



Knowledge Organiser: 'The Handmaid's Tale'



Plot Summary	Characters
<p>Written in the 1980s by Canadian author Margaret Atwood, 'The Handmaid's Tale' is set in a fictional place called Gilead, previously the USA. The novel tells the story of a female protagonist named Offred ('Of Fred' = belonging to Fred, her Commander), who was captured when trying to escape with her husband and daughter at the start of Gilead's takeover. She is then turned into a Handmaid: a fertile younger woman assigned to rich, socially superior, infertile married couples in order to provide them with a baby. Only Commanders receive Handmaids, as this is the highest position in Gilead's society.</p> <p>Although the Handmaids are viewed as important and respected (because they are the only way to procreate and continue Gilead's legacy), they are kept as virtual prisoners in the homes of the Commanders. They have no identity and have to follow very strict rules – they are controlled through brutality and fear, which is the way that Gilead's regime is upheld.</p> <p>All Handmaids go through rigorous and brutal training by the Aunts (older females who reinforce Gilead's strict rules) to brainwash them of the past. However, Offred survives by remembering her past life, her husband Luke, daughter, mother and best friend Moira. She becomes involved in an affair with the Commander who invites her to play Scrabble secretly in his office. This progresses into frequent meetings and even a night out to a brothel called Jezebel's, where Offred bumps into her best friend Moira.</p> <p>Offred also becomes romantically involved with Nick, the Commander's gardener and chauffeur, after Serena Joy concocts a secret plan for Offred to get pregnant by Nick after Offred fails to conceive from two Ceremonies (sexual intercourse with the Commander in the presence of his wife, Serena). There are hints throughout the novel that Nick is also an Eye (Gilead's secret police) or part of an underground resistance movement, like Offred's shopping partner Ofglen. At the end of the novel, Offred is taken away in a black van and we are led to believe that Nick has either saved her or turned her into the police.</p>	<p>Offred: Narrator and protagonist, Handmaid to the Commander and Serena Joy. Mentally strong and resilient character, finds many coping strategies to survive the regime.</p> <p>The Commander: Named Fred, believed to be one of the founders of Gilead. Married to Serena Joy, has secret affairs with his Handmaids, secretly breaks the rules of Gilead.</p> <p>Serena Joy: Married to the Commander, former gospel singer and advocate for traditional values in her previous life. Desperate for a baby but unable to have her own. Just as trapped as all the other women in Gilead, despite her elevated social position as a Commander's Wife.</p> <p>Ofwarren: Real name is Janine, a fellow Handmaid. Struggled with her mental health at the Red Centre, tries too hard to please the Aunts and the regime (she's a conformist), is smug when she conceives but then has a deformed baby (an 'Unbaby'). Presented as a victim of the system and a generally weak character.</p> <p>Ofglen: Offred's shopping partner and fellow Handmaid, member of the secret underground resistance movement known as 'Mayday'. She hangs herself when this is discovered.</p> <p>Moira: Offred's best friend from the past. They also went the Red Centre together and were trained as Handmaids. After an escape attempt went wrong, Moira is incarcerated at Jezebel's where Offred bumps into her.</p> <p>Nick: A Guardian (a low ranking officer of the Gilead regime) who is assigned to the Commander's household as chauffeur and gardener, has sexual relations with Offred after Serena Joy plans to use them both for a baby, hints that he's also a secret member of the resistance movement or a member of Gilead's secret police called the Eyes. An ambiguous character, we're unsure if he can be trusted.</p> <p>Luke: Offred's husband from her past life. He was married before and had an affair with Offred before marrying her and having a child together. They all tried to escape to Canada but were captured. We're unsure of Luke's fate.</p>

The Historical Notes provide a flashforward to the future where university academics are discussing Offred's story.



Aunt Lydia: The most frequently referred to/ remembered Aunt from Offred's experiences of re-education/ brainwashing at the Red Centre. Sadistic and religiously extreme, her biblical quotes and mis-quotes further reinforce the male-dominated regime.

Aunt Elizabeth: Another Aunt, Moira attacks her and uses her uniform to escape from the Red Centre.

Offred's mother: Single mother and feminist activist, makes various appearances throughout the novel in the form of Offred's flashbacks as well as being in a video used for 're-education' in the Red Centre. She is everything that Gilead despises about women.



Themes

- **Dystopian world:** A nightmare world (vs a utopia = a dream world), science fiction genre of dystopian fiction, 20th century literary tradition where writers create imaginary worlds that are terrifying, controlling and repressive (totalitarian) as prophecy and warning. In the novel, there is a distinctly feminist vision of a dystopia that considers the consequences of a reversal of women's rights.
- **Feminism vs Patriarchy:** Politics and sexuality/gender are closely entwined throughout the novel. There's a constant battle between feminism and patriarchy, as represented by various characters such as Offred's mother and Moira, and the Commander, Nick and Luke. Places/ institutions also provide this contrast: Jezebel's, the household of the commander, the act of the Ceremony itself. Overall, the book is a feminist critique of patriarchal society.
- **Doubles:** Motif/ symbol repeated throughout, the novel, for example: Offred and Ofglen as doubles, Offred and her predecessor as doubles,

Context

- **Margaret Atwood:** Canadian poet and novelist, as well as university lecturer. Married with a daughter. Although she is clearly a feminist writer, she is also interested in gender politics, environmental/ ecological interests and basic human rights.
- **Feminism:** The novel provides a brief history of the Second Wave of feminism ie. sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, women's freedoms won in the 70s such as contraception, abortion and female political influence (First Wave = mainly concerned with women's right to vote, 19th/ 20th century).
- **1980s America/ the Western world:** The American New Right in the early 1980s warned about low birth rates, was anti-feminist, anti-homosexuality and racist with strong underpinnings from the Bible. Aimed to influence government laws on family and public morals, linking back to America's Puritan past, the New Right was politically powerful under Presidents Reagan and Bush. The dystopian world in the novel can thus be seen as a satirical response to societal anxiety at the time of writing, clearly warning against threats to liberal social policies, pollution and infertility, decreased birth-rates,

Offred and Serena Joy as doubles, the double of the love story: Luke vs Nick, double of sexual relations: with the Commander vs with Nick.

- **The Bible/ Religious Fanaticism:** Gilead is a theocracy: it is taken over by a group of conservative religious extremists, where religious terms are used for political purposes, thus there is no separation between religion and politics. Gilead was founded on a return to traditional values held by the 'religious right'. Names of shops, cars and people's ranks use biblical references in the novel.
- **Past vs Present:** The nonlinear and fragmented flashback narrative structure of the novel is used to show the blurring of past and present. Offred's coping mechanism is to live in the past with her memories for comfort.
- **Communication and Language:** Names used to denote ownership of Handmaids by their Commanders (Of Fred), Gilead's own vocabulary, terms and greetings, distorted misquotes from the Bible, literature and popular culture. The forbidden nature of storytelling. The Scrabble game. The significance of the form and structure of the novel itself as a story being told by a female banned from communicating, and how Offred's narrative ironically survives the regime and becomes an historical artefact.
- **Infertility/ Women's Bodies:** Women are commodified in Gilead, objectified as a tool for reproduction, breeding and childbearing. Sexual violence and rape are used as a means to control and coerce women into submission. Even the Commanders' wives are stigmatised by their infertility, which is used as a way to make women complicit in sustaining the patriarchal regime: there is a clear divide between wives and Handmaids, where envy and hatred are used to ensure they're always pitted against each other. Serena Joy's garden also evokes imagery symbolic of fertility/ infertility and the feminine, as do the red costumes of the Handmaids (red symbolises fertility and the female menstrual cycle, however it also symbolises sin).

environmental concerns and fears over nuclear power. Written just after the elections of Ronald Reagan in the US and Margaret Thatcher in the UK, which categorised a period of conservative revival in the West, including religious conservatism aiming to contain and control the sexual liberation of previous times. This made feminists wary about women's rights and the need to protect gains made in recent decades.

- **American History:** Puritans follow very strict, regimented and self-disciplined lives through their own interpretation of the Bible and were categorised by their striking black and white costumes. New England Puritanism is rooted in the English Reformation, when a Protestant group rose up against the Church of England because they believed Henry VIII's changes to the church had made it too similar to Roman Catholicism. Under attack from church and crown, many Puritans migrated to English colonies in the New World aka America in the 17th century. New England is a region in America consisting of numerous states including Massachusetts, which is considered the centre of Puritanism. New England region is also on the American-Canadian border. The city of Boston and the town of Cambridge are most famous for Puritan history; there are clues in the novel that where Offred lives in Gilead is the town of Cambridge, such as Harvard University's location being used by the regime. Atwood's interest in Puritan New England links to her own ancestry, especially her relative Mary Webster (see Dedication at start of novel) who was hanged as a witch in 1683, and her studies at Harvard University with Professor Perry Miller, an expert on Puritan Studies.

