



The Handmaid's Tale

Margaret Atwood's dystopian masterpiece explores a theocratic society where women are valued only for their reproductive capabilities. Set in the Republic of Gilead, the novel follows Offred, a Handmaid assigned to bear children for the ruling elite in a world of declining births.

Margaret Atwood: Literary Visionary



Academic Excellence

Bachelor's from University of Toronto and Master's from Radcliffe College (Harvard).



Prolific Writer

Published dozens of books across poetry, fiction, and nonfiction genres.



Award-Winning Author

Recipient of major literary prizes for her insightful and thought-provoking works.



Academic Career

Taught writing and English at numerous universities throughout Canada and the US.

Historical Context: Seeds of Dystopia

Atwood's research on 17th-century American Puritans heavily influenced Gilead's rigid theocracy. The novel responds to the rising religious right in America during the 1980s, which emerged as backlash against feminist movements and sexual liberation.

Jerry Falwell and other Christian leaders urged Republicans to bring prayer back to schools, restrict abortion rights, and defeat the Equal Rights Amendment. The novel demonstrates how religion can be weaponized to reduce women's rights, a pattern that continues worldwide.

The Handmaid's Tale references Chaucer's Canterbury Tales and shares themes with Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter. Atwood herself compares it to other influential dystopian works like 1984, Brave New World, and A Clockwork Orange.



The Fall of America, Rise of Gilead



Catastrophe Strikes

Assassination of the President and Congress, blamed on "Islamic fanatics"



Rights Suspended

Constitution suspended "temporarily" for security; women's bank accounts frozen



Women Disempowered

Women fired from jobs; property transferred to male relatives



Theocracy Established

Reading banned for women; biblical justifications for new social order

Plot Summary: Offred's Journey



Indoctrination

Offred trained at the Rachel and Leah Center (Red Center) to become a Handmaid



Assignment

Placed with the Commander and his wife Serena Joy to bear them a child



Rebellion

Secret meetings with the Commander; affair with Nick; contact with resistance



Escape?

Taken away by the Eyes, possibly to punishment or freedom via Mayday resistance

Key Characters



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Offred

The novel's protagonist and narrator. A Handmaid assigned to the Commander, formerly married to Luke with a daughter. Intelligent and observant, she maintains her humanity through memories and small rebellions.



The Commander

Fred Waterford, a high-ranking official who breaks rules by playing Scrabble with Offred and taking her to Jezebel's. Complex character who helped create the system he now subverts.



Serena Joy

The Commander's wife, former televangelist who advocated for traditional values. Now trapped in the world she helped create, bitter about needing a Handmaid.



Nick

The Commander's driver and household Guardian. Begins a secretive relationship with Offred. His true loyalties remain ambiguous - possibly a member of the Eyes or the Mayday resistance.



Luke

Offred's husband before Gilead. They attempted to escape to Canada with their daughter. His fate remains unknown after their capture at the border, haunting Offred's memories.



Moira

Offred's feminist friend from before Gilead and at the Red Center. Symbol of resistance who escapes the Center but is later found working at Jezebel's, her spirit diminished but not broken.

Major Themes



Gender Roles

Exploration of rigid gender hierarchy and institutionalized misogyny



Religion & Theocracy

How biblical texts are manipulated to justify oppression



Fertility

Women valued only for reproductive capabilities in a sterile world



Rebellion

Various forms of resistance against totalitarian control



Love

Personal connections as source of strength and hope

Symbols and Motifs



The Eye

Represents surveillance, paranoia, and Gilead's authority. Appears as the secret police (Eyes), Offred's ankle tattoo, and the plastered-over light fixture.



The Color Red

Symbolizes fertility, menstruation, and shame. Seen in Handmaids' robes, tulips in the garden, and blood throughout the narrative.



Makeup

Represents femininity, the past, and lost freedom. Forbidden to Handmaids but used at Jezebel's, highlighting the hypocrisy of Gilead.



Storytelling

Offred's narrative itself becomes a symbol of resistance and preservation of identity through memory.



Chapter Summary: Indoctrination

1

Chapters 1-7

Introduces Offred's restricted life at the Commander's house and the Red Center. Establishes the rules of Gilead through flashbacks and present observations.

2

Chapters 8-15

Explores daily rituals including shopping trips, the Wall (where bodies hang), and the Ceremony. Reveals more about Offred's past life.

3

Chapters 16-25

Focuses on Janine's birth, Moira's escape, and the beginning of Offred's secret meetings with the Commander to play Scrabble.

4

Chapters 26-34

Reveals how America became Gilead. Offred learns about the Mayday resistance from Ofglen and receives a proposition from Serena Joy.



Chapter Summary: Rebellion and Consequences

1

Chapters 35-39

The Commander takes Offred to Jezebel's where she reunites with Moira. Learns about the Underground Femaleroad and the Colonies.

2

Chapters 40-43

Offred begins an affair with Nick. Attends a Salvaging where women participate in executing prisoners. Witnesses the Particicution.

3

Chapters 44-46

Discovers Ofglen has committed suicide. Serena Joy discovers Offred's visits to the Commander. The Eyes come for Offred.

4

Historical Notes

Set in 2195, academics discuss Offred's story as historical artifact, revealing possible identities of the Commander and Nick's role in her escape.

Contemporary Relevance

35+

Countries

Where women's rights have declined in the past decade

2017

TV Adaptation

Renewed interest in the novel after award-winning series premiered

100+

School Bans

Attempts to remove the book from curricula for its content

The Handmaid's Tale remains disturbingly relevant today. Its themes resonate with contemporary debates about reproductive rights, religious fundamentalism in politics, and surveillance states. The novel's language has entered political discourse, with protesters wearing red robes and white bonnets at demonstrations worldwide.

