



# The Handmaid's Tale

Study Guide by Course Hero



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## 👁 Book Basics

### AUTHOR

Margaret Atwood

### YEAR PUBLISHED

1985

### GENRE

Dystopian

### PERSPECTIVE AND NARRATOR

Atwood presents *The Handmaid's Tale* predominantly through the first-person point of view of the narrator, Offred, a 33-year-old woman. The reader's understanding of events is limited to Offred's understanding of them. The novel is framed by an epigraph, or short quotation, and a final section of historical

notes set in the future, in the year 2195, at an educational symposium, where a professor narrates the story of his transcription and study of the text known as *The Handmaid's Tale*.

### TENSE

*The Handmaid's Tale* interchanges present and past tense. The narrator alternates between events in the immediate present and events that happen in both flashbacks and dreams at various times in the past.

### ABOUT THE TITLE

The narrator is one of a class of women known as Handmaids, women who serve as birth mothers for childless elites. The novel is set in the Republic of Gilead, formerly the United States, where birth rates have dropped significantly due to environmental pollution.

## 🕒 In Context

Is *The Handmaid's Tale* a representative example of Canadian literature, a feminist novel, a bleak look at a possible conservative and fundamentalist future, or a criticism of humanity's violent and oppressive tendencies? As it turns out, the novel might fit all of these descriptors.

## Canadian Literature

Atwood grew up within a Canadian culture that struggled for an identity of its own. Of her childhood, she writes in *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* about being caught between U.S. and British culture: "At school we were being taught to sing 'Rule, Britannia' and to draw the Union Jack; after hours we read stacks of Captain Marvel, Plastic Man, and Batman comic books." Over time, Atwood developed a theory that most Canadian literature has two underlying

themes—victimhood and survival—that make it distinct from both U.S. and British literatures.

While *The Handmaid's Tale* is distinctly Canadian in its examination of one woman's victimhood and survival, it is also a novel that speaks to the author's cross-cultural identity. The novel is dedicated to Mary Webster, about whom Atwood also wrote the poem "Half-Hanged Mary." Webster, an American Puritan ancestor of Atwood's, was tried and hanged as a witch, but survived and lived another 11 years. Webster, like Offred, was victimized by authoritarian male figures, yet she, too, survived this British-American brand of oppression. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood offers Canada as a refuge for those who would flee Gilead and its oppression.

## Feminism

Although feminists generally respect her work, Atwood maintains that she did not set out to write feminist literature and does not consider herself a feminist—she simply draws ideas from real life. If women suffer in her stories, it is because they suffer in the real world. Although the novel takes place in the future (circa 2015–2045), Atwood insists that she limits the events of Gilead to real events from world history that are technologically possible. While these actions and technologies may take on slightly different forms and applications in the novel, they are strictly based on real elements already present in human history and society.

Despite Atwood's dislike of the label, feminism and debates within the feminist movement play a central role in *The Handmaid's Tale*. For example, feminist views on marriage differ. Some feminists believe that marriage is a patriarchal institution that is inherently misogynistic. Others believe that the nature of marriage is evolving into a relationship of equals. In the novel, Offred's marriage to Luke is based on love and shared responsibility for the care of their family. Yet their marriage suffers when Offred loses her job and her income and thus her power to be an equally contributing partner or self-sufficient, if need be. In contrast, in Gilead, marriage has been reformed to stand on unquestioned and clearly defined patriarchal roles, even if the institution now lacks love and romance. The conflicting feminist views represented in the novel suggest that social reforms intended to protect some of the concerns of women often come at the unintended cost of other freedoms.

## Conservatism and Religious Fundamentalism

The basis of Christian religious fundamentalism is the belief that the Bible is the word of God and that the Bible should be read and followed literally. Beginning in the 1920s, fundamentalists avoided the political arena as a place of un-Christian impurity. However, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a small but vocal percentage of fundamentalists known as the Christian Right became interested in the idea of rebuilding the United States as a Christian theocracy. This movement was a response to changes in U.S. culture that fundamentalists viewed as direct threats to biblical practice, such as the civil rights and women's movements. This shift was the beginning of a social trend toward conservatism that was supported by Ronald Reagan's rise to the presidency in the United States (1981) and Margaret Thatcher's rise to prime minister in Great Britain (1979). Feminists became worried that important gains would be lost in this new political climate. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, written right after Reagan's election, it is just such a group of religious fundamentalists who have overthrown the U.S. democratic government and replaced it with a theocracy. Atwood shines a harsh light on the hypocrisy of these fundamentalists, who manipulate biblical text for their own selfish political gains.

## Dystopian Fiction

While a utopia is a perfect society, a dystopia is its opposite—a deeply flawed, even nightmarish, society. Dystopian novels, such as *The Handmaid's Tale*, frequently depict a future in which social or political structures established to form a utopian society are revealed to be oppressive. These novels often provide criticism of real governments, laws, and social norms by removing them from their real-life contexts and making them more extreme. In this case, Atwood posits the question, how could someone take over the United States?

Atwood developed a taste for dystopian literature by reading *1984* (George Orwell, 1949), *Brave New World* (Aldous Huxley, 1932), and *Fahrenheit 451* (Ray Bradbury, 1953). *The Handmaid's Tale* shows the influences of these novels: the idea of surveillance from *1984*, the eradication of individuality and government-controlled procreation from *Brave New World*, and the power of language from *Fahrenheit 451*.

## Author Biography

Born in Ottawa on November 18, 1939, Margaret Atwood is a prolific Canadian writer who has published in multiple genres, including poetry, essays, nonfiction, short stories, and novels. As a child, Atwood spent time in the woods of Ontario and Quebec, where her father, a biologist, pursued his research. Her parents encouraged her to read, get an education, and use her intelligence. However, when she decided she wanted to become a writer, she found little precedent for becoming a female Canadian novelist or poet. Professional writing was considered a man's career.

After earning an undergraduate degree at the University of Toronto, Atwood moved to the United States for graduate school, attending both Radcliffe College and Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts. This city, and Harvard University, provides the landscape of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Atwood's Canadian identity equips her with an observer's perspective of U.S. culture, including the Puritan roots on which the New England culture is based.

*The Handmaid's Tale* was well received, but evaluations of the possible reality of its bleak dystopian future where a totalitarian government reduces its citizen to social roles and biological functions were more mixed. A *New York Times* book review condescendingly suggested that a Gilead-like society was unlikely to develop. Yet the novel has been hugely successful, with millions of copies sold and a movie adaptation made in 1990. As awareness of the women's issues that the novel addresses has increased worldwide, the novel's resonance has grown.

## Characters

### Offred

Though she is called Offred in the story, the narrator's true name remains unknown. In the pre-Gilead United States, she is a college-educated woman with a job, a husband, and a daughter. When the Republic of Gilead seizes control, she loses everything, including her freedom. She is sent to a reeducation center with other fertile women, where she is taught about being a Handmaid—her new prescribed role in

society. As a Handmaid, she must live with wealthy couples to provide them with children. Offred narrates the story of her life as a Handmaid and her struggle to survive and hold on to a sense of self despite her current circumstances and her tragic losses, which are revealed through a series of flashbacks and dreams.

### The Commander

As one of the men who leads the government coup and designs the social structure of the new Gilead, the Commander is a powerful, wealthy man. He epitomizes the oppressive system that has taken away everything of value to Offred and consigned her to a life of sexual slavery. He seems to have some regret that Gilead's rules cause Offred and other women such suffering, but he believes in the necessity of these rules to create a better future. However, he admits that this future might be better for only some people. While he must obey the rules to some extent, he also has greater ability to subvert the rules. He has more privacy than most, so he can pursue secret affairs, visit brothels, and employ servants who will not betray him.

### Serena Joy

A former religious television personality and anti-feminist speaker, Serena Joy was a darling of the religious fundamentalist movement before the establishment of the new Gilead. However, she, like the other women, loses both her career and her freedom when the fundamentalist vision of society becomes a reality. In the Commander's household, her freedom is severely restricted, although she is allowed some control over the servants, over the garden, and over Offred. As a childless woman, Serena Joy must tolerate the presence of a Handmaid, although she makes it clear that the arrangement is distasteful. In Gilead, the ability to have a child is one of the only things valued about women, so Serena Joy's value to society hinges on Offred's ability to give birth to a child on her behalf. This situation makes the relationship between Serena Joy and Offred strained, as the women need each other for survival but resent this need.

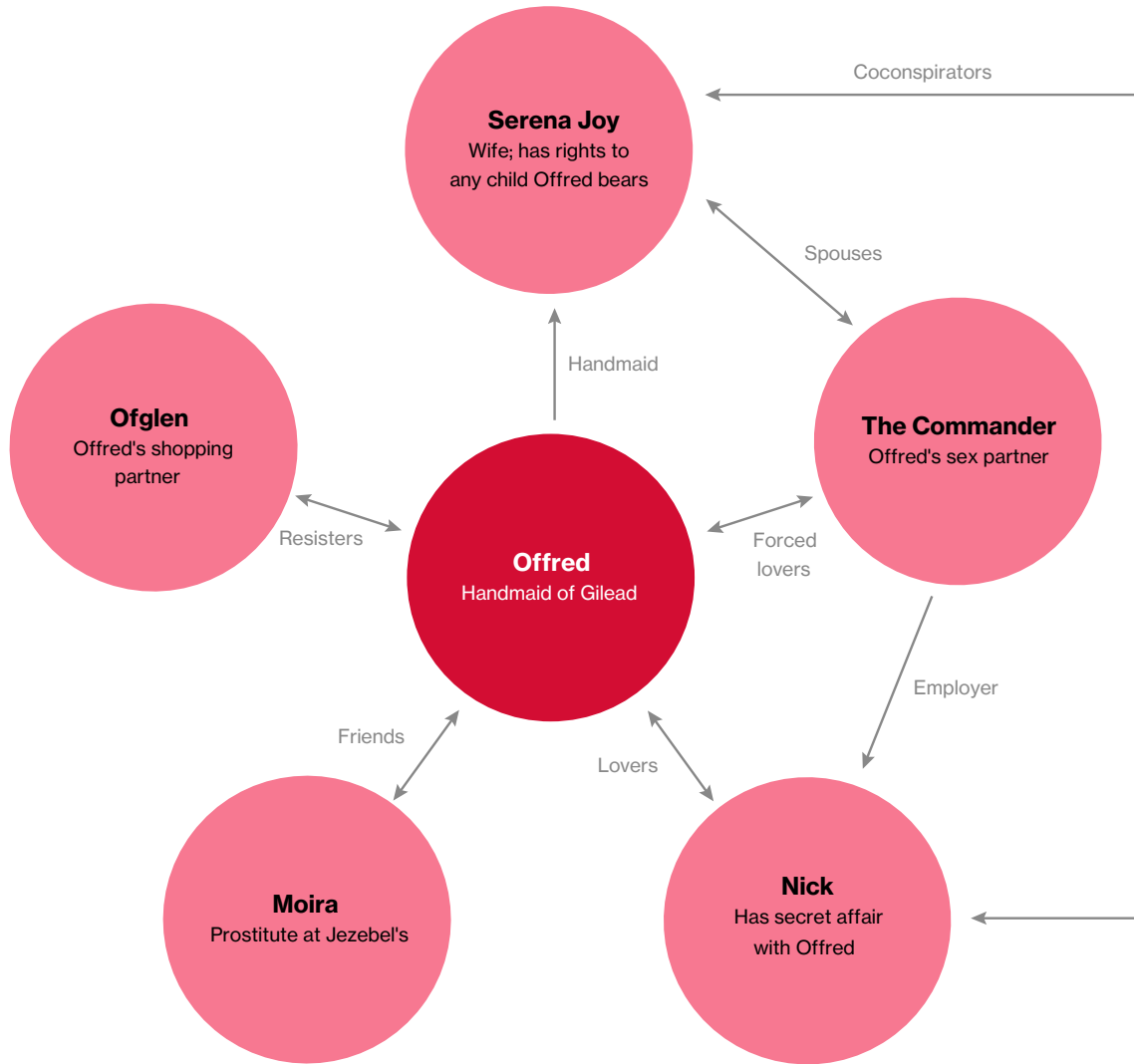
## Nick

As a Guard—a low-level servant—in the Commander's household, Nick takes care of the Commander's car, acts as the chauffeur, and conveys messages to Offred when the Commander wants to see her secretly. He eschews social norms by making eye contact and speaking informally with women. He is an enigmatic figure—willing to conspire with Serena Joy to impregnate Offred but then carrying on an illicit affair with Offred behind both Serena Joy's and the Commander's backs. Offred has early suspicions that he is an Eye (a spy for the government), but later in the story, there are suggestions that he is a member of Mayday, the resistance.

## Moira

Like Offred, Moira is assigned to a reeducation center to become a Handmaid. She escapes by threatening to kill one of the Aunts (the women in charge), but she is recaptured and tortured before she can cross the border out of Gilead. Now considered ill-suited to be a Handmaid, she is reassigned to the brothel Jezebel's, where she provides sex for high-ranking and foreign men. Moira is a dominant figure in Offred's imagination and memory, and Offred is discouraged when she learns that Moira has become a prostitute.

# Character Map



- Main Character
- Other Major Character
- Minor Character

## Full Character List

Character	Description
Offred	Offred is the 33-year-old narrator of the story and the Handmaid to whom the title refers. Handmaids are women who, because they are capable of childbearing, are forced to conceive and give birth to children for the infertile wealthy.
The Commander	The Commander is a wealthy citizen of Gilead. Offred is his Handmaid.
Serena Joy	Serena Joy is the Commander's Wife. Before present-day Gilead, she was a religious celebrity and anti-feminist activist.
Nick	Nick is the nonchalant Guardian who serves the Commander but begins an illicit sexual relationship with Offred.
Moira	Moira is Offred's lesbian, feminist college friend. Her courage and sense of humor play a prominent role in Offred's memories.
Aunt Elizabeth	A member of the Aunt class, Aunt Elizabeth indoctrinates the Handmaids at the reeducation center, or Red Center.
Aunt Lydia	A member of the Aunt class, Aunt Lydia indoctrinates the Handmaids at the reeducation center, or Red Center.
Cora	Cora is a Martha, or housemaid, at the Commander's home who shows some sympathy toward Offred.
Janine	Janine is a Handmaid who does whatever is necessary to make her life easier, even at the expense of other Handmaids. Renamed Ofwarren, she is with Offred and Moira in the Red Center and later gives birth to a baby who dies. Afterward, her mental state is compromised.

Luke	Luke is Offred's husband and the father of her daughter in the pre-Gilead United States. His fate is unknown after the family is captured while trying to escape.
Offred's Daughter	Offred's daughter is adopted by a wealthy couple after the family is captured.
Offred's Mother	Offred's mother, a feminist activist, disappears mysteriously when the new Gilead regime takes charge.
Ofglen	Ofglen is Offred's assigned partner for daily shopping. She introduces Offred to the Mayday resistance movement.
Professor James Darcy Pieixoto	Professor Pieixoto is the keynote speaker in the "Historical Notes" section at the end of the novel. Pieixoto has apparently transcribed and sequenced <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> from audio tapes.
Professor Maryann Crescent Moon	This speaker in the final section of the novel introduces Professor James Darcy Pieixoto.
Rita	Rita is the cook at the Commander's home who shows little sympathy toward Offred.

## Plot Summary

*The Handmaid's Tale* takes place very roughly in the first half of the 2000s in the Republic of Gilead, a theocracy established by religious fundamentalists who have overthrown the democratic government of the United States and established themselves in what was once Cambridge, Massachusetts (a city near Boston that is home to Harvard University). In Gilead, the government controls all aspects of people's lives, enforces strict rules, and exercises terrible punishments for disobedience. People are assigned by the government to groups, or castes. Each caste of people must wear clothing of the same color. Marthas, or female domestic servants, wear green, as do Guards, or the military. Upper-class married women, called Wives, wear blue; lower-class married women, or Econowives, wear stripes; and fertility slaves, known as

Handmaids, wear red. Other groups include the Aunts, who reeducate fertile women to become Handmaids, and the Eyes, who act as spies for the government.

Sexuality is strictly controlled, and fertility is rare due to environmental pollution. The Handmaids—such as Offred, the narrator—are fertile women who are required to provide children for wealthy, infertile couples. They do this in a manner that is loosely based on Old Testament stories in which a woman's handmaid conceives a child by the woman's husband and the child is raised as if it were the wife's. Offred is assigned to the Commander and his Wife, Serena Joy, to provide this service. She lives in the Commander's home, along with several other servants. Offred and the Commander are required to have sex each month when Offred is most fertile.

Each day, Offred goes shopping for household food, accompanied by another handmaid, Ofglen. All of the Handmaids are given names that are made up of the prefix *Of-* combined with the first names of their Commanders. In fact, readers never learn Offred's real name, though she alludes to it often as part of her lost identity. Offred and Ofglen frequently walk past the Wall, where the bodies of executed lawbreakers are displayed as warnings for disobedience. Offred learns from Ofglen that there is a secret resistance group called Mayday.

Throughout Offred's narrative, she flashes back to a time before present-day Gilead to reveal how she came to be in her current situation. Readers have to reconstruct this disjointed narrative to understand the tragic events of Offred's past. Approximately three years ago, she had a husband, a daughter, friends, an education, a job, choices, and opportunities. Then the democratic U.S. government was overthrown, and the Republic of Gilead took its place, a takeover made possible, Offred believes, because people took their freedoms for granted and ignored injustices. As a result of the takeover, society and gender roles changed radically and violently. When Offred and her husband, Luke, tried to escape into Canada with their daughter, they were captured and separated. The daughter was taken away and given to a wealthy couple. Offred became a Handmaid. Luke's fate remains unknown.

After several months at the Commander's house, Offred begins meeting in secret with the Commander at his request. At these meetings, which are outside the boundaries of their lawful relationship, the two talk, read (a forbidden activity for women), and play Scrabble. Sometimes, he gives her gifts. Offred wonders over the Commander's motivation for these

meetings, which she determines take place out of boredom with his Wife and his desire to believe that the lives of the Handmaids are bearable. After the relationship is established, the Commander takes Offred secretly to an illegal brothel called Jezebel's.

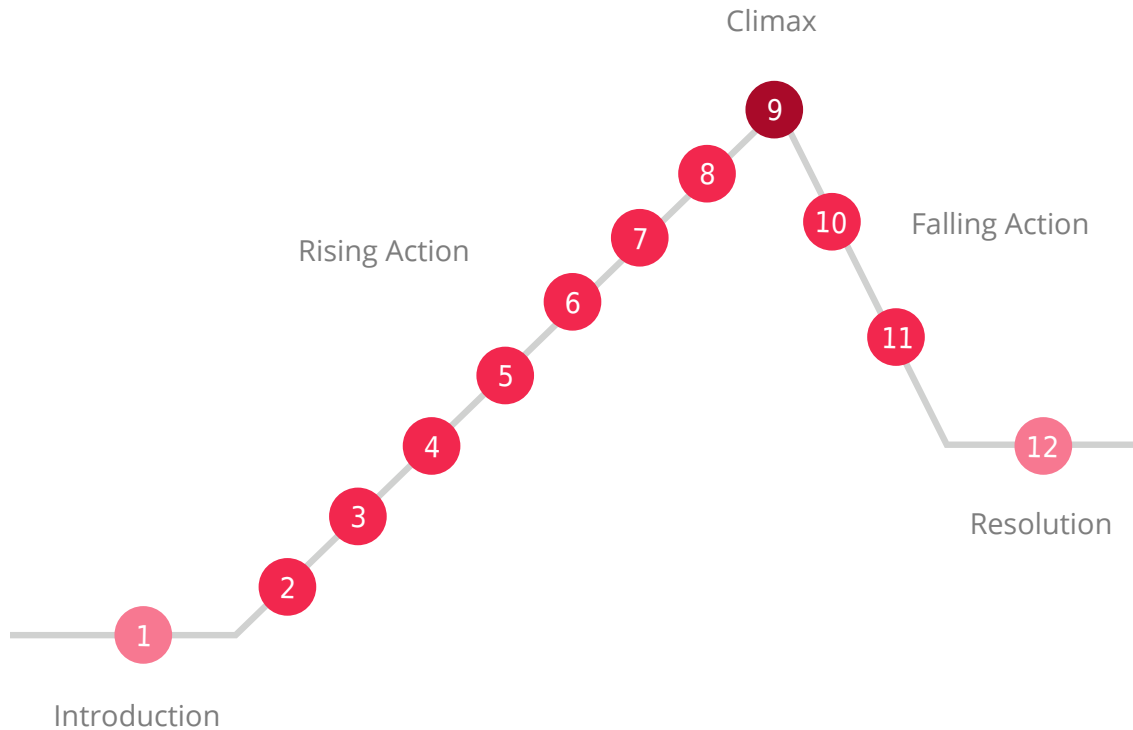
However, the Commander does not control all of the household's secrets. When Offred does not become pregnant with the Commander's baby, Serena Joy hatches a conspiracy, thinking the Commander may be sterile. She makes plans for Offred to meet in secret for sex with Nick, a servant and the only other man who lives at the Commander's house, hoping Offred will become pregnant. The fact that Nick and Offred live in the same household reduces their risk of getting caught by authorities. Eventually, Offred begins meeting secretly with Nick on her own to conduct an affair and possibly become pregnant, unbeknownst to both Serena Joy and the Commander.

During a daily shopping trip, Ofglen reveals that Offred's secret meetings with the Commander are no secret, and she urges Offred to spy on the Commander and relay any information to the resistance. However, Offred is selfishly unwilling to help the resistance now that she has a small degree of control in her life due to her romance with Nick. The effects of Offred's unwillingness to help the resistance become brutally clear when Offred and Ofglen attend a gathering of women where the Handmaids beat an accused rapist to death with their bare hands. Offred is disturbed by Ofglen's enthusiastic participation in the beating. Ofglen then tells her the man is not a rapist but a part of Mayday, the resistance, and that she has purposefully knocked him out to spare him any further pain.

Offred soon learns that Ofglen, after seeing government authorities coming for her in a black van, has killed herself. Serena Joy confronts Offred about her unlawful relationship with the Commander. Then Offred sees the black van coming for her, too. However, Nick tells her that the men in the van are from Mayday and are there to help her. With the Commander, his Wife, and other members of the household in a confused uproar, Offred goes with the men.

A section called "Historical Notes on *The Handmaid's Tale*" follows the final chapter of the story. In this section, which takes place at least 150 years in the future, a professor gives a lecture about *The Handmaid's Tale* as if it were a real historical document transcribed from audio tapes.

## Plot Diagram



### Introduction

1. Offred is held captive in an old gym with other women.

### Rising Action

2. Offred is posted to the Commander's house as Handmaid.
3. Offred meets her new shopping companion, Ofglen.
4. Offred takes part in the Ceremony to become pregnant.
5. Offred begins meeting secretly with the Commander.
6. Offred is taken to Jezebel's, where she learns Moira's fate.
7. Offred begins having a secret affair with Nick, a Guard.
8. Offred goes to a Women's Salvaging.

### Climax

9. Handmaids kill an accused rapist who is with the resistance.

### Falling Action

10. Ofglen kills herself when she sees Eyes coming to take her.
11. Offred leaves in a black van, but Nick assures her safety.

### Resolution

12. In 2195 a professor speaks on *The Handmaid's Tale*.



## Timeline of Events

### Mid-1980s

The U.S. government is overthrown, and the Republic of Gilead is established.

### Three weeks after

Moira, Offred's best friend from college, arrives at the Red Center.

### Spring; May

Nick catches Offred stealing a flower in Serena's sitting room the night of a Ceremony; they kiss.

### Summer; July

The Commander takes Offred to Jezebel's; later, Offred meets Nick to have sex.

### Summer

The Eyes come for Offred, but Nick tells her to trust him

### Late 1970s–early 1980s

Offred and Luke have a love affair, marry, and have a daughter.

### Mid-1980s

Offred's family escapes but is caught. Offred is taken to the Red Center to become a Handmaid

### Years later; winter

Offred is assigned to the Commander as Handmaid, her third such posting.

### Next day

The Commander and Offred begin meeting secretly.

### Summer

The Handmaids kill a man. Ofglen hangs herself when she realizes the Eyes are coming for her.

and go with them.

## 🔍 Chapter Summaries

*The Handmaid's Tale* has numbered chapters. Each chapter or group of chapters additionally falls under a section name such as "Night."

### Chapter 1

#### Summary

The opening chapter is in a section headed "Night"; six other sections have this name. Night gives the narrator an opportunity to reflect on her life.

The novel begins as an unnamed narrator, whom readers later will know as Offred, recalls living with several other women in an old high school gymnasium in the state of Gilead. She has just been forcibly separated by the government from her husband and daughter. She describes how the women sleep on army cots; she thinks about the contrast between the past and the future as two other women—Aunt Sara and Aunt Elizabeth—keep guard with cattle prods. Not allowed to talk aloud with one another, the women communicate silently by reading one another's lips. Armed male guards called Angels are stationed outside the building, which is surrounded by a fort-like football field and barbed wire. Offred describes her longing that the Guards might look at or talk to her during her twice-daily walks with the other women, because then she might leverage her body in some kind of exchange.

#### Analysis

*The Handmaid's Tale* opens with the immediate establishment of important themes in the novel: identity, liberty, and captivity. The fact that Offred begins the tale with no introduction, not even a name, suggests the theme of a compromised identity. The women have been stripped of their voices, the ability to tell their stories and claim their identities. The only communication takes place in silence through lipreading. The women are bound without liberty to the prison-like setting through weapons and force. In all ways, socially and physically, these women are captives.

The opening chapter also introduces the unique narrative style of the novel. The timeline is disjointed, forcing readers to piece together the story from details as they are revealed. This approach causes readers to struggle to hang onto the narrative of the story, just as Offred struggles to hang onto her identity through her complicated memories of the past.

### Chapter 2

#### Summary

The novel shifts into the present and the commencement of a shopping trip that will last for several chapters.

Offred has been stationed as a Handmaid in the Commander's home for five weeks. Offred describes her white bedroom, which contains a window and minimal furniture—a bed, a chair, and a picture of flowers. All items that might be used as weapons or to assist in suicide have been eliminated. Offred acknowledges the appeal of suicide but asserts her will to live. She dresses in clothes that cover all parts of her body and that are almost entirely red; the white wings of a headdress obscure her face, limiting her ability to see and be seen. Carrying a shopping basket, she enters the kitchen, where Rita, a Martha dressed in green, is making bread. Without smiling or other friendly gestures, Rita gives Offred tokens with pictured foods to use for shopping. Offred describes eavesdropping on Rita and Cora—the maid and another Martha—and hearing them gossip. She briefly entertains a daydream in which she, Rita, and Cora chat about their lives over coffee. She takes the tokens, listens to Rita's instructions about which foods to buy, and leaves.

#### Analysis

At first glance, Offred's new situation seems to be an improvement from the prison-like confinement of the gymnasium. The bedroom is quaint and sunny. The house is rich and luxurious, if old-fashioned in a slightly romanticized way. Servants attend to their duties, making the bread and oiling the wooden bannisters with lemon oil. Yet this deceptively charming setting is marred by ominous details and images. The bedroom chandelier, a means of suicide, has been removed, leaving a plastered-over spot on the ceiling "like the

place in a face where the eye has been taken out." While the house is large enough for a family, no children are present, and Offred thinks anxiously about the location of the Commander's Wife within the house. In this setting, as well as the first, the women are isolated from one another and do not communicate openly.

## Chapter 3

### Summary

Offred walks by the garden on her way to do the grocery shopping. The garden belongs to the Commander's Wife, who spends most of her time gardening or knitting. Offred remembers once having her own garden and feels envious of the Commander's Wife. She recalls her arrival and first meeting with the Commander's Wife five weeks ago, when she was dropped off by a Guardian and used the front door for the only time. In this flashback, the Commander's Wife, dressed in blue, invites Offred into her sitting room, where she is illegally smoking. Here, she makes her expectations clear for Offred's third assignment (the other two having failed) as a Handmaid. She wants as little as possible to do with Offred, and she does not want to be called ma'am. Whatever Offred is there to do is "like a business transaction." As the Commander's Wife speaks, Offred recognizes her as Serena Joy, a woman who was once a singer on a religious television show.

### Analysis

The relationship between the Commander's Wife and Offred is complicated. As women in a patriarchal society, they both suffer from restrictions of liberty. Both have been assigned roles, and both wear color-coded clothing—blue for the Wife, symbolic of purity and passivity, and red for the Handmaid, symbolic of sexuality and childbearing. Both have limited activities that no longer include working outside the home. The Wife may garden, knit, and run the household, although the Wife's elite position in the society does afford her some additional freedoms, such as smoking. The Handmaid may shop, walk, and bear children.

Despite their similarities, the women in this household do not form a sisterhood. Rather, the Wife views Offred's position in

the household as a reproach against the Wife's infertility, even if Offred's presence is a necessity for procreation. This resentment allows the Commander's Wife to exercise what little authority she has over the narrator and other household servants, belittling them and further stripping them of their identities. The narrator takes a bit of comfort in the knowledge that she would not have liked the Commander's Wife even in other circumstances based on Serena Joy's work as a religious television figure.

## Chapter 4

### Summary

Offred walks toward the front gate, where Nick, a Guardian who lives at the house and works for the Commander, is washing the Commander's car and smoking. She stares, and he winks at her, a forbidden gesture. She looks away, uncertain about how to interpret Nick's actions and wondering whether he might be an Eye, or a spy, looking to entrap her. She walks to a street corner, where she is joined by another woman in red. They exchange formal greetings. Offred recalls that her last shopping partner disappeared about two weeks ago without warning. This woman, Ofglen, is the replacement. Offred reveals, finally, that they are Handmaids. Ofglen has news of the war that continues in remote areas, which she shares in a guarded fashion.

The two women encounter more Guardians as they cross the "first barrier," one of many checkpoints. As Offred gives her pass to one of the Guardians, their eyes meet. She fantasizes about undressing in front of him and considers the punishment it would mean for both of them. As the two women proceed, Offred can feel the men watching her. She enjoys having the power to cause a sexual response in these men.

### Analysis

The slow, bit-by-bit revelation of the religious nature of the oppressive government under which Offred lives starts to come into focus. In this society, sexuality is strictly controlled, and people are disposable and replaceable. It is forbidden for Nick to wink at the narrator, and the Guardians of the Faith strain to catch glimpses of the women's faces beneath their

wings as they move through the checkpoint. The narrator's previous shopping partner disappears without explanation and is simply replaced by a seemingly identical woman. This interchangeability of women reinforces the government's reduction of female identity to functional roles.

Citizens of Gilead learn about the war only on television. It may be merely propaganda; Offred is not sure.

The idea that small acts of independence function as substitutes for real liberty, or at least give the illusion of brief moments of control, is revealed when the narrator, despite her fantasy of causing a public scene by engaging in forbidden actions, chooses to obey the rules out of fear for her life. Those who disobey the law may be killed or reassigned to toxic colonies. Nonetheless, she delights in her power to stimulate the men sexually as she sways her hips, taunting them because she knows they are watching. She recognizes that this fleeting moment of power is false—a tidbit allowed to her so that she does not consider real rebellion. Yet she seems somewhat satisfied with this moment, at least for now.

## Chapter 5

### Summary

The two Handmaids arrive in the Republic of Gilead. The area is subdued and tidy, and there are no children present. Offred briefly revisits a memory of walking with Luke, her former husband, and talking about a future house and family. The pair see other women, Marthas and Econowives, but all are on prescribed errands. There is no freedom in their choices.

The women pass a clothing store called Lilies and then wait in line at a store called Milk and Honey, which is marked by an image rather than words, as women are not allowed to read. The women enjoy shopping, as it is the only time they might see old friends or family. Offred thinks of her college friend Moira. Other Handmaids enter, and one is pregnant, which causes a stir of excitement and envy among the women. Offred recognizes this woman as Janine, now called Ofwarren, from the Red Center (the gymnasium in Chapter 1). The women pay for their purchases with tokens, but Offred cannot buy any of the rare oranges because she does not have a token for them.

The two women next visit the butcher shop, All Flesh, where there are no shopping bags. This event triggers a memory of an argument with Luke over plastic grocery bags. The memory is from a time when the narrator and Luke had a daughter together, and it is painful, so she lets it go. As the women leave the butcher shop, a group of tourists from Japan ask to take their photograph, which the women refuse. The tourists also ask the Handmaids whether they are happy, and after a pause, Offred says yes.

### Analysis

As the narrator observes women on the street, she recalls the distinction Aunt Lydia used to make between "freedom to" and "freedom from." The former is the freedom to make one's own choices, while the latter is the freedom from dangers such as crime and violence. Aunt Lydia notes that the previous society had been dying "of too much choice." The implication is that some "freedom to" must be sacrificed to achieve the improved state of "freedom from." Offred may not have the choice to buy oranges, but she need not worry about being attacked by a man on the street.

The shops, like the Handmaids, have new names. Old identities have been erased by renaming; symbols have replaced words. Language as a means of power for defining and interpreting one's experience and relation to the world has been usurped in the lives of these women. Offred correctly comprehends that the government equates language with rebellion: "Even the names of shops were too much temptation for us." By denying women power over language, the government maintains its control of gender.

The Handmaids in particular have lost their independence and their power to control their own lives. They are allowed the "honor" of bearing children, yet they have no choice in whether to become pregnant or by whom. When the women get excited about Janine's pregnancy, they acknowledge that a successful pregnancy has the potential to maintain Janine's status in the society. However, it is a status that none of them want.

## Chapter 6

## Summary

The two women decide to walk past the church on their way home from shopping. Their headdresses make it difficult for them to observe the world around them, but they catch glimpses of structures that have new purposes. Ofglen stops and appears to pray in front of the church, which is now a museum. As they turn away from the church, they see the Wall—made of brick, barbed wire, and shards of glass—which is what they really walked this way to see. The bodies of six men, their heads covered with bags, hang from metal hooks embedded in the Wall. One man's injuries have left a smile-shaped bloodstain on the front of the bag. The men's white coats reveal them to be those who were, in the past, doctors who performed abortions. Offred is relieved, knowing that Luke was not a doctor. Ofglen seems to be crying, but the narrator is afraid to ask why.

## Analysis

The church, now a museum, contains paintings of Puritans, leaders of a religious movement who sought to purify the church and society through extreme moral and religious teaching. This setting offers some clues regarding the nature of the religion that has now become the government, though Gilead is extreme even by Puritan standards. Other details—the river, boathouse, football stadium, red brick wall—identify this area as Cambridge, Massachusetts, where Harvard University is located. The transformation of Harvard, a renowned center of learning, into a center of the oppressive new government is a powerful statement that education is the antithesis of oppression.

The reader gets insight into Offred's thought process near the end of the chapter. As she looks at the dead man's bloodstained smile, she thinks of the red tulips in Serena Joy's garden and how the flowers, in their turn, look like blood. Flowers become an important symbol in the novel for what the women lack—individual beauty and choice. Yet in her mind the narrator rebels against this tendency to make everything connect. These things—the dead man and the red tulip—are separate objects that do not affect each other. She explains that making these distinctions is important to her. Separating reality from the story she imposes upon that reality is part of how she stays in control of her own thoughts and her own sense of identity or self.

## Chapter 7

### Summary

It is night, and although the narrator must stay still and quiet in her bed, she can wander in her thoughts. She first chooses a college memory of studying, wearing makeup, and going out for a drink with her friend Moira. Then she chooses a childhood memory of going to a park with her mother, where a crowd is gathered to burn pornographic magazines. As she watches the magazine photos burning, her recollection becomes disjointed and confused. In the memory, time is lost—years. She thinks she must have been restrained and drugged, and when she is conscious again, her daughter has been taken away. She is told she is unfit, and there are new people taking care of her child. She is shown a photograph of her daughter wearing a long white dress.

The chapter ends as the narrator describes her life as being both like and unlike a story. It is like a story in that she is narrating events; it is unlike a story in that she cannot control the ending and there is no real life to return to afterward. She also makes the distinction that she must tell the story, not write it, and that there must be an audience, even if it is only an invented *you*.

### Analysis

The narrator experiences a kind of liberty of choice by revisiting memories in her mind. She finds refuge in her memory of Moira. She revisits her mother, even though, as a child, she does not quite understand that her mother's feminist group is burning pornographic magazines. However, these happier memories are hijacked by a gap in memory and followed by the terrible memory of losing her daughter. Does she really have the liberty to go where she will, even in her mind? It seems that the answer may be no. She is captive to her terrible memories.

The narrator addresses this issue in the final paragraphs of the chapter. "If it's a story I'm telling, then I have control over the ending. ... It isn't a story I'm telling." Yet she acknowledges she *is* telling a story: "It's also a story I'm telling in my head, as I go along." On the one hand, she must face the reality of her story to maintain her identity, but on the other hand, she must

control the way the narrative moves through these events. This small amount of control protects her from the madness that may result in facing the entire terrible reality at one time.

## Chapter 8

### Summary

Offred is again at the Wall with Ofglen, where three new bodies hang. Offred suggests that they leave, and Ofglen says, "It's a beautiful May day." Then a funeral procession of three Econowives passes. The bereaved woman carries a jar, and from its small size Offred knows that the woman has miscarried. One of the Econowives spits on the sidewalk near the Handmaids, and another frowns at them.

Back at the Commander's yard, Nick asks Offred a question, and she replies with only a nod. Inside the house, Offred's thoughts turn to Serena Joy, and she recalls reading that Serena Joy is a fake name. She had been a singer on a religious television show and had gone on to even more celebrity by giving speeches about how a woman's place is in the home. There were a couple of attempts on her life, possibly by radical feminists who objected to Serena Joy's message. However, there were also rumors that she staged the attempts to garner public sympathy. Offred remembers that Luke found Serena Joy comical, but Offred always found her frightening. Now Serena Joy's beauty is fading, and she mostly ignores Offred as she comes and goes from the house. Yet Offred knows that, in many ways, Serena Joy is more dangerous to Offred's safety than the Commander is.

As Offred enters the kitchen, the smell of bread reminds her of her daughter. She quickly shuts down this memory. As she returns to her room to prepare for bath day with Cora, she is surprised to find the Commander standing outside it. There is a moment of tension before he walks away. Offred is surprised that she thinks of the room as hers for the first time.

### Analysis

Ofglen's mention of "May day" is an attempt to find out whether Offred is a member of the resistance movement known as Mayday. At this point in the story, the reference is lost on Offred, though she correctly remembers a conversation

with Luke about the meaning of the term: "help me."

The division among women is highlighted in the exchange between the Econowives and the Handmaids. Although the Handmaids have greater status in society, the Econowives look down on them, spitting and frowning. The government believes it can avoid a rebellion if it can keep each caste of women hostile toward the others. Where there is hostility, there can be no unification.

The theme of language as a means of power or constraint continues to develop in Offred's description of Serena Joy, who in the past gave speeches about the sanctity of the home and how a woman's place is in the home. The double irony of this situation is not lost on the narrator. Serena Joy, in being out giving speeches, was not in the home. Now that she is "speechless," she is unhappy and homebound. The narrator observes, "How furious she must be, now that she's been taken at her word."

Finally, the tension between the rules and the following of the rules continues to challenge Offred's security, or "freedom from." Nick speaks openly to her, and the Commander stands outside her bedroom door, in clear violation of the rules for conducting his relationship with the Handmaid.

## Chapter 9

### Summary

As Offred waits in the room she has now accepted as hers, by necessity if not by choice, she is reminded of the hotel rooms where she and Luke would meet secretly before his divorce. She recalls exploring her room when she was new to the Commander's house. On one day, she discovered stains on the mattress left by a couple's lovemaking, which brought on such a powerful rush of longing for Luke that she felt faint.

She decides that she will divide the room into sections and explore one thoroughly each day. Although the room is supposed to be suicide-proof, she finds hooks in a cupboard. She also finds a phrase, scratched in the floor, written in an unfamiliar language: *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*. She finds pleasure in thinking about the woman who might have previously occupied the room and who was brave enough to leave a message—someone like the Moira she knew in college.

When Offred asks Rita about the woman, Rita says, "What you don't know won't hurt you."

## Analysis

While Offred reviews her claim that she is trying not to tell this story, she acknowledges that the story needs a setting: her room, "some space, finally, that I claim as mine." Through the stain on the mattress, the room becomes a setting for Offred and Luke's story as she remembers their time together. Yet she blames herself, in part, for the loss of this story. She uses the word *careless* to describe her previous attitude toward her many freedoms, like ordering room service or sending a postcard.

Yet when Offred finds tangible evidence of a woman who came before her, she realizes that the room and the text scrawled on the floor, which translates to "Don't let the bastards grind you down," are a part of another woman's story, too—a story that intertwines with Offred's story. Offred's desire to know part of this woman's story by questioning Rita illustrates again the power of language, the power of story, to give identity. In capturing part of this woman's story, Offred can perhaps restore part of her lost identity so that this woman, like the one who came before Ofglen, does not simply disappear. The woman's use of Latin, a dead language, is symbolic. A dead woman uses a dead language to communicate with Offred across time and space. If communication takes place, then the dead language and perhaps the woman who uses it are revived to some extent.

## Chapter 10

### Summary

Offred recalls song lyrics. She notes that there is very little music in the house or anywhere else for that matter. Thoughts of the upcoming summer and the shedding of the winter costume for a summer version trigger a memory of Aunt Lydia railing against the indecencies of the past.

Offred moves quickly from this memory to one of her own indecencies: Moira borrowing a cigarette and inviting her to an "underwhore" party to trade inexpensive lingerie. This memory now seems unbelievable to Offred. She understands that, both

then and now, people behave as if abnormal behaviors are normal as long as they remain relatively unaffected.

She hears the sound of the car starting and looks out the window. The Commander follows Nick toward the car. She imagines spitting out the window at him or throwing something. This image prompts her to remember being with Moira at the college dorm, throwing water balloons out the window at the boys below. As she watches the car depart, Offred tries to define her feelings for the Commander.

## Analysis

Offred compares and contrasts her life before Gilead to the present. In the past, there were stories in newspapers—of rapes, murders, and violence, terrible things happening to other people. She was able to ignore crimes that did not affect her directly. She describes this life as living "in the gaps between the stories," a careless life of fun and irresponsibility in college with Moira. Now, in the present, she has emerged from these gaps, and her life is the story, one she wishes desperately to escape but cannot.

Offred's conflicting feelings for the Commander, not hatred but not love either, speak to the idea of victimization. By acknowledging her own guilt in her past ignorance toward the suffering of others, she recognizes that the present situation is, at least in part, her own doing. Each character, male and female, has had some part to play in the construction of Gilead.

## Chapter 11

### Summary

Alone in her room again, Offred describes the previous day's events. She is driven to a monthly doctor's appointment by a Guardian. Other Handmaids sit in the waiting room. When it is Offred's turn to have her fertility and general health checked, she goes into a white exam room, undresses, and gives a urine sample. She uses one sheet to cover her body; another hangs suspended over her neck so the doctor cannot see her face and she cannot see him. The doctor arrives and examines her intrusively. He breaks protocol by speaking to her and lifting the sheet to view her face. He suggests that the Commander may be infertile and offers to help her become pregnant by



having sex with her. Even though her life depends on becoming pregnant, she refuses. He leaves, and she gets dressed, but she is shaken by the idea that she might have this option.

## Analysis

Again, the protocol of the doctor's visit is designed to deny Offred any sense of self. Her face is hidden behind a sheet so that she has no unique identity. She is simply a female vessel who could become pregnant—a "torso." However, the doctor operates within the gaps of this protocol. He looks at Offred's face, and he suggests the Commander is infertile, a blasphemous idea in a society where women have been given the responsibility of all fertility issues. Yet the doctor's offer to impregnate Offred reinforces the concept that her identity and her survival are dependent on her role as a bearer of children.

In fact, the doctor's advances call to mind the black-market cigarettes and other evidence of a hidden world under the façade of obedience to the rule of law. There is image and there is a reality, and the two are not the same. On the surface, all is in order. People abide by the rules; they wear the correct clothing and use the accepted words. In fact, they have become experts at the appearance of obedience. Yet there is a secret world in which all these rules are broken. Offred's gradual realization that this underworld exists and what it might mean for her is an important part of her story.

## Chapter 12

### Summary

Cora sits outside the bathroom as a guard against male intruders while Offred bathes. There is no worry of suicide because the bathroom, like the bedroom, has been proofed for safety. The smell of soap triggers a memory for Offred of bathing her daughter. She recalls a time when a strange woman attempted to kidnap the child at the grocery store. She wonders whether her daughter has any memory of her. She realizes that the child has probably been told her mother is dead and reveals that it has been three years since she was taken. Her daughter is now eight.

At Cora's urging, Offred finishes her bath, dresses, and notes a tattoo on her ankle. She compares her required long but uncut

hair with something she saw in a film once, in which women kneeling in a town square were being held and having their heads shaved. After Offred eats a bland dinner in her room, she hides the butter in the toe of an extra shoe. Then she waits and "composes herself" for what is going to happen next.

## Analysis

Offred's examination of her long but uncut hair causes her to remember Aunt Lydia's joke about a "close shave." This language connects the narrator to the memory of a film in which women have their heads shaved in the town square. After World War II, women—mostly French and Belgian—accused of collaborating with German Nazi soldiers had their heads publicly shaved as a way of stripping the women of identity. The narrator asks, "What had they done?" Historically, it is understood that the nature of their "collaboration" was primarily sexual.

The closing paragraph hinges on two meanings of *compose*. The idiom *compose myself* usually means "calming oneself, or regaining emotional control—regaining *composure*." Yet this word can also mean "to create," in the way one might compose a letter or a symphony or this text. The idea that Offred must now "compose" a self, as one would compose a speech, suggests that the self is malleable and can be changed by words alone. The final line, "What I must present is a made thing, not something born," reinforces the idea that Offred is composing an identity through the telling of her story.

## Chapter 13

### Summary

This chapter falls in its own section, called "Nap." It spans the time between the narrator's bath and the next event. It is a chapter focused on the theme of women in waiting. Offred is bored. She considers other examples of boredom: women in paintings, pigs being fattened for slaughter, and caged rats and pigeons. She decides to do a pelvic exercise she learned from Aunt Lydia, which is meant to prepare the body for childbirth. She recalls the drug-induced naps the Handmaids-in-waiting had to take each afternoon.

She remembers the time when Moira came to the gymnasium

to become a Handmaid. Making sure not to give their friendship away to the Aunts, they arranged to meet in the men's bathroom. The next day, after a humiliating activity called "Testifying," where Janine was blamed for a confession of rape, Offred met Moira in the bathroom for a few freely spoken words. As this memory fades, Offred briefly recalls her first apartment with Luke but then begins a more terrible memory of trying to escape with her daughter and being caught. A bell sounds, and Offred awakens to find Cora at the door.

## Analysis

Traditionally, a lady-in-waiting is a woman of lower but noble rank who serves as the personal assistant of a queen or princess. Here, the term *wait* means "to serve or to be ready and available." The Handmaids wait in this sense as well. They are ready and available to serve the Commanders and their Wives in the goal of reproduction. Also, once impregnated, they become ladies-in-waiting. However, the term *wait* may also mean "to pass the time until another event occurs." Offred waits in this sense, too. She passes the time while she waits to wait on the Commander and his Wife. In this case, her time-passing activities include preparation for birth (pelvic exercises), remembering elements of her story (the Red Center, Luke, and her daughter), and napping.

Memories of the Red Center show that the women in this society are divided by government design. At the Testifying, Janine tells about being raped and getting an abortion, and the other women, led by an Aunt, publicly blame her for both, making fun of Janine for crying. The next week, during the Testifying, Janine is quick to say the events are all her fault. Not only do these scenes show that victim blaming is the norm, they show how quickly women turn on other women.

## Chapter 14

### Summary

Offred walks downstairs to the sitting room, where she kneels in her assigned location for the Ceremony and fantasizes about stealing something. The other members of the household arrive one by one: Cora, Rita, Nick, and then Serena

Joy. Offred thinks that Nick's foot might touch hers, but she is not sure. They all wait for the Commander. Serena Joy clicks through television channels before settling on the news, which shows only victories Gilead is winning in the war against Baptists and Quakers.

Serena Joy turns off the TV and lights a cigarette, and Offred remembers getting into a car on some past September Saturday. In the back of the car, her daughter is ready for a family picnic—a ruse to cover the escape attempt into Canada. All goes as planned through the first checkpoint. Luke is confident and happy. She is worried.

### Analysis

As the household prepares for the Ceremony, Offred notes that they are all gathered in the sitting room because of her body. She says, "Even the Commander is subject to its whims." Gilead, for all of its mechanisms of control, cannot or does not control a woman's fertility cycle. In this way, the body for which Offred is valued asserts a small amount of power within the proceedings.

For the first time, the narrator reveals a name, but it is not her true name. She is known as Offred, but her true name is something else, something now forbidden. She thinks of her true name as a buried treasure from the past that she might one day dig up. Her identity is intact and valuable, but it is buried.

## Chapter 15

### Summary

The chapters in the "Household" section reflect events in a home that revolve around the Commander.

The Commander arrives, sits, and prepares to read from a Bible that is otherwise locked away. He asks for a glass of water. While they wait, Offred thinks about the Commander as a man who is watched by women. After the water arrives, the Commander reads a variety of stories about having children to those who are not allowed to read for themselves. Offred recalls listening to recordings of these and other Bible verses in the gymnasium, but she suspects that some of the verses

have been altered by the government. She remembers Moira telling her of a plan to fake an illness and escape the gymnasium.

The Commander finishes reading and offers a prayer. Serena Joy cries quietly, and Offred prays, "*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*," the phrase scratched on the floor of her room, even though she does not know what it means. She remembers that when Moira tried to trick the Angels and escape, she was caught and violently punished. This portion of the Ceremony concludes.

## Analysis

The Commander is the center of power in this household; he is the one who enforces the government laws and the new order in the household. In this way, he remains set apart from the others, a mystery of sorts. Everything he does seems to Offred to be part of a show or illusion: "Is there no end to his disguises, of benevolence?" The rest of the household watches, hanging on his every move. Offred briefly considers that he, too, is trapped by the rules and roles of this society. However, it is clear that his plight is not as terrible as that of the women, as he holds power and position within the government and comes and goes from the house as he pleases.

It also becomes clear that the leadership of Gilead, while claiming to base its society's structure on the Bible, has altered biblical text. The text of the Beatitudes has been changed: "Blessed are the silent" does not appear in the Bible. "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth" becomes simply "Blessed are the meek." There is no inheritance for meekness, only blessings as doled out by the government. Because the women are not allowed to read, those in power can change the biblical text to support their own agendas without question.

## Chapter 16

### Summary

During the Ceremony, Offred, lying between Serena Joy's legs and holding hands with her, must allow the Commander to have sex with her. The Ceremony is performed with as much clothing in place as possible and with no passion or intimacy.

Offred states that while she is not in control, the act should not be considered rape because she has chosen the role of Handmaid over other alternatives. When the Commander finishes, he leaves. Serena Joy tells Offred to leave. Offred wonders which participant is most deplorable.

## Analysis

Offred feels that she is partly responsible for what happens to her in the Ceremony because she has chosen her situation over other options. However, what are her other options? If the only other options are variations of pain, torture, and oppression ending in death, does she freely choose her fate?

Serena Joy may finally conjure the sympathies of readers as the most unnecessary participant in the scene. She is in a humiliating position, and her shame and failure to conceive a child are important features of the Ceremony.

## Chapter 17

### Summary

Back in her room, Offred uses the butter she saved to moisturize her hands and face in the hope that she may one day lay claim to her own body again. Through the window, she sees the moon. She longs for Luke and his voice saying her name. She decides to steal something in an effort to control her own actions. She sneaks back to Serena Joy's sitting room and starts to steal a flower petal when Nick suddenly arrives. They kiss passionately. Nick tells her the Commander wants to see her the next day in his office. Confused, she returns to her room.

## Analysis

Offred's impulses to moisturize her skin and to steal something result from a longing to be restored to her former self. Hiding the butter and stealing the flower petal are ways of doing something active to reclaim her identity and enact a small rebellion, rather than passively waiting for others to make decisions for her. She experiences a sense of freedom as she sneaks away from her room. Kissing Nick, too, is a choice she

makes for herself. However, this brief flirtation, with the power to choose, is cut immediately short by Nick's message. The Commander is breaking protocol by calling Offred to his office. Again, her fate is in his hands.

## Chapter 18

### Summary

After her encounter with Nick, Offred recalls being in bed with Luke. In the memory, she is pregnant and can feel the baby kicking. Back in the present, she longs to touch another person and to be touched. Next she describes three possible fates for Luke: he is dead, he is in prison, or he has successfully escaped. The idea that Luke may have escaped takes hold of her imagination, and she envisions receiving a secret message from him and escaping together. She knows that these three endings to Luke's story cannot all be true, but for her, somehow, they are: "This contradictory way of believing seems to me, right now, the only way I can believe anything."

### Analysis

As she describes her longing for connection, Offred compares herself to "a room where things once happened and now nothing does." In many ways, Offred has become a passive actor within the rooms of her life: she waits in her bedroom, and she has sex in the Commander's bedroom. As in the previous chapter, she laments this lack of action on her part. While in the previous chapter she combats passivity with action—moisturizing with butter and stealing a flower—she uses her imagination in this chapter to act by connecting with Luke through the possible endings to his story.

As Offred struggles between her desire for Nick and her feeling of loyalty toward Luke, she makes a distinction between sex and love, noting that it is love that she has been denied and love that she needs.

## Chapter 19

### Summary

The chapters in the "Birth Day" section include Offred's participation in the birthing ritual as Ofwarren has her baby.

Offred begins, "I'm dreaming that I am awake." In this dream, Offred's daughter runs to meet her, but as she picks up her child, she realizes it is a dream. She wakes from this dream into another dream in which her mother brings her something to eat on a tray.

Then she truly awakens. Her breakfast is interrupted by the siren of a red Birthmobile. Ofwarren is about to have her baby. Offred and the other Handmaids ride in the Birthmobile to attend the birth. She wonders whether it will be a baby or an Unbaby—a baby with severe deformities who will be quickly killed. Toxic pollution has caused a loss of fertility for many people and a 25 percent chance of having a baby with terrible birth defects for those who are not completely sterile. In light of this situation, some women have made themselves intentionally infertile to avoid the fate of the Handmaids.

The Birthmobile arrives at the home of Ofwarren, and the Handmaids disembark. Doctors wait outside the house, as they are only allowed to enter in cases of emergency. In Gilead, women are not allowed to have any painkillers during birth.

A separate blue Birthmobile arrives, bringing the Wives to the birth.

### Analysis

Offred offers insight into her life of reduced means, in which she has lost her freedom as well as her ability to own material possessions. What is she able to own? She can possess sanity: "Sanity is a valuable possession." What pleasures is she able to experience? Small sensory details of life provide pleasure, such as the way an egg seems to glow in the sunlight. What power does she have? The power to "compose herself" with words.

The break from routine that comes from a baby's birth is another insight into just how limited Offred's existence is. On most days, she is captive to routine—she gets up, gets dressed, eats breakfast, goes shopping with Ofglen, returns home, sits in her room, and so on. Anything that breaks this routine is a kind of freedom.

## Chapter 20

### Summary

Both Wives and Handmaids gather for the birth. Ofwarren is in labor in a birthing room. The Handmaids and Aunts gather around Ofwarren, preparing for the birthing ritual. The Wives gather around Warren's Wife, who mimics labor. Ofwarren's Commander is absent.

Offred recalls lessons from the Red Center. In this memory, Aunt Lydia shows them films of women being raped and beaten, explaining that the Handmaids must make sacrifices so that those who come after them will have an easier time. She also shows them films of the so-called Unwomen. In one of these films, Offred sees her own mother holding a banner in a feminist protest march. She remembers her mother as a strong woman, a woman who fought for women's rights, and she misses her even though they frequently disagreed over politics. Offred also recalls the disappearance of Moira, who did not report to breakfast one morning.

### Analysis

The slogan Offred recalls from lessons at the Red Center, "From each, according to her ability; to each according to his needs," is not a biblical text as she has been told. It is based on a quotation from the writings of Karl Marx, "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs," and is associated with communism. The only biblical passage that is similar is Acts 4:34–35: "For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need." However, once again, Offred has no means of checking the factual basis of the government's propaganda. As the government controls the language of the culture, so it controls the people.

The slogans written on the signs in Aunt Lydia's Unwomen documentaries are feminist and women's rights slogans. The term *Unwomen* is used to characterize those who support women's rights, including the right to control reproductive processes. Here again the government uses language to strip women who disagree with its politics of their gender identities, as the prefix *un-* means "not" or "the opposite of."

## Chapter 21

### Summary

As Janine (Ofwarren) labors, the Handmaids chant. The room is hot and loud. Offred asks one of the other Handmaids whether she knows anything of Moira. On Birth Days, the Handmaids take advantage of the chaos to exchange information.

As Janine nears the time for delivery, she is led to the two-seated Birthing Stool, and the lights are shut off. Warren's Wife sits behind Janine on the stool. Janine gives birth to a girl, and the baby is washed and given to the Wife, who names her Angela. Janine will nurse the baby for a short time before Janine is reassigned to a new family. This successful birth means that Janine will avoid being sent to the Colonies.

The scene causes Offred to remember the birth of her own daughter and the happiness she felt at that time. She also recalls her own mother and the goal of her feminist group to create a "women's culture."

The Handmaids get back into the Birthmobile and return to their homes.

### Analysis

The ritual of the birth parallels the Ceremony of conception, as the Handmaid lies between the legs of the Wife, who acts as a surrogate. The women celebrate Janine's success, but this success denies Janine the opportunity at motherhood. Instead of mothering her daughter, Janine will be reassigned to another family to begin the process of the Handmaid all over again, emphasizing her physical role in this practice.

Offred's mother and other feminists of her time worked to create a "women's culture." However, the women's culture of Gilead is not the one these women hoped for. Rather, it is shaped by oppression and defined by divisions, barriers, and betrayal. Just as the word *freedom* is manipulated in Gilead to mean something entirely its opposite, the idea that the women have a culture all their own is a façade.

## Chapter 22

### Summary

Offred arrives back at the house and goes to her room, too tired to sleep. She begins to describe a memory of driving late into the night. Then she suddenly decides to narrate instead the story of what happens to Moira, which she has pieced together from various accounts. While at the Red Center, Moira causes a toilet to overflow and calls for Aunt Elizabeth. When Aunt Elizabeth comes, Moira threatens to stab her, steals her clothing, ties her up in the furnace room, and escapes dressed as an Aunt. After the escape, Aunt Elizabeth asks Janine to spy on the other women. The women at the Red Center are both frightened and excited by the idea that Moira has escaped, and nothing more is heard of her.

### Analysis

The flashback of driving is a metaphor for control in Offred's life. The fragmented memories that follow illustrate an effort by Offred to deduce the truth behind veiled events. This effort is a means of retaining identity and self-control.

Illustrating that the "women's culture" of Gilead centers on women's betrayal of one another, Aunt Lydia enlists Janine as a spy. As Offred tells us, "There can be alliances even in such places, even under such circumstances." Yet while the women are distrustful of Janine, they also appreciate the news she gives them about Moira.

Offred's habit of playing with the multiple meanings of words, a regular feature of her narrative style, illuminates her mixed feelings about Moira's escape. She says that Moira "set herself loose" and that she is "now a loose woman." Of course, she means that Moira escapes captivity. However, she is also playing on the idiom "loose woman," an old-fashioned term for a woman with questionable morals (a woman who is promiscuous or free sexually). Clearly at work in Offred are the competing feelings of admiration for Moira and the feelings of shame that are part of the women's indoctrination in Gilead. Offred also specifically says that Moira "set herself loose," a variation of the passive voice ("she'd been set loose") that Offred first uses. This switch from passive to active voice is directly related to Offred's own struggle to act—to take

action—rather than receive life passively.

As is her narrative style, Offred relates some of the events of this chapter based on what she has heard from other women. However, she fills in the gaps in the story by imagining or clarifying for herself what might have gone on: "Janine would have replied" and "I expect Moira said something like it."

## Chapter 23

### Summary

Offred muses once again on the nature of narrative: "This is a reconstruction," she begins. She recognizes that all stories, including hers, are shaped by the details the narrator chooses to include or leave out. She tells us that the Commander asks her to kiss him and notes that there is, of course, more to that story.

When Cora brings Offred dinner after a nap, they have a short conversation about Ofwarren's baby girl. Then Offred resumes the story of going to her secret meeting with the Commander. After the Birth, she makes an illegal visit to the Commander's office at his request. The visit is dangerous for Offred. If she gets caught, she will be in trouble; if she refuses to obey the Commander, she will be in trouble. The room is full of books, and he invites her to sit and play Scrabble. She relishes the opportunity to spell words. Before she leaves, he asks her to kiss him, and she complies. He says, "Not like that ... As if you meant it." She fantasizes about fashioning a weapon and then killing the Commander at the next meeting, but then she admits that this fantasy is part of the reconstruction only; she did not have this thought at the time of the incident.

### Analysis

The fact that secret meetings between the Commander and Offred are forbidden by Gilead's strict rules make the meetings desirable for both parties. It is ironic that the Commander helps fashion these rules and now condones breaking them. Kissing, which is not allowed during the Ceremony, and a game based on printed words, which are forbidden to women, add to the danger and so to the sexual tension of the scene.

Offred again reminds readers that this narrative is a story—a

"reconstruction." Given her insistence on clearly separating fact from fiction, these constant reminders suggest that Offred struggles with the truth. However, as long as she tells the reader that something is imagined, she is still being truthful in some way. In another sense, these reconstructions, true or not, become a way for Offred to try to access the truth of her story and her situation.

## Chapter 24

### Summary

Offred returns to her room. She does not undress, as the red costume helps her focus on her thoughts. She refers to herself as Offred and gives readers some rare defining physical details: her hair color and height. She also knows this new development with the Commander is a turning point, whether an escape or a trap, and she must figure out a way to make use of it as she tries to sort out her present identity.

She remembers watching a documentary about World War II with her mother. The documentary features an interview with the mistress of a man in charge of a Nazi concentration camp. In the interview, the woman says that her lover is not a monster. Then the woman commits suicide a few days after the interview.

Offred begins to laugh and crawls into the cupboard with her hands over her mouth to stifle it. She sees the words *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum* and traces them with her finger.

### Analysis

Offred reacts to her visit with the Commander in a variety of ways. First, she feels trapped and struggles to regain a sense of her own identity. After a litany of factual information about herself—"I am thirty-three years old"—she feels a little calmer and is able to examine her situation analytically, considering how to gain an advantage from this newly developing situation as she replaces chaos and brainwashing with truth.

The memory of the Nazi's mistress causes Offred to speculate about the woman's choices. Is she really so naïve, or does she convince herself to ignore the truth and become the Nazi's mistress for some private reason? In either case, the truth of

the matter destroys the woman's beauty and health, and ultimately, she chooses to end her life. The woman in the documentary dies at her own hands, just as she makes the decision to become mistress to a monster. She is responsible and holds herself accountable, which women such as Offred cannot do within their social structure.

After this reflection, Offred's method of retreating from emotionally difficult situations by analyzing or escaping them fails her, and she begins to laugh uncontrollably. She has been very controlled regarding her outward behavior thus far in the novel. This laughter comes as a surprise, revealing a progression toward a reclamation of emotion.

## Chapter 25

### Summary

This chapter is the first of a series that fall under the section heading "Soul Scrolls." Soul Scrolls is a store in Gilead that sells prayers.

Offred, who falls asleep on the floor, is wakened by Cora's scream and the sound of the breakfast tray crashing to the floor. Cora suspects that Offred is dead. The two unify for a moment as they discuss a possible baby and decide not to tell anyone about the lost breakfast.

Time passes via the flowers and other plants that grow near the Commander's home: tulips, irises, bleeding hearts, peonies, a willow tree, and green grass. Offred describes the ongoing arrangement she makes with the Commander: She visits him secretly a few times a week based on clues from Nick about when to go, and they play Scrabble. Unable to give voice to his desires, the Commander gives her small gifts, such as the chance to read a *Vogue* magazine or a bottle of hand lotion. He complains that he and Serena Joy have grown apart.

### Analysis

The *Vogue* magazine the Commander offers Offred, with its "endless series of possibilities," provides a metaphor for the effect this arrangement has on Offred's life. She has greater and greater access to forbidden items, such as reading materials. She gains the courage to ask for specific items for

the purposes of caring for herself, breaking the rules, and exploring her newfound power with the Commander. Additionally, for the first time, she has a sense of more than one possible path in her future.

Offred's growing companionship with the Commander is contrasted with the image of Serena Joy, alone in her garden, hacking away at seedpods. The monotony of her existence is only relieved by visits from and to other Wives, just as the monotony of Offred's life is only relieved by her secret visits with the Commander.

## Chapter 26

### Summary

Offred finds that the next Ceremony is awkward because of her arrangement with the Commander. She is self-conscious and has conflicting emotions toward Serena Joy. She notes that she is now the Commander's mistress, a word choice that hearkens back to the film about the Nazi leader and his lover. Although Offred's and the Commander's social roles remain the same, the circumstances are very different. She says that the arrangement makes her slightly happier now because being more than just an object of fertility makes her feel as if she is more than nothing.

### Analysis

The growing intimacy with the Commander, though still far from love, has progressed to the point where Offred recognizes a shift in her relationship with him. Recall that this is not Offred's first experience as a mistress. She was Luke's mistress, too, as he was married when the two first started seeing each other. While love motivated Offred in her first experience as a mistress, something else motivates her now: reclamation of identity and possible escape. Offred's similarity to the Nazi's mistress is important, too. Will Offred stand by this choice to become the Commander's mistress and live or die with its consequences?

## Chapter 27

### Summary

It is now full summer, and Offred walks with Ofglen to do the shopping. They are able to purchase fish, although it is not usually available and many types are becoming extinct. Offred recalls bringing her daughter to an ice cream shop that is gone now. The women walk past the Wall, where no bodies hang. Offred is disappointed because she is not able to check for Luke's corpse. Offred remembers when the buildings on the other side of the Wall, including a now forbidden grand library, were part of the university.

They pass a store called Soul Scrolls. Inside, machines print out and then read aloud the prayers of those who are able to pay for them. Watching the machines at work, the two secretly agree that God does not listen to these machine-read prayers. Ofglen hints that she is part of some kind of resistance group. Suddenly, the black van of the Eyes arrives; two men get out and grab an ordinary-looking man who is walking down the street. Offred is relieved that she is not the target.

### Analysis

Offred puts herself at risk to learn whether Ofglen is friend or foe, but the risk turns out to be worth it when Ofglen tells her about a secret antigovernment group. Immediately after this exchange, both women are reminded of the punishment they will face if they are discovered, as the Eyes take someone away right in front of them. Though Offred is relieved that it is not her, it is clear that at any time she, or Ofglen, might meet a similar fate.

The forbidden library, which Offred says "is like a temple," is symbolic of the free exchange of knowledge and ideas. Now it serves as the center of Gilead's operations. The transformation of the library and the university setting is a metaphor for the transformation of an open society to a regulated one. The replacement of personal faith with meaningless machine-generated words reflects the way the government of Gilead uses the words of religion in ways that negate or ignore true meaning. Both images reiterate how language has been usurped in this culture.



## Chapter 28

### Summary

Offred sits in her room, looking out the window and feeling the summer breeze. She thinks of talking with Moira, who disapproved of her affair with Luke. She remembers having a job. This train of thought reveals the birth of Gilead. The president and members of Congress were assassinated, and their deaths were blamed on Islamic terrorists. To counter this threat, the army took over, the Constitution was suspended, roadblocks were set up, and new identity cards were required. Then laws were passed that did not allow women to have their own money or jobs. Offred realized that the men with guns who forced her evacuation from her workplace were not part of the regular army but some other group. She speculated that the shift from paper to electronic money laid the foundation for such an easy takeover. These developments introduced an awkward dimension into Offred's relationship with Luke, as he told her not to worry because he would take care of her; she wondered whether he enjoyed having this power over her.

In the present, she sees Nick out the window; he is wearing his hat askew, a sign that she is summoned to the Commander. She wonders what Nick thinks of the arrangement and what he gets out of his role in it.

### Analysis

Offred clearly resents the fact that Luke acts so calmly—so normal—after she loses so much. Moira frames sexual relationships as transactions, and Offred understands this logic when she feels that something has shifted in her romantic relationship with Luke after her social status is reduced. As soon as she loses her job and money, she begins to feel that he is patronizing and maybe even enjoying the role of protector. The feeling of being Luke's property rather than his equal makes her feel "small as a doll"—childlike, someone to be taken care of—rather than an independent woman, which foreshadows her fate in Gilead.

## Chapter 29

### Summary

Offred meets with the Commander, and she asks him about the meaning of the Latin phrase in her room. He reveals that it is actually a fake Latin phrase he and his friends made up when they were in school. It is supposed to mean, "Don't let the bastards grind you down." He shows her the phrase written in one of his old textbooks. She realizes that the previous occupant of her room must have had a similar arrangement with the Commander. He tells her that the last Handmaid hanged herself after Serena Joy became aware of her secret relationship with the Commander. She understands the Commander's motivation: he wants Offred's life to be bearable because he feels bad about the suicide. Offred realizes that this situation gives her some power over the Commander.

### Analysis

Offred's relationship with the Commander has become far less formal. She takes her shoes off, she defends her Scrabble play, and she isn't afraid to surprise him. He seems to let his guard down as well, showing a willingness to give information she has been denied, such as the fate of the previous Handmaid. However, the attitude he displays while relating this information is thoughtful rather than sad, which reiterates the interchangeability of the Handmaids because they lack real identity. Offred realizes she is just the next in line and that his indulgence toward her is just a way to serve his own needs.

The theme that relationships have been reduced to emotionless transactions is illustrated when Offred feels like she is a "bank customer negotiating a hefty loan" and notes that his pampering must be leading to some gain for him.

## Chapter 30

### Summary

Offred looks out the window at the night. She sees Nick, toward whom she feels an attraction on which she cannot act.

She feels conflicted about her attraction to Nick because she does not know Luke's fate.

She remembers that on the night before they made their escape attempt, Luke killed their cat. They could not take it with them or leave it to advertise their absence. She knows now that the cat's death was meaningless, because they were caught anyway. She wonders who betrayed the family by turning them in. She has a hard time remembering the faces of those she has lost and feels guilty. With these thoughts in mind, she prays to God. However, unlike the prayers in the Red Center, where the women ask to be made empty and then filled with babies, Offred prays for assistance, forgiveness, and the strength to keep living. God is silent.

## Analysis

The incident with the cat helps Offred understand the mental process involved in causing another suffering or death. Before Luke kills the cat, he calls the animal "it" rather than "her." Before causing harm to another creature, one must first erase its identity. In this case, Offred's experience as a Handmaid parallels the experience of the cat and the hanged people with their faces covered.

The inability to remember people's faces is tied to the theme of identity and is a recurring image in the novel. As Offred loses her memories, she loses herself.

Offred's sincere and unscripted prayer contrasts with the impersonal, commercialized, mechanized prayers of the Soul Scrolls. However, in each case, God is absent. Offred does not believe that God hears the Soul Scrolls, and her own prayers go unanswered. In a world where religion has been corrupted to serve human ambition, God is hard to find.

## Chapter 31

### Summary

This chapter is the first of nine that fall under the section heading "Jezebel's," named for a brothel.

As Offred eats breakfast and gets ready for her shopping walk, she longs to have an argument with Luke over something

unimportant, such as housework. During their walk, Ofglen and Offred visit the Wall, where one body is marked with a "J," for Jew, Offred suspects. All Jews have been forced to leave the country, but Offred is not convinced that they left alive. Ofglen shares the password for the secret resistance group: *Mayday*.

When Offred returns from her walk, she gets a signal from the Commander via Nick. As Offred passes by Serena Joy, she asks Offred whether she is pregnant yet. She is not. Serena Joy suggests that perhaps the Commander cannot father a child and offers to help Offred secretly have sex with Nick in hopes of conceiving a child. Offred agrees because she realizes the danger no matter her answer. As a kind of reward, Serena Joy offers to let her see a photograph of her daughter, gives her a cigarette, and tells her to get a match from Rita.

## Analysis

Secrets, deceit, exchanges, and bargains are becoming a regular part of Offred's life. She is already carrying on a secret affair with the Commander behind Serena's back. Now she has agreed to be involved in a conspiracy with Serena behind the Commander's back. She and Nick are involved in both conspiracies; as a team, they are the common denominator. For their involvement, they get small rewards: cigarettes, sex, and the freedom to break the rules, just a little.

Offred is also rewarded with the promise of seeing a photograph of her daughter. As always, Offred's feelings toward Serena Joy are conflicted. She feels sorry for Serena Joy, but she is also wary of her. She is enraged knowing that Serena Joy has known where her daughter is the entire time, but she must hide this rage if she hopes to see the photograph.

## Chapter 32

### Summary

Though she is excited by the prospect of smoking a cigarette, Offred considers throwing it down the toilet or eating it to save the match. She imagines using the match to burn the house down.

The Commander has begun drinking alcohol when they meet. The alcohol makes him lose his reserve. One night, he tries to

explain the transformation of the society. He claims that women's economic independence emasculated men. By restricting women, men's appetite for sex increases. However, he admits, "Better never means better for everyone ... It always means worse, for some."

Later, in bed, Offred stares at the ceiling where the chandelier used to be. She thinks about the previous occupant of the room and how she found safety in death while Offred feels buried in life.

## Analysis

The ability to choose from a variety of options regarding the cigarette and the match is exciting for Offred, reminding readers of the severe limitations on Offred's liberty.

The Commander's attempt to justify Gilead's radical laws reveals layers of selfishness and inhumanity with regard to gender. He tells Offred that the society is planned to address men's complaints. Obtaining sex was too easy, he tells her. There was nothing to work for, he tells her. He says, "You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs." As one of the broken, Offred is not comforted by the explanation.

## Chapter 33

### Summary

Offred goes with Ofglen to the Prayvaganza, where young women will be given away in arranged marriages. On the way, she remembers picking flowers with her daughter.

While there, the women are separated by ropes into their stations: Wives, Handmaids, Marthas, and Econowives. Offred learns from Ofglen that Janine's baby is "a shredder" and that it is not her first baby with deformities. She recalls that Janine had an episode while at the Red Center during which she stared into space and talked to herself. Moira slapped and shook her to return Janine to her senses. Moira warned Offred that she may need to help Janine on another occasion. Offred realized that Moira was probably arranging for another escape.

## Analysis

Janine blames herself for the fact that her baby has defects, in the same way that she blamed herself for miscarrying and being raped. Offred interprets this tendency to assume the role of victim as Janine's way of trying to find purpose and meaning in her life. Taking the blame for her baby's defects gives Janine a sense of acting for effect. Although these imagined actions cause harm, they are still actions. Janine's warped logic, which keeps her subservient, is an effect of her indoctrination.

## Chapter 34

### Summary

The main event of the Prayvaganza is the giving away of daughters in arranged marriages to Angels (soldiers who fought in the war). The ceremony includes a speech by a Commander about sacrifice and victory as well as a tirade about how terrible society used to be for women. This ritual reminds Offred of a conversation she had with the Commander. He asked her to give an opinion on the way he and the other men constructed the new society. She told him they left out love. The Commander then argued that the new society is natural and better built for survival.

On the way out of the ceremony, Ofglen reveals that she and the other Handmaids know about Offred's secret meetings with the Commander. Ofglen urges her to gather information from the Commander for the resistance.

## Analysis

Offred considers how many years it will be before the young girls will not have any memory of a different way of life. She decides it will be about three to five years, a frighteningly short time, before all women's memories of the past are lost.

The Commander is puzzled by Offred's opinion that he and the other city planners left out love in the construction of Gilead's society. In the same way, Aunt Lydia clearly has a negative view of love. Both characterize the pre-Gilead society by focusing on the negatives, not the beauty. This tendency

makes these officials pitiable yet clearly dangerous in their lack of empathy.

Ofglen invites Offred to join yet another conspiracy, one in which she acts as a double agent by gathering information from the Commander while carrying on an affair with him. Offred's safety hangs precariously in the balance between those who know of her illegal actions and those who do not. In this way, knowledge becomes a medium of exchange for gain or loss.

## Chapter 35

### Summary

Offred begins again to tell the story of her family's escape. They have fake passports and a picnic cover story. At the border, the guard seems to have suspicions and moves to make a phone call. Fearing capture, Luke rushes to drive away; later, they abandon the car in the woods and make a run for it.

Offred does not want to continue telling the story. Instead, she considers the Commander's question about love and the nature of romance in the pre-Gilead society. She is amazed at the number of possibilities that had been available to her in that life.

Serena Joy arrives and shows Offred the photograph of her daughter as promised. Offred realizes that she has been erased from her daughter's life and regrets seeing the photograph.

As Offred eats her dinner that night, she notes that she is never given a knife.

### Analysis

Offred contemplates the nature of time. Luke, whom Offred loses, is "stopped dead in time." He is unchanged from the point at which he drops out of her story because she has no further information about him. In contrast, her own life, if not the evolution of her identity, continues: "Time ... has washed over me, washed me away." The photograph of Offred's daughter provides evidence that allows the daughter to grow beyond Offred's last memory of her. Time causes Offred's

daughter to grow without her and to grow beyond any further connection to Offred's story.

## Chapter 36

### Summary

Offred visits the Commander's office again, where the Commander, who has been drinking ahead of time, gives Offred an illegal, sexy costume of feathers and sequins to wear along with some gaudy makeup. He sneaks her out of the house, wrapping her in a Wife's blue cloak. Nick secretly drives the pair to a red brick building after they manipulate their way through a couple of checkpoints. Nick drops the pair off in an alley behind the building and leaves, planning to return later to pick them up. The Commander gives Offred a purple tag to wear on her wrist and tells her to say she is "an evening rental."

### Analysis

Offred agrees to put on the costume and go out partly because anything that "subverts the perceived respectable order of things" is worth doing. She likes doing something that calls attention to the perverseness of society. She knows that there is a rottenness under the image of respectability, and she believes that her actions in some way expose this truth, even if at the same time she participates in her own objectification.

The ease with which the Commander and Nick execute their ruse and circumvent the law exposes the hypocrisy of Gilead. It is acceptable to behave immorally and engage in subversion by night as long as one gives the appearance of morality in the respectable light of day. Offred and Nick silently observe this hypocrisy even as they willingly participate in it.

## Chapter 37

### Summary

Inside the building, the rooms all have numbers on them, and Offred realizes it is an old hotel. She recognizes it as a hotel she once visited with Luke during her first experience as a

mistress. There are many women present, some former prostitutes and some former professionals, all dressed in gaudy or revealing outfits and obviously there to provide sex for the men. Other men are there, too, and not just men from Gilead. The Commander tells her the place is called "the club" and that it serves the needs of men. The Commander parades Offred around, never loosening his grip on her, as if she is his special trophy or prize.

Among the women, Offred spots Moira, dressed in a sexy bunny costume. They make eye contact, and Moira signals for a secret meeting in the bathroom. The Commander leaves briefly and returns with drinks; Offred excuses herself to go to the washroom.

## Analysis

The Commander's arguments about the necessity of Gilead's strict gender divisions and restrictions have begun to take on an absurd quality. It is becoming clear that his belief in them is based on misguided, if not delusional, notions. This time, he tries to convince Offred that nature is responsible for the fact that women are kept illegally in brothels such as this one, because nature causes men to crave variety. Recall that in Chapter 34 he defended Gilead's way of life as returning women to their "biological destinies" and "nature's norm." Offred points out the irony of his position and feels fed up with him, but of course she is not free to express her opinion.

## Chapter 38

### Summary

An Aunt is on guard in the ladies' room. As Moira emerges from a bathroom stall, the two friends greet each other with friendly insults about their costumes. Moira gives Offred an overview of her story. She stole Aunt Elizabeth's clothes and walked out of the Red Center, bluffing her way through the checkpoints and seeking out a Quaker couple for help. She traveled from safe house to safe house on the Underground Femaleroad for about eight to nine months. Eventually, she was caught, tortured, and assigned to this brothel, known as Jezebel's. Offred is disheartened that the old rebellious Moira seems to have disappeared, ending the chapter with "I never saw her

again."

## Analysis

Of all the blows Offred has endured, witnessing Moira's defeat is one of the worst. Moira is the "loose woman" who excites and frightens the women at the Red Center. She is a stable and inspirational presence in Offred's memories. She is the source of the freckles and spirited personality Offred imagines also belong to the previous occupant of her room at the Commander's house. She is the one who takes action when all of the others are passive. Now Offred understands that Moira has become indifferent and resigned; she is as passive as Offred herself, claiming that life at Jezebel's is not that bad. Because Offred draws strength from her memory of Moira's courage, Offred wishes that she could reconstruct Moira's story, tell that she escapes successfully or blows up Jezebel's while it is filled with Commanders. Instead, like Luke, Moira stops in time in her moment of resignation because Offred has no further evidence to add to the story.

## Chapter 39

### Summary

The Commander takes Offred to one of the hotel rooms. She thinks about her conversation with Moira, recalling that Moira told her she saw Offred's mother in a film about the Colonies, where outcasts live among toxic waste. This revelation sparks the memory of when she and Luke discovered her mother's mysterious disappearance during the coup. The Commander initiates sex, saying he wants it to be enjoyable for Offred. She finds the idea unappealing but thinks she should try to please him.

## Analysis

The hotel that has become Jezebel's is all too familiar to Offred, right down to the wrappers on the individual soaps. Because the situation is parallel—she was Luke's mistress, and now she is the Commander's mistress—she feels Luke's absence more keenly. She feels the absence of love.

## Chapter 40

### Summary

Back at home, Serena Joy fetches Offred at midnight, and she goes to Nick's apartment as planned. She tells the story of their sexual encounter twice but then says that neither of these accounts is completely accurate—that both are reconstructions. She feels guilty for enjoying sex with another man when Luke might be alive.

### Analysis

The contrast between the two accounts of Offred's sexual encounter with Nick is striking. The first resembles something from a movie, complete with dramatic flashes of lightning and rumbling thunder. The sentence structure—short phrases strung together with commas—suggests being caught up in a moment of passion, "never-ending." The second telling is a little more awkward, flirtatious, and realistic. Both versions end with, "I knew it might only be once." The varying versions capture Offred's attempt to capture the feeling of a situation with words, as the feeling is more important than fact.

## Chapter 41

### Summary

This chapter and the next four fall in the section headed "Salvaging." A Salvaging is a ceremony in which women are executed and an audience participates.

Offred apologizes to her audience for this story and her behavior, but she continues to have a sexual relationship with Nick without Serena Joy's help or knowledge. This risk seems reckless, yet she takes it. She feels enormous gratitude toward Nick and shares her real name with him, along with other details about herself, although Nick does not reciprocate with such details of his own. She feels she is betraying Luke, but this feeling does not stop her. Also, she realizes that her relationship with Nick has made her content, or at least complacent. She no longer wants to escape, and she does not

care about Ofglen's talk of resistance. She wonders whether the household staff is aware of her meetings with Nick.

### Analysis

Offred's apologetic tone reflects the regret she feels over having a relationship with Nick when there is still a possibility for reunion with Luke. In fact, Luke may take on the identity of the "you" she addresses as her audience. She implies that by confessing her sins to Luke, she honors him by believing in him. Clinging defiantly to the truth as one of her only remaining possessions helps Offred control the options that may be the outcome of her story.

## Chapter 42

### Summary

For the first time in two years, Offred goes to a Women's Salvaging on a lawn near the library. As always at these public events, the women are separated by their roles: Wives, Handmaids, Marthas, and Econowives. A lengthy rope winds its way among the audience. The Handmaids kneel at the front before a stage set up with three hanging poles. The three women to be Salvaged—two Handmaids and a Wife—are seated on the stage. Aunt Lydia presides over the event and refuses to name the women's crimes. The women have bags placed over their heads. Audience members are expected to pull on the rope so that all take part in the execution. Offred refuses to participate this time, but the women are hanged nonetheless.

### Analysis

Offred deals with the terrible events at the Salvaging through distraction; first she focuses on making love with Nick, then she looks at the grass and describes the rope. This strategy of distraction is reminiscent of the way Offred gets through the Ceremony in Chapter 16: "One detaches oneself. One describes."

The government's manipulation of language is again evident in the term *salvaging*, which means "saving something from being

destroyed." It is ironic that the government takes the lives of the three women it salvages, presumably to save the other women from rebellion or disobedience.

## Chapter 43

### Summary

After the hangings, Aunt Lydia tells the Handmaids to form a circle for an event called a Particution. Two Guardians bring in a third Guardian, one who has been badly beaten, and Aunt Lydia announces that the man is guilty of rape. One of the victims was pregnant, she adds, and the baby died. The Handmaids are enraged, and when Aunt Lydia blows a whistle, they converge on the man and begin to beat him to death. While Offred refuses to participate, Ofglen delivers a particularly violent blow to the man's head. Later, she tells Offred that the man was not really a rapist but a political dissenter—"one of ours."

### Analysis

This chapter sows the seeds of the climax of the novel. Both Ofglen and Offred have acted in ways that could arouse suspicion. Offred has reacted too weakly to the situation by pulling back and showing her disgust; Ofglen has reacted too strongly, putting herself at risk by mercifully knocking out the accused man.

The enthusiasm shown by the Handmaids at the Particution—constructed of the base words *participation* and *execution*—is evidence of the suppressed rage and hatred they feel toward men in general. There is a sense that the government may allow such expressions of rage to keep the Handmaids docile at other times.

## Chapter 44

### Summary

Offred eats lunch and goes to meet Ofglen to do their shopping. However, Ofglen has been replaced with another

Handmaid. Unsure of the new Ofglen's loyalties, Offred tries the Mayday signal, but Ofglen does not respond positively. Offred fears that this development means she might be in danger. As they part, the new Ofglen tells her that the old Ofglen committed suicide by hanging when she saw the black van approaching to take her away.

### Analysis

Things escalate quickly as the day progresses. The morning's Salvaging and Particution are over, but Offred's paranoia is heightened when Ofglen does not appear, and she evaluates the new Ofglen as treacherous. She fears the punishment that comes to lawbreakers. She fears for her daughter. Yet as they part, the new Ofglen reveals the information about the old Ofglen. In this, there is a sense of history repeating—the new Ofglen seems pious, but she may be a part of the resistance.

## Chapter 45

### Summary

Offred is relieved that Ofglen's suicide means Ofglen was not forced to give up her secrets, although she considers that perhaps this report of suicide is a lie. When she gets back to the Commander's house, Serena Joy confronts Offred by saying, "I trusted you ... I tried to help you." Offred does not know which of her many secrets Serena Joy has discovered. She plays dumb, but Serena Joy produces her evidence: the sequined costume and lipstick on the blue cloak Offred wore to Jezebel's.

### Analysis

Like Offred, readers do not know which characters are trustworthy and which are untrustworthy. This tension is present throughout the narrative as Offred must decide who will keep her secrets and who will not, but the stakes are higher now that Ofglen is dead. Should Offred trust Nick, her lover? He is washing the car, seemingly oblivious. Yet Nick has been trusted with many potentially damaging secrets.

Serena's confrontation reminds us that Serena, too, is severely

oppressed in this society. She has had a kind of trusting relationship with Offred that is gone now as well.

## Chapter 46

### Summary

Offred sits in her room and waits for the inevitable. She considers the options: burn down the house, kill herself, beg for mercy, attack Serena Joy unaware, go to Nick, or try to run away. She does nothing. Presently a black van arrives, and two Eyes come for her, accusing her of spying. However, Nick arrives at her room with them and says it is safe to go with the men—they are part of Mayday. She goes with them. The Commander asks for a warrant that is not produced, while Serena Joy questions what is happening. Rita and Cora are confused and upset as she is taken away. All seem to blame Offred for putting the family in jeopardy.

### Analysis

Offred regrets her perpetual inaction during this final event. She wishes she had taken matters into her own hands and killed herself while she had the chance. However, it seems as if her inaction—her willingness to do anything, even give in, if it permits her survival—pays off, as Nick assures her that the van is Mayday, not the Eyes.

Offred ends her narrative with her characteristic offering of story options: either this is the darkness, or it is the light. She does not know for certain, and neither do readers.

## Historical Notes on The Handmaid's Tale

### Summary

This section is presented as a transcript of a scholarly conference given in the distant future, on June 25, 2195. Gilead is now a period of time in the past that historians study. Introduced by Professor Moon, Professor Pieixoto gives a

presentation entitled "Problems of Authentication in Reference to *The Handmaid's Tale*." Cassette tapes that contain the story of *The Handmaid's Tale*, he says, have been found in a footlocker in Maine at the site of a well-known station of the Underground Femaleroad, suggesting that Offred survives her escape and makes it at least as far as Maine. He and a colleague transcribe and sequence the story from 30 tapes. The professor outlines scholars' attempts to identify the narrator and other characters and their conclusions about the causes and nature of Gilead society. He speculates that Offred may have escaped to England.

### Analysis

This final section tells us that Offred did escape successfully. Although her ultimate fate is unknown, the story for which she imagined an audience is being shared.

It is significant that by the year 2195, a university has a department of Caucasian anthropology; white behavior is now something to be studied. The chair is a woman, Maryann Crescent Moon.

It is also significant that Professor Pieixoto, a man, claims credit for the sequencing of the story, a further "reconstruction" of the tale of this woman.

## “” Quotes

*"There's always a black market, there's always something that can be exchanged."*

— Offred, Chapter 3

Offred recognizes that exchanges and transactions are a fundamental part of human interactions; she is always alert for something she can exchange, even though she has no possessions of her own.

*"It was true, I took too much for*



*granted; I trusted fate, back then."*

— Offred, Chapter 5

After Offred considers her carelessness in keeping plastic bags in reach of her daughter, she connects this assessment of taking things for granted to other items: freedom, choices, her loved ones. This regret comes up frequently in the novel as Offred considers all that has been lost.

*"There is more than one kind of freedom ... Freedom to and freedom from."*

— Aunt Lydia, Chapter 5

Aunt Lydia suggests that these two kinds of freedom are exclusive. While the women of Gilead do not have the freedom to love, marry, work, or procreate as they choose, they are free from obscenities, catcalls, and violence. Aunt Lydia suggests there is a value in *freedom from* that should not be underrated.

*"This may not seem ordinary to you now, but after a time it will."*

— Aunt Lydia, Chapter 6

Aunt Lydia argues that one of the powers of the totalitarian state is its ability to recondition people's responses. What once was horrible becomes ordinary; what once was horrible becomes normal.

*"If it's a story I'm telling, then I have control over the ending."*

— Offred, Chapter 7

The admission that this story is a story, a reconstruction of

events, is an essential element of Offred's narrative style and her control over her life. She revisits this idea often, noting that she dislikes telling this story but feels compelled to finish it. In the end, this story becomes a primary historical source for the frame of the novel.

*"I compose myself. My self is a thing I must now compose."*

— Offred, Chapter 12

While language can be a tool used to remove identity, Offred shows that it also has the power to create or preserve identity.

*"My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden."*

— Offred, Chapter 14

Offred's true name, which readers never learn, is an anchor of her true identity. Making this name forbidden is a way government authorities remove individuality from Offred and other Handmaids.

*"In reduced circumstances the desire to live attaches itself to strange objects."*

— Offred, Chapter 19

The desire to live—to survive—is present in Offred, no matter how passive she seems. She endures her circumstances, despite periodic thoughts of suicide, because she wants to continue living. This will to live causes small pleasures, such as having a pet, to gain great importance.

*"Moira had power ..., she'd set herself loose. She was ... a loose woman."*

— Offred, Chapter 22

While many of the women at the Red Center have begun to "los[e] the taste for freedom" as victims of state indoctrination, Moira reclaims her power by setting herself free from the center. The pun "loose woman" is also suggestive of a reclamation of Moira's identity as a sexual being.

*"To want is to have a weakness."*

— Offred, Chapter 23

Offred frequently tries to identify other people's desires, thinking that there could be a possible exchange from which she might benefit. At the same time, Offred herself is no longer permitted to want anything, from her daughter to her identity.

*"How easy it is to invent a humanity, for anyone at all."*

— Offred, Chapter 24

Offred thinks this about a Nazi's mistress and connects it to the way she views the Commander as sad and lonely, humanizing him despite his lack of compassion.

*"A rat in a maze is free ..., as long as it stays inside the maze."*

— Offred, Chapter 27

The government of Gilead grants its people, especially its women, the illusion of freedom. Offred's bedroom, her daily walk, and her role in society is a maze of confinement. Yet the

decision about whether to walk to the Wall or to the church, for example, grants the illusion of freedom within the confinement.

*"Better never means better for everyone ... It always means worse, for some."*

— The Commander, Chapter 32

The Commander believes that the society he helps create is an improvement, but he grudgingly admits that it is only better for some people, while others must necessarily suffer. His commitment to and defense of Gilead's rules despite the fact that they dehumanize whole segments of society is a key element of his characterization.

## Symbols

### Red

Red, the color of blood, represents the role of the Handmaids, who wear red dresses. Here, blood signifies life. Blood is also associated with menstruation, ostensibly a sign that a woman is able to bear children. In Chapter 2, Offred points out that blood is the defining feature of her position, though she says red is not really her color. Red may also allude to Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, in which a woman must wear a red A as punishment for committing adultery. Although the Handmaids are doing what the law requires, they are in some ways the Commanders' mistresses and so occupy an uncomfortable moral area.

### Eyes

The Eyes of God are the secret police of Gilead, and they use a winged eye as their symbol. This symbol reminds residents of

Gilead that God (and the government, by extension) is always watching them. This sense of constant surveillance causes a paranoia and fear of punishment that is an effective means of control. Of course, there are places—the Commander's study, Jezebel's—where the Eyes do not extend, providing an interesting tension between what is seen and unseen in the novel.

## Flowers

As the reproductive parts of plants, flowers are symbolic of fertility and reproduction. They sprout everywhere in *The Handmaid's Tale*. They are pictured in paintings and stained glass windows, embroidered along the edges of Serena Joy's dresses, printed on the wallpaper in Offred's bathroom, and even carved from radishes. Flowers are also prominently displayed in Serena Joy's garden—a contrast to Serena Joy herself, who is unable to reproduce. Their blooming and fading helps Offred track the seasons.

In addition to symbolizing fertility, flowers also remind Offred of the existence of beauty. They come to symbolize what the women lack: individual beauty and the ability to grow and reproduce freely.

## Themes

### Identity

In Gilead, markers of an individual's identity are reduced, and inhabitants interact according to strictly defined and controlled social roles. Every person has a class, or caste, to which he or she belongs. These classes are identified by colors, and people in the group must wear clothing of that color. A person's class and representative color (blue for purity, red for sexuality) are considered more important than the person's name or individuality. The Handmaids, unlike other classes, are completely stripped of their names. The Handmaids are renamed with the prefix *Of-* combined with their Commanders'

first names to indicate ownership—thus, the Handmaid of Glen is named Ofglen, while the Handmaid of Fred becomes Offred. This theme is introduced in Chapter 1, when the Handmaids at the Red Center secretly tell one another their names. The narrator's true name is never revealed, and even her substitute name, Offred, is not divulged until Chapter 14. Convicted criminals are executed with bags over their heads, obscuring their faces, and signs identifying the crimes are placed around their necks as they hang on the Wall so that their crimes become their identities.

### Language

Language is a powerful tool in Gilead, one that is used to control and oppress its citizens. Spoken language is restricted. The Handmaids greet one another with ritualistic language. When Nick speaks freely to Offred in Chapter 8, it is a surprise. Written language is even more tightly controlled. The written names of shop signs have been replaced with symbols. The women are not allowed any reading material. Although the society and its customs are supposed to be based on the Bible, the text is often changed when quoted so that it supports Gilead's laws. Because most people are not allowed access to the Bible itself, they cannot verify the accuracy of quoted scripture and are at the mercy of those in charge.

This focus on language plays out in interesting ways. When the Commander invites Offred to their clandestine meetings, his private study is filled with books, and they play Scrabble among these books. He then offers her a magazine and other reading material. Breaking the rules in this way gives him the pleasure of playing the role of benevolent master, which seems to be sexually arousing to him. In addition, Offred constantly reflects on words and their meanings. She explains many times over that she uses words to both create and reconstruct her story and herself.

In these ways, language becomes both a tool of oppression and a tool of freedom.

## Gender Roles

Women and men in Gilead's society have strictly defined roles and functions. Men have military ranks, including Commanders, Guards, Angels, and Eyes. They father children, guard, spy, and punish. Women are stripped of all rights and liberties and are useful only for their physical abilities. Marthas do the housework and cook, while Aunts oversee the training, punishment, and indoctrination of other women. Wives manage the household and serve their husbands, and Handmaids bear the children. Expressions of sexuality that are not for the purpose of procreation are not allowed. Pornography, masturbation, homosexuality, and birth control are against the law. Marriages that existed before the establishment of Gilead—such as Offred and Luke's—are no longer considered legal.

## Liberty and Captivity

Because everyone lives according to some restrictions, real liberty is impossible. However, people find ways to have a kind of liberty by breaking rules—meeting behind closed doors, frequenting brothels, or buying cigarettes on the black market. The theme of captivity, or the lack of liberty, is introduced immediately with the prison-like setting of Chapter 1. Later, Offred tells readers that she can go places in her mind that are not allowed in the physical world. She also has the freedom to construct this narrative as she pleases, sometimes changing details or imagining events differently than they actually occur, flashing back to events, and thinking forbidden thoughts.

The question of defining liberty proves important as the narrative progresses. The women are told that their freedom to make choices has been replaced by something better: freedom from events such as rape and violence. Here, again, language is manipulated to distort the reality of the society and offer the illusion of security.

The idea that a small amount of liberty or control can keep oppressed people from rising up and rebelling is also explored. The Wives have their gardens to take care of, and the hierarchy allows higher ranks power over lower ones. Once

Offred has her affair with Nick, she loses interest in joining or helping the resistance because she selfishly wants to hold onto this small measure of control over her life.

## Suggested Reading

Atwood, Margaret. *Dire Cartographies: The Roads to Utopia and The Handmaid's Tale*. New York: Vintage Books, 2011. Print.

*Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale*. Eds. Harold Bloom and Margaret Atwood. New York: Chelsea House Publications, 2001. Print.

Bouson, J. Brooks. *Critical Insights: The Handmaid's Tale*. Pasadena: Salem Press, 2009. Print.

*The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*. Ed. Coral Ann Howells. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Print.

Tolan, Fiona. *Margaret Atwood: Feminism and Fiction*. New York: Rodopi, 2007. Print.