

***The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood: Outline for Study**

"They seemed to be able to choose. We seemed to be able to choose, then. We were a society dying of too much choice."

Pre-Reading

Go to my web page and click on the "Flipped" lesson for this novel. Listen and take notes. By the end, you should have questions – the sites below should help you find some answers. Write at least three questions after listening to the lesson for homework and answer them using the sites below (knowing that you have had lessons ever since your freshman year about reliable sources, you may find some, if you wish, to find the answers to your questions) .

- Gilead (much more than just the place where the novel is set) and the three epigraphs
<http://www.keyway.ca/htm2001/20010827.htm>
- Dystopian Literature – main features <http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/A510922>
- The history of American Puritanism <http://www.history.com/topics/puritanism>
- Betty Friedan and the feminist movement in the USA
<http://www.pbs.org/fmc/interviews/friedan.htm>
- Margaret Atwood – her life and work
<http://www.motherjones.com/arts/qa/1997/07/visions.html>
- Jerry Falwell and the fundamentalist right-wing movement in the USA
<http://www.rapidnet.com/~jbeard/bdm/exposes/falwell/general.htm>

The Importance of Language as Power

-neologisms

-Biblical language

-metacognition (Offred's)

-epigraph

-point of view

-parody

-satire

"We lived, as usual by ignoring. Ignoring isn't the same as ignorance, you have to work at it."

Reading¹

Be ready to discuss the following questions in detail using proof from the novel. For each section you will also prepare resonance commentary. Resonance commentary is a passage that has significance for you for some reason; perhaps it is confusing or beautiful or thematically important. You will write these on the board, citing page number, and they will form the basis for our class discussion. A searchable Bible will also be helpful. <http://bibleontheweb.com/bible/KJV>
<https://www.biblegateway.com/>

Section One: I-VII (Chapters 1-17)

Due _____

How is the epigraph from Jonathan Swift an example of *reductio ad absurdum*?

Chapter 1: What can you tell about the period from the first sentence of this chapter?

Chapter 2: Define the either/or logical fallacy and apply it to this chapter. What is the biblical reference to “Martha?”

Chapter 3: Who does Serena Joy represent? How do we know that the revolution that caused this society is fairly recent?

Chapter 4: What is an “Eye”? How are the names of the handmaids formed? Look at Jeremiah 8:22 compared to Numbers 36.

Chapter 5: Discuss the implications of Aunt Lydia’s statement on page 24: “There is more than one kind of freedom...freedom to and freedom from.”

Chapter 6: Why have the doctors been executed? Why is there a rule that the evidence of one woman is not adequate? What tradition is it based on?

“How easy it is to invent a humanity, for anyone at all.”

¹ Some discussion questions are from:

http://public.wsu.edu/~brians/science_fiction/handmaid.html#epigraphs

Chapter 7: Stories are rarely told in the present tense, as this one. What effect does it have? The passage on page 39 that begins, “But then what happens, but then what happens?” is strangely fragmented. Can you make any inferences about her meaning?

Chapter 8: Serena Joy's speechmaking on behalf of housewifery is a clear satire on the career of Phyllis Schlafly, lawyer, right-wing activist, and cofounder of the Eagle Forum, who put most of her energy for many years into leading the fight against the Equal Rights Amendment while admonishing other women to stay home and raise their children. Comment.

Why is Offred startled when she calls the room “mine”?

Chapter 19: What feelings does Offred have as she looks back on the early days of her affair with Luke?

Chapter 10: Discuss the quote, “We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of print” (57).

Chapter 11: What do we learn about the Handmaid system during the scene at the doctor's office?

Chapter 12: What is Offred referring to when she says, “There were incidents in bathrooms at first: there were cuttings, drownings” (62)

Chapter 13: What do her dreams about her husband and daughter have in common? What does she mean by saying at the end of the chapter "Of all the dreams this is the worst"?

Chapter 14: Why was the family warned not to look too happy when they are trying to escape Gilead?

Chapter 15: Why is reading forbidden for women?

Chapter 16: This chapter depicts “The Ceremony.” What are your reactions?

Chapter 17: Discuss Offred’s comment that “It would be like shouting” (98).

Section VIII-XII (Chapters 18-30) Due _____

Chapter 18: Discuss the paradox of Offred’s beliefs.

Chapter 19: What do you think about Offred’s thoughts on language? i.e.: “I sit in the chair and think about the word *chair*” (110).

Chapter 20: "Take Back the Night" originated as the slogan of Women Against Pornography, but has developed in more recent years into an anti-rape slogan. What themes of the women's movement is Atwood blending together here? What do you think her attitude toward them is? It may be difficult to imagine now, but in some feminist circles in the seventies a woman who chose to bear a child could come under considerable pressure from other feminists, like Offred's mother. What are the main tensions between Offred and her mother? These distinctions are part of the crux of the novel, which is about a society which reacted to the older feminists by repression and which the younger women did not sufficiently combat.

Chapter 21: The reference to a "women's culture" at the end of the chapter refers to certain kinds of feminists who have argued that women possess superior values and could build a superior society. What is Offred's attitude toward this idea?

Chapter 22: How is Moira the "lava beneath the crust of daily life"? (133)

Chapter 23: What are the effects of the last line, "That is a reconstruction too" (140).

Chapter 24: What does the story about the death camp commander's mistress convey?

Chapter 25: Why does Offred covet Serena Joy's shears? What do these occasional dark comments tell us about the state of her mind underneath her usual bitterly sarcastic narrative?

Chapter 26: What are the connotations of "stee[ing] yourself?" (160).

Chapter 27: What do Ofglen and Offred see immediately after they have revealed their true views to each other?

Chapter 28: Many of the extreme aspects of Gileadean culture have actually existed in the past. Discuss.

Chapter 29: "Pen Is Envy" is a pun on Freud's "penis envy," the notion that women who want to be like men are neurotic.

Chapter 30: There is a traditional Jewish prayer for men which thanks God for not having made them women. This prayer is satirized and parodied in this chapter.

"Forgiveness too is a power."

Section XIII-End: (Chapters 31-end) Due _____

"As all historians know, the past is a great darkness, and filled with echoes."