



Readers Guide for *The Handmaid's Tale*

Discussion Questions

What is in the book about?

1. In what ways is Gilead a stable society? In what ways is it not? What destabilizing influences are there? Are they enough to change or overthrow it?
2. How does Gilead keep women in check? How is this similar to and different from how it keeps men in check?
3. Describe the categorization of women in Gilead as wives, handmaids, Marthas, Aunts, or Unwomen. What color is each status given? How are women sorted into these categories?
4. At the Red Center, Aunt Lydia tells the new handmaids, "There is more than one kind of freedom. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it." (page 24) What do you think she means by this?
5. In what ways is Serena Joy in power or out of power?
6. Why is reproduction such an issue in Gilead?
7. Babies are referred to as keepers, unbabies, and shredders. What other terms or descriptions do these words suggest?

What do you think?

8. Why is reading considered dangerous?
9. Offred makes a point of saying she is not writing this down. Why is that important?
10. Why do the handmaids whisper their real names to each other in secret?
11. Words can limit and add new connotations. What words are used here that have new meanings? Why doesn't the author explain all of them as they occur? "Salvagings," for example.
12. Does Offred fight or survive? How?
13. Why do you think Moira defies the categories available to women in Gilead?

14. At Jezebel's (the nightclub) the Commander says, "...you can't cheat Nature. Nature demands variety, for men." (page 237) How do characters find ways to follow their natural instincts?
15. What do you feel the "Historical Notes" at the book's end add to the reading of this novel? What does the book's last line mean to you?

What connections can you make?

16. Several times in the novel, supporters of Gilead note that this is the most difficult generation. Why is this so? What other generations could this also be said of?
17. Describe how you think Moira's story continues, and possibly, how it finishes.
18. Is the reader meant to take the final section seriously or not? What might Atwood consider important in the final section. Explain.
19. At one level, this novel is about the writing process. Atwood weaves this subplot into a major focus with remarks by Offred such as "Context is all," "I've filled it out for her," "I made that up," and "I wish this story were different." How does Offred's habit of talking about the process of storytelling affect you as a reader?
20. This novel is set in a fictional future, but we are currently living further in the future than the time frame in which the story is set. What parts of the story struck you as not futuristic, but perhaps as quaint, because of your current perspective in time? How did it affect you as a reader that the story has elements of the future, but also of the past?

Teacher Resources

<http://falcon.jmu.edu/~ramseyil/atwood.htm>

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