7, Offred relates some of the details of how she lost her child. This loss is the central wound on Offred's psyche throughout the novel, and the novel's great source of emotional power. The loss of her child is so painful to Offred that she can only relate the story in fits and starts; so far the details of what happened have been murky. When telling stories from her past, like the story of her daughter's disappearance, Offred often seems to draw on a partial or foggy memory. It almost seems as if she is remembering details from hundreds of years ago, when we know these things happened a few years before the narrative.

Partly this distance is the product of emotional trauma—thinking of the past is painful for Offred. But in Chapter 7, Offred offers her own explanation for these gaps: she thinks it possible that the authorities gave her a pill or injection that harmed her memory. Immediately after remembering her daughter, Offred addresses someone she calls “you.” She could be talking to God, Luke, or an imaginary future reader. “I would like to believe this is a story I'm telling,” Offred says. “Those who can believe that such stories are only stories have a better chance . . . A story is a letter. Dear You, I'll say.” In the act of telling her imagined audience about her life, Offred reduces her

life's horror and makes its oppressive weight endurable. Also, if she can think of her life as a story and herself as the writer, she can think of her life as controllable, fictional, something not terrifying because not real. We learn in Chapter 8 that Serena used to campaign against women's rights. This makes her a figure worthy of pity, in a way; she supported the anti-woman principles on which Gilead was founded, but once they were implemented, she found that they affected her as well as other women. She now lives deprived of freedom and saddled with a Handmaid who has sex with her husband. Yet Serena forfeits what pity we might feel for her by her callous, petty behavior toward Offred. Powerless in the world of men, Serena can only take out her frustration on the women under her thumb by making their lives miserable. In many ways, she treats Offred far worse than the Commander does, which suggests that Gilead's oppressive power structure succeeds not just because men created it, but because women like Serena sustain it.

Nolite te bastardes carborundorum—the Latin phrase scrawled in Offred's closet by a previous Handmaid—takes on a magical importance for Offred even before she knows what it means. It symbolizes her inner resistance to Gilead's tyranny and makes her feel like she can communicate with other strong women, like the woman who wrote the message. In Chapter 29 we learn what the phrase means, and its role in sustaining Offred's resistance comes to seem perfectly appropriate. Chapters 10-12 Summary: Chapter 10 Offred often sings songs in her head—"Amazing Grace" or songs by Elvis.

Most music is forbidden in Gilead, and there is little of it in the Commander's home. Sometimes she hears Serena humming and listening to a recording of herself from the time when she was a famous gospel singer. Summer is approaching, and the house grows hot. Soon the Handmaids will be allowed to wear their summer dresses. Offred thinks about how Aunt Lydia would describe the terrible things that used to happen to women in the old days, before Gilead, when they sunbathed wearing next to nothing. Offred remembers Moira throwing an "underwhore" party to sell sexy lingerie.

She remembers reading stories in the papers about women who were murdered and raped, but even in the old days it seemed distant from her life and unrelated to her. Offred sits at the window, beside a cushion embroidered with the word Faith. It is the only word they have given her to read, and she spends many minutes looking at it. From her window, she watches the Commander get into his car and drive away. Summary: Chapter 11 Offred says that yesterday she went to the doctor. Every month, a Guardian accompanies Offred to a doctor, who tests her for pregnancy and disease.

At the doctor's office, Offred undresses, pulling a sheet over her body. A sheet hangs down from the ceiling, cutting off the doctor's view of her face. The doctor is not supposed to see her face or speak to her if he can help it. On this visit, though, he chatters cheerfully and then offers to help her. He says many of the Commanders are either too old to produce a child or are sterile, and he suggests that he could have sex with her and impregnate her.

His use of the word "sterile" shocks Offred, for officially sterile men no longer exist. In Gilead, there are only fruitful women and barren women.

Offred thinks him genuinely sympathetic to her plight, but she also realizes he enjoys his own empathy and his position of power. After a moment, she declines, saying it is too dangerous. If they are caught, they will both receive the death penalty. She tries to sound casual and grateful as she refuses, but she feels frightened. To revenge her refusal, the doctor could falsely report that she has a health problem, and then she would be sent to the Colonies with the "Unwomen." Offred also feels frightened, she realizes, because she has been given a way out. Summary: Chapter 12

It is one of Offred's required bath days. The bathroom has no mirror, no razors, and no lock on the door. Cora sits outside, waiting for Offred. Offred's own naked body seems strange to her, and she finds it hard to believe that she once wore bathing suits, letting people see her thighs and arms, her breasts and buttocks. Lying in the bath, she thinks of her daughter and remembers the time when a crazy woman tried to kidnap the little girl in the supermarket. The authorities in Gilead took Offred's then-five-year-old child from her, and three years have passed since then.