

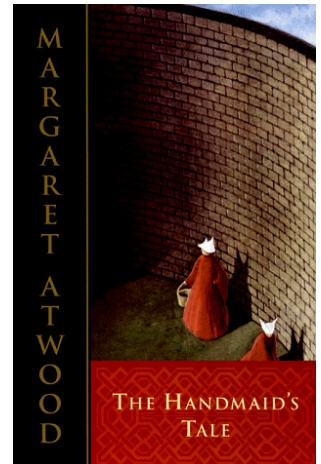
# *The Handmaid's Tale*

By Margaret Atwood

## Suggested Discussion Questions

### Chapters 1-6

- What impressions have you gained from this chapter of the narrator and her circumstances?
- By what means? (How)
- What do you not know that you would have expected to find out from the first chapter of a novel?
- What might be the author's purpose in keeping such knowledge from her readers?
- How does Gilead control its citizens?
- Atwood describes differences between the present time in Gilead and 'the time before'. How are changes for the worse?
- In the section 'Historical Notes', Professor Pieixoto says that '*Judgements are of necessity culture-specific... Our job is not to censure but to understand.*' Do you think it is desirable or necessary to make a moral judgement about past regimes? Is it possible to do so?
- Atwood said of her novel '*There's nothing in the book that hasn't already happened.*' The Wall, which Atwood describes as being 'hundreds of years old' has been used in Gilead for a sinister purpose. Can you cite examples to support her comment?



### Chapters 7 - 12

- How many instances can you find in this chapter in which Offred compares and contrasts her past life and her present existence? What is the effect of these constant comparisons?
- In chapter 9, we learn a crucial fact about Luke. In the light of what you discover, can you think about Atwood's methods of structuring her narrative and her use of suspense?
- If chapter 11 were a self-contained short story, what, in your opinion, would be the most significant points to emerge?
- What other books, films or plays do you know which also discuss moral choices and dilemmas?

[Continues...]

## Chapters 13-17

- Through the use of certain metaphors and images Atwood forms the character of the Commander (Chapter 15) Can you assess the picture that emerges?
- What is Serena Joy's attitude towards Offred? When does it begin to change and why?
- How far do names help to define one's identity? Why might Atwood choose not to reveal explicitly the real name of Offred?

## Chapters 18 -23

- In chapter 18 (Night VII) p116, Offred says, '*One of the gravestones in the cemetery... has an anchor on it and an hourglass.*' What, in your opinion, are the possible meanings of these symbols? How do they relate to the words, 'In Hope?'
- In chapter 19, the idea of an egg is focussed on in great detail, though it adds nothing to the immediate plot. Why?
- On p. 124 we read, "*I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children.*" [This is Genesis 3:16.](#) Why is it cited, and how are biblical quotes used in this book?
- What is the character Moira's function within the story?
- The banning of language or of books/magazines is a frequently-used political tool. How is it used here?

## Chapter 24 -29

- What topics or issues does Atwood use in this dystopian novel to investigate or attack?

## Chapter 30 - 36

- In chapter 34, Atwood describes the imagined shaming of men who sold titillating clothing for women. She says they were made to wear 'conical paper hats like dunce hats'. For different reasons, public shaming has taken place in various regimes throughout history and often been depicted in popular culture and Literature. Discuss the following or other examples you can think of:
  - ⇒ The Puritans of New England (eg. [The Scarlet Letter](#), Nathaniel Hawthorne)
  - ⇒ The Chinese Cultural Revolution, 1966 - 76.
  - ⇒ [Shaming of Cersei, Game of Thrones.](#)

[Continues...]

- On page 240 of chapter 35, Offred says that she has been 'obliterated'. What does she mean? Compare this to Margaret Atwood's poem, *This is a Picture of Me*.

It was taken some time ago.  
At first it seems to be  
a smeared  
print: blurred lines and grey flecks  
blended with the paper;

then, as you scan  
it, you see in the left-hand corner  
a thing that is like a branch: part of a tree  
(balsam or spruce) emerging  
and, to the right, halfway up  
what ought to be a gentle  
slope, a small frame house.

In the background there is a lake,  
and beyond that, some low hills.

(The photograph was taken  
the day after I drowned.

[\[Read full poem here\]](#)

Do you see any similarities?

### Chapter 37 - 45

- In chapter 38 what language does Atwood use to make the women in Jezebel's seem tawdry? (hortera)
- Atwood is always alert to nuances of language and the importance of being aware of shades of meaning. In Chapter forty, Offred says that using the clichéd language of romance, such as that used in old movies, was a way 'to keep the core of yourself out of reach'. What does she mean by this?
- Did you like the way Atwood ended the story?
- Why do you think she included the "Historical Notes" at the end? What effect does it create?



Ajuntament de L'Hospitalet



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