

# **The Handmaid's Tale Book Notes**

## **The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood**

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## Author/Context

Margaret Atwood was born on the eighteenth of November, 1939, the daughter of a forest entomologist. She traveled for much of her childhood between the wilderness of Northern Ontario and the capital, Ottawa. Atwood went to high school in Toronto, majoring in home economics, but at the age of sixteen determined to become a writer. She received her undergraduate degree from the University of Toronto and her graduate degree from Radcliffe College. In 1966, Atwood's first published collection of poetry, *The Circle Game*, gained critical praise, and in 1969 her first novel was published, *The Edible Woman*. It was made into a film soon after. Atwood was one of the most sudden literary successes in Canadian history.

In 1986, *The Handmaid's Tale* was published and became a bestseller. It was written during the anti-feminist backlash of the 1980s in which feminists were criticized for breaking up the traditional home. The book is composed of two parts: the Handmaid Offred's diary and the Historical Notes, which provide more historical context for the Tale and another fictional perspective of Offred's society. Atwood wrote *The Handmaid's Tale* in an attempt to illustrate the logical extension of anti-feminists statements such as "it is every man's right to rule supreme at home" and "a woman's place is in the home." *The Handmaid's Tale* is often described as a feminist dystopia (negative utopia) because it is set within an imperfect society of the future, and addresses the misogyny of patriarchal culture. Other influences on the book acknowledged by Atwood include her studies of the American Puritans and the Iranian monotheocracy of the 1970s and 1980s.

Throughout her career Margaret Atwood has received numerous awards and honorary degrees. She is the author of over 23 books fiction and nonfiction. Her work is published in more than 25 countries. Atwood currently lives in Toronto with novelist Graeme Gibson and their daughter.

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# Plot Summary

The narrator is a fertile woman living in the late twentieth century in Cambridge, Massachusetts. A religious group called the Sons of Jacob has recently overthrown the United States government. Our narrator has been arrested for being married to a divorced man, which is heretical. She and her husband, Luke, were arrested while trying to escape the country on fake passports. Their daughter was taken away from them, and given to an elite, childless family. Our narrator was sent to the Rachael and Leah Re-Education Center, which is known as the Red Center, to be trained for her new role in The Republic of Gilead. All Handmaids are trained at the Red Center, where they are brainwashed into submission to their new role by a group of women called Aunts. A Handmaid's role is to bear children for elite, childless families of The Republic. They must be pure, which means they cannot read or write or associate with other men or have desires of any kind. Their names are taken from them and they are tattooed with a number. They are taught to believe that the previous ills of society were their fault and that men are blameless. Our narrator is given the name Offred when she arrives at the home of her Commander, Fred. She spends much of her time waiting in her designated room. She wears the outfit of a Handmaid, which is modest and entirely red except for a white, winged bonnet. She discovers a message from the previous Handmaid carved into her closet, "Don't let the bastards grind you down." Offred avoids the Commander's Wife because she resents Offred's presence in her house. She sometimes talks with the Marthas in the house. Marthas are women whose role is to do housework.

Offred goes shopping everyday accompanied by another Handmaid, Ofglen. This part of a Handmaid's routine is considered necessary exercise. Offred is afraid that Ofglen may be part of a spy contingent of the government called the Eyes. Everyone is dangerous if you are not a true believer. At one shop, a pregnant Handmaid enters. All the other women including Offred are jealous. If a Handmaid has a child, she will never be killed or exiled to the Colonies to do hard labor with the Unwomen (women who cannot or will not fulfill one of the prescribed roles for women in The Republic). Some tourists ask Offred and Ofglen if they are happy. They must respond positively or risk being found out and arrested. They visit the Wall of the prison, and view several men who were executed. Harsh censorship is one of the defining elements of Gileadean society. Offred cannot help the recurrent dreams and memories she has about her baby girl, husband, and mother. They may as well be dead. She herself feels like a ghost whose existence has become meaningless.

One day, Offred is taken to the doctor for her monthly check-up. He says she is healthy and then offers to do her the service of impregnating her. She declines his offer, which is illegal, although she desperately wants a child. That night is the night of the Ceremony. The household assembles for the Commander to read to them from the Bible. The excerpt is about Abraham having a child with his wife's maid, which is the Biblical story upon which the Ceremony is based. Later the Commander has ceremonial sex with Offred and his Wife in his Wife's bed. Offred lies inert in between the infertile Wife's legs and the Commander mechanically inseminates her and leaves. While he does this, Offred thinks about her rebellious friend Moira, who escaped from the Red Center.



The next day, Offred attends the birth of a Handmaid's child. Many Handmaids attend to assist in the ceremony. The Wives have a party in another part of the house, and come up after the birth to claim the baby and name it. That evening, the Commander has arranged a private meeting with Offred in his study. She does not know what to expect and is cautious. They play Scrabble and he asks her for a kiss. In her bedroom later that night, she cannot suppress laughter over the simplicity of his desires. They continue to meet. He lets her read heretical magazines and brings her some lotion. She discovers that the previous Handmaid had frequented the study as well, and that she hung herself in her room. She begins to think of the Commander in a more complex way. The Ceremony becomes embarrassing.

During a shopping trip, Offred lets Ofglen know that she is not a true believer. They are both relieved. Later Ofglen tells Offred that she is part of a secret information network, and that their codeword is Mayday. Offred does not gain hope though. She often considers killing herself. That day the Commander's Wife offers to arrange a meeting between Offred and the Commander's chauffeur, Nick. She suggests that the Commander may be sterile, which is heretical. Offred agrees.

The next day Offred attends a Prayvaganza where a group wedding of decorated military men, Angels, and Daughters is performed. That night the Commander dresses Offred up in a gaudy costume and takes her to a secret club for the elite, called Jezebel's. There Offred is reunited with Moira, and hears the rest of her story of escape and capture. Moira was being secretly transported along the Underground Femaleroad when she was captured and given the choice to work at Jezebel's as a whore or in the Colonies disposing of toxic waste. Offred and the Commander return home, after some uninspired sex. Serena knocks on Offred's door later that night and tells her to go to Nick's apartment above the garage. They have sex, but deny themselves any semblance of romance or intimacy. Offred visits Nick repeatedly afterwards. She is ashamed by her faithlessness to her husband Luke, but is compelled to indulge in the sole form of love available to her.

In midsummer, all the women in the district are summoned to a Salvaging. All the Handmaids watch and symbolically consent to the execution of three women whose crimes are not announced. The salvaging is followed by a Particution, in which a man who is condemned as a rapist is torn apart by a mob of Handmaids goaded to action by an Aunt. Ofglen knocks the man out on purpose to save him further pain. He was part of the Maydays and falsely accused of rape. Ofglen hangs herself after the ceremony when she sees an Eye van stop at her house. Offred is shocked when she hears this, but more so when her Commander's Wife discovers the costume she wore to Jezebel's and sends her to her room to await punishment. Offred contemplates suicide, but an Eye van comes to take her away before she can take her life. Nick tells her that the Eyes are really part of Mayday and that she should trust them. She is powerless anyway and can only hope he is right. The Commander's wife curses her as she leaves.

The main body of the tale is followed by an excerpt of a historian's speech, in which the speaker attempts to authenticate the Handmaid's Tale as a historical document. This

part of the novel serves to provide some more details on the society in which Offred lived and gives the reader another perspective on her story and storytelling in general.



## Major Characters

**Offred:** The narrator and central character of the novel. Offred is a Handmaid in the Republic of Gilead. Handmaids are fertile women forced to bear children for elite, barren couples. Fertility is rare and highly valued in Gilead. She has one more year left to have a child before she is determined barren and sent to the Colonies. Offred has been separated from her family and friends and leads a severely repressed lifestyle. Her emotional state alternates between rebellion, resignation, bitterness, and despair. However, she maintains hope and eventually escapes and records her story.

**Aunt Lydia:** The authoritarian head mistress of the Red Center, where the Handmaids are indoctrinated with rules they must live by. Aunt Lydia is the primary spokesperson for the ideology of Gilead in the novel. Fragments of her speeches come up throughout Offred's narration. Aunt Lydia is ruthlessly manipulative under the guise of piety and concern.

**Moira:** Offred's rebellious, bisexual friend who she has known since college, before Gilead. Moira is sent to the Red Center along with Offred. She is a staunch feminist and has a penchant for making lewd jokes. She escapes the Red Center, but is apprehended before she can escape the country and is sent to work in the official brothel of Gilead, Jezebel's. Moira represents strength and hope for Offred. However, when they last meet at Jezebel's Offred is concerned that Moira may have lost her spirit.

**Serena Joy:** The Wife of the Commander. Serena Joy was a gospel singer and an anti-feminist advocate before the war and formation of Gilead. Her pre-war character parodies two real-life spokeswomen for the conservative right, Tammy Faye Baker and Phyllis Schlafly. In Gilead she is forced into the subdued role of housewife. She resents Offred because her presence is a testimony to Serena's failure to produce children, which is the purpose of a women's life in Gilead ideology. She is also jealous of the sexual relationship Offred must have with her husband, though this feeling is unacceptable by law. The stifled relationship between Offred and Serena Joy points to the failure of the government to produce cookie-cutter women for different female roles.

**Ofglen:** Offred's shopping partner who is a Handmaid. Ofglen and Offred are careful to appear perfectly pious to each other when they first meet. Months later, the two become more free to share their fears, opinions, and desires with each other. Ofglen tells Offred she belongs to a secret, subversive society and tries to get Offred to get information from the Commander's study. Offred is too afraid to participate. Ofglen hangs herself when government spies discover her anti-government activities.

**Commander:** Offred's sterile stud and one of the founding fathers of Gilead. The Commander belongs to the ruling elite but appears to cling to certain aspects of life before Gilead. He fulfills his legal obligations within his household, but does so without conviction. He has a large collection of taboo items from the time before Gilead, and he initiates an unorthodox relationship with Offred. His views of women are simplistic and contradictory.



## Minor Characters

**Janine:** A Handmaid who is particularly vulnerable to psychological manipulation. Janine appears to fully adopt the ideology of Gilead even though she breaks down mentally and physically in the process. She is trusted by the Aunts but disliked and pitied by all the Handmaids.

**Rita:** A servant in the household of the Commander. She belongs to the class of women called Marthas, who are infertile but have done nothing to classify them as Unwomen. She despises Handmaids and fears her superiors.

**Cora:** A servant in the household of the Commander. She belongs to the class of women called Marthas, who are infertile but have done nothing to classify them as Unwomen. She sympathizes with Offred and hopes Offred will have a child.

**Nick:** The Commander's chauffeur as well as a double agent in the elite, government agency of spies called the Eyes. Nick is a member of the underground rebel group called the Maydays. Serena Joy sets up an illegal rendezvous between Offred and Nick for the purpose of producing a child. Offred and Nick continue to see each other secretly. When Nick believes her to be in danger, he arranges her escape.

**Offred's mother:** A radical feminist before Gilead. Offred's mother was a single parent and an activist. She disapproved of Offred's marriage for the simple reason that she believed men to be unnecessary. Offred is critical of her mother's extreme views, but mourns her absence.

**Offred's daughter:** The child Offred had with her husband, Luke, before Gilead. She was given away to another family when Offred was arrested and forced into service as a Handmaid. Offred is tortured by thoughts of her daughter. Communication between them is impossible. Offred feels she has been erased.

**Luke:** Offred's husband. Luke was married when they began their relationship. He divorced his wife and married Offred. They attempt to escape Gilead, but are caught and arrested. As far as we know, they never see each other again. Offred misses their caring relationship based in equality. She feels guilty when she begins her relationship with Nick.

**Previous Offred:** The Handmaid stationed at the Commander's home before Offred. Offred finds a message carved in her boudoir by one of the previous Handmaids. She repeats it to herself like a mantra, 'Nolite te bastardec carborundorum,' which means don't let the bastards grind you down. Offred discovers that the previous Handmaid met the Commander in his study as she does and that she hung herself after Serena discovered their secret trysts.

**Aunt Elizabeth:** One of the headmistresses of the Red Center. Aunt Elizabeth was threatened and tied up by Moira, who used her outfit and identification to escape the Red Center.



**Professor Pieixoto:** The speaker at a symposium described in the epilogue to *The Handmaid's Tale*. Professor Pieixoto discusses his efforts at verifying the tale as a historical document. His speech includes important details about certain characters and the historical context of Gilead.



## Objects/Places

**Handmaids' Outfit:** The outfit of the Handmaids is almost entirely red. The dress is cut modestly and gloves are often worn with it. A white, winged bonnet accompanies the outfit. The bonnet limits a Handmaid's vision and is often worn with a veil.

**Pornography:** Offred's mother participates in a demonstration against pornography. As a child, Offred is not scandalized by a pornographic image she sees at the demonstration. Pornography is readily available in traveling vans and franchised stores in the pre-Gilead United States. The Handmaids are shown pornographic films at the Red Center to demonstrate the horrors inflicted on women in pre-Gilead society.

**The Wall:** Gilead has transformed a former university into a prison run by their secret police, the Eyes of God. Dissidents are executed and hung on the outer walls of the university as a warning to the people of Gilead of the punishment for heresy.

**Winged Eye:** A winged eye is the symbol used by the secret police of Gilead, the Eyes of God. It appears upon their black vans, which carry the reign of terror in Gilead. The Eyes are always watching for unorthodox behavior, and ruthlessly root out unbelievers in the ideology of Gilead.

**Knife:** Offred repeatedly describes her craving for knives as well as shears. Handmaids are systematically denied access to knives and sharp objects. One of Serena's main occupations is cutting flowers in her garden. Offred describes her as cutting off the plants sexual organs.

**Baby Angela:** Janine is the only Handmaid in the novel to become pregnant. The other Handmaids are deeply jealous of her. At the birthing of baby Angela, many Handmaids are present. They all experience sympathetic birth pangs. When the baby is born she is immediately taken away from Janine by the Wives and named Angela. Later we find that the baby dies. Janine blames herself for its death because the father was not her Commander.

**Flowers:** Offred describes flowers in detail several times in the novel. Red tulips like empty chalices thrust themselves up in Serena's yard only to explode and wither. Offred often describes the ideal Handmaid as an empty chalice as well. One evening she sneaks downstairs to steal a single daffodil as a means of compensating for her lack of power in almost every area of life. Later, Offred describes irises as subversive and sexual, silently insistent. Serena cuts off the sexual organs of the plants to allow the bulbs to store power. Gardening is a distraction for both Serena and Offred in former times.

**Soul Scrolls:** Machines that print out and mechanically voice standard prayers. Wives pay to have these prayer printed because it is considered pious to do so. The Soul Scrolls remind Offred of Tibetan prayer wheels. Offred and Ofglen do not believe God hears these prayers.



**Jezebel's:** The officially sanctioned setting for the elite males of Gilead as well as foreign businessmen to indulge their desire for extramarital sex. The Commander brings Offred to the club illegally to entertain himself. Moira belongs to a group of women who work as prostitutes at Jezebel's. They all have been sterilized and wear revealing, pre-Gilead fashions. Jezebel is the name of a sinful and manipulative queen in the Bible.



## Quotes

Quote 1: "girls, felt-skirted as I knew from pictures, later in mini skirts, then pants, then one earring, spiky green-streaked hair." Chapter 1, pg. 3

Quote 2: "yearning for something that was always about to happen, and was never the same as the hands that were on us there and then." Chapter 1, pg.3

Quote 3: "Blessed be the fruit." Chapter 4, 19

Quote 4: "the heart of Glied, where the war cannot intrude except on television." Chapter 5, pg. 23

Quote 5: "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." Chapter 5, pg. 24

Quote 6: "She is a flag on a hilltop, showing what can still be done: we too can be saved." Chapter 5, 26

Quote 7: "They are very interested in how other households are run; such bits of petty gossip give them an opportunity for pride or discontent." Chapter 5, pg. 27

Quote 8: "[has not] fiddled with the gravestones, or the church either. It's only the more recent history that offends them." Chapter 6, pg. 31

Quote 9: "Ordinary, said Aunt Lydia, is what you are used to. This may not seem ordinary to you now, but after a time it will. It will become ordinary." Chapter 6, pg.33

Quote 10: "I'll pretend you can hear me. But it's no good, because I know you can't." Chapter 7, 40

Quote 11: "She doesn't make speeches anymore. She has become speechless. She stays in her home, but it doesn't seem to agree with her. How furious she must be now that she has been taken at her word." Chapter 8, pg. 46

Quote 12: "Nolite te bastardes carborundorum" Chapter 9, pg. 52

Quote 13: "We were the people who were not in the papers. We lived in the blank white spaces at the edge of print. It gave us more freedom." Chapter 10, pg. 57

Quote 14: "I don't want to look at something that determines me so completely." Chapter 12, pg. 63

Quote 15: "I wait. I compose myself. My self is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech. What I must present is a made thing, not something born." Chapter 12, pg. 66



Quote 16: "Her fault, her fault, her fault, we chant in unison." Chapter 13, pg. 72

Quote 17: "I have failed once again to fulfill the expectations of others, which have become my own." Chapter 13, pg. 73

Quote 18: "Give me children, or else I die. Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb? Behold my maid Bilhah. She shall bear fruit upon my knees, that I may also have children by her." Chapter 15, pg. 88

Quote 19: "Moira had power now, she'd been set loose, she'd set herself loose. She was now a loose woman." Chapter 22, pg. 133

Quote 20: "Maybe none of this is about control. Maybe it isn't really about who can own whom, who can do what to whom and get away with it, even as far as death. Maybe it isn't about who can sit can who has to kneel or stand or lie down, legs spread open. Maybe it's about who can do what to whom and be forgiven for it. Never tell me it amounts to the same thing." Chapter 23, pg. 135

Quote 21: "There is something subversive about this garden of Serena's, a sense of buried things bursting upwards, wordlessly, into the light, as if to say: Whatever is silenced will clamor to be heard, though silently." Chapter 25, pg. 153

Quote 22: "That was one of the things they do. They force you to kill, within yourself." Chapter 30, pg. 193

Quote 23: "Better never means better for everyone, he says. It always means worse for some." Chapter 32, pg. 211

Quote 24: "Agreed to it right away, really she didn't care, anything with two legs and a good you-know-what was fine with her. They aren't squeamish, they don't have the same feelings we do." Chapter 33, pg. 215

Quote 25: "And Adam was not deceived, but the women being deceived was in the transgression. Notwithstanding she shall be saved by childbearing." Chapter 34, pg. 221

Quote 26: "butch paradise." Chapter 38, pg. 249

Quote 27: "There is something reassuring about the toilets. Bodily functions at least remain democratic. Everybody shits, as Moira would say." Chapter 39, pg. 252

Quote 28: "The trouble is I can't be, with him, any different than I usually am with him. Usually I am inert. Surely there must be something for us, other than this futility and bathos." Chapter 39, pg. 255

Quote 29: "It makes me feel more in control, as if there is a choice, a decision that could be made one way or the other." Chapter 41, pg. 269



Quote 30: "The crimes of others are a secret language among us. Through them we show ourselves what we might be capable of, after all. This is not a popular announcement." Chapter 42, pg. 275

Quote 31: "Dear God, I think, I will do anything you like. Now that you've let me off, I'll obliterate myself, if that is what you really want; I'll empty myself, truly, become a chalice. I'll give up Nick, I'll forget about the others, I'll stop complaining. I'll accept my lot. I'll sacrifice. I'll repent. I'll abdicate. I'll renounce." Chapter 45, pg. 286

Quote 32: "Don't let the bastards grind you down. I repeat this to myself but it conveys nothing. You might as well say, Don't let there be air; or Don't be. I suppose you could say that." Chapter 46. pg. 291

Quote 33: "replaced the serial polygamy common in the pre-Gilead period with the older form of simultaneous polygamy practiced in the Old Testament times." Chapter 47, pg. 305



# Topic Tracking: Religion

## Chapter 2

Religion 1: Marthas are unmarried, infertile women who perform household duties in the homes of the elite of Gilead. In the gospels, Martha is one of two sisters. Martha devotes herself to housework while Mary spends her time listening to Jesus speak. Jesus praised Mary, whereas Martha's role is exalted in Gilead.

## Chapter 5

Religion 2: In the Bible, Gilead is an idyllic section of the land of the Hebrews. Atwood was probably referring specifically to Jeremiah 8:22: "Is there no balm in Gilead; is there no physician there? Why then is not the health of the daughter of my people recovered?" The Republic of Gilead was intended to be a panacea for the problems left unsolved by the United States of America.

## Chapter 11

Religion 3: Offred fears being caught having sex with the doctor. He reassures her that two people will not break down the locked door. Deuteronomy 17:6 requires two witnesses to an act of adultery for a couple to be stoned to death.

## Chapter 13

Religion 4: The Bible the Commander reads from is usually locked in a box. This practice was prevalent during the Dark Ages. The Commander reads prescribed sections of the Bible that support the Ceremony and the role of the Handmaid. The sections he reads are Genesis 8:17, 30:1-8, 30:18, and Zechariah 4:10. His selective reading mirrors the censored television programming Serena flipped through before he entered the room.

## Chapter 13

Religion 5: The televised news reports on different battles the Republic of Gilead is fighting. The enemies are all religious groups, Baptists and Quakers. Earlier Offred mentioned that trade routes to Central America were severed by the Libertheos, a group probably vying for freedom of religion.

## Chapter 19

Religion 6: In Offred's room there is a cushion with the word "Faith" embroidered on it. Offred imagines that it belonged to a three-cushion set. She refers to I Corinthians 13:13, "So faith, hope, love; abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love." As a Handmaid, Offred has been denied hope and love and told to have faith.



Religion 7: Janine gives birth on a two-tiered birthing stool, so that she can fulfill the biblical practice of the maid giving birth on the knees of the wife.

### **Chapter 31**

Religion 8: The Republic of Gilead gave Jews the opportunity to immigrate to Israel or convert to the state religion. Jews that pretended to convert and were found out were hung.

### **Chapter 34**

Religion 9: The orator at the Prayvaganza quotes scripture that says women shall save themselves through childbearing. He says it was Eve that caused sin to enter the world and she must pay for it.

### **Chapter 38**

Religion 10: Moira is taken in by Quakers and smuggled to Salem before she is caught. This religious group is sympathetic to the plight of women and its members risk their lives in their involvement with the Underground Femaleroad.

### **Historical Notes**

Religion 11: Professor Pieixoto's talk is prefaced with a list of the studies he is famous for. One is a comparison of the Iranian government of the late twentieth century to the Republic of Gilead. Iran's conservative Islamic revolution involved demodernization and severe restrictions on the freedoms of women.



# Topic Tracking: Sexual Power Struggle

## Chapter 4

Sexual Power Struggle 1: Offred tempts a Guardian by looking into his eyes when he asks for her identification and swaying her hips as she walks away. Though her ability to seduce men is limited by her government-prescribed clothing and lifestyle, she still enjoys what is left to her of that power. She hopes men suffer from unsatisfied lust.

## Chapter 6

Sexual Power Struggle 2: Six doctors hang on the Wall of the prison. The government has executed them for performing abortions, even though at the time they were legal.

## Chapter 7

Sexual Power Struggle 3: Offred recalls attending an anti-pornography demonstration with her mother as a child. Her mother's friend gave her a magazine to throw into a bonfire and she saw a pornographic image on the cover. Offred was not disturbed by the image, but her mother was disturbed that she had seen it.

## Chapter 8

Sexual Power Struggle 4: Serena Joy is an infertile Wife. She has failed to do what her society values women for most. She is given powers in her household and over her husband, but she has no cards to play in the struggle for sexual power. She is defeated in this sense, and replaced by Offred.

## Chapter 12

Sexual Power Struggle 5: Offred says that she dislikes her body because it determines her so completely. At the Red Center, Handmaids were taught that the new government would free them from objectification, but really it has instituted a new kind of objectification.

## Chapter 18

Sexual Power Struggle 6: The Ceremony demonstrates a loss of sexual power to all those involved. Choice is denied to all of them and sexual arousal is denied to both women. The government has promised Offred freedom from male sexual aggression, and this is what they have replaced it with.

## Chapter 19

Sexual Power Struggle 7: Offred remembers her mother's role in the feminist movement and her criticism of Offred's lifestyle. Her mother never married, but raised a child alone. She did not value men. She thought Offred took the advances of feminism for granted



and told her that she did not need Luke. Offred valued men and considered her mother a bit of a fanatic.

### **Chapter 22**

Sexual Power Struggle 8: When Moira escapes the Handmaids think of her as a hero. Moira had demonstrated that she had power and freed herself, if temporarily, from the domination imposed by the Red Center. Offred describes her as a loose women, which implies sexual freedom.

### **Chapter 26**

Sexual Power Struggle 9: The Commander's secret meetings with Offred have undermined the arrangements of the government for Offred. The secret she shares with the Commander gives her power to ask favors from him and separates her further from his Wife. Offred makes fun of the idealistic community of women that was the goal of the Republic.

### **Chapter 28**

Sexual Power Struggle 10: Offred remembers Moira's statements about heterosexuality versus homosexuality. She said luring men away from other women was not the same as luring women away from their women lovers because there was a balance of power in homosexual sex. Offred thinks this is absurd.

### **Chapter 32**

Sexual Power Struggle 11: The Commander explains the plight of men before the Republic. They were loosing interest in procreation. Under the new system men desire women again. He acknowledges that women have suffered in the process.



# Topic Tracking: Truth in Storytelling

## Chapter 6

Truth in Storytelling 1: Aunt Lydia tells the future Handmaids that although aspects of the new way of life may seem atrocious they will eventually become ordinary. Offred recalls this statement while viewing six executed doctors hanging on the Wall. This is an explicit suggestion that accepted views/stories should be questioned.

## Chapter 7

Truth in Storytelling 2: Offred wishes to be telling a story, and yet she has no audience and she has no control over the outcome because she wishes to tell the truth. She wants control and she wants to affect an audience. All she can do is pretend and hope for a future audience.

## Chapter 12

Truth in Storytelling 3: The evening of the Ceremony in which Offred is ritualistically inseminated, she describes her mental preparation as "composing herself." She tries to rewrite herself as she was rewritten at the Red Center. Atwood also implies the second meaning of compose, to calm.

## Chapter 13

Truth in Storytelling 4: During Testifying, Janine tells the story of her rape and interprets it one way. After the Aunts and the other Handmaid's ridicule her she interprets it another way.

## Chapter 18

Truth in Storytelling 5: Offred believes three contradictory stories about what has happened to Luke since the last time she saw him. She has created each story herself based upon what she believes could be possible based upon the limited information she has about the world of Gilead. Each story is simultaneously true because she lacks the knowledge of what really has happened to Luke. These contradictory beliefs allow her to be both suicidal and hopeful.

## Chapter 23

Truth in Storytelling 6: At the end of the first night Offred spends in the Commander's study, he asks her for a kiss. She says she imagined stabbing him while acting out this semblance of love. Then she retracts this story and says she did not imagine it, though perhaps she should have.

## Chapter 39



Truth in Storytelling 7: Offred learns from Moira that her mother has been sent to the Colonies. She had previously believed her to be dead. Now she must mourn for her death again.

### **Chapter 40**

Truth in Storytelling 8: Offred describes her first arranged meeting with Nick twice. The first story emphasizes the sensual and the second story emphasizes their dialogue. She gives more credibility to the second rendition, but denies that either is true. She asserts that a reconstruction can never be really true.

### **Chapter 41**

Truth in Storytelling 9: Offred wishes her story were different. She wishes it were a different story entirely and that she had told it better, but she also wishes to tell the truth. She says her painful, fragmented story does include the truth.

Truth in Storytelling 10: Offred believes different stories about her feelings for Nick at different times. Some days she thinks she is in love. Some days she thinks she has adapted to the conditions. Her truth fluctuates.

### **Chapter 43**

Truth in Storytelling 11: Aunt Lydia tells the Handmaids that the man they are about to Particulate raped a pregnant woman and killed her unborn child. This story inspires livid hatred in all the Handmaids. However, as we find out later, the man committed political crimes and never raped a woman.

### **Historical Notes**

Truth in Storytelling 12: The goal of Pieixoto's talk is discuss verification of the Handmaid's Tale as a historical document. He and his colleagues are unable to ascertain the identity of the Handmaid or back up the specifics of her story. However, they can place the document within the time period suggested by its narrator and pinpoint the person who may have been the Commander she describes. Pieixoto describes the historian's job as grasping for echoes of an incomplete story.



## Part 1: Night

Our narrator, who we later find is called Offred, records her recollections of a gymnasium in a not-so-distant past, which served as a sort of barracks for her and many other women. For Offred the gymnasium evoked images, sounds, and smells of past school games and dances. She imagined "girls, felt-skirted as I knew from pictures, later in mini skirts, then pants, then one earring, spiky green-streaked hair." Chapter 1, pg. 3

There was a particular yearning in the air that the women could still sense, though the room had been filled with army cots and was patrolled by Aunts with electric cattle prods. It was an insatiable "yearning for something that was always about to happen, and was never the same as the hands that were on us there and then." Chapter 1, pg.3

Guards from the elite group called the Angels encircled the fence of the building. The women feared them, but also fantasized about exchanging sexual favors with them for some freedom. Offred and the other women learned to whisper and read lips. In this way, they exchanged names.



## Part 2: Shopping

The narrative has now moved to the present. Offred's room is furnished sparingly, but with folk-art accents, which represent traditional values and womanhood. Knives or anything that can be used to harm oneself has been removed. All the women of Offred's status have a room furnished similarly. Offred remembers that Aunt Lydia said to think of her new situation as a privilege not a prison.

Offred wears a full red dress outfit with red gloves, red shoes, and a white winged bonnet. Her dress is designed to cover her from neck to ankle and obscure her shape. The bonnet is intended to limit her view as well as hide her face. All Handmaids wear this outfit.

Offred picks up her shopping basket and goes down to the kitchen where Rita is making bread. Rita belongs to the class of women called Marthas. Marthas wear green dresses similar to Offred's dress, but need not cover their faces. Rita gives Offred shopping tokens but does not speak to her. Rita despises Offred's position. She once said she would rather be sent to the Colonies and starve to death than accept Offred's lifestyle. Offred wishes she could sit and talk with Cora, another Martha who functions as a maid in the house of the Commander. Offred remembers her former husband, Luke, telling her there was no feminine correlate to the word fraternize.

Topic Tracking: Religion 1

Offred is on the lookout for the Commander's Wife as she leaves the house. The wife is consistently cold toward Offred because she is reproached by the existence of a Handmaid in her house, but she still has power over Offred. Offred envies the wife's freedom to garden and knit. The Commander's Wife met Offred when she arrived at the house five weeks before. This was Offred's third assignment. The Wife told her she wanted to see as little as possible of her. Offred was disappointed. She wanted a mother figure or a friend. The Wife continued their conversation by asserting her ownership of her husband. Offred then recognized the Wife as a famous television gospel singer, named Serena Joy, from the time before the war. Wives wear light blue dresses.

Offred does not encounter Serena Joy on her way through the garden, but passes by Nick, the Guardian who is the Commander's chauffeur. He winks at her and she turns her head away in a rush of fear. The government does not allow that sort of familiarity. Offred fears he may be an Eye, which is a government spy.

At the sidewalk, Offred is met by Ofglen, a Handmaid who has been her shopping partner for two weeks. They greet each other with the accepted greeting among Handmaids, "Blessed be the fruit." Chapter 4, pg. 19 They converse guardedly because they fear the other may report any unorthodox comments. The first of several barriers surrounding the center of the city of Gilead is staffed by two Guardians, low-rank soldiers used for a variety of menial functions. A Guardian shot a Martha recently



because she took too long getting her pass out and he suspected she had a bomb. Offred looks into the eyes of the Guardian as he takes her pass and he blushes. She savors this little bit of power left to her. A Guardian is not allowed to marry until he attains higher rank, and all other sexual outlets are considered sacrilege.

#### Topic Tracking: Sexual Power Struggle 1

Offred and Ofglen walk down the empty streets of Gilead, which are lined with manicured mansions. They are in "the heart of Gilead, where the war cannot intrude except on television." Chapter 5, pg. 23 They turn onto a main street and join Marthas and Econowives, the women of poorer men who have to do the job of Wife and Martha for their husbands. Offred remembers jogging on similar sidewalks and having to avoid dark streets and strange men. Women were not protected then. Offred recalls another fragment of one of Aunt Lydia's speeches; "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." Chapter 5, pg. 24

#### Topic Tracking: Religion 2

The first stop is at the Milk and Honey shop. The sign bears only a picture. Words were banished from women's lives long ago because they were considered too much of a temptation. On entering the shop, they find that oranges are available. The war often interfered with the supply of foods imported from other countries and even from California and Florida. Offred looks at the other shoppers trying to find Moira, a friend she made at the Red Center where the Handmaids were trained. Then a hugely pregnant Handmaid enters the shop. All the others stare in envy. "She is a flag on a hilltop, showing what can still be done: we too can be saved." Chapter 5, pg. 26 Offred recognizes her as a favorite of Aunt Lydia's at the Red Center, Janine. She has come to show off her good fortune. Offred and Ofglen make their purchases and head to the All Flesh shop. All the names of the shops are Biblical references. Ofglen gets steak for the second time that week. Offred decided to tell this to Rita and Cora. "They are very interested in how other households are run; such bits of petty gossip give them an opportunity for pride or discontent." Chapter 5, pg. 27

Leaving the meat shop, Offred and Ofglen met a group of Japanese tourists. The short skirts, toenail polish and heeled shoes of the women both scandalize and mesmerize Offred. She remembers wearing similar clothing herself. When asked to be photographed the Handmaids hide behind their bonnets. The guide asks if they are happy. Offred must say yes. Many of the guides are Eyes.

On the way home, they stop at an old Puritan church. The government "[has not] fiddled with the gravestones, or the church either. It's only the more recent history that offends them." Chapter 6, pg. 31 Ofglen bows her head in prayer, and Offred assumes her piety is a show. They then head to the Wall, which is the face of Gilead's prison. Six male corpses are hanging by their necks on the Wall from a Men's Salvaging earlier that morning. The men are identified as former abortionists by signs hung around their necks bearing images of fetuses. The men's heads are covered in white bags. One has a



bloodstain like a mouth. Ofglen trembles, but Offred is not tempted to inquire or even look at her. "Ordinary, said Aunt Lydia, is what you are used to. This may not seem ordinary to you now, but after a time it will. It will become ordinary." Chapter 6, pg.33

Topic Tracking: Sexual Power Struggle 2

Topic Tracking: Truth in Storytelling 1

## Part 3: Night

At night Offred recalls fragments of her past. She remembers talking with Moira in her apartment during college. She remembers taking a walk in the park with her mother and witnessing the public burning of pornography. She remembers awakening in a hospital without her daughter. She had delusions that her daughter had been killed. Offred wishes these memories were only stories she was telling. She wishes to control the outcome of her story. She wishes she had an audience for this story she is telling. "I'll pretend you can hear me. But it's no good, because I know you can't." Chapter 7, pg. 40 Her action of telling a story at all is a testimonial to her hope for change and control, and at the same time her lack of audience renders her hopeless.

Topic Tracking: Sexual Power Struggle 3

Topic Tracking: Truth in Storytelling 2



## Part 4: Waiting Room

There are three new bodies on the Wall. A priest and two Guardians accused of Gender Treachery. Offred again resents Ofglen's meek appearance. As they head home they pass a funeral procession. An Econowive has miscarried. The handmaid's put their hands over their hearts in a gesture of sympathy but are scowled at by the Econowives who generally dislike Handmaids. Offred rebuffs a friendly Nick on her way into the house before passing by Serena Joy in the garden. Offred remembers watching Serena Joy make speeches on television about the sanctity of the home, and how women should stay in the home. "She doesn't make speeches anymore. She has become speechless. She stays in her home, but it doesn't seem to agree with her. How furious she must be now that she has been taken at her word." Chapter 8, pg. 46 Serena Joy doesn't acknowledge Offred's presence. According to the values of society, Serena is a defeated woman, while Offred is the hope for the future.

Topic Tracking: Sexual Power Struggle 4

Entering the kitchen, the smell of bread taunts Offred with memories of the past and she looks at Rita's sharp knife covetously. Rita and Cora decide who will bathe Offred, and Offred goes upstairs to wait in her room. In the hallway she catches the Commander looking into her room. He turns and walks around her silently. Offred is shocked and excited by this violation of custom. She feels a surge of ownership for her private space, which has not felt recently. When she arrived in the house she decided to meticulously explore her room to fill her free hours. She remembers the hotel rooms she explored quickly and carelessly while waiting for Luke to meet her. She was happy then, but she did not know it. On the third day of her exploration she found evidence of a previous Handmaid. On the inside of her cupboard the words, "Nolite te bastardes carborundorum" (Don't let the bastards grind you down), were scratched. Chapter 9, pg. 52 Offred was pleased that this taboo message had reached her though she did not understand it. She speculated about who wrote it. It reminded her of energetic, quirky Moira. Rita would not give her any information about previous Handmaids.

Offred sings to herself, but all the songs she sings are now outlawed. Serena Joy listens to tapes of her youthful voice, but does not want to be caught remembering her former glory. It is hot in the house. Offred remembers Aunt Lydia lamenting with religious fervor the vile, former practice of sun tanning. Offred wanted to cry too, because Aunt Lydia's mouth reminded her of the dead mice her cat used to leave on the doorstep. Thoughts of Moira follow. She planned a lingerie-party and dropped water balloons on college boys from her dorm window. Offred remembers the gruesome crimes that occurred before the war, but they were not a part of her life. She could ignore them. "We were the people who were not in the papers. We lived in the blank white spaces at the edge of print. It gave us more freedom." Chapter 10, pg. 57 Offred sees the Commander outside the window and thinks she ought to feel hatred for him, but she does not. Nor does she feel love. Her feelings towards him are more complicated.



Offred is taken to the doctor's office for her obligatory monthly exam. In the examining room she undresses, lies down, and covers her body with a sheet. A curtain runs from the ceiling to her shoulders as well, hiding her face from the doctor. When the doctor comes in he performs the check-up and then whispers a proposal to Offred. Would she like him to help her have a baby? She is terrified by the choice he is offering her. He reasons that the Commander is probably sterile. This expression is forbidden; by law there are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren. Offred does want a child because she wants to be saved from death or exile to the Colonies, but she puts off his proposal in fear of being caught.

Topic Tracking: Religion 3

Taking a bath, Offred remembers her baby girl. A woman tried to steal her baby at a grocery store once. Offred thinks of her daughter as a ghost at times. Her daughter was taken from her when she was five years old. It has been three years since then. Aunt Lydia said not to think about it. She notices the number tattooed upon her ankle. As she dresses after the bath she remembers an image of women getting their heads shaved in a town square, but she cannot remember what they had done and assumes it must have been a long time ago. She is remembering events from the end of World War II, in which women who dated the Nazi occupiers had their heads shaven in public. She dislikes looking at her body. "I don't want to look at something that determines me so completely." Chapter 12, pg. 63 Offred feels nauseous when she is served dinner in her room, but she forces the food down so as not to get into trouble. She imagines the Commander's Wife leaving her food untouched. Then she wraps up the butter on her plate and puts it in the toe of her shoe. Then she waits.

*"I wait. I compose myself. My self is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech. What I must present is a made thing, not something born."* Chapter 12, pg. 66

Topic Tracking: Sexual Power Struggle 5

Topic Tracking: Truth in Storytelling 3



## Part 5: Nap

Offred does not like the forced inactivity of a Handmaid's life. Remembering harem paintings, she speculates that female boredom may be erotic. Waiting in her bedroom, she wishes for a pig ball, toys given to confined prize pigs. She lies down on the floor and executes a series of pelvic rolls, the recommended exercise for Handmaid. Offred remembers the daily nap the Handmaid's were forced to take at the Red Center. During one nap, a new woman was brought in. It was Moira. They couldn't talk for several days, but when placed together during the daily walk they quickly arranged a meeting time in the bathroom. That time comes during Testifying, which is a daily meeting where individual women share the stories of their past and are pressured into seeing those experiences from the prescribed perspective of the new government. That day Janine testified about how she was gang-raped and had an abortion. One of the Aunts asks the audience whose fault it is. "Her fault, her fault, her fault, we chant in unison." Chapter 13, pg. 72 They all agree that Janine led men on. The first time Janine shared this story she burst into tears as the Handmaid's jeered at her in unison. This time she immediately said she was to blame and that she deserved the pain. After her testimony, Offred asked to be dismissed and met Moira joyfully in the bathroom.

Topic Tracking: Truth in Storytelling 4

Offred has fallen asleep and dreams.

Offred used to think of her body as an instrument, commanded by her will, one with her. Now she thinks of herself as a cloud congealed around a mysterious uterus that is out of her control. Time passes in months and despair increases. "I have failed once again to fulfill the expectations of others, which have become my own." Chapter 13, pg. 73

Offred's dream skips to her old apartment, empty except for a cupboard of clothes. She wants to put something on, but nothing fits. Luke is behind her with a cat rubbing his legs, mewing for food. She says his name but he does not answer. It occurs to Offred that Luke may not be alive. Then she is running with her daughter through a forest. They are being chased and shot at. She pulls her daughter to the ground and covers her with her body, but they are caught and her daughter is taken away from her. Offred is awakened by a bell. There are tears upon her face. This is the worst of her recurrent dreams.



## Part 6: Household

Offred joins Rita and Cora in the sitting room. She kneels next to Serena Joy's chair. Nick enters, followed by Serena. Serena turns on the television and flips through sermons and blocked channels to the news. There is news of war victories, and the anchorman soothingly assures viewers that peace will come soon. The Quaker and Baptist insurgents will be quelled. Serena turns off the television and Offred begins to daydream of her other forbidden name and then of her escape across the border with Luke and her daughter. Then the Commander knocks and enters the sitting room. He looks puzzled, but moves to his chair, removes the Bible from a locked box, and begins reading a passage from it to the household. Offred is lulled into reflection by the sections that were taught at the Red Center. "Give me children, or else I die. Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb? Behold my maid Bilhah. She shall bear fruit upon my knees, that I may also have children by her." Chapter 15, pg. 88 This is the precedent set forth in the Bible upon which Offred's new life is based. She remembers Moira threatening to play sick and seduce the Angels in the ambulance in order to escape the Red Center. The Commander finishes the passage and asks everyone to pray silently. Serena Joy has begun to cry. The only thing Offred can think of to say to God is *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*. Then she begins thinking about how Moira was taken away from the Red Center in an ambulance only to be brought back soon after and punished. Her feet were lacerated with frayed steel cables. They did not care about the feet of a woman. The Commander ended the prayer and dismissed the household.

Topic Tracking: Religion 4

Topic Tracking: Religion 5

The Ceremony continued upstairs in Serena Joy's bedroom. Offred lay between Serena Joy's legs with her head resting on her pelvis and her hands clasped in Serena Joy's hands. Offred's skirt is lifted above her waist and the Commander is preoccupied with the lower half of her body. Offred does not see this as rape because she has agreed to it. It is not copulation because only one person is involved. Offred feels neither desire nor love. Arousal is considered to be frivolous. The Commander comes at last and leaves the room silently. Serena Joy sends Offred out of the room with loathing.

Topic Tracking: Sexual Power Struggle 6

Offred retires to her bedroom and takes the butter she has reserved out of her shoe. She rubs it into her face. Lotion was outlawed as vain. Many Handmaids do this in hope of retaining their beauty till they can be loved freely again. Offred wants Luke desperately. This impossible desire is followed by a desire to steal. She sneaks down to the sitting room hoping to take a wilted daffodil she saw in a vase that evening. Nick discovers her there. In the darkness, they embrace and kiss with unbolting desire. He tells her he was coming to find her to tell her that the Commander wishes to see her in his office the following evening. They part with difficulty.

## Part 7: Night

Offred lies in bed, on edge with desire. She will not die from lack of sex but from lack of love. The ones she loves are missing persons, as she is for them. Offred believes Luke's dead body is lying in the woods, a bullet through his head. She also believes he is sitting, sick and dirty, in a prison cell somewhere, and she believes he was never caught at all but smuggled to safety by some group of resisters. This last belief is what keeps Offred alive.

Topic Tracking: Truth in Storytelling 5



## Part 8: Birth Day

A bell wakens Offred from dreams of her daughter. She eats an egg for breakfast and finds pleasure in its perfect shape and grain. A siren interrupts her breakfast, and a red Birthmobile pulls into the driveway. Offred runs downstairs and gets into the van where three other Handmaids sit. One of them tells her Ofwarren, Janine, is giving birth today. Offred wonders if it will be an Unbaby, mutated. The chances are one in four because of environmental pollution. Births are no longer supervised by doctors, though they wait outside in case of an emergency. Natural birthing is standard because it is the best for the baby. Anesthetics are not used because the Bible said women would suffer giving birth. Handmaids and Wives are present at birth days. Offred imagines the Wives admiring Janine and spoiling her with sweets, but calling her a whore behind her back. There is a banquet prepared for the Wives to follow the birth. The Wives massage the Wife of Warren's belly as if she is going to have the baby. Janine sits in the master bedroom, eyes squeezed shut and surrounded by Handmaids and Aunt Elizabeth who taught Gyn Ed at the Red Center. Offred remembers the weekly movies shown at the Center. A limited variety of movies were shown: movies showing men struggling to conquer problems easily solved in modern society, porn films depicting women being brutalized, or films showing Unwomen, doing the work of men. In one documentary, Offred recognized her mother carrying a sign of protest. The sign read "Take Back the Night." "Take Back the Night" originated as the slogan of Women Against Pornography, but developed into an anti-rape slogan. This image engenders a wealth of images in Offred's mind. She remembers her spunky graying mother defending her decision to be a single mother. She would come over to Offred's and Luke's apartment and explain the uselessness of men. She wanted Offred to follow her path, to vindicate her sacrifices. Offred admired her mother, but did not want to live her mother's life. Now she just wants her mother back.

Topic Tracking: Religion 6

Topic Tracking: Sexual Power Struggle 7

The room is hot and noisy with the chanting of the Handmaids. Grape juice is passed around. It has been spiked. Offred and the others begin to feel sympathetic birth pangs. Janine is restless and panting. She paces and then sits. When the time comes, the Wife of the Commander is led in to sit above Janine in the ceremonial Birthing Stool. Janine gives birth to a healthy baby girl below her. Aunt Elizabeth washes the baby and puts her in the arms of the Wife of the Commander. She names her Angela. Janine will nurse her child for the first few months, but then she will be transferred to another household in order to give another family the chance for a child. She will never be sent to the Colonies, which is her reward.

Topic Tracking: Religion 7

Offred returns home and her room. She thinks of Moira. She found out what happened to Moira from Alma, who was told by Dolores, who was told by Janine, who was told by Aunt Lydia. Aunt Lydia told Janine that Moira had escaped from the Red Center. Moira



had asked to go to the bathroom and then lured Aunt Elizabeth in with the complaint that the toilet was overflowing. She then threatened Aunt Elizabeth with a metal pole she took out of a toilet and hurried Aunt Elizabeth down into the basement. There she switched outfits with the Aunt and gagged and bound her behind a furnace. Moira, dressed as Aunt Elizabeth and bearing her identification cards, escaped the Red Center. Aunt Lydia told this all to Janine in order to get her to spy on the other Handmaids to see if they were involved. When the rest of the Handmaids heard this story they were both excited and frightened by it. "Moira had power now, she'd been set loose, she'd set herself loose. She was now a loose woman." Chapter 22, pg. 133 Moira has yet to reappear.

Topic Tracking: Sexual Power Struggle 8

The narrator explains that her story is an inexact reconstruction of events. She is not sure what it is about even. "Maybe none of this is about control. Maybe it isn't really about who can own whom, who can do what to whom and get away with it, even as far as death. Maybe it isn't about who can sit can who has to kneel or stand or lie down, legs spread open. Maybe it's about who can do what to whom and be forgiven for it. Never tell me it amounts to the same thing." Chapter 23, pg. 135

Cora wakes Offred from her nap and inquires about the birth day. Cora wants a baby for their home. Offred eats dinner and thinks about the coming meeting with the Commander. At nine she goes down to his study, where all women are normally banned. She speculates about what he wants from her. His want is a weakness that may give her power. She enters and finds the Commander leaning on the mantel of his fireplace. His study is lined with books. It is an oasis of the forbidden. He asks her to play a game of Scrabble with him. She wants to laugh, but simply assents. The words she spells are like delicious candies to her senses. After two games he tells her to leave and asks for a kiss. She places her lips on his and he draws away. He says he wants her to kiss him like she means it.

Topic Tracking: Truth in Storytelling 6

## Part 9: Night

Offred returns to her room, and takes stock of her life. She is thirty-three years old. She is five foot seven inches tall. She has viable ovaries, and one more chance to use them. Something has changed tonight. Offred can now ask for something. She remembers an interview with the mistress of a supervisor of one of the Jewish death camps of the Holocaust. The woman denied that her lover was a monster. Offred can imagine the endearing idiosyncrasies the supervisor could have had. The documentary noted that the woman killed herself a week after the interview had taken place. Offred feels uncontrollable laughter boiling up in her. She covers her mouth as she drags herself into the cupboard to hide the noise. She tries to compose herself and eventually falls asleep.



## Part 10: Soul Scrolls

Cora drops the breakfast tray when she sees Offred's body inside the cupboard the next morning. Offred lies and says she fainted. Cora decides to keep it a secret between them. Offred is pleased by this small token of friendship.

It is summer. Serena Joy cuts irises in her garden. The irises are beautiful and female in shape. "There is something subversive about this garden of Serena's, a sense of buried things bursting upwards, wordlessly, into the light, as if to say: Whatever is silenced will clamor to be heard, though silently." Chapter 25, pg. 153 Offred shares the dangerous sensuality of the garden. The winter is less tempting.

Offred visits to the Commander's study have become routine. She is signaled by the slant of Nick's hat, and Serena is kept in the dark. Offred could not understand why the Commander desired these visits at first. She expected something more perverted. On her second visit, they played Scrabble again and he gave her a Vogue magazine to read. She feigned disinterest at first, but then supported by his encouragement realized that taboos did not exist within his study. However, she felt naughty as he watched her read it. She questioned how he could own this contraband. He said that his motives were beyond reproach. He told Offred she was the only one with whom he could share these things from the past. She discovered that he was estranged from his wife. The third night she asked him for some hand lotion, and he brought it for her on the fourth night. Despite this newfound power, Offred remained guarded because she knew she was only a means of entertainment for the Commander.

Offred's new relationship with the Commander changed the experience of the monthly Ceremony significantly. She felt shy and was embarrassed by her hairy legs. The Commander was no longer a thing to her, a bee to the flower. She was jealous of Serena and at the same time guilty for secretly entertaining her husband. Offred also relished the secret power this secret gave her, and feared being found out because of the Commander's carelessness. He touched her face during one Ceremony. Aunt Lydia said that the new system would cause women to live in harmony together and support each other, but the fact is that Offred has become the Commander's mistress and a familiar web of deceit and competition accompanies this role. Offred is no longer simply an empty womb.

Topic Tracking: Sexual Power Struggle 9

Offred has bought fish and strawberries. Fish are rare now because of water pollution. Offred and Ofglen have become more comfortable with each other, and converse with more ease. There are no bodies on the Wall today. They walk to the store known as the Soul Scrolls and look in the window at the machines that continuously print standard prayers paid for by Commanders' Wives. Before the war, the store sold lingerie. Offred catches Ofglen's eyes in the reflection of the window, and they hold each other's gaze steadily. Then Ofglen asks in a whisper if she thinks God listens to the mechanical prayers of the Soul Scrolls. This is a treasonous question. Offred considers protesting,



but instead says no. Ofglen is relieved and reveals that neither does she believe God listens to the prayers. They move away from the shop, fearing hidden microphone, and continue their conversation with new freedom. They both confess they thought the other was a true believer. Ofglen asks Offred to join an underground alliance of dissenters, but then they enter a crowded area and their conversation is cut short. On the way home, a van pulls up near them and two Eyes violently arrest an unassuming man on the street. Offred is shocked by this encounter, but relieved that it was not her being arrested.

Offred does not feel like a nap today. Instead she thinks about the past. Moira always criticized her for luring Luke away from his wife. Offred said he could make his own decisions, and countered saying Moira stole women from their girlfriends. Moira said it was different because there was a balance of power in sex between women. They never took these arguments very seriously.

#### Topic Tracking: Sexual Power Struggle 10

At the time of the coup, Offred had a job at a library, transferring books onto computer discs. All the high profile government officials and representatives were killed at once. The Constitution was suspended. Newspapers and radio stations were shut down. Everyone had to travel with a pass. Also Pornomarts were shut down. No one knew who was making these changes. One day Offred went to the store and found her Compubank number was invalid. All the women at the library were fired that day and escorted out by men with machine guns. Later that day, she found that all women's credit accounts had been canceled and could only be accessed by their husbands or male kin. Women could no longer hold property. Luke tried to console Offred by telling her he would take care of her and that they still had each other, but Offred felt the ownership was now one-sided. She was his.

Offred sits across from the Commander playing Scrabble. They let each other cheat, and he enjoys her small triumphs. After the game, he asks her what she would like to read. By this time, Offred has read many magazines and a few novels in his study. She decides tonight that she would like to talk rather than read. She asks about his career. He tells her he is a social scientist. Then she asks him the meaning of the saying scratched in her cupboard, "Nolite te bastardest carborundorum." He laughs and says it is fake Latin. He pulls out an old textbook of his and shows her an identical phrase scribbled in the border. He tells her the meaning, and she realizes that the Handmaid before her had been in this library. He tells her the woman before her hung herself. She realizes he wants her life to be bearable to her. Her power over him is guilt. He asks her what she would like, and she says she would like to know what is going on in the world.



## Part 11: Night

Offred returns to her room. Night has fallen. It presses upon Offred like a stone. Nick walks across the lawn below her window and looks up. They hunger for each other, but Offred pulls a curtain between them. Indulgence is impossible, and also unfaithful to Luke. The night they left their apartment, Luke killed the cat so it would not tip off a search for them. "That was one of the things they do. They force you to kill, within yourself." Chapter 30, pg. 193 It was useless because someone betrayed them anyway.

Tonight Offred prays, but not the type of prayer she was taught at the Red Center. She does not pray for emptiness or fruit. She prays for the safety of those she loves. She prays to be delivered from temptation and evil. She is desperate and tempted to commit suicide. She wishes she knew what God was doing. She wishes God would answer her.



## Part 12: Jezebel's

Everyday Offred hopes to wake up in her old bed. She keeps track of the days like a prisoner, but she is not serving a term that will end. She feels unhealthy, tired. She scripts frivolous fights with Luke in her head while waiting for the inevitable breakfast egg. Later that day, Ofglen and Offred visit the Wall. There is a body hanging marked with a J. It does not stand for Jewish. Most Jews left when they were given the choice to emigrate or convert. Jews who pretended to convert and were found out were hung on the Wall. As they pass by a building called Memorial Hall, Ofglen tells Offred that the Eyes have banquets there. She says she was told by someone in a secret support network to which she belongs. She tells Offred that the password is Mayday. Offred recalls when Ofglen used it on her on their first walk. They part and Offred returns to the Commander's house. Passing through the garden she is summoned by Serena Joy. Serena is knitting and wraps a skein around Offred's hands. Then she casually asks if Offred is pregnant yet. She suggests that maybe the Commander is sterile. This is heresy, but Offred agrees. Serena suggests that Offred try to have a baby with another man. She says she can arrange it with Nick. Offred assents. Serena says she will try to get a picture of Offred's baby girl for her as a present. This incenses Offred who does not even know if her child is alive till this moment. Then Serena gives her a cigarette and tells her to ask Rita for a match. Rita gives her the match after warning her not to burn down the house. Offred returns to her room, fantasizing about all the ways she could use the cigarette and match. She lies on her bed and remembers her last evening with the Commander.

Topic Tracking: Religion 8

He has taken to drinking in her presence. They cheat at Scrabble and listen to the radio. He explained that in the time before women no longer inspired men. Sex could be bought. Men complained that they no longer had feelings. They did not want sex or marriage. Offred asks if men feel now. He says yes. He wants to know what she thinks. He wants intimacy, but she cannot give him that. She lies and says she has no opinion about the way things have turned out. He apologizes. "Better never means better for everyone, he says. It always means worse for some." Chapter 32, pg. 211

Topic Tracking: Sexual Power Struggle 11

The next day, Offred and Ofglen walk to the Prayvaganza together. Offred looks for dandelions on the lawns they pass, remembering the wreaths of them she would make with her daughter. Guardians with machine guns guard the doors to the building in which the Prayvaganza is being held. The Wives sit in folding chairs in the courtyard and the Econowives sit in the gallery. The Handmaids kneel on the floor opposite the Wives. The whispering is uncontrollable. Janine walks in and Ofglen tells Offred that her child died after all. Ofglen says Janine thinks it is her fault for having it with a doctor instead of the Commander. Offred wonders if the Wives already gossip about her in the same way. "Agreed to it right away, really she didn't care, anything with two legs and a good you-know-what was fine with her. They aren't squeamish, they don't have the



same feelings we do." Chapter 33, pg. 215 Offred remembers seeing Janine whispering to herself in the Red Center. She had a smile frozen on her face and was whispering the conversation of a waitress. The Aunt on guard had left and Moira slapped Janine and told her she would be killed and burnt up with the garbage if she had lost her mind. Janine snapped out of it then.

A Commander gives a speech about victory and sacrifice and then twenty newly decorated Angels come in to accept their brides. Offred remembers the Commander explaining how the new order had eliminated the indignities women had to go through to fulfill their biological destinies: singles' bars, blind dates, nose jobs, silicon implants, domestic beatings, and divorce. Offred said what was now missing was love. The Commander said love is unnecessary and a historical anomaly. Offred caught the tail end of the service. The new Wives were being exhorted to be subject to their husbands. "And Adam was not deceived, but the women being deceived was in the transgression. Notwithstanding she shall be saved by childbearing." Chapter 34, pg. 221 Offred imagines the reaction of the wives on introduction to their husbands. They have never seen these men till this day, and they are stuck with them for the rest of their lives. However they are not expected to love them, just copulate with them. Offred imagines all the new couples sweating and grunting and failing in bed. She remembers Moira suggesting that Aunt Lydia made Janine perform oral sex on her in her office. These rebellious thoughts were heartening. Leaving the Prayvaganza, Ofglen told Offred that she knew about her secret meetings with the Commander and asked her to get information of any kind for her.

#### Topic Tracking: Religion 9

In her room again, Offred thinks of her attempt to escape with Luke. At the border the officials called to verify their passports. They knew the outcome of that phone call so they got in the car and tried to escape but were caught in the woods. Offred questions whether she should fight at all. She wonders how the Commander could doubt the validity of love. Everyone fell in love and hoped to fall in love before. Love was intangible and wonderful and precarious. You had to work at it. You could change yourself or you could change the man. Offred weeps and waits. Serena Joy knocks at the door and shows Offred a picture of her child. She is tall and changed. Offred believes she has been obliterated in her daughter's eyes. She remembers why they do not give Handmaid's knives with their dinner.

That night the Commander has a surprise for Offred. He takes out a gaudy, purple dress and tells her to put it on. He wants to take her out. He has makeup to disguise her and a blue cloak. They don't have any problem at the checkpoints. Offred gets onto the floor of the car at the gate of their destination, because Wives and Handmaids are not allowed in. They get out and he puts a tag around her wrist. He tells her to say she is an evening rental if anyone asks. He opens a door and they pass down a corridor into the courtyard of an old hotel. The courtyard is full of women dressed in a variety of sexy outfits from the time before. The Commander tells her not to gawk because she will give herself away. He shows her off to various men and then leads her over to a couch. He says wanting variety is natural for men, and the club is good for business. All the trade



delegations are brought to the club. He says the women at the club are a mixture of former intellectuals and whores who prefer this lifestyle to the standard choices for women. When he goes to get her a drink, Offred spots Moira across the room in a bunny costume. Moira signals for Offred to meet her in the bathroom in five minutes.

When the Commander returns, Offred excuses herself and seeks out the bathroom. An Aunt monitoring the door to the restroom tells Offred she has fifteen minutes. She finds Moira within and they hug. Moira welcomes her to Jezebel's. Offred tells her she is only at the club for the night. Moira tells her the story of her path since her escape from the Red Center. She walked all the way to the center of Cambridge, getting through all the checkpoints with Aunt Elizabeth's identification card. Moira remembered a Quaker family from the mailing list of the feminist paper she had worked for before and went to their door. She told them she was taking a survey and they took her in. She then immediately confessed her predicament and asked them to help her. They burnt her clothes and identification cards and took her to another Quaker house, which was a station on the Underground Femaleroad. Moira was smuggled from house to house for eight months before she was caught in Salem along with the couple escorting her. Some of the people who assisted her had been killed and hung on the Wall. When she was caught she thought she was going to be killed, but they gave her the choice to work at the club or in the Colonies. They showed her movies about the work that exiled women and men did in the Colonies: shoveling dead bodies, farming, or working with radioactive materials and other toxins. She chose to work at the club, even though it required that she be surgically sterilized. Offred worries that she has lost her fighting spirit, but is encouraged when Moira comments that the club is a "butch paradise." Chapter 38, pg. 249 This was the last time Offred saw Moira.

Topic Tracking: Religion 10

The Commander takes Offred up to one of the rooms in the hotel. She asks to go to the bathroom. "There is something reassuring about the toilets. Bodily functions at least remain democratic. Everybody shits, as Moira would say." Chapter 39, pg. 252 Moira just told her that she had seen her mother in the film about the Colonies. Offred had believed her to be dead. She now remembers her mother's disappearance and the discovery of her ransacked apartment. She mourns her mother's death again. Meanwhile, the Commander is getting impatient in the room. She joins him on the bed, conscious of the fact that she does not want to have sex with him alone. She tries to pretend to enjoy it. "The trouble is I can't be, with him, any different than I usually am with him. Usually I am inert. Surely there must be something for us, other than this futility and bathos." Chapter 39, pg. 255

Topic Tracking: Truth in Storytelling 7

## Part 13: Night

Offred waits in her room for Serena to take her to Nick. She has removed the makeup of the early evening. Serena knocks and leads her downstairs. She instructs her to walk across the yard to the garage where Nick sleeps. Offred wonders how this has been arranged. She knocks on the door of the garage apartment and Nick lets her into his austere decorated room. Offred describes the event that follows twice, in two different ways. She is unsure what the true story is or if there is a true story. In the first reconstruction, Nick says nothing. The encounter is compulsive and purely sensual. In the second account, which Offred says is more truthful, they have a cynical repartee before the sexual act. He asks that there be no romance. He does not want her to risk herself for him. Offred feels she has betrayed Luke with her feelings. She wishes she were shameless. She wishes she were not painfully conscious of her ignorance.

Topic Tracking: Truth in Storytelling 8



## Part 14: Salvaging

The narrator wishes her story was different, less painful, less fragmented, more focused, more complimentary to herself. However, she wants to tell as much of the truth as possible. She wants someone to hear her story.

Topic Tracking: Truth in Storytelling 9

She admits to visiting Nick numerous times to gratify herself. She expected him to shut her out at some point, but he never did. She always asks him if it is too late, and he always says no. She asks anyway. "It makes me feel more in control, as if there is a choice, a decision that could be made one way or the other." Chapter 41, pg. 269 Each time, they make love as if it were the last time, as if this one last time was a gift. Offred tries to remember every detail of Nick's appearance. Luke is fading in her memory, and she is becoming faithless. She tells him her real name and stories about Moira, but not about Luke. He talks little. They never mention love.

It is midsummer now. Ofglen suggests that Offred look through the Commander's desk for information. Offred refuses. She does not want to risk losing Nick. She thinks she may be pregnant with his child. Some days she thinks she is in love. Some days she thinks she has adapted to the conditions.

Topic Tracking: Truth in Storytelling 10

One morning, Offred attends a district Women's Salvaging, execution. All the Handmaids kneel on red cushions in front of a stage set up inside the former university. Offred thinks of making love until she sees the women to be salvaged, two Handmaids and one Wife, sitting on the stage. Two Aunts and the executioners take the stage. Offred recognizes Aunt Lydia and realizes she hates her. She ignores Aunt Lydia's speech. Aunt Lydia announces that a description of the crimes of the prisoners will be dispensed with because similar accounts during televised executions have been followed by an increase in similar crimes. "The crimes of others are a secret language among us. Through them we show ourselves what we might be capable of, after all. This is not a popular announcement." Chapter 42, pg. 275 The first woman is brought up to the noose. A Handmaid behind Offred begins vomiting. Offred has seen this before, has symbolically consented to the executions before. She does not want to see anymore.

When the Salvaging is concluded, Aunt Lydia asks all the Handmaids to form a circle for a Particution. Two Guardians drag a beaten man into the center of the circle. Offred thinks he looks drunk. Aunt Lydia announces his crime as rape involving the murder of an unborn child. This announcement inspires hatred in all the Handmaids. Aunt Lydia blows a whistle and before the man can protest the crowd of Handmaids is upon him. Ofglen makes her way to the front and knocks out the fallen man with a few well-placed kicks to his head. Offred is shocked and revolted by this at first, but Ofglen quickly explains that the man was not a rapist at all. He was a member of her network and was



being killed for political crimes. She was simply making his death less painful for him. Janine walks by with an absent smile on her face and a clump of the man's hair in her fist. Offred notices that she is ravenously hungry. She thinks it is her body's self-affirming reaction to death.

#### Topic Tracking: Truth in Storytelling 11

Later that day when Offred goes shopping she finds that a new Handmaid has replaced Ofglen. They converse cautiously. After shopping they go to the Wall. Ofglen comments that the women hanging there should be a reminder to them. Offred says, "yes" rather than the more acceptable "praise be," but gets no distinguishable reaction from the new Ofglen. As they approach their houses, Offred hazards trying the password on Ofglen. Ofglen responds coldly. Offred believes the new Ofglen knows about the network and is warning her not to persist in folly. Offred begins to fear what may happen to her if the former Ofglen reveals that Offred knows about the network. When they part, Ofglen whispers to Offred that the former Ofglen hung herself that morning because she saw the van of the Eyes coming for her. Offred immediately feels relieved that this link between her and crime has been eliminated.

*"Dear God, I think, I will do anything you like. Now that you've let me off, I'll obliterate myself, if that is what you really want; I'll empty myself, truly, become a chalice. I'll give up Nick, I'll forget about the others, I'll stop complaining. I'll accept my lot. I'll sacrifice. I'll repent. I'll abdicate. I'll renounce."* Chapter 45, pg. 286

The threat of death, which she feels she has nearly escaped, has caused her to become abject to the demands and teachings of the government. She experiences the true power of the government for the first time. As she walks toward the house, she notices Serena on the front steps calling her. She is angry with Offred. She drops the winter cloak and purple dress on the stairs and tells Offred to take them up to her room. She calls her a slut. Offred wants to run to Nick who has stopped whistling just behind her, but she walks calmly into the house and up to her room instead.



## Part 15: Night

Offred sits and waits in her room for what she thinks may be the last time. She feels indifferent to her situation. "Don't let the bastards grind you down. I repeat this to myself but it conveys nothing. You might as well say, Don't let there be air; or Don't be. I suppose you could say that." Chapter 46. pg. 291 She enumerates all her options for action. She could set fire to the house with her one match she has saved. She could escape through the window and walk the streets until she was caught. She could implore the Commander. She could kill the Wife. She could hang herself from the hook in the closet. She could hide in Nick's room. None of her options seems any better than the others. Offred senses the presence of the last Handmaid who hung herself. This is the most compelling option, but before considers acting on her thoughts she sees a black van of the Eyes pull into the driveway. She chastises herself for wasting time. Nick opens the door unexpectedly and tells her the men who are taking her are with Mayday. She does not believe it, but seizes upon his request to trust him. As she is being led out the door the Commander asks for the Eyes' authorization. Serena did not call them. They tell him the charges are on violation of state secrets. He is stunned. Serena is incensed. Cora is crying. Offred leaves with the strangers. She has no choice.



## Part 16: Historical Notes

This section is a parody of academic discussion. It is a partial transcript of a symposium on Gileadean Studies given in the year 2195. Professor Crescent Moon introduces the speaker, Professor Pieixoto. He is well known for his study "Iran and Gilead: Two Late-Twentieth-Century Monotheocracies, as Seen Through Diaries." The title of his talk is "Problems of Authentication in Reference to *The Handmaid's Tale*." After a few esoteric jokes, Pieixoto tells the audience that the tale, which came in the form of thirty cassette tapes, was discovered in Maine in a sealed army footlocker near what used to be the Underground Femaleroad. It was titled *The Handmaid's Tale* at a later date. Each tape began with music to disguise the nature of the diary, but the bulk of the tape recorded a woman's voice. Pieixoto and his colleague transcribed the tapes to the best of their ability. He suggests that it is unlikely that the tapes are forged. He also suggests that as historians they must not censor the Gileadean society but try to understand it.

Topic Tracking: Religion 11

The professor then goes into detail about how he attempted to discover the identity of the narrator and more information to back up her account. He explains the history behind the role of the Handmaid. The regime of Gilead declared all second marriages and non-marital liaisons adulterous and arrested all the females involved in such relationships. The fertile females among this group were doled out to the elite and childless. This occurred during an era of rapidly declining birthrates among Caucasians worldwide. The declining birthrate may have been caused by pollution as well as birth control. Claiming Biblical precedent, Gilead "replaced the serial polygamy common in the pre-Gilead period with the older form of simultaneous polygamy practiced in the Old Testament times." Chapter 47, pg. 305 Pieixoto notes that Gilead incorporated polygamous and racist practices of the society that preceded it into its tenants. He continues to explain the difficulty of authenticating the Tale. The narrator's name does not appear in the text. Official records of her existence would have been destroyed upon her entry into the Rachel and Leah Re-education Center. The rest of the names in the account were likely to be false for the purpose of protecting the people involved.

Pieixoto and his colleagues considered two possible men who may have been Offred's Commander. Both were instrumental in the formation of The Republic of Gilead. The evidence they found pointed to the man called Waterford, who had a former television personality as a wife and who was purged shortly after the time Offred would have escaped. He had an extensive collection of heretical materials, and was housing a subversive. Pieixoto guesses that Nick could be this person as the diary implies that Nick belonged to the quasi-military group called the Maydays who could have helped Offred escape. This is the extent of what they can guess with reasonable accuracy. Pieixoto can only speculate about the ultimate fate of the narrator and her characters. She may have escaped to Canada and then England. Nick had her rescued by the Eyes, who he undoubtedly belonged to, but it may have capitulated his own downfall. Pieixoto confesses that he can only summon forth echoes from the past. He claims this is the nature of history. The audience applauds.

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