Discussion Guide for

THE HANDMAID’S TALE

Margaret Atwood

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This discussion guide includes references to *The Handmaid’s Tale* (Anchor Books, 1998).

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ABOUT THE HANDMAID’S TALE

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 *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 *Guardian* piece. *The Handmaid’s Tale* is simultaneously a depiction of where we might let ourselves go, and where we have already been.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

How does Atwood reveal the features of Gilead to the reader?

1. Why does Offred include so many flashbacks to the society before Gilead in her narrative?
2. Why does Offred refer to her story as a “reconstruction”? (134)
3. Why did the Gileadean regime decide to call the women capable of procreating ‘Handmaids’? What does this title reveal about their social status?

4. What significance does the phrase *nolite te bastardes carborundorum* have for Offred?

**Why does Atwood choose to situate her novel at the onset of the Gileadean regime?**

1. Why does Aunt Lydia tell the new Handmaids at the Red Center that “we were a society . . . dying of too much choice”? (25)

2. Why does the Commander tell Offred, “Better never means better for everyone . . . It always means worse, for some”? (211)

3. Why does Offred tell Moira that she can’t create a utopia by excluding men?

4. In the historical notes, why do the conference attendees applaud when Professor Pieixoto says that “we must be cautious about passing moral judgement upon the Gileadeans”? (302)

**Are the women in the novel in any way responsible for their social status?**

1. Why does Offred ask, “which of us is it worse for, her or me” after she and Serena Joy participate in The Ceremony? (95)

2. Why are the Handmaids encouraged to tear the rapist apart at the end of the Salvaging?

3. How do Moira’s choices affect Offred’s will to survive?

4. What does Offred think about the possibilities of escape?
FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. How necessary is the freedom to read and write?
2. What motivates resistance groups to take risks for individuals?
3. Is it humane for oppressors to form personal relationships with those they rule over?
4. Can an individual live out his or her own utopia, or must all utopias be instituted as a society?

ABOUT MARGARET ATWOOD

Margaret Atwood (1939–) was born in Ontario, Canada. Though her early years coincided with the Second World War, she was sheltered from its effects by the significant amount of time her family spent in the backwoods of Canada. Her father, an entomologist, often took the entire family with him on trips into the wilderness. These extended vacations were a creative haven for Atwood. After morning school lessons from her mother she was free to pursue her own interests: reading fairy tales, legends, and mysteries; writing and illustrating comics; and playing imaginative games outside under the instruction of her older brother, Harold. So much of her early life was spent in this idyllic isolation that she was well into her elementary education before she completed her first full year in a traditional school.

Although from a family of scientists, Atwood declared, while still in high school, that she intended to write the great Canadian novel. In pursuit of this lofty goal, she obtained a bachelor’s degree in English from Victoria College at University of Toronto in 1961 and a master’s degree from Radcliffe College in Cambridge, Massachusetts. On the advice of one of her professors, Northrop Frye, she pursued doctoral work at Harvard University, but never completed her doctoral dissertation. Years later, Harvard would become one of many institutions to award her an honorary degree.
While still a student, she published her first book, the poetry collection *Double Persephone* (1961). This was to be followed over the course of her career by another twenty anthologies of poetry, sixteen novels, and numerous other works ranging from radio plays to essays to children’s books. Among her recent publications is a post-apocalyptic trilogy—*Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009), and *MaddAddam* (2013)—that draws on some of the same dystopian themes she first established in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Her interest in identifying a purely Canadian literature, presaged by her intention to write the country’s first great novel, has persisted through the entirety of her career. She has given life to the idea of a national voice both through her own fiction and in nonfiction commentaries such as *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972).

**ABOUT THIS GUIDE’S AUTHOR**

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