

The Handmaid's Tale

(Margaret Atwood)

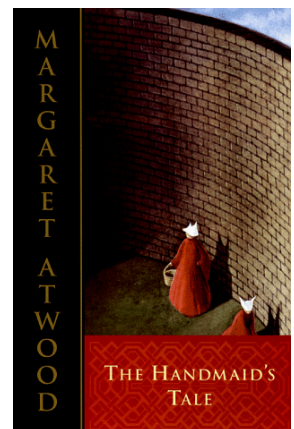
In the world of the near future, who will control women's bodies?

Offred is a Handmaid in the Republic of Gilead. She may leave the home of the Commander and his wife once a day to walk to food markets whose signs are now pictures instead of words because women are no longer allowed to read. She must lie on her back once a month and pray that the Commander makes her pregnant, because in an age of declining births, Offred and the other Handmaids are only valued if their ovaries are viable.

Offred can remember the days before, when she lived and made love with her husband Luke; when she played with and protected her daughter; when she had a job, money of her own, and access to knowledge. But all of that is gone now....

Funny, unexpected, horrifying, and altogether convincing, *The Handmaid's Tale* is at once scathing satire, dire warning, and tour de force.

[<http://www.readinggroupguides.com/reviews/the-handmaids-tale>]



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Margaret Atwood - A Brief Biography

Margaret Eleanor Atwood, (born November 18, 1939) is a Canadian poet, novelist, literary critic, essayist, and environmental activist. She is a winner of the Arthur C. Clarke Award and Prince of Asturias Award for Literature, has been shortlisted for the Booker Prize five times, winning once, and has been a finalist for the Governor General's Award several times, winning twice. In 2001, she was inducted into Canada's Walk of Fame. She is also a founder of the Writers' Trust of Canada, a non-profit literary organization that seeks to encourage Canada's writing community. Among innumerable contributions to Canadian literature, she was a founding trustee of the Griffin Poetry Prize.

Atwood is also the inventor, and developer, of the LongPen and associated technologies that facilitate the remote robotic writing of documents. She is the Co-Founder and a Director of Syngrafii Inc. (formerly Unotchit Inc.), a company that she started in 2004 to develop, produce and distribute the LongPen technology. She holds various patents related to the LongPen technologies.

While she is best known for her work as a novelist, she has also published fifteen books of poetry. Many of her

poems have been inspired by myths and fairy tales, which have been interests of hers from an early age. Atwood has published short stories in *Tamarack Review*, *Alphabet*, *Harper's*, *CBC Anthology*, *Ms.*, *Saturday Night*, and many other magazines. She has also published four collections of stories and three collections of unclassifiable short prose works.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Margaret_Atwood]

The Handmaid's Tale - About The Book

The Handmaid's Tale (1985) remains one of Margaret Atwood's most popular works and marks a turning point from her earlier realistic fiction. Despite this, Atwood has resisted labeling the novel as science fiction. She prefers to call it speculative fiction, in recognition of the fact that everything discussed in the novel is possible by the standards of today's technology, cultural trends, and historical precedents. A Poetry Foundation profile quoted Atwood as saying, "*The Handmaid's Tale* does not depend upon hypothetical scenarios, omens, or straws in the wind, but upon documented occurrences and public pronouncements; all matters of record." Despite this chilling evaluation, she has also commented that portions of the novel are meant to be satirical. In an article she penned for *The Guardian* in 2005, Atwood observed the irony that women popularly dress up as Handmaids for both Halloween parties and political protests. She asked, "Is it entertainment or dire political prophecy?" This paradox is likely to have been understood by Atwood's protagonist Offred, who like all Handmaids, was required to navigate a divided social status. In *The Guardian* article Atwood went on to say that the Handmaids are "treasured for what they may be able to provide—their fertility—but

untouchables otherwise." Equally unusual is the depiction of a dystopia new enough for its protagonists to remember their lives before the regime. As a result of these complexities, Offred must accept a new society that has revoked her right to everything she previously valued, but at the same time, requires her to stand on its periphery. The insider's view into Gilead that she provides is just as much a view from the outside. This estranged role for women and the focus on reproductive oppression has led to *The Handmaid's Tale* being heralded as the defining feminist dystopian novel. Despite her pronounced activism in feminism, environmentalism, and social justice, Atwood has often rebuked this title. She has said, "I didn't invent feminism and it certainly didn't invent me," according to a *The Guardian* profile. In her view, *The Handmaid's Tale* depicts a hierarchy that is divided on more than gender lines. Rather than having all men on the top, there is a typical pyramid hierarchy that allows for women in power, although subjugated by the men of their level. *The Handmaid's Tale* is more than just a vision of patriarchy toppling American society. It also involves the complex collaboration of men and women working to institute a new regime that limits them both. All the same, in accordance

with her definition of speculative fiction, she was systematically conscious of including only documented forms of control and punishment that had been used elsewhere in the Western world. "I did not wish to be accused of dark, twisted inventions, or of misrepresenting the human potential for deplorable behaviour," she explained in her 2005 *The Guardian* piece. *The Handmaid's Tale* is simultaneously a depiction of where we might let ourselves go, and where we have already been.

[https://www.greatbooks.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/HandmaidsTale_guide_final.pdf]

Themes In *The Handmaid's Tale*

GENDER ROLES

Gilead is a strictly hierarchical society, with a huge difference between the genders. As soon as the Gileadean revolutionaries take over after terrorism destroys the US government, they fire all women from their jobs and drain their bank accounts, leaving Offred desperate and dependent. Luke, however, doesn't seem so furious at this turn of events, a subtle suggestion that even good men may have embedded misogynistic attitudes, and that Gilead merely takes these common views to the logical extreme. Soon Gileadean women find all liberties taken from them, from the right to choose their clothes to the right to read.

Even women in positions of power, like Aunt Lydia, are only allowed cattle prods, never guns. The Commander's Wife, once a powerful supporter of far right-wing religious ideas about how women should stay in the home, now finds herself unhappily trapped in the world she advocated for. Gilead also institutionalizes sexual violence toward women. The Ceremony, where the Commander tries to impregnate Offred, is institutionalized adultery and a kind of rape. Jeze-

bel's, where Moira works, is a whorehouse for the society's elite.

Though the story critiques the religious right, it also shows that the feminist left, as exemplified by Offred's mother, is not the solution, as the radical feminists, too, advocate book burnings, censorship, and violence. The book avoids black-and-white divisions, forcing us to take on our own assumptions regarding gender. We may blame Offred for being too passive, without acknowledging that she's a product of her society. We may fault the Commander's Wife for not showing solidarity to her gender and rebelling against Gilead, without understanding that this expectation, since it assumes that gender is the most important trait, is just a milder version of the anti-individual tyranny of Gilead. These complicated questions of blame, as well as the brutal depictions of the oppression of women, earn *The Handmaid's Tale* its reputation as a great work of feminist literature.

RELIGION AND THEOCRACY

Gilead is a theocracy, a government where church and state are combined. Religious language enters into every part of the society, from Ri-

ta's position as a Martha, named for a New Testament kitchen worker, to the store names like Milk and Honey. And religion, specifically the Old Testament, is also the justification for many of Gilead's most savage characteristics. Offred's job as Handmaid is based on the biblical precedent of Rachel and Leah, where fertile servants can carry on adulterous relationships to allow infertile women like the Commander's Wife to have families. Each month before the Ceremony, the Commander reads from Genesis the same lines that make the book's epigraph, justifying and moralizing the crude intercourse that will take place.

Yet many of the biblical quotes in the book are twisted. The theocracy is so rigid about its religious influences, and so emphatic about the specific rules it upholds, that it even warps essential virtues like charity, tolerance and forgiveness. Offred knows that the prayers that the Aunts play the Handmaids in the Rachel and Leah Center are not the words that actually appear in the Bible, but she has no way of checking. The Salvagings and executions are supposedly the penalty for biblical sins like adultery, but Offred knows that others

are executed for resisting the government. *The Handmaid's Tale* is not a criticism of the Bible in itself, but a criticism of the way that people and theocracies use the Bible for their own oppressive purposes.

FERTILITY

Fertility is the reason for Offred's captivity and the source of her power, Gilead's major failing and its hope for the future. Inhabitants of Gilead give many reasons for the society's issues with creating viable offspring: the sexual revolution and birth control, pollution, sexually transmitted diseases. And the book hints at other, more subtle problems: in a society that restricts women so much, treating the potential child-bearers alternately as precious objects, bothersome machines, and prostitute-like sources of shame, how could anyone conceive? Similarly, though Offred knows her life depends on a successful birth, the atmosphere of extreme pressure and fear can't be as successful a motivator as the hope, love and liberty that characterized life with her first daughter and Luke. Despite the sterile atmosphere, markers of fertility, such as flowers and worms, throng in the Commander's Wife's carefully tended garden.

The Commander and his wife

host Offred for her proven fertility, and they even rename her as Fred's possession—her body's functions are valued, but her personhood is not. This division is highlighted in Janine's Birthing Ceremony, where Janine's Commander's Wife pretends to give birth at the same time, and the faked birth is treated as the authentic one. In this way, Gilead manages to strip away even the Handmaid's connection to the babies they bear in a version of a sharing, collective society gone totally wrong.

REBELLION

Every major character in the story engages in some kind of disobedience against Gilead's laws. Moira rebels most boldly, disguising herself and managing to escape from the Handmaids' imprisonment, though her daring escape proves futile, and she ends up at Jezebel's, resigned to her fate. Ofglen's rebellion is more community-minded, since she works as part of an organized resistance, although her careful plotting also ends badly. More unexpected are the small-scale rebellions from the Commander and the Commander's Wife.

The Commander seems to have every advantage, being a man, powerful in the new regime, and wealthy. Gilead should be his ideal society,

especially since the book suggests that he had a role in designing it. Yet he desires a deeper emotional connection, and cares enough about Offred's well-being to break the law and consort with her beyond his duties. The Commander's Wife also tries to get around the strictures of Gilead, setting Offred up with Nick in an illegal attempt to make a family.

These rebellious acts, coming from Gilead's privileged group, add complexity to their characters and to the dystopia as a whole. No one in the book is purely evil, and no one is so different from real-world humans to fully embrace the lack of independence in Gilead. Whether large or small, attempting to destroy the Gileadean government or merely to make one's personal circumstances more tolerable, each character commits rebellious acts, highlighting both the unlivable horror of Gileadean society, and the unsteadiness of its foundations.

LOVE

Despite Offred's general passivity in the face of the oppressive society, she has a deep and secret source of strength: her love. Though love might keep Offred complacent, permitting her to daydream rather than to rebel outright, it's also responsi-

ble for the book's greatest triumph, as love drives Nick to help Offred escape, which she manages more effectively than Moira or Ofglen. Her love for her mother, her daughter, Luke, Moira, and ultimately Nick, allow her to stay sane, and to live within her memories and emotions instead of the terrible world around her. Although the novel never proposes an ideal society or a clear way to apply its message to the real world, and although the novel looks critically both on many modern movements, including the religious right and the extreme feminist left, love—both familial and romantic—surprisingly turns out to be the most effective force for good.

Love is also a driving force behind other characters' actions. We know that Nick reciprocates Offred's feelings, but also the search for love, in the form of a real, not purely functional human connection, influences the Commander's desires to bend the rules for Offred. In the end, love is the best way to get around Gilead's rules, as it allows for both secret mental resistance, and for the trust and risk that result in Offred's great escape.

STORYTELLING AND MEMORY

The structure of *The Handmaid's Tale* is characterized by many different kinds of storytelling and fiction-making. For one, the title itself, and the fictional "Historical Notes on the Handmaid's Tale" of the book's end, frame the entire novel as Offred's story, that she's said into a tape recorder in the old fashioned storytelling tradition. For another, her whole story is also punctuated by shorter stories she tells herself, of the time before Gilead or Aunt Lydia's lessons. These small flashbacks can be triggered by the slightest impression, and they occur so often throughout the novel that it seems like Offred lives in several worlds, the terrible present, the confusing but free past, and the Rachel and Leah Center that bridged them.

Adding to the overlap of past and present, the tenses are always shifting, with some memories in the past tense, and some in the present. A third form of storytelling comes about because of the constant atmosphere of paranoia and uncertainty. Offred constantly makes up fictions. She's filled with questions—is Ofglen a true believer, or lying? Is Nick's touching her foot accidental, or intentio-

nal? Offred must keep several stories in mind at once, imagining each to be true at the same time. This form of storytelling is most clear in her imaginings about Luke's fate, where he could be dead, imprisoned or maybe escaped.

Fourth, Offred also uses storytelling as a pastime. Since she has no access to any entertainment, and very few events happen in her life, she often goes over events from other people's points of view, making up very involved fictions about what others might be thinking and saying. One major example is her long imaginary recreation of Aunt Lydia and Janine talking about Moira. Another is her creative ideas about what Nick might think of her and the Commander's relationship. With more stories and memories than current-time actions, the book is profoundly repetitive. It forms its own kind of simple, quiet hell—we, like Offred, are trapped within the echo-chamber of her mind.

[<http://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-handmaid-s-tale/themes>]

A review of the book...

This year [2010] sees the 25th anniversary of the publication of Margaret Atwood's dystopian classic, and to honour the occasion, the book has been reissued by Vintage. *The Handmaid's Tale* tells the story of Offred – not her real name, but the patronymic she has been given by the new regime in an oppressive parallel America of the future – and her role as a Handmaid. The Handmaids are forced to provide children by proxy for infertile women of a higher social status, the wives of Commanders. They undergo regular medical tests, and in many ways become invisible, the sum total of their biological parts.

Offred remembers her life before the inception of Gilead, when she had a husband, a daughter and a life. She had been a witness to the dissolution of the old America into the totalitarian theocracy that it now is, and she tries to reconcile the warning signs with reality: "We lived in the gaps between the stories."

Offred's tender remembrances of times past provide relief from the brutality of her new life, in which her body has become a cause of discomfort for her. Her former life is presented through glimpses of her university

friends, her husband, her freedom. They are shadowy memories made all the more indistinct by Atwood's lyrical prose, in which facts appear to merge into one another, and history appears immaterial; Offred is kept alive by her inner life, and reality and history become a kind of symbiotic mirage.

Fiercely political and bleak, yet witty and wise, the novel won the inaugural Arthur C Clarke award in 1987, but Atwood has always maintained that the novel is not classifiable science fiction. Nothing practised in the Republic of Gilead is genuinely futuristic. She is right, and this novel seems ever more vital in the present day, where women in many parts of the world live similar lives, dictated by biological determinism and misogyny.

[<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/sep/26/the-handmaids-tale-margaret-atwood>]

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Notes

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.