

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood

Book Information

Margaret Atwood, The Handmaid's Tale
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It is the future world, and Offred is a Handmaid in the home of the Commander and his wife. She is allowed out once a day, she is not permitted to read, and she is hoping the Commander makes her pregnant, because only then will she be valued.

Award: ALA Notable/Best Books; Governor General's Literary Award; Misc./Other; Nebula Award/Finalist; Prix Aurora Award/Nominee

Topics: Canadian Content, Canadian Content (All); Community Life, Gender Issues; Recommended Reading, ALA Outstanding Books for College Bound; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12; Science Fiction, Future; Women's Studies, Women's Studies (All)

Main Characters

Luke Offred's husband, who may or may not be alive

Moira Offred's rambunctious friend from a former life, who makes choices that are different from Offred's

Nick the Commander's chauffeur, who offers Offred a return to humanness

Offred narrator of the story, a woman who holds the position of Handmaid in the futuristic society of Gilead

Ofglen another Handmaid with whom Offred runs the daily errands

The Commander a high ranking official in the Gilead society, in whose home Offred has been placed

The Commander's Wife (Serena Joy) the woman of the house in all ways but one

Vocabulary

eunuch a castrated man

palimpsest a parchment that was used after previous writing had been erased

peremptory marked by arrogant self-assurance

subvert to overthrow or ruin

Synopsis

In the future, women have been severely limited in their roles. They can be Wives (of important men), Econowives (of average men), Marthas (those who serve), Prostitutes, Aunts, or hallowed Handmaids. There is also the distinction of Unwomen, who are exiled to the Colonies. The role of the Handmaid is to procreate. The Handmaids have no identity; even their names depend on the men who own them (Offred, Ofglen, Ofwarren). Offred and her family were caught at the border trying to escape from a world that was growing increasingly frightening. By the time of their escape attempt, women were not allowed to hold jobs or have money. Offred is uncertain of the whereabouts of her husband and daughter as she begins her handmaid training. At the training center she encounters her friend Moira, who engineers an unsuccessful escape attempt. Offred is sent to the Commander's home where she begins her two-year term of monthly conception attempts. The sterile environment in which these attempts take place includes the Commander, his Wife and Offred.

As Offred continues her cloistered lifestyle, she discovers, through an underground grapevine of Handmaids, that a resistance movement exists. When the Commander begins to take a personal interest in Offred, she gains access to such forbidden items as magazines, hand lotion, Scrabble, and even a "night out." The Commander takes her to a club where she reunites with Moira, who has become a "working girl."

The Commander's Wife shows a modicum of compassion when she gives Offred first a cigarette, then a glimpse at a picture of the child who was

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taken away. She also arranges an encounter with the chauffeur, Nick, who is an escape to reality for Offred. At great risk, Offred continues to see Nick. When Offred thinks she might be pregnant, the Commander's Wife discovers her relationship with the Commander. Before she can retaliate, the dreaded black van arrives, and the Eyes of Gilead come for Offred. Before she is taken away, Nick whispers a coded message to her, hinting that everything will be all right. In the epilogue, a conference convenes two hundred years after the end of Offred's story to discuss the society of Gilead. After Offred escaped, she left an oral history of her life as a Handmaid, which was transcribed into *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

The last line of Offred's tale is, "And so I step up into the darkness within; or else the light." What did she mean?

She was unsure if the van held death or life for her. If the van was indeed a true "black van of Gilead," she was headed for certain torture or death. The "darkness within" is both literal and figurative. The van was black, and wherever it was taking her was certainly bleak. If Nick had been sincere when he told her not to worry, that the men taking her were from the "Underground Femaleroad," she was on her way to the first freedom she had known in years.

Literary Analysis

The Commander comments to Offred that "you can't cheat Nature." How did the Commander, his Wife, Offred, and Moira attempt to follow their natural instincts?

The Commander had his club where he had a variety of women. His Wife felt jealous of the Handmaid's presence in her house. Offred saved butter to put on her dry skin, fantasized about Nick, and was tormented with thoughts about her daughter. Moira craved her freedom so much that she risked danger to escape from the society that would bind her.

Inferential Comprehension

Though Offred thinks she is weak because she will "say anything they like" or "confess to any crime," we know she is a strong person. Which incidents illustrate this?

She stays alive in spite of all her thoughts of suicide. She is able to block out much of the unpleasantness. She continues to see Nick even though it is dangerous.

Constructing Meaning

The Wives and the Handmaids are both ensconced in the houses of the Commanders. Compare them to one another.

The Wives wear blue clothing that may be embellished with embroidery or flowers. They may smoke, drink alcohol and coffee, and pursue hobbies such as gardening or knitting. They are respected in the society, and hold tight to their charade of power. The Handmaids wear red from head to toe, and their faces are shielded from the public. They are treated somewhat like children. They have no possessions, they may not consume alcohol or caffeine, or use tobacco. Because of their role in the society, they are respected by some and reviled by others.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting The story takes place in

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what was once an average city. References are made to a university, churches, houses with big lawns, parks, shops, and restaurants. How might a local city or town be used if it were turned into a Gilead? Have students describe how certain buildings and landmarks would be used. Where would the Salvagings take place? Does the town or city have an equivalent of the Wall? Where would the roadblocks be set up?

Understanding Literary Features The central theme of the story considers a society in which men have complete power, and women have none. Have students choose an incident or event from the book, and rewrite it from the opposite perspective--a society in which women make the rules and are the owners of the men. Students should consider: Will the tone be the same, or will the society have a different attitude? What kind of men would be revered? What kind would draw disapproval?

Understanding Characterization Some of the women in the story defied the society's categorization. Moira and Offred's mother were neither Handmaid nor Aunt. Have students discuss each woman's role in the story. They should consider: What do the women represent? Why didn't they fit into the Gilead society? Do they remind the students of anyone they know? Why?

Understanding the Author's Craft Readers don't know for sure what happened to Offred after she stepped into the black van. The people at the conference speculated that she may have gone to Canada or England, or that she might have been recaptured. Have students write an ending to the story that explains what happened to Offred after she was taken away in the van. It can be written either as a narrative in the third person or as a continuation of Offred's story, written from her perspective.